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JAPAN SHOULD PLAY A CONSTRUCTIVE ROLE IN THE ARCTIC

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The sea ice melting in the Arctic Ocean caused by climate change has effects on such issues as oil and natural gas development and environmental protection. Among those issues, the opening of Arctic sea routes may have the deepest impact on Japan.

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Historically, the “sea” was used mostly as a great highway or trade route that carried people and goods. Although the “closed” Arctic Ocean was not used as a commercial route until recently, its commercial use is now becoming possible due to climate change and sea ice melting.

The primary benefit of Arctic sea routes is a shortened distance. It is expected that the Northern Sea Route (NSR or Northeast Passage) would cut 40% off cruising distance and shorten the number of navigational days significantly. The second benefit of the Arctic sea route where there is not a piracy threat is the low insurance cost compared to sea routes via the Suez Canal.

Let’s consider the impact of opening Arctic sea routes on Japan on two levels, regional and global.

In Northeast Asia and around Japan, this raises concerns about increased traffic and a sea power struggle between Russia and China.

If navigation on the Arctic sea routes becomes routine, traffic between the Asian littoral countries, including China—which has become an economic power—and South Korea, and Europe will pick up substantially. Active communication through those routes, including the one between Northeast Asia and the west coast of North America, would mean increased traffic by foreign vessels in the Sea of Japan, the waters from the Tsugaru Strait to the Kuril Islands, and other seas surrounding Japan. In such a scenario, the countries concerned would likely compete for protection, or appropriate control from the Russian viewpoint, of maritime traffic in the waters surrounding Japan.

Russia is modernizing its military capabilities in the Northern Territories, although it is not clear whether such a move reflects the increase in maritime traffic. Russia plans to deploy the Yakhont anti-surface missile (range: 300km), allowing Russia to exercise greater influence there.


Sometimes Russia does not hide its precautions against China. It must be understood that the military modernization in the Northern Territories is not necessarily targeting Japan. Japan needs to maintain intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities in the surrounding seas, to maintain an

adequate military presence, and to communicate with Russia from geopolitical and strategic viewpoints.

On a global level, it is important to make rules and institutions regarding the Arctic.

The Arctic littoral countries have agreed in general to respect the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). However, Russia and Canada are against free passage from their respective standpoints, and both are attempting to impose obligations such as escort and reporting. One issue that Japan needs to consider is whether it will pursue “freedom of navigation” like the United States or accept littoral countries’ claims. Japan needs to take into account its alliance with the United States and the merits and demerits of the claims applied in other parts of the world when making decisions and claims of its own.

In the years to come, resource development, pollution prevention, and other issues will be considered and institutionalized. It is important for Japan as a maritime nation to be actively engaged from the rule-making phase. That requires Japan to obtain observer status in the Arctic Council, which plays a central role in institution building regarding the Arctic, and this in turn means Japan must conduct scientific research and make contributions in order to become an observer.

Nobody knows whether the sea ice will continue to melt and open regular sea routes. However, other countries are preparing for the opening of the Arctic and taking concrete measures. Given these circumstances, Japan urgently needs as a matter of security to become actively engaged if it is to survive as a major player in the international community. 

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