

‘Observing’ the Arctic: Asia in the Arctic Council and Beyond.
Edited by Chih Yuan Woon and Klaus Dodds. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, Massachusetts: Edward Elgar, 2020. Hardcover: 243pp.

Although many observers have pointed to 2007 as *the* watershed year when the Arctic first gained its current level of global attention—as that was the year Russia used a submarine to plant its national flag on the seabed at the North Pole—2013 can be considered as equally important. For in that year, the Arctic Council, by far the most prominent organization overseeing policies in the Far North, granted observer status to five Asian countries: China, India, Japan, Singapore and South Korea. It was a difficult decision, as it was made amid rising speculation about a “scramble” for Arctic resources. Nevertheless, the move underscored the rising attention that the region had been receiving from non-Arctic states and highlighted the question of whether the title of regional stakeholder should only be limited to the “Arctic Eight” (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States).

‘Observing’ the Arctic addresses this question from multiple angles, discussing not only the perspectives of the states involved but also those of sub-state and non-state actors, such as indigenous organizations, scientific bodies and business interests. The eleven chapters of the book are divided into two broad sections, with the first looking at institutions and Arctic regimes, including those linked to the Council, and how Asian governments have addressed them, while the second features an analysis of specific case studies within the Asian states themselves. The book specifically examines how these Asian observers have added a new dimension to the concept of a “global Arctic”, and discusses the differences in Arctic policies of non-Arctic Asian states from those of their Arctic partners. However, this book not only provides a description of the specific interests which Asian states have developed in the Arctic, but also seeks to frame them within longer historical and cultural narratives which, the authors argue, has been lacking in recent media coverage of polar regional diplomacy. A key argument of the book is that the five Asian states have developed multifaceted approaches to engaging the Arctic which extend well beyond perceived windows of economic opportunity created by climate change and greater access to resources. In addition, the volume goes beyond studies of interstate politics in the region, delving deeper into the questions of national identity, and how they are constructed, in the Far North.

Understandably, much of the book is dedicated to China, which has been under intense international scrutiny for its strategic intentions regarding the Arctic. One specific concern, elucidated in the chapter by Nadezhda Filimonova, is China's cooperation with Russia in the Arctic, leading to discussions about whether an "Arctic alliance" is on the cards. However, Filimonova suggests that Russian views on China's Arctic engagement, while largely favourable, are dominated by joint economic interests as opposed to grand strategies. At the same time, in the chapter by Nong Hong, Beijing is painted as seeking to widen and deepen its Arctic engagement, including adding the Arctic Ocean to its Belt and Road Initiative, while experiencing growing levels of pushback, led by the United States. This chapter makes clear, however, that China is not going to be satisfied as a passive observer as the Arctic continues to open. Unlike some other recent studies on China's Arctic diplomacy, notably the 2017 work *China as a Polar Great Power*, which have adopted more narrow, hard power approaches to explaining China's Arctic interests, this volume examines Beijing's Arctic policies in a more multifaceted and nuanced manner. It also benefits from the availability of new information provided in China's 2018 White Paper on the Arctic.

China may be the "first among equals" among the five Asian observer states, especially in terms of visibility, but the other Asian states have also helped shape the "internationalization" of many Arctic policies in both the scientific and political domains. It is therefore regrettable that there is no chapter on Japan's Arctic policy, given Tokyo's framing of the Arctic as key to its economic security and trading interests. However, this is compensated by Uttam Kumar Sinha's chapter on India, and Young Kil Park's chapter on South Korea, as both countries have often been left out of studies on Arctic politics. Meanwhile, Singapore, often seen as the "unsung" Arctic actor, has developed interests in Arctic, according to the contribution by editors Chih Yuan Woon and Klaus Dodds, due to its concern of being left out of emerging Arctic debates, not only on climate change but also on the opening of Arctic shipping lanes, which could compliment, or possibly even challenge, existing maritime trade routes, including the Straits of Malacca.

What also distinguishes this book from previous studies is its focus on "small state" diplomacy. The case of Singapore shows that even a non-polar small state can be given a voice in Arctic affairs as they are highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and rising sea levels. Small states in the Arctic, notably Iceland and Norway, are also given special attention in the chapter by Ingrid A. Medby,

given their status as resting not only between the two major Arctic powers, the United States and Russia, but also at times caught between the interests of fellow Arctic states, and non-Arctic observers. This chapter adroitly uses extensive interview data to illustrate mixed feelings among Arctic-state policymakers regarding the expansion of non-Arctic Asian states' interests in the Arctic Council.

One theme found throughout the volume is that although the five Asian states were admitted as observers of the Arctic Council, they are themselves being observed, not only by the Arctic governments but also by the international community. This is taking place as the definition of an "Arctic stakeholder" is now subject to a much wider debate among both regional policymakers and scholars. Those interested in Arctic diplomacy and its expanding frontiers will find this book highly useful, as it has added several diverse dimensions to the question of what the five Asian governments seek in the Arctic, and how their politics, history and culture frame their engagement with this increasingly visible part of the world.

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