

ALL GENRES

Behind the Scenes / Govt closely watching efforts to actively use Arctic region



Japan, France, Germany, Britain, China, India, Singapore,

South Korea, etc.

** Location of sea ice extent based on images created by Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency, using data from U.S. satellites, Japan's observation satellite Shizuku and other sources*

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By Keiko Chino / Yomiuri Shimbun Senior Writer

The government is closely watching efforts by nations around the world to use the Arctic region (see below) to pursue various purposes there, including the exploration of natural resources on and under the seabed.

The government's move apparently reflects a changing environment surrounding the region, as shown by a temporary recovery in the extent of sea ice and a Russian attempt to establish a year-round sea route there.

The Arctic could also be a strategically important region for military purposes.

On Oct. 16, the Headquarters for Ocean Policy, a government organ headed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, adopted a basic policy regarding issues related to the Arctic region. The policy is the first of its kind to be devised by Japan in that field. This came after "cooperation" among Japan, China and South Korea in areas around the North Pole was included in a joint declaration adopted at three-way summit talks on Nov. 1.

At the Oct. 16 meeting held to adopt the basic policy related to the Arctic region, the prime minister said, "A rapidly changing environment surrounding the Arctic region has posed new challenges for the international community that also could affect our country's national interests."

The Arctic region has been a matter of scientific concern over the years. Observations have been conducted there in the past, including research on the impact of global warming.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, however, the region has drawn increasing international attention. This was partly because the Arctic sea ice began to melt due to global warming, a development that could make it possible to use the Arctic sea route throughout the year. Seabed resources could also be extracted there.

If a sea route between the Arctic region and Russia and elsewhere is established, for example, the geographical distance covered by a ship traveling between Asia and Europe could be 40 percent less than that of the Suez Canal route, according to an estimate.

According to a projection by the U.S. Geological Survey, 30 percent of the world's natural gas and 13 percent of crude oil lie above the Arctic Circle.

The Arctic region has also gained military attention. If the navigable period and the expanse of waters in that region are expanded, according to specialists, it could be possible to deploy military strength there.

The Arctic Ocean is surrounded by five nations, including the United States, Russia and Canada. In

1996, these countries joined hands with three other nations that have territory above the Arctic Circle to inaugurate the Arctic Council. This was followed by requests from Japan, China and some other nations to be admitted to the Arctic consultative body, as they were concerned that rights and interests in the region could be monopolized only by a few countries. The requests were accepted in 2013.

“Part of the [Arctic] sea ice in the region has melted, and this means the area has become an ordinary sea that must be considered from the standpoint of security and other issues,” said an official of the Headquarters for Ocean Policy.

Not everything is rosy

However, many uncertainties remain as to the possibility of developing a sea route and tapping the area for natural resources. Prospects for success in securing rights and interests in the region are not as promising as earlier imagined, according to specialists.

For instance, it is unclear whether an attempt to extract seabed resources in the region will prove to be profitable, although this might be scientifically possible. Crude oil prices have declined due to such factors as the recent increase in shale gas production. This has made it less profitable to sail across the Arctic Ocean.

Another factor behind the murky prospects for Arctic region-related projects is the current international political situation. Any ship that wants to sail along the Arctic sea route needs to be led by a Russian icebreaker, and fees would have to be paid for this service. However, there were fewer requests for this service last year, due to such factors as objections over Russia’s actions vis-a-vis Ukraine.

The extent of the sea-ice in the Arctic region has fluctuated in recent years, as shown by its current, temporary growth in size. However, from a long-term perspective, sea-ice will continue to melt. If we consider the situation 10 years to 20 years ahead, the Arctic region can still serve as a promising sea route.

The latest basic policy toward the Arctic region seems, by and large, to show that the government will continue to carry out measures that have been implemented by each ministry and agency over the years.

According to the Foreign Ministry, cooperation among Japan, China and South Korea in the Arctic region was included in the joint declaration as a result of a proposal by Seoul. But these countries remain undecided about how to pursue that goal.

“There still are many mysteries about the Arctic region. Efforts should be made to scientifically explore such questions as how ice melts [in the region] and possible sea routes and seabed resources. The results of such studies should be used to formulate necessary policies [related to the region],” said Prof. Atsushi Sunami of the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, who also serves as deputy director for the institute’s science, technology and innovation policy program.

Japan has been somewhat slower than other nations when it comes to addressing issues related to the Arctic region.

In 2013, the government revised its Basic Plan on Ocean Policy, citing the Arctic region as a priority area. However, the plan’s inaugural version, devised in 2008, did not even refer to the Arctic region. Japan also lagged China and South Korea in submitting a request for admission to the Arctic Council

Japan also tagged China and South Korea in submitting a request for admission to the Arctic Council as an observer.

Can Japan recover from its laggardness in addressing Arctic region-related issues? The answer to the question hinges on what policies the government comes up with.

Main points of the Arctic region-related policy

Basic concept

- Use scientific technology to the fullest
- Pay full attention to security-related moves
- Explore the economic potential of Arctic sea routes and natural resource development

Specific measures

- Increase efforts to promote studies conducive to policy decisions and problem resolution
- Contribute to establishing international rules
- Provide a better environment for the use of an Arctic sea route

■ Arctic region

The region refers to an area that extends northward from latitude 66.5 degrees north, with its center located at the North Pole, which lies at latitude 90 degrees north. Antarctica is a continent, while the Arctic region is part of the sea. There is also ambiguity about how the Arctic region should be defined, as the area has no clear-cut border, unlike a continent. The Antarctic Treaty bans claims for territorial rights and the use of the continent for military purposes. There is no treaty governing such matters in the Arctic region.

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