

A MISSED OPPORTUNITY

Barry Scott Zellen reveals how China ceded its claims to what is now the Russian Far East, leaving Japan as Asia's pre-eminent near-Arctic state

Much attention has been devoted to China's recently articulated Arctic ambitions, particularly since Beijing's white paper on Arctic policy was released on 26 January, 2018, which asserted that: "China is an important stakeholder in Arctic affairs. Geographically, China is a 'Near-Arctic State', one of the continental States that are closest to the Arctic Circle". While Beijing's assertion drew widespread attention both within and beyond the Arctic policy world, not everyone embraced China's claim of near-Arctic statehood.

This became evident in the recent comments from Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Rovaniemi at the last Arctic Council ministerial in May 2019. There, Pompeo dismissed the entire concept as pure fantasy: "Beijing claims to be a 'Near-Arctic State,' yet the shortest distance between China and the Arctic is 900 miles. There are only Arctic States and Non-Arctic States. No third category exists, and claiming otherwise entitles China to exactly nothing." Secretary Pompeo did not dismiss China's interest in the Arctic nor its ambition to engage with the Arctic diplomatically or economically. Indeed, transparent Chinese investment would always be welcome, but not – Pompeo added – debt-trap diplomacy of the sort that has overwhelmed governments from Sri Lanka to Malaysia, which became "ensnared by debt and corruption," a fate Pompeo wants Arctic nations and vulnerable indigenous communities to be spared.

JAPAN IS AN IMPORTANT GATEWAY TO STRATEGIC WATERS NEAR THE EASTERN NSR ENTRANCE

A look at the map does indeed throw cold water on Beijing's claim of China being a "Near-Arctic State." Beijing, the capital of the PRC, lies 3,468 miles from the North Pole but is only 2,747 miles from the Equator. This would suggest that China is more accurately a near-Equatorial state than a near-Arctic one. Curiously, the world's highest point, the summit of Mount Everest, at 29,035 feet, falls within the jurisdiction of the PRC, as do four of the world's highest lakes. Impressive, yes, and comparable to India, which due to its own proud Himalayan heritage has long considered itself a polar power (the Himalaya

being described as Earth's "third pole"), but this qualifies China at most as being a Himalayan state, not a near-Arctic one.

And even these noteworthy claims of extreme geographical prowess were only attained by Beijing's brutal conquest of the independent Kingdom of Tibet, a country that still suffers under the yoke of Chinese occupation. Moreover, as the late neo-realist IR luminary Kenneth Waltz once told me, polarity is inherently dyadic; so even if the Himalaya is described as a "third pole," it cannot really be so. Just as Pompeo argues there are only Arctic states and non-Arctic states, there are only two poles – North and South – but no third pole is possible. As Waltz explained: there's simply no such thing as either monopolarity or multipolarity, despite the best efforts of many revisionist IR theorists to so argue when the bipolar order of the Cold War collapsed. If there can be no third pole, then China like India may be a Himalayan power, but not a polar power.

WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN

Ironically, China could well have been not only a near-Arctic state, but Asia's pre-eminent near-Arctic power, had it retained sovereign control of the far North-Eastern corner of the Qing empire, which came firmly under Manchu dominion by the 17th century, and was recognised as such by its regional rival, Russia, in the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk, with the Manchurian border reaching as far North as the 56th degree parallel, and as far East as the Sea of Japan across from Sakhalin, which was already a Chinese tributary since the preceding Ming era. But in the mid-19th century, the Russian Empire expanded into outer Manchuria, and these territorial gains were formally conceded by the Qing dynasty in the 1858 Treaty of Aigun and the 1860 Treaty of Peking, resulting in today's Russo-Chinese border that wraps around Manchuria, much the way the trans-Siberian railroad hooks to the South as it approaches its Eastern terminus in Vladivostok.

Had China not recognised Russia's imperial expansion onto Manchurian lands, and instead successfully contested Russia's sovereignty over these lands, it would be a near-Arctic state today. Even a vocal assertion by Beijing of traditional sovereign dominion over these lands would help convey a sense of urgency to its near-Arctic aspirations, much the way it has done in the South China Sea. But as Beijing fortifies contested islands to its South-East while vocally reiterating its impassioned (even if not

recognised as valid) claims, it remains silent on its long-surrendered North-Eastern lands, leaving Russia the undisputed sovereign of Eurasia's far North-East. Indeed, around the same time that China retreated from outer Manchuria, its neighbour Japan began to expand North to Hokkaido, in part to prevent further Russian expansion toward Japan, and later to crush the last stronghold of Tokugawa loyalists who rose up in rebellion in 1868, formally expanding Japan's sovereignty to Hokkaido the next year and initiating a broader colonial expansion by Japan that later reached Sakhalin, the Korean peninsula and Manchuria itself. Two years earlier, the United States, via the Treaty of Purchase (1867), gained possession of Alaska from Russia, and three years after that, Canada finalised its purchase of Rupert's land from the Hudson's Bay Company (1870) after agreeing to purchase Rupert's Land a year earlier, and just two years after Canada's confederation as an independent state in 1867. The sovereign boundaries of much of today's Arctic were thus established during a relatively brief period of Northward state expansion in both North America and Eurasia, but because of China's Southward retreat during this same period, it remains a non-Arctic and not a near-Arctic state.

But is there really no such thing as a near-Arctic state as Secretary of State Pompeo has argued, or is it just that China is not a member of this club – despite its recent assertions? And if China is not a member, then who might qualify? A downward look at the globe from the North Pole reveals there are, indeed, near-Arctic polities adjacent to the Arctic region all around the world, such as the island state of Iceland in the high

North Atlantic. Indeed, Iceland abuts the Arctic Circle, but its territory otherwise lies to its South, though its EEZ does, at the North-Western end of the island, extend beyond the Arctic Circle to as far North as 69° 35' N. As such, it nicely illustrates the concept of near-Arctic statehood. But by virtue of its Northern geography (and significant glaciation), its millennium-long sovereign experience and centuries of subsistence fishing culture, and its possession of a sliver of land adjacent to (and a sector of sea to the North of) the Arctic Circle, it is increasingly accepted by the world community as a bona fide Arctic State – so much so that it is a founding member of the Arctic Council (AC) and current holder of the rotating chair of the AC. But to its disappointment, Iceland was excluded from the 2009 Ilulissat conference of the "Arctic 5" (A5) states held in Greenland, reflecting a view held then (but less so today) that not all Arctic states were equal in their Arcticness. Iceland has worked diligently to correct this impression among its peers, and since 2013 has annually hosted its must-attend Arctic Circle assemblies, where even China, as part of its campaign for recognition as a near-Arctic state, hosted a swanky reception last year. While China's near-Arctic aspiration is little more than wishful thinking, geography, climate and culture align to suggest Iceland would be an archetypical near-Arctic state if ever there were one.

There's another logical member of the near-Arctic club, I believe, and that is Japan. Not only was it briefly an Arctic power, when at the zenith of its global empire in 1942 it held the outer Aleutians for over a year. While it is true that the



Aleutians are well South of the Arctic Circle, they are included by virtue of their climate, geography, and indigenous cultures in many definitions of the Arctic region (including America's own official

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definition), making their possession a qualifying precondition for being a bona fide Arctic state, and their subsequent dispossession restoring Japan to its previous status of near-Arctic statehood, by virtue of Hokkaido's adjacency to the Russian Far East and the Eastern terminus of the Northern Sea Route (NSR), along with its many other Northern climatic, geographic and cultural features that instill in Japan a Northernness familiar to residents of the circumpolar Arctic and subarctic – including winter sea ice, record snow falls, and long cold winters, as well as its Ainu indigenous culture, whose traditional homeland extends all the way up to Sakhalin, Kamchatka, and the Northern Kurils. That Russian President Vladimir Putin recently described the Ainu as an indigenous people to Russia further reinforces Hokkaido's near-Arctic status (being part of the same Northern, indigenous homeland that Putin now recognises as part of mother Russia), much the way the long presence of indigenous Unangan (Aleut) culture reinforces the Aleutians' (and by extension, America's) Arcticness, and the long Inuit cultural presence reinforces Canada's own Arcticness.

So there is much merit to the concept of near-Arctic statehood, if properly qualified by climate, geography and culture. But for China, as Pompeo observed, the claim of being a "Near-Arctic State" is, at least since the Qing dynasty's retreat from outer Manchuria, without merit. That doesn't mean China cannot or should not participate in the Arctic region's economic development, so long as it remains transparent and in the interest of Northerners; but it does mean that China is no more Arctic than other countries of similar latitude, from Belarus to the United Kingdom.

STRATEGIC PARTNERS

In contrast, Japan – an archipelagic state comparable to the island state of Iceland for its geostrategic importance adjacent to emergent Arctic sea lanes and increasingly active Russian naval bastions – thanks to its Northward expansion to Hokkaido around the same time as the Manchu retreat from outer Manchuria, presents us with an important gateway to increasingly strategic waters near the Eastern entrance to the NSR. Comparable in geostrategic importance to Iceland, which sits at the center of the vital G-I-UK gap, these island-states would become especially important in war time as fortified bastions from which to take the fight to the enemy (just as we experienced in World War II in the case of Iceland), and for which we prepared diligently during the Cold War. Fortunately for America, Japan and Iceland remain dedicated allies and long-time strategic partners that help bring stability to both the high North Pacific and Atlantic, and to the increasingly important Arctic basin. And, just as fortunate for America, Japan and Iceland stand out for their uniquely important role in world politics as bona fide near-Arctic states, a status that China lost more than a century and a half ago ●

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US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has dismissed China's claims as pure fantasy

