



HOKKAIDO'S IMPORTANCE

Barry Scott Zellen, PhD, examines why Japan's most Northern island is at a cultural, economic and geopolitical crossroads

Hokkaido and the Kuril Islands, with their long-contested but fortuitously situated geography, remain critical to the future stability of the Arctic, putting pressure on Tokyo to shift its attention away from its South, where it has been focused on the threat to Taiwan from China and on Beijing's frequent maritime probes of its contested Southern islands, as widely reported (such as in 2022 by Deutsche Welle, 2024 by CNN and Kyodo News, and 2025 by South China Morning Post.) Instead, Tokyo needs to pivot to the North, where Beijing, in conjunction with Moscow, are probing Japan's frontiers with increasing frequency and intensity. Indeed, according to Alec Rice: "Japan is an ideal archipelagic staging area in the Western Pacific"

and its: "geographic location as the backbone of the first and second island chains indeed makes it a critical strategic location," particularly Hokkaido.

As Alec Rice recounts, since: "the early nineteenth century, the increasing encroachment of the West and Russia sounded an alarm within then-shattered Japan of the necessity to secure its Northern border. With the fall of the shogunate in the 1860s and the advent of the Meiji Restoration, organised settlement of Hokkaido and beyond began in earnest in conjunction with Japan's rapid industrial modernisation." Rice further explains: "A core endeavour of the settlement of Hokkaido was the tondenhei, or 'colonial troops,' system ... a homesteading/military program in which former families of the now-disbanded samurai class ... not only

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helped settle Japan's undeveloped northern frontier, but also served as a military bulwark against Russian encroachment from the North."

Hokkaido continued to serve as an important bulwark against Southward encroachment by Soviet Russia (and later, post-Soviet Russia) after World War II, through the Cold War and into the post-Cold War era. Moreover, while it is distant from Taiwan and thus widely perceived to be peripheral to recent efforts to contain China's rise, for today's emergent Arctic cold war with its intensifying strategic alignment between Beijing and Moscow, Hokkaido proffers a: "geographic location that is strategically consequential when considering the current global atmosphere of renewed great power competition... Since forcibly taking the Japanese territories of Southern Sakhalin (known in Japanese as Minami Karafuto) and the Kuril Islands at the close of World War II, the Soviet Union – and, since its collapse, Russia – has maintained military forces there as a protective gateway for Pacific access from its Far East port of Vladivostok."

This contested but well-positioned forward geography that Japan holds with its continuing possession of Hokkaido and its former possession of the Kurils, Sakhalin and (briefly) the outer Aleutians informs Japan's perspective on Arctic security in a warming and increasingly contested world. Khan Pham describes how, in: "an age of climate crisis and growing great power competition, Japan faces increasing incentives to engage itself across the Arctic region's research, governance and emerging commerce landscape" and: "asserts itself as an essential partner in stewarding and studying this vital region alongside fellow concerned nations. Both international collaboration and domestic coordination are key vehicles for Japan to match its ambitions with its capabilities in an increasingly busy Polar North." As the Arctic remilitarises and old Cold War fault lines between East and West re-emerge as salient boundaries defining new blocs of increasing mutually exclusive cooperation, Japan is not alone in rethinking the foundations of Arctic security, keeping pace with a fundamental geopolitical transformation of the region under way.

Japan, as a neighbour of China with a mutual interest in increasing Arctic engagement, a neighbour of Russia with an unresolved sovereignty dispute over Russia's continued occupation of the Southern Kurils since they fell to Moscow during the final days of World War II, and the most-Northerly Asian ally of the West, has had to walk a delicate walk. Especially since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in 2022, with the consequent tightening of the strategic alignment between Beijing and Moscow, Japan, along with its neighbours and fellow stakeholders at the Arctic Council, has been forced by necessity to acknowledge that the Arctic has become increasingly divided as GPC displaces circumpolar cooperation as the predominant paradigm in Arctic diplomacy.

Ever since Japan's Northward expansion absorbed Hokkaido in the latter half of the 19th century, its sovereign possession has imbued Japan with what can be described as an inherent *Arcticness*, from its important cultural role as the homeland of the indigenous Ainu people to its historic role as an essential frontier buffer to contain Russian expansion, to its emergent role as an exemplar of Japan's recent efforts to confront its complex history of expansion onto indigenously self-governing lands and its willingness to increasingly

recognise Ainu indigenous rights; a process that catalysed by land losses and large scale megaprojects such as the contentious Nibutani dam project that expropriated and then flooded Ainu lands along the Saru River. While it has been slow and incremental process facing persistent bureaucratic resistance from Japan's national government, the years since have witnessed further progress on the restoration of Ainu rights, starting in 1997 with the Act for the Promotion of Ainu Culture, followed in 2008 by the non-binding but no less historically important resolution recognising the Ainu as an indigenous people of Japan, which paved the way to the more formal and binding 2019 Ainu Culture Promotion Law.

HOKKAIDO HAS THE POTENTIAL TO ATTRACT MANY DATA CENTRES GOING FORWARD

In addition to its shared commitment to redressing historical injustices against its own Indigenous peoples through its proactive policies of indigenous rights recognition and re-affirmation, Japan also shares with the Arctic nations a long and proud history as a whaling nation joining fellow commercial nations, Iceland and Norway as well as subsistence whaling nations including Canada, the United States, Greenland, Denmark and Russia.

Japan recently brought to an end its controversial scientific program in Antarctic waters, shifting its whaling practices to coastal whaling within its EEZ, so that its cultural commitment to continued whaling now has more in common with the Arctic states, and faces less political pushback than its more controversial Antarctic whaling one, targeted by the international animal rights movements popular in many Western nations. Though hampered by both domestic and international headwinds, and with historic tensions arising from the decimation of whale stocks by commercial whalers adversely impacting indigenous subsistence whalers, whaling as a national and indigenous tradition has served as a cultural, economic and diplomatic bridge uniting Japan with Iceland and Norway through their bilateral whale trade while also providing a starting point for Japan to engage with the Arctic states with active indigenous whaling practices including the US, Canada, Greenland/Denmark and Russia. More broadly, such endeavours further reinforce the notion that Japan's proud and enduring whaling heritage is part and parcel of its inherent *Arcticness*.

It's not just lessons and traditions from the past that informs Japan's perception of Hokkaido as a strategic frontier but visions for the future as well and in particular the digital future. Tokyo has thus been pursuing an ambitious strategy to leverage its fortuitously forward geography adjacent to the polar world to turn Hokkaido into a future digital hub that interconnects global fibre-optic data networks as reflected in initiatives such as Japan's East Asia to America (E2A) Cable System and Far North Fibre (FNF) projects.

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emerging as a geostrategic centre. As the vision of the Hokkaido Data Center Campus Network describes: “Hokkaido has a vast amount of land. The construction of large-scale renewable energy power stations by both domestic and international companies will establish an environment in which renewable energy is readily available, giving Hokkaido the potential to attract many data centres going forward.” Large-scale megaprojects such as that eternalised by the Nibutani Dam case, which flooded Ainu lands but catalysed a movement for the restoration of Ainu rights and the

AS THE BACKBONE OF THE FIRST AND SECOND ISLAND CHAINS, JAPAN IS A CRITICAL LOCATION

eventual recognition of the Ainu as indigenous to Japan with a favourable outcome for the Ainu, can thus present a favourable narrative for Japan’s approach toward the development of not just Hokkaido, but beyond Japan’s Northernmost island to the Arctic – following the trajectory experienced across the Western-aligned Arctic as Northern development transformed from state-driven megaprojects imposed upon native peoples at great risk to their culture and environment into co-managed joint venture projects with the equity and managerial participation by natives to ensure better alignment with traditional and local values.

Japan’s vision for Hokkaido as a hub for green energy to power a future of AI-friendly data centres has much potential to continue this synergistic alignment, particularly if Japan continues to foster the restoration of Ainu rights, beyond cultural rights

to an eventual recognition of Ainu land rights and with that a commitment to Ainu prosperity, positioning Japan for prominence in not just *sustainable* but also *mutual* and *collaborative* Northern development – so much so one can envision Japan’s emergence as the ultimate winner in the intensifying trilateral contest for regional influence with its neighbours China and Russia.

While much attention has been focused on China’s increasing strategic and diplomatic alignment with Russia, and its implications for the security of the Arctic and the world, the West has not sat idly by as Eurasia consolidates into an increasingly unified regional bloc. In lockstep with the tightening Beijing-Moscow alignment, NATO has expanded in a rapid fashion to now include the formerly neutral Nordic states, Finland and Sweden, and while North America has experienced recent diplomatic tensions since President Trump’s return to the White House in 2025 largely as a result of this reiterated ambition to acquire Greenland (and on some days, Canada as well – in whole or part), even this can be understood through a lens of hemispheric consolidation into a North American bloc – mirroring the diplomatic and strategic alignment under way in North-East Asia (as formally codified as policy in America’s newly released 2025 National Security Strategy).

In the increasingly contested polar region, Japan does not stand alone and, as noted, has its own impressive hand to play, evident in its alignment with the democratic Arctic nations on indigenous issues; its distinctive whaling diplomacy uniting Japan’s long and proud whaling heritage and contemporary commitment to its preservation with the Arctic nations; and its embrace of a clean, green energy and digital future centred on the North – finding issues and values beyond their mutual embrace of constitutional democracy and the rule of law to forge a united front with like-minded nations of the circumpolar world ●

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Japan faces increasing incentives to engage itself across the Arctic region

