

From October 14 to 18, the Third Arctic Circle Assembly was held in Reykjavik, Iceland. Despite the fact that the Fletcher School has hosted the Arctic Conference for four consecutive years in the past, there has been a lack of general awareness of the Arctic issues on campus. Partly in response to the question posed by President Grimsson, who was a keynote speaker at the Arctic Conference IV, in regards to the school's future plan with the Arctic, the two centers at the school – the Center for International Environment and Resource Policy (CIERP) and the Institute for Global Maritime Studies (IGMS) – generously sponsored more than 20 students as part of the Fletcher delegation to the Arctic Circle Assembly this year. As for me, with the generous funding from CIERP, I was able to attend the Arctic Circle Assembly for the first time.



My interest in the Arctic had always been tangential until I became involved with the Arctic Conference IV at Fletcher last year. Since then, my interest grew to the point where I have decided to incorporate the Arctic into my graduation thesis idea. While perusing many issues pertinent to the Arctic, I was drawn by China's growing interest in the Arctic. Although the international community has recently noticed China's growing presence in the Arctic, the Internet seems to be already inundated with speculations as to what China's intentions are and what it means for the world. Much were, not surprisingly, written by those outside of China, albeit with references from Chinese sources. I myself have come up with a speculation in which China's energy needs and its global long-term strategy is partly or mainly why China's interests

in the Arctic have grown with no way to directly hear from the Chinese – until the opportunity to attend the Arctic Circle Assembly came along.

Before the main program was to start on Friday, the Fletcher delegation was invited to participate in the Energy Forum hosted by Reykjavik University. During one of the sessions, we had the chance to hear from the ambassadors to Iceland from various countries including China.

Ambassador Zhang Weidong emphasized three things: 1) China welcomes the discussion; 2) Balance is the key in the Arctic; and 3) We already have the international regime to solve the Arctic issues called the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), of which China is part. Up until 2012 or 2013, China had been somewhat aggressive in its claims in the Arctic, with the most notable comment made by Chinese Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo in 2010 that “the Arctic belongs to all the people around the world as no nation has sovereignty over it.”

Whether its aggressive stance made the Arctic Council members uneasy or not and affected their decision to accept China as one of the permanent observer in the Arctic Council is unclear. In any case, after several postponements of its application for permanent observership, China seemed to have toned down, and in 2013 finally China was granted permanent observership in the Arctic Council. From this experience, China seems to have learned how to approach the Arctic issues – while not directly challenging the sovereignty of the Arctic countries, it emphasizes inclusive dialogues and open discussions in which China takes part, thereby gradually increasing its presence and voice in the region; it also highlights the use of UNCLOS to demonstrate that China is part of the international community, that China endorses the international convention that encompasses common interests, and that indirectly it could validate itself as a responsible actor. As an answer to one of the ambassadors’ question on the observer’s role and China’s plan to contribute in the Arctic Council, Ambassador Zhang stated that “an observer is just an observer... We will actively participate, we are ready to cooperate. When we are allowed to make statements, we will. When we are invited to make contributions, we are ready because we are ready to show.” My impression of his answer was that China was passively, indirectly addressing the limited scope of role China as an observer can play, implying China could do so much more if given an expanded role beyond just being an observer.

At the plenary session on China on October 16, the Chinese delegation reiterated the Chinese view and position in the Arctic: 1) China has had its interest in the Arctic since 1925; 2) Changing nature in the environment and resource exploration have direct impact on China’s climate, environment, agriculture, shipping, trade as well as social and economic development, making China a major stakeholder in the Arctic; 3) China is ready to participate in the relevant work in cooperative and practical manner, in accordance with the international rules; 4) China is a constructive partner, willing and able to make an even greater contribution to the sustainable development of the Arctic, on top of its scientific research and exploration projects as well as the LNG project that will contribute to the LNG export to Europe and Asia; and 5) Geographically speaking, China is a near Arctic state. China identifying itself as a “near Arctic” state as well as a stakeholder in the Arctic could indicate the degree to which China is committed in the area in the long term. The composition of the Chinese delegation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Polar Research Institute, China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO), and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) could be used to identify main interests of China in the Arctic – climate change influencing the Chinese natural environment and weather that ultimately affect food security, new shipping routes, and energy opportunities.

In contrast with the China sessions, what stood out in the Japan and Korea sessions was the fact that they did not identify themselves as Arctic countries. Masao Fukusawa, who is part of the New Arctic Science Project of Japan explicitly stated that “Japan is not an Arctic country but [Japan] is going to have projects with the Arctic because the Arctic problem is already beginning to be a global issue.” Korea also focused more in their brief presentation on what they are doing at home and in the Arctic to contribute through scientific research projects. Of course, that does not mean that these two countries are uninterested in potential economic opportunities in the region, including new shipping routes, fisheries, fresher water, and hydrocarbon extraction.

What I got out of all the sessions I attended at the Arctic Circle Assembly is that 1) whatever happens in the Arctic will not stay in the Arctic, it will affect everyone living on the Earth; and 2) the Arctic issue is inherently connected to the global security, as the melting of the ice changes the jet stream pattern and ocean stream pattern, changing fishery dynamics and agricultural patterns, which influence all the countries’ food and energy security. Also culinary patterns, indigenous cultures, and livelihoods of people that have relied on certain patterns in terms of the weather and animal movements are at risk. Contemplating all the interconnected issue that brings us back to the Arctic, I am sure I was not the only one who came to the realization that the Arctic impacts us all. I feel all the more compelled to learn more about the Arctic and the development that will unfold in the region in the near and far future.

What was interesting was that while messages the Chinese delegation was delivering was essentially the same as other countries and delegations, emphasizing the balance between preservation of the ecosystem and sustainable development, the interconnectedness of the Arctic issue, peace, and stability in the region, how the messages were perceived was different from the messages from other sessions and delegations – largely with suspicion on their “good will”. Contemplating on why that was the case, I speculate that the scale by which China could implement its projects could be perceived as threatening, as any investment by China could potentially overshadow any attempts and investments by other groups. Aside from my own research topic in regards to China’s presence in the Arctic in alignment with its long term strategy (potentially in energy security, with further research required), I would love to learn about why China’s moves are perceived with much more skepticism than others and what China could do or is doing to mitigate and to gain trust as a trustworthy, responsible actor in the world.

The trip to Iceland and participation in the Arctic Circle Assembly gave me a lot to think about over the next few months, and even years. This trip definitely made me more passionate about the Arctic issue and reaffirmed how important the region is in the world - in the face of global warming and climate change, you cannot be ignorant of the development in the Arctic as a human being living on this Earth. I am tremendously thankful for CIERP that made this trip possible.