

**Review of Japan's Arctic Policy 2015–25:
A Report of the Rovaniemi Workshop and the 17th Polar Law Symposium**
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Introduction

Japan announced its Arctic Policy in 2015,¹ and it is opportune that a decade of its implementation will be reviewed based on the Japanese practice.² Co-organised by the Arctic Challenge for Sustainability II (ArCS II) project and the Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, and supported by Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) KAKENHI International Collaboration Research Grant on International Polar Law, the Rovaniemi Workshop on the *Review of Japan's Arctic Policy 2015-25: A Suggestion for the Next Decade* was held on 20-21 September 2024 in Rovaniemi, Finland. The Rovaniemi Workshop was attended both in person and online by a Japanese team consisting of 7 researchers from ArCS II and 12 international experts designated to

provide expert opinions, as well as guest participants. The results of the review and feedback from this Workshop will be published as a Policy Brief under the ArCS II Briefing Paper Series.³ During the 17th Polar Law Symposium held in Östersund, Sweden, on 24-25 September 2024, a seminar was convened to report on the Rovaniemi Workshop and to receive wider feedback from the polar law community.

Japan's Arctic Policy: Why its review today?

Japan's Arctic Policy was announced at the Arctic Circle Assembly in October 2015 by the Japanese Ambassador to the Arctic Affairs, two years after Japan gained its Observer status at the Arctic Council, with its high hope of extending its national interests in and contributing to more

¹ The Headquarters of Ocean Policy, *Japan's Arctic Policy* (16 October 2015):

<https://www8.cao.go.jp/ocean/english/arctic/pdf/japans_ap_e.pdf> (accessed 30 October 2024).

² See for the first 5 years of practice under ArCS I (2015-2020), Romain Chuffart, Sakiko Hataya, Osamu Inagaki, and Lindsay Arthur, "Assessing Japan's Arctic Engagement during the ArCS Project (2015-2020)", *The Yearbook of Polar Law*, Vol.12 (2020).

³ ArCS II International Law Briefing Paper Series: <https://www.research.kobe-u.ac.jp/gsics-pcrc/arctic/press_release/briefing_papers.html> (accessed 30 October 2024).

sustained and strengthened international Arctic cooperation. Japan's Arctic Policy has been updated twice, in 2018 and 2023, through the five-year Basic Plans of Ocean Policy of Japan. However, its original three pillars have not changed: Japan is to engage in and contribute to the Arctic issues through (1) research and development, (2) international cooperation, and (3) sustainable development. The ArCS II project, with its strong research components in the areas of international law and politics, aims to establish an academic basis for the implementation and advancement of Japan's Arctic Policy.⁴ As ArCS II is winding up in the end of March 2025 and with the changing geopolitical landscape both globally and more acutely in the Arctic region due to the continuing Russian invasion of Ukraine, the ArCS II International Law Research Team considered it necessary to examine academically and objectively Japan's implementing practice of the Policy over the past decade and to suggest a way forward in this changing Arctic situation.

The Japanese team first identified 10 elements within Japan's Arctic Policy that are relevant to Japan's engagement in and contribution towards Arctic international cooperation: security, the Rule of Law, science diplomacy, the Arctic Council and other bilateral/multilateral cooperative mechanisms, collaboration with Indigenous Peoples, protection of the Arctic environment and ecosystem, the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement, Arctic sea routes, sustainable economic development, and comparative perspective of Arctic policies and strategies of other nations.⁵ The team then gathered relevant implementing practices of Japan and Japanese Arctic stakeholders. Those practices reviewed were official government documents reporting on the implementation of the Basic Plan on Ocean Policy,⁶ as well as other more specific statements and activities that can be interpreted as implementing the Policy. The latter included several statements and activities of Japan's foreign ministers and Arctic ambassadors, as well as Japan's Observer Reports submitted to the Arctic

⁴ Strategic Goal 4 of the ArCS II: <https://www.nipr.ac.jp/arcs2/e/goals/strategic_goals4/> (accessed 30 October 2024).

⁵ On the comparison of Arctic policies of Japan, China and Republic of Korea, see Medy Dervovic and Akiho Shibata, 日本・中国・韓国の北極政策の比較：法の支配・国際協力・ビジネス・先住民族への取り組み, *ArCS II International Law Briefing Paper Series No.4* (in Japanese only): <https://www.research.kobe-u.ac.jp/gsics-pcr/pdf/ArCS2_Int'lLaw_BPS_04_J_FS_Jan_2022.pdf> (accessed 30 October 2024)

⁶ Cabinet Office of Japan, *Annual Ocean Reports* (in Japanese only): <<https://www8.cao.go.jp/ocean/info/annual/annual.html>> (accessed 30 October 2024).

Council. A table analysing these practices was provided by the Japanese team prior to the Rovaniemi Workshop for two rounds of feedback and comments from the designated international experts (see Annex for the list).

The Rovaniemi Workshop

The location of Rovaniemi, Finland, for the Workshop was a deliberate choice, with the expectation that many experts on Arctic governance would be available for feedback and comments on this exercise to produce a more academically robust and effective Policy Brief both in Japanese (for Japanese stakeholders) and English (for a broader international audience), expected to be published at the end of March 2025. A Policy Brief under the ArCS II Briefing Paper Series provides the policy-makers with a concise summary of relevant information and/or policy options on Arctic issues. This expectation was realised, as 25 Arctic governance experts from various countries attended the Workshop both in person and online, and actively engaged in the discussion.

The Workshop began with a speech by Mr. Petteri Vuorimäki, the Finnish Ambassador for Arctic Affairs. Referring to Finland-Japan bilateral cooperation on the Arctic and Japan's active contribution as an Observer to the Arctic Council, he highly evaluated the significance of this project and the Workshop. Mr. Shinichi Nagano, a Researcher in Economic Section at the Embassy of Japan in Finland, read a

message from Mr. Takashi Okada, the Japanese Ambassador to Finland. In the discussion, for example, Professors Rasmus Bertelsen and Timo Koivurova commented on the use of the term "security" in the context of the Arctic and how the changing "security" situation in the Arctic should or should not set the background of the Policy Brief analysing the 2015 document. These comments have had a concrete impact on the Japanese team in re-considering and re-configuring the entire exercise. Dr. Betsy Baker emphasised Japan's research strength in the Pacific gateway to the Arctic region, with the new icebreaking research vessel *Mirai II* soon to be operational, suggesting that how this scientific and logistical strength could be utilised more effectively in Japan's engagement in the Arctic cooperation. Professor Kamrul Hossain made an important point regarding the perceived linkage between Japan's domestic policy and its external policy towards the Arctic regarding the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Dr. Dan-bi Um, a Senior Researcher at Korea Maritime Institute, who participated in person at the Workshop, provided the Korean experience of updating its Arctic Policy. Finally, Nansen Professor Romain Chuffart reiterated the importance of including strong recommendations in the Policy Brief.

On the Rule of Law, Professor Akiho Shibata, the Principal Investigator of ArCS II International Law Research

Program, and Ms. Fumika Iwama, an LL.M. candidate at Kobe University, revealed that attachment to and promotion of the Rule of Law formed the core of Japan's Arctic engagement. Its essence can be observed through the key practices, such as Foreign Minister Kono's speech in 2018 at the Arctic Circle Assembly and Foreign Minister Hayashi's comment in 2023 at the Arctic Circle Japan Forum, displaying Japan's interest in realising the Rule of Law in the Arctic. According to their analysis, the emphasis on the Rule of Law has generally increased in Japan's foreign policy in the past few years, but it has remained at the same level in the context of the Arctic even after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Dr. Baker referred to the fact that there are several views on the concept of the Rule of Law in the international community and in the Arctic in particular, and suggested that Japan would promote both diplomatic and academic dialogue between the relevant actors on how to reach a common understanding of the precise implementation of the Rule of Law specifically in the Arctic.

According to the original Arctic Policy and under the ArCS II project, the Arctic Council has been identified as one of the main Arctic governance mechanisms through which Japan would be able to contribute to the Arctic collaborative efforts through its research and development. Dr. Osamu Inagaki, a Researcher at Kobe University, examined

Japan's engagement in the Arctic Council from three perspectives: participation, participants, and contribution. Regarding participation, there has been clear progress during this decade, and today Japan participates in all six working groups of the Arctic Council. While most Japanese participants in these working groups are ArCS II scientists, some government officials also participated in the Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR) and Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF) working groups. While Japan has made substantial contributions, particularly to Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP) and CAFF, including writing scientific reports and holding regional meetings, there is still room for it to make further contribution to other working groups. Into the future and under the current circumstances, Dr. Gosia Smieszek-Rice commented on the increasing importance of the Chairship of the Arctic Council and the secretariats of its working groups. The Japanese team will surely reflect this when drafting recommendations on how Japan would maintain its scientific contributions through the Arctic Council.

Funded by the ArCS II project, Mr. Medy Dervovic, a PhD candidate at Reykjavík University, participated in the Workshop as both an international expert and a rapporteur. Also funded by ArCS II, Ms. Iwama assisted in producing the Workshop documents, as well as in the preparation and organisation of the

Workshop. Dr. Inagaki and Associate Professor Maiko Raita at Osaka University of Economics and Law, both participating in the Workshop with the support of above JSPS KAKENHI, have planned and prepared the organisation of this Workshop. Through this process, they obtained valuable insights in pursuing international collaborative research. The Japanese team expresses their sincere thanks to the warm hospitality of the Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, and to those actively participated in the discussion.

The 17th Polar Law Symposium

The 17th Polar Law Symposium, hosted by Mid-Sweden University, provided an excellent opportunity to follow up the process of receiving feedback on the review of Japan's Arctic Policy, as well as to obtain additional and comparative comments from Antarctic legal and policy experts. Dr. Inagaki organised a seminar titled "Japan's Arctic Policy: A Decade of Implementation and Its Future Improvements," inviting Professor Koivurova, Dr. Chuffart, and Professor Shibata as commentators and Associate Professor Hitomi Kimura at Otsuma Women's University as a moderator. This seminar highlighted three aspects of Japan's Arctic Policy: contribution to the Arctic Council, collaboration with Indigenous Peoples, and the Rule of Law. In the discussion, speakers exchanged their views on how Japan can contribute more

substantially to the work of the Arctic Council, particularly in the Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG) and its projects focused more on Arctic peoples and societies and how Japan should utilise the Arctic Council under the current difficult situation as a means of science and technology diplomacy.

Taking advantage of the Polar Law Symposium with experts from both the Arctic and Antarctic legal communities, Ms. Iwama, together with Professor Shibata and Ms. Ridzanna Abdulgafur, LL.M. candidate at Kobe University, gave a unique research presentation on whether and how Japan may establish its Antarctic Policy by referencing to its counterpart, the Arctic Policy. While Japan does not have any official policy documents on the Antarctic, this presentation examined whether there are coherent Antarctic policies being discernible from Japanese diplomatic practice, as reflected in Japan's Diplomatic Bluebooks and its submissions to the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings (ATCM). Ms. Iwama argued that Japan does have a practice that may be interpreted as supporting the two principles being applied as its Antarctic diplomatic policies, namely the Rule of Law and Science and Technology Diplomacy under the Antarctic Treaty System. However, because of their low visibility and explicitness, the trust and stability of Japan's engagement in the Antarctic governance may be undermined. Thus, she concluded with the suggestion

that Japan should officially announce its Antarctic Policy in one document by May 2026, similar to its 2015 Arctic Policy, when it hosts the 48th ATCM in Hiroshima.

Engagement of early-career polar legal scholars

The Rovaniemi Workshop and the seminar at the Polar Law Symposium were not only

October 2025; ATCM-related workshop in Kobe or Hiroshima, Japan, in May 2026; and the 19th Polar Law Symposium in Hamilton, New Zealand, in November 2026. All the co-authors of this short conference report look forward to international and interdisciplinary collaboration in the research on international polar law.



Rovaniemi Workshop Group Photo

great successes but also provided concrete opportunities for early career polar legal scholars both from Japan and globally to engage collaboratively in these projects. The JSPS KAKENHI project on International Polar Law (23KK0019, Principal Investigator: Akiho Shibata) intends to continue inviting early career scholars to its associated events and meetings, including the 18th Polar Law Symposium in Nuuk, Greenland, in

Annex: List of international experts, guest speakers and discussants in the Workshop

International Experts

Betsy Baker, Baker Arctic Consulting, USA (online)
 Rasmus Bertelsen, Professor, UiT, Norway (online)
 Romain Chuffart, Nansen Professor, University of Akureyri, Iceland
 Medy Dervovic, Ph.D. Candidate, Reykjavik University, Iceland

Katharina Heinrich, Junior Researcher, Arctic
Centre, University of Lapland, Finland

Kamrul Hossain, Director, Northern Institute for
Environmental and Minority Law, University
of Lapland, Finland

Minsu Kim, Deputy President, Korea Maritime
Institute (KMI), Republic of Korea (excused)

Timo Koivurova, Research Professor, University of
Lapland, Finland

Margozata Smieszek-Rice, Postdoctoral
Researcher, UiT, Norway (online)

Adam Stepień, Researcher, Arctic Centre,
University of Lapland, Finland

Pavel Tkach, Junior Researcher, Arctic Centre,
University of Lapland, Finland

Dan-bi Um, Senior Researcher, Ocean Economy
Strategy Department, KMI, Republic of Korea

Guest speaker at Workshop

Petteri Vuorimäki, Arctic Ambassador of Finland
and Senior Arctic Official

Shinichi Nagano, Researcher, Economic Section,
Embassy of Japan in Finland

**Discussants from Arctic Centre, University of
Lapland**

Irene Ballesteros, Visiting Researcher

Nadezhda Filimonova, Post-Doctoral Researcher

Medes Malaihollo, Visiting Researcher, Ph.D.
Candidate, University of Groningen, The
Netherlands

Krittika Singh, Ph.D. candidate