

South Korea and the Arctic¹*Hyunkyo SEO*

The Republic of Korea's interest in the Arctic has started with scientific research. Korea's Arctic activities began in 1999 when two Korean scientists from the Korea Ocean Research Institute (KORDI, predecessor of the Korea Institute of Ocean Science and Technology), to which the Korea Polar Research Institute (KOPRI) belonged, participated in an Arctic Ocean expedition together with a Chinese ice-breaking research vessel, MV 'Xue Long'. In 2002, with the opening of the Arctic Dasan Research Station in Ny-Alesund, Norwegian Arctic, S.Korea became capable of performing independent research in the Arctic as well. And since the icebreaking research vessel 'Araon' was built in 2009, the country has played a role as an axis of Arctic Ocean research in the international community by carrying out field research in the Arctic Ocean every summer season.

Based on the research achievements from the Arctic research infrastructure, S.Korea applied for an observer status of the Arctic Council in 2008 and became an ad-hoc observer country in the same year. In 2013, it was granted formal observer status at the Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council held in Kiruna, Sweden. In December of the same year, the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries (MOF) established the 1st pan-governmental Masterplan for Arctic Policy" as a follow-up measure to obtaining formal observer status which can be called the first Arctic policy of S. Korea. And five years later, in 2018, the 2nd Masterplan for Promotion of Arctic Activities' (2018-2022) was announced. Through the establishment of these two masterplans, Korea formed a three hierarchical structure of Arctic policy: Vision, Policy goals, and Strategic Plans.

Firstly, the Korean government established the vision as a leading country in Arctic activities, and it made 3 major policy goals: 'Strengthening international cooperation', 'Strengthening scientific research', 'Economic/business partnership'. Followed by these goals, 4 subordinated strategic plans (Four pillars) were built to establish and perform specific tasks: 'Strengthening international cooperation', 'Sustainable economic/business partnership',

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‘Encouraging scientific research’, and ‘Strengthening national capacity-building’. Considering these policy framework, S.Korea's priorities in Arctic policy could be summarized as ‘international cooperation’, ‘scientific research’, and ‘economic partnership’.

Subsequently, the Act on the Promotion of Polar Activities, initiated by MOF, was enacted in 2021, providing an integrated legal basis for systematic support of Korea's Antarctic and Arctic activities for the first time in 2021. And in November of the same year, MOF announced ‘the Arctic Activity Strategy 2050’ which orientates the country’s future policy direction in the long term. In November 2022, MOF established and announced the statutory basic plan called the 1st Masterplan for Polar Activity Promotion of Korea (2023-2027) based on Article 6 of the act on the Promotion of Polar Activities. This Masterplan is the basic plan that integrates the existing non-statutory ‘Masterplan for Arctic Policy’ and ‘A Basic Plan for promotion of research activities in Antarctica’ in accordance with ‘the Act on Activities in the Antarctic Area and the protection of Antarctic Environment’ enacted in 2004 in Korea. In particular, from the perspective of the Masterplan for Arctic Policy, it means a transition from the existing non-statutory plan to a legal-based plan that has secured driving-force based on the law.

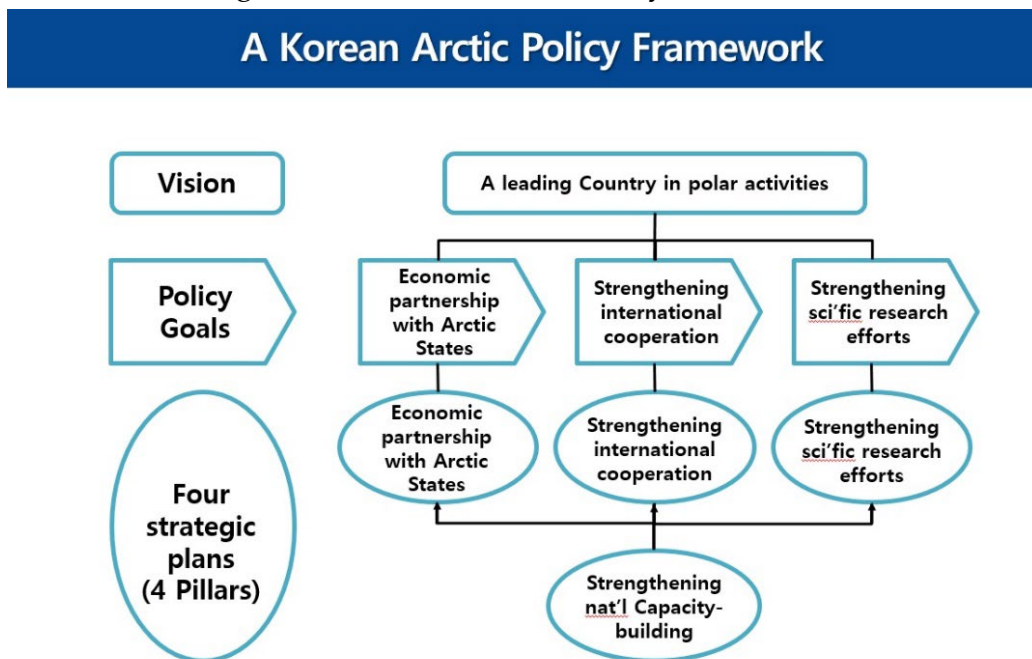
The 1st Masterplan for Polar Activity Promotion (2023-2027) also presents the vision of being a leading country in polar Activities, inheriting the vision of the existing Masterplan for Arctic Policy. And in terms of policy goal, ‘Strengthening Arctic science research’ such as scientific monitoring an unexplored Arctic area, addressing to climate change issues, and ‘Stimulating Arctic business activities’ like the technology development & the Korean industry’s participation in Arctic business are constituting high level policy goals.

And at the lowest level of 5 strategic plans were also presented as contents of ‘Stronger building network of domestic collaboration and foreign cooperation’ respectively Establishing the Arctic industrial foundation for contributing to the national economy, ‘Strengthening scientific research’ including addressing climate change’, ‘Scientific exploration in unexplored area of the Arctic’ (including the Antarctic), and Capacity-building covering the co-use of research infrastructure, training of early-career scientists, and public

participation in Arctic activities, which were composed of detailed action-plans and relevant projects and programs, etc.

If this masterplan is successfully implemented, Korea will complete the construction of next-generation icebreaking research vessels in addition to existing Araon in 2027, becoming a leading country in the polar marine research with two icebreaking research vessels. In addition, by Arctic sea-ice monitoring through the development and operation of micro satellites, S.Korea will play a major role in Arctic climate change issues in global community. And, following the existing icebreaking LNG tankers, S.Korea will continue its status as a global shipbuilding powerhouse in the world through creating new Arctic industries such as securing eco-friendly icebreaking container ship technology. S.Korea, as the country with world's 10th largest economy, will actively participate in international cooperation activities to enhance its national status as a leading country that actively contributes to addressing global Arctic issues.

Figure 1: A Korean Arctic Policy Framework



For more on this, read...

Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, Arctic Policy of the Republic of Korea, 2013

Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, Policy Framework for the Promotion of Arctic Activities of the Republic of Korea 2018-2022, 2018.

Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, The 1st Masterplan for Polar Activity Promotion (Korean Version), 2022.

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