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East Asian subnational government involvement in the Arctic: A case for paradiplomacy?

The globalised Arctic has in recent years witnessed an influx of extra-regional actors, many of whom come from East Asia. Although there is an abundance of analysis of the roles of East Asian nation-states—including Japan and China—in Arctic governance and resource development, research on East Asian subnational governments' (SNGs) increased Arctic engagement has not drawn much attention. Leaning on the concept of paradiplomacy and being particularly inspired by Alexander S. Kuznetsov's explanatory framework for the study of SNGs' involvement in international relations, this study examines the motives behind East Asian subnational governments' involvement in Arctic affairs and the attitudes of national governments towards this involvement. Based on the study of Hokkaido Prefecture in Japan and the provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning in China, this article argues that the East Asian SNGs' Arctic initiatives are mainly based on economic objectives, especially those connected with new transportation routes in the Arctic Ocean. Scientific cooperation also plays an important role in the evolving subnational Arctic engagement. At the national level, East Asian SNGs are actively interacting with their respective central governments, which have, in general, been supportive of their Arctic endeavours.

Keywords: paradiplomacy; subnational government; East Asia; Arctic; China; Japan

Discussions concerning the global Arctic and the role of Asia in the Arctic (and the Arctic in Asia) are no longer new. On the contrary, recent years have witnessed numerous studies dedicated to the analysis of the relationship between the Arctic and Asian actors, including China, Japan and other non-Arctic Asian states (see, for example, Ohnishi, Hwan, and Nagao 2013; Li 2016; Lunde, Yang, and Stensdal 2016; Sakhuja and Narula 2016; Tonami 2016). This interest was sparked by their intensified commercial presence in the region, expanding contributions to Arctic research and their roles as observers to the Arctic Council (AC).¹ Whereas the Asian nation-states have thus become

recognised as important players in the Arctic international relations and governance literature, the role and involvement of East Asian subnational governments (SNGs) have been touched upon only in a handful of studies (see, for example, Saunavaara 2017; Zhang 2019). These studies introduced rich empirical data but lacked a solid theoretical or conceptual framework for analysis.

Despite the accumulation of knowledge concerning European and Russian SNGs' international activities and paradiplomacy in the Arctic (see, for example, Sergunin and Joenniemi 2014; Ackrén 2019), the East Asian SNGs' Arctic engagement has not drawn the kind of attention that, for example, East Asian commercial actors have in recent years (Lajeunesse and Lackenbauer 2016; Deng 2018). The lack of research does not, however, arise from a lack of interest and readiness to be involved in the Arctic affairs among SNGs in East Asia. This study focuses on the engagement of the Hokkaido Prefecture in Japan and the provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning in China with the Arctic region, a vast but sparsely populated area that is geographically relatively distant, represents a different cultural background and has a smaller total population than many East Asian cities.

Leaning on the concept of paradiplomacy and being particularly inspired by Alexander S. Kuznetsov's explanatory framework for the study of SNGs' involvement in international relations, this study asks the following questions: What are the motives of the East Asian regional governments to be involved in Arctic affairs; what is the attitude of the central governments towards the Arctic activity of the given regions; and what are the results and consequences of this paradiplomacy for the regions themselves and for the nations? This research is based on a rich pool of sources, including public reports and declarations, media material (printed newspapers, magazines and digital publications) and data collected through interviews and participatory observation. The authors utilised

sources available in all relevant languages, including English, Chinese, Japanese and Russian. The article consists of five parts. First, the paradiplomacy research is reviewed in order to formulate the conceptual foundation. Second, the article describes the global interest in the Arctic and the initiatives Japan and China have made vis-à-vis the Arctic. The third part examines the Japanese and Chinese SNGs' engagement with the Arctic. This is followed by the fourth section, which contains comparative analysis. The discussion section summarises the most important conclusions and examines the possibility of cooperation among the East Asian SNGs with regard to Arctic-related matters.

Paradiplomacy and the analysis of SNGs' international activity

International relations and activity are not the prerogative of nation-states and national governments. When analysing the subnational governments' (referring here mainly to the territorial and administrative units on the first level of authority after the central government) activities in international affairs, this study utilises the concept of paradiplomacy. While recognising the criticism directed at this concept and the existence of other terminology utilised in the conceptualisation of the regional and local governments' involvement in international affairs (Dickson 2014, 692–697; Li 2014, 275–276, 292; Kuznetsov 2015, 2–3, 22–31), we consider the paradiplomacy scholarship as the most comprehensive framework for the analysis of the multidimensional phenomena we are interested in. Our study includes both the SNGs' direct and indirect international activity; that is, the SNGs' attempts to develop external relations of their own and their attempts to influence the national foreign policy (Dickson 2014, 691; Sergunin and Joenniemi 2014, 5). Furthermore, in order to present as comprehensive a

picture as possible, we decided to include both SNG-SNG and SNG-foreign central government as well as SNG-commercial entity relations in our analysis.

Despite the global expansion of paradiplomacy studies since the 1990s, the literature on SNGs as international actors has been dominated by the analysis of North American and European SNGs' international activities (Jain 2005, 4; Dickson 2014, 691; Kuznetsov 2015, 34–4). The existing literature on the East Asian SNGs' international activities rarely builds its conceptual foundations on paradiplomacy (*paradipuumashii* in Japanese and *pingxing waijiao* in Chinese). In the Chinese and Japanese contexts, concepts such as *jichitai gaikō* in Japanese or *ci guojia zhengfu waijiao* in Chinese have been more often used for referring to SNGs' international activities. Therefore, this study builds on the research concerning the East Asian SNGs' paradiplomatic activities in general and SNGs' interests in Arctic issues in particular. It builds on Kuznetsov's (2015, 100–101) integrative explanatory framework, which is based on the analysis of different academic discourses on paradiplomacy. This model introduces six questions that are considered crucial for the comprehensive analysis of an examined region:

(1) What are the causes of the blooming of the paradiplomatic activities of an examined region; (2) what are the legal grounds of constituent diplomacy in the country of an examined subnational case; (3) what is the predominant motive of the government of an examined region to be involved in international affairs; (4) how has paradiplomacy been institutionalised in an examined region; (5) what is the attitude of the central government towards the paradiplomacy of its constituent entities and (6) what are the consequences of paradiplomacy for the development of the whole nation? The current study emphasises questions number three, five and six because they are considered the most meaningful in the context of Arctic involvement.

If Duchacek's (1990, 16–18) classification of paradiplomacy is utilised in the contextualisation of this study, it can be described as research on global paradiplomacy. Rather than concentrating solely on the relations between neighbouring regions on different sides of the national border (transborder regional diplomacy) or on relations between regions of the neighbouring countries without a common frontier (transregional paradiplomacy), this research focuses on SNGs' international activity involving actors and issues that are geographically distant. However, due particularly to the vast size of the Russian Federation and its regional entities, part of the activity analysed fits into the latter two categories as well.

Despite the possibility of compressing Kuznetsov's third question (regarding the motives) into simple 'why' and 'with whom' inquiries, it is still one of the most discussed aspects in the paradiplomacy literature. The complex web of possible and often interconnected motives seems to include at least economic motivations (e.g., attracting inward investments and foreign tourists, seeking markets for domestic products and supporting the internationalisation of local firms, possibilities for technological transfer), political motivations (e.g., regions with nationalistic aspirations seeking recognition and legitimacy through international cooperation, utilising the international arena as a platform for internal region-building or for demonstrating the capabilities of the regional politicians, promoting desired development in foreign countries), cultural motivations (e.g., cooperating with foreign SNGs who have similar cultural or linguistic identities) and the motives related to transborder cooperation in various issues ranging from the environment and emergency management to transport, infrastructure and migration. While recognising the existence of a great number of functional and geographical determinants guiding the selection process of foreign partners, it is important to remember

that similar actions performed by different SNGs may have very different motives (Keating 1999, 3–5; Jain 2005, 21; Kuznetsov 2015, 109–111).

If one wants to understand the features of SNGs' international activity, an examination of the attitude of each country's central government towards paradiplomacy is highly relevant. Although this study does not attempt to place individual state-SNG pairs into categories corresponding to different levels of cooperation, coordination and contradiction, the need to analyse the level and mechanisms of central government control, as well as the potential positive expectations and support on behalf of the state, is recognised. The SNGs' potential to undertake actions that may conflict with the policies of the central governments is directly connected to the sixth question concerning the consequences of paradiplomacy for the development of the whole nation. Although this is a valid question in general, it is worth pointing out that the empirical cases examined in this study—East Asian SNGs and the Arctic—possess no direct links to issues, such as territorial secession, that are often discussed in the theoretical research literature (Duchacek 1990, 11, 29; Keating 1999, 11–12; Kuznetsov 2015, 113–115).

Global interest and growing East Asian involvement in the Arctic

One could argue that the Arctic, as a topic of discussion, is 'hotter' today than ever. The great challenges in this region—ranging from the melting of sea ice to permafrost thawing—are globally discussed. These are linked with the recognised possibilities offered by hydrocarbons and other extractive industry developments, as well as the utilisation of new shipping routes. The impact of these changes on the Arctic flora and fauna, indigenous people and international relations have, likewise, been analysed in areas far south of any lines attempting to describe the borders of the Arctic. As a result,

the globalised Arctic has recently witnessed an influx of extra-regional actors, many of whom come from East Asia.

Japan's increasing interest in the Arctic

Whereas Japan's historical engagement with the Arctic region can be traced back to the signing of the Svalbard Treaty in 1920, and its initial Arctic research efforts began in the 1950s, the diversification of its interests and intensification of its involvement took place in the 1990s. In 1991, Japan established its permanent research station in Ny-Ålesund on Svalbard and applied for membership in the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC). The International Northern Sea Route Programme (INSROP), initiated by Norway, Japan and Russia, was launched two years later. Phase 1 (1993–1995) and Phase 2 (1997–1999) of this project studied the potential utilisation of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and were eventually succeeded by the national Japan Northern Sea Route Programme (JANSROP), which continued until 2005.

Following the example of China and South Korea, Japan submitted its application to become an observer to the Arctic Council in July 2009. While awaiting the decision concerning observer status, which was eventually granted to it in 2013, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) established its Arctic Task Force and the position of the ambassador in charge of Arctic Affairs. Questions concerning the Arctic have not, however, belonged only to the administrative field of MOFA during the 2010s. The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) has investigated the usability of the NSR, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) launched the GRENE Arctic Climate Change Research Project (2011–2016), followed by the larger Arctic Challenge for Sustainability (ArCS) project (2015–2020), and the Headquarters for Ocean Policy (2015) prepared and announced Japan's first

Arctic Policy in 2015. This document emphasised science and technology cooperation, international cooperation and a stable security environment, sustainability, respect of indigenous people and the potential of the NSR. Besides the Arctic Council, Japan's international engagement has also taken the shape of involvement in drafting the 2014 Polar Code—a mandatory code for shipping in the Arctic and Antarctic waters—and the 2018 International Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean (China is also party to it) (Bennett 2014a, 78, 83; Ohnishi 2016, 172–178).

China's road to the Arctic

Similar to Japan, China's active involvement with the Arctic commenced in the 1990s, first with joining the IASC in 1996 and then with the launch of its first official Arctic scientific expedition in 1999. Since then, China has been steadily building up its Arctic credentials domestically by continuously expanding its own Arctic-focused scientific institutions and infrastructure and internationally by engaging with regional actors and organisations.

So far, China has organised ten Arctic research expeditions (as of October 2019), become an AC observer in 2013 (applied in 2006) and appointed a special representative for Arctic affairs in 2016. Since 2012, the country has also been referring to itself as a near-Arctic state (jin Beiji guojia). In addition to its research outpost on Svalbard, China completed an Arctic science observatory—in cooperation with Icelandic research institutions—on Iceland in 2018, and the country is considering establishing another research station on Greenland (The State Council 2016a, Xinhua 2018a). It also launched its second icebreaker in 2018, the Xuelong 2, which should become operational in 2019 (Xinhua 2018b). Meanwhile, China's large state-owned enterprises are using the Arctic shipping routes to deliver goods to Europe (Humpert 2018) and investing in resource

extraction projects above the Arctic Circle, such as the Yamal LNG project in the Russian Arctic (Xinhua 2017a).

China's interests in the Arctic region are formulated in its Arctic White Paper published in 2018. The document outlines China's regional goals in terms of (1) understanding the Arctic—improving its capacity and capability in Arctic scientific research, (2) protecting the Arctic—actively responding to climate change in the Arctic, (3) developing the Arctic—focusing on Arctic technological innovation and exploration and exploitation of Arctic resources and (4) participating in Arctic governance—China will participate in affairs and activities related to the Arctic governance system (Xinhua 2018c). With the publication of this white paper, China also officially included the Arctic (together with the shipping routes) in its Belt and Road Initiative in order to build a Polar Silk Road.

INSERT Map 1.

Hokkaido: A pioneer of northern cooperation with new Arctic aspirations

Japan can be described as a unitary state with a strong tradition of centralisation, so the legal foundations for Japanese SNGs' international activities are weaker than in many other countries. The constitution of Japan clearly states that the Cabinet is in charge of the foreign policy, and it contains no articles clearly authorising Hokkaido's paradiplomacy. However, neither the Constitution nor the Local Autonomy Law prohibit Hokkaido or other prefectures from acting internationally. Therefore, despite the previous attempts to clarify the legal footing of SNGs' international activity, regional governments are advancing their paradiplomatic initiatives in a somewhat ambiguous environment

(Japanese Constitution 1947, Articles 72, 73 and 94; Local Autonomy Law 1947, Articles 1 and 2; Jain 2005, 10, 24, 41, 53–54).

The intensification of SNGs' international activity in Japan

Notwithstanding the long tradition of central government dominance in external affairs, Jain (1–9, 32–33, 43, 67–70, 87–90) argued as early as 2005 that new actors had become significant in Japan's international relations and highlighted SNGs as the new key agents. Although Japanese SNGs had, in general, been slow to initiate paradiplomatic activities in comparison to their counterparts in North America and Western Europe, and although there were still great differences in the level of interest and involvement among the SNGs, some of them were already engaging in international exchanges during the Cold War. Starting from sister-city relations with counterparts from the United States in the 1950s, the development has also led to cooperation with regional and local governments in countries such as the Soviet Union and North Korea—with which Japan's diplomatic relations were strained because of the Cold War tensions—since the 1960s and 1970s. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the international activities of Japanese SNGs intensified further and evolved from exchange (*kōryū*) to cooperation (*kyōryoku*). Their objective and purpose also shifted from symbolic goodwill to mutual, often economic, benefits.

The intensification of SNGs' international activities led to competition among the central government ministries and to the institutionalisation of the structures supporting regional actors' paradiplomacy. The increasing SNG involvement in international affairs, which was supported by the Ministry of Home Affairs (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications since 2004), which manages local governments, expanded to the field controlled by MOFA. Although MOFA attempted to protect its bureaucratic turf, it gradually formed a constructive partnership with the new types of international actors.

While the SNGs started to develop their own international affairs departments, the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) was established in 1988 as a national body designed to assist SNGs in their internationalisation (Jain 2005, 33–39, 42–44, 49–51).

Hokkaido's northern outlook and interest in the Arctic

Hokkaido is Japan's northernmost and by far largest prefecture, which has served as the country's gate to the north since it officially became a part of the territory of Japan in the mid-19th century. Hokkaido has been a forerunner among the Japanese SNGs' international engagements, and geography—i.e., the tendency to establish relationships with regions that are geographically close and where there are, for example, economic opportunities to share—undoubtedly partly explains its past and current ties with the foreign SNGs (Akaha 2003, 104–105; Jain 2005, 71,79). In this context, a policy called the Northern Regions Plan (Hoppōken kōsō), incorporated into the Hokkaido Comprehensive Development Plans for the first time in 1971, must be analysed in order to understand why and how Hokkaido became an active player in international cooperation among the northern SNGs.

When initiated, the Northern Regions Plan consisted of hopes concerning economic cooperation between Hokkaido and other northern regions in the Russian Far East, Alaska in the US and British Columbia and Alberta in Canada. Although the expectations concerning the economic side were not ultimately fulfilled, the scope of activities and the number of partner regions expanded to include, for example, the Nordic countries. The institutionalisation of the policy advanced in the early 1970s, when the Northern Regions Study Council (reorganised into the Northern Regions Center in 1978) was established as a private organisation and the Northern Regions Study Office was

established within the Hokkaido Government. The heyday of the policy was in the 1980s and 1990s, but the Northern Regions Center was eventually integrated into the Hokkaido International Exchange and Cooperation Center (HIECC), established in 2011. HIECC does not concentrate solely on cooperation with the northern regions but acts as a coordinator of all international exchange and cooperation in Hokkaido Prefecture (Hoppōken Jidai Kankōkai 1980, 168–173, 199–202, 378; M. Iguchi, personal communication, April 11, 2017; HIECC and Hokkaido Government, personal communication, December 5, 2017).

These changes did not break the ties between Hokkaido and the other northern regions, and the prefecture has retained, for example, its distinctive role as a bridge builder between Tokyo and Moscow, especially in questions concerning the Northern Territories² dispute. Although the activities taken by the regional actors vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and Russia have occasionally been criticised or vetoed by the central government (Akaha 2003, 105–106; Jain 2005, 61, 67, 79–80, 103–106, 123–126), Hokkaido's cooperation with other northern regions has also been supported by MOFA (Hoppōken Jidai Kankōkai 1980, 275; S. Koiso, personal communication, March 23, 2017; HIECC and Hokkaido Government, personal communication, December 5, 2017).

Furthermore, many of the organisations that Hokkaido-based actors helped establish—such as the Northern Forum (NF), the World Winter Cities Association of Mayors (WWCAM) and the Siberia-Hokkaido Cultural Center (Siberia-Hokkaido Bunka Sentaa) in Novosibirsk—continue their activities. The NF was established to improve the transboundary cooperation between northern regional governments in 1991, and its roots go back to the First International Conference on Human Environment in Northern Regions, organised in Hokkaido in 1974. Hokkaido is no longer a full member, but HIECC continues to represent the prefecture in the organisation as a business partner. The

WWCAM was initiated by the city of Sapporo in 1981, and the city's international office serves as the association secretariat. The Siberia-Hokkaido Cultural Center is a product of Sapporo's sister-city agreement with Novosibirsk signed in 1990 (NF 2019; City of Sapporo 2019; Munitsipal'nyi kul'turnyi tsentr 'Sibir'-Hokkaido' 2019).

Although the general emphasis of Hokkaido's international activity has been on East and Southeast Asia—as indicated, for example, by the establishment of the Hokkaido Government's Overseas Offices in Shanghai and Singapore in order to attract tourists and investments to Hokkaido and promote Hokkaido's products and companies abroad (HIECC and Hokkaido Government, personal communication, December 5, 2017; HEED 2017; HGRO 2019)—the past decade has also witnessed the re-emergence of interest in northern and Arctic matters.

The future of the NSR and the possibility to emerge as the East Asian hub of the new route have dominated Hokkaido's interest in the Arctic since the early 2010s. During the first half of the decade, the prefectural government cooperated, for example, with the Hokkaido Development Bureau and the City of Tomakomai in order to study the possibilities offered by the new transportation route. Meanwhile, the cooperation with the Hokkaido Committee for Economic Development (Hokkaidō Keizai Dōyūkai)—a private business organisation issuing policy proposals—and with Hokkaido University have become important since 2015. In March 2015, the former established a working group studying Hokkaido's possibilities vis-à-vis the NSR in which a representative of the prefectural government acts as an adviser (Hokkaidō Keizai Dōyūkai Waakingu 2016, 8; Representatives of Hokkaido Government, personal communication, April 18, 2017; Saunavaara 2017). The latter has established the Arctic Research Center, which conducts studies of the NSR. Together, these three have co-organised and hosted various Arctic-related events—such as the Arctic Economic Council's Top of the World: Arctic

Broadband Summit in June 2017—and exchanged information on a regular basis (Saunavaara 2018).

Apart from its involvement in the events that brought Arctic-related knowhow to Hokkaido, the prefectural government has also been involved in dispatching information-gathering missions abroad. Various delegations, usually including representatives of the two above-mentioned partner organisations, have occasionally been led by the leaders of the regional government and visited the capitals of the Arctic countries, as well as the key areas of the NSR-related development on Yamal Peninsula (2018), in Murmansk (2013, 2016), Saint Petersburg (2018) and Kamchatka (2018). In addition, representatives of the Hokkaido Government have participated in discussions with foreign stakeholders, such as COSCO (a Chinese shipping company active in Arctic shipping) and Cinia (a Finnish state-owned company in charge of planning the Arctic Connect project to build a new submarine fibre optic cable connecting Europe, North America and East Asia through the Arctic). Within the Hokkaido Government, several departments and offices—including, for example, the Office of Logistics and Ports, the Office of International Business, the Industrial Promotion Division and the Tourism Bureau—have been involved in Arctic-related initiatives (Saunavaara 2018; Otsuka 2019).

Finally, although the Arctic as a wide but somehow undefined geographical context has received its attention, it has not replaced other territorial entities in Hokkaido's engagements with the North. Hokkaido was one of the first prefectures to actively seek formalised relations with SNGs of the Soviet Union, and the ongoing cooperation with Russian regions plays an important role in Hokkaido's external activities. This cooperation has taken institutional forms that are absent in the case of the Arctic. There is, for example, no Arctic correspondent to the Hokkaido-Russia Inter-regional Cooperation Team established by the prefectural government in 2013. This

ambitious undertaking has attracted over 120 heterogeneous participants, including local government agencies, businesses (large, medium and small), trade associations, NPOs, and public and private educational and research institutions and hospitals (Hokkaidō 2019b; Hokkaidō 2019c).

Heilongjiang, Liaoning and Jilin: Connecting China, the Russian Far East and the Arctic

According to the Chinese constitution, the People's Republic of China (PRC), consisting of 33 provincial level units (excluding Taiwan), is formally a 'unitary multi-ethnic state', in which the State Council has the power 'to administer foreign affairs and conclude treaties and agreements with foreign states' (NPC Observer 2018). Within this legal framework, the constitution does not mention any role of provincial governments in Chinese foreign relations. Yet, as a result of the 1978 reform and opening-up policies, these subnational units became important politico-economic actors in China's domestic development and external affairs (Cheung and Tang 2001, 91), bringing new dimensions to Chinese central-local relations to such a degree that some analysts declared the Chinese political system a de facto federalism (Zheng 2007). The post-1978 reforms (including economic decentralisation and export-led development) were the main drivers behind Chinese subnational governments' interests in international affairs (especially in the coastal areas) because these actors were actively seeking economic connections with foreign states for investment opportunities to drive their own socio-economic development (Tubilewicz 2017, 936).

Chinese central-local relations in international affairs

At present, Chinese subnational governments are engaged in various paradiplomatic activities. Chinese provinces and municipalities not only conduct their own overseas visits and receive foreign delegations but also actively organise various conferences devoted to subnational engagement—such as the Exchange Conference of Friendly Cities among China, Japan and South Korea (CPAFFC 2017)—and participate in international organisations focused on the protection and advancement of local interests on the world stage, such as the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG 2018). Additionally, border provinces take advantage of their geographic locations and strive to become gateways between China and its neighbouring regions, such as Yunnan and Guangxi's roles in regional cross-border trade and integration with Southeast Asia (Li 2014). Beyond China's immediate neighbourhood, Chinese subnational governments also engage states on distant continents such as Africa, where they are regarded as traders, project builders, investors, aid providers and facilitators of deepening Sino-African relations (Chen and Jian 2009).

These arrangements are beneficial for both the central government and the provinces. Chinese leadership depends on the localities to implement many of its foreign policy projects and to manage non-security issues in border regions; conversely, subnational governments can improve their international standing by supplementing Beijing's role in national diplomacy and pursue their own interests in order to boost their economic growth and develop greater access to overseas markets (Li 2017). In this regard, major provincial policy initiatives, especially in the border areas, provide foundations for the advancement of China's national level strategies, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Chen and Wei 2016).

China's Northeast and the Arctic: Revitalisation and new transport corridors

Given their geographic location in China's northeast and their relative proximity to the Arctic region—combined with the need for economic development and access to overseas markets—Heilongjiang, Liaoning and Jilin provinces have in recent years become interested in the opportunities of the Arctic opening. Although the whole north-eastern region is larger than Germany and Great Britain combined, it faces some rather unpleasant economic realities. Because of their traditional focus on heavy industry, these provinces have been lagging behind the southern coastal provinces in economic modernisation giving the region the title 'China's rust belt' (Rechtschaffen 2017). The State Council in Beijing is acutely aware of these issues (The State Council 2016b), and it has an official government strategy in place to revitalise the region, which includes a focus on economic reform, innovation, infrastructure development, high-tech industry and greater integration of the entire Northeast Asian region, with China's north-eastern provinces at its centre (The State Council 2016c).

In this regard, greater access to the sea (Heilongjiang and Jilin are land-locked) and, by extension, to the shorter Arctic shipping lanes can help these provinces more efficiently reach European and North American markets. This, in turn, would increase the competitiveness of their enterprises (Chen and Zhang 2018, 43–44). Heilongjiang Province, sharing a long border with Russia, began its Arctic engagement in 1991, when it became one of the founding members of the Northern Forum (NF 2019). The province ceased to be an active member of the NF in 2011, but to underline the emerging link between the province and the Arctic region, Harbin, the provincial capital, and Murmansk signed a sister-city agreement focusing on tourism and education in 2016 (Nilsen 2016). This adds to its long-standing sister-city ties with Yakutsk, the capital of Russia's Sakha Republic (Yakutsk 2019). Heilongjiang is thus emerging as a nexus between China and

the Russian Far Eastern and Arctic regions. This connection became ever stronger with China's incorporation of the Arctic region into its BRI in 2017. Ever since, the province, and especially the border municipality of Heihe have been pitching themselves in China as the optimal platforms for an additional expansion of Sino-Russian cooperation and as a 'golden fulcrum' for the Polar Silk Road (Xinhua 2017b).

Liaoning, on the other hand, has a very advantageous position within the north-eastern region. It is a coastal province facing the Yellow Sea and operating a large container port, Dalian, as well as an advanced port grid. At present, Liaoning is promoting the development of the 'Liao-hai-Ou' transportation corridor (Liao-hai-Ou tongdao, translated as 'Liaoning to Europe via the ocean corridor') to connect the province with Europe via Arctic shipping routes (JRJ 2015). Provincial officials believe that this corridor will increase trade between Europe and the entire north-eastern region, boosting Liaoning's economy (Presentation by a representative from the Liaoning Provincial Government, 2017). The corridor was officially put into service in 2018 with a shipment of iron plates from the province to several destinations in Europe (MOFCOM 2018).

Likewise, the port of Dalian, with a developed supply chain of export goods—including crude oil, minerals, grain and automobiles from the northeast—is formulating its Northeast New Silk Road plan. The Arctic sea routes are considered a shortcut between the port and destinations in Western Europe and Northern America, as well as a force that could influence the redistribution of industrial centres in the region (Yu 2015). In this regard, Liaoning clearly sees the benefits of Arctic shipping, and the province wants to accelerate Arctic-related research, including the areas of navigation, maritime safety and international law (Presentation by a representative from the Liaoning Provincial Government, 2017).

Jilin Province also sees great potential in the opening of the Arctic sea routes. Although land-locked, the province has always been eager to gain access to the sea, which was taken away from it in the 1860s. The province faces unique geographic circumstances because it can ‘see seagulls but not the sea’ (CEN 2016). This means that it is only 15 kilometres upstream from the Tumen River delta, which empties into the Sea of Japan. Jilin’s export potential would be significantly enhanced if it were to gain access to this sea. Therefore, while planning to open up more transportation links with the neighbouring countries to develop a modern logistic industry and increase the competitiveness of its economy (Zhong and Liu 2015; The State Council 2017), the province is promoting a strategy called ‘borrowing a port to go to the sea’ (jie gang chuhai). Jilin is, in other words, looking for ports in the neighbouring countries that it could use to export its own production (CNSS 2015).

This strategy is also seen as one of the ways Jilin could connect itself with the Arctic shipping routes (China Ocean Online 2015). Jilin officials previously declared that the province was planning to work with selected ports in Russia and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) to develop shorter maritime routes to ship goods to European ports via the Northeast Passage (Zhong and Liu 2015a). This thinking is also underlined in Jilin’s green transformation development plan, which states that the province will be looking at ports in the DPRK and the port of Zarubino in Russia to implement the strategy of borrowing a port to go to the sea in order to reach Europe via the Arctic and to transform itself into a strategic point for the BRI (Jilin Province Development and Reform Commission 2015). The port of Zarubino (ice free year-round) is located in Russia’s Primorsky Krai around 70 kilometres away from the Chinese borders and linked through a road to the border city of Hunchun. The DPRK port that Jilin’s strategy refers to is most likely the port of Rajin, one of the northernmost year-

round ice-free ports in Asia and a part of the North Korean Rajin-Sonbong Special Economic Zone established in 1991, which borders China and Russia. The port is only about 52 kilometres away from public roads along the Chinese border, and it has already received a trans-Arctic shipment when ‘general cargo’ was delivered from the Russian port of Ust-Luga via the NSR in 2013 (Bennett 2014b).

East Asian SNGs and the Arctic: A comparative assessment

The motives for involvement in Arctic affairs

The different economic and political motives that guide the SNGs’ international activities may co-exist but are frequently intertwined. Therefore, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to separate them from each other. However, it is clear that economic incentives have played an important role in the Arctic involvement of Hokkaido, Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning. In the case of Hokkaido, numerous hopes and expectations have been linked to the concept of geographical advantage (*chiritekina yūisei*). Local actors, including the regional government, have assumed that Hokkaido’s location in the north-eastern most corner of East Asia would open possibilities for the regional economy.

Hokkaido-based discussions have mainly concentrated on harbours, especially Tomakomai, and their potential to develop into the hub ports of the NSR. The cargo flows of the new route between East Asia and Europe and the current route between North America and East Asia going through the Tsugaru Strait (separating Hokkaido from Honshu) could meet in such a hub, and the ships heading to the NSR could utilise different services. Hokkaido has also been mentioned as a potential landing site for the planned Arctic submarine fibre optic cables. Because the improved international connectivity

provided by such connections might attract, for example, new data centre investments in the area, the Hokkaido Government has been actively involved in the collection of information and in negotiations with commercial actors (Hokkaidō 2016, 16–24; Saunavaara 2018).

The discussion concerning the economic opportunities of the Arctic overlaps or competes with the motivation to cooperate with Russian SNGs that are located, at least partly, in the Arctic region. Russia has been perceived as a lucrative market for Hokkaido products and technologies targeted at cold climate areas, with its past and ongoing projects ranging from agricultural greenhouses to waste disposal and the improvement of Yakutsk Airport facilities. This perception resulted in the launch of the above-mentioned Hokkaido-Russia Inter-regional Team and the increasing efforts to promote Hokkaido ‘northern’ products and technologies at the major industrial fairs in Russia starting in 2017 (Hokkaidō 2017; Hokkaidō Kensetsu Shinbunsha 2019; Hokkaidō Sōgō Shōji 2019a; Hokkaidō Sōgō Shōji 2019b). Furthermore, the outcomes of the 26th Japan-Russia Summit Meeting on the occasion of the G20 Osaka Summit—such as the commitment of the Japan Oil, Gas and Metals National Corporation (JOGMEC is an independent government corporation) and Mitsui & Co. to participate in the Arctic LNG 2 Project with major investments, as well as the joint declaration to hold the Japan-Russia year of regional exchanges from 2020 to 2021—along with the Japanese companies’ interest in contributing to the development of an LNG transshipment hub in Kamchatka, will likely give further impetus to Hokkaido’s expanding ties with the Russian Arctic SNGs (MOFA 2019; Humpert 2019).

Transport infrastructure and engagement with Russia also play a major role in the economic incentives that have been recognised in Heilongjiang. Because China and Russia agreed to jointly develop the Primorye 1 and Primorye 2 international transport

corridors,³ Heilongjiang will effectively obtain access to the Sea of Japan (Port News 2017; Russia Briefing 2017). Additionally, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) branch in Heilongjiang Province announced in 2018 that the local government, in its efforts to increase connectivity in the region and cross-border economic exchanges, will promote the establishment of the Heihe–Amur Oblast–Sakha–Arctic Ocean international transportation corridor to ‘string together a chain of Polar Silk Road pearls’ (The propaganda department of the Heihe CCP municipal committee 2018). Such developments could turn Heilongjiang province into an important actor in China’s Arctic engagement.

Jilin Province is also eyeing infrastructure development and connectivity with Russia. In 2014, for example, the provincial government, together with a Russian company, agreed to jointly develop a new deep-water port in Zarubino (China Daily 2014). Although this type of cooperation has had its share of problems—China attempted to lease the port as early as 2003, but this request was denied by Russia, citing national security reasons (Xinlang 2014), and the project is currently stalled due to a lack of funds on the Russian side (Zuenko 2017)—the Primorye 2 Project, which specifically aims at connecting Jilin with Russian ports in the region, may give a new impetus to it in the future. Jilin province already has experience transporting cargo via Zarubino—such as the Hunchun–Zarubino–Niigata (Japan) Sea Line (The State Council 2011)—and the provincial officials seem to be confident that the combined development of rail, sea, road and other infrastructures is a practical way of establishing a flexible transportation network from Jilin to Europe (Zhong and Liu 2015a).

As previously indicated, Jilin has also considered accessing the Sea of Japan through ports in the DPRK. However, given the volatility in Sino-North Korean relations, the situation is hard to read. At the moment, however, it seems that relations between

Beijing and Pyongyang are improving. This is having a positive effect on the situation at their borders. Only recently, a new bridge connecting Jian in Jilin with North Korea's border city of Manpo was opened (Yonhap 2019), and Chinese authorities agreed to promote new land routes between the key areas in the province as a national priority (Shim 2018). With regards to Liaoning, the province sees the Arctic shipping routes as the 'new pivot lanes' (xin de zhouxin hangxian) between the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans that open the shortest, most economic and most efficient sea channel to Europe for Liaoning (Xinhua 2018d). Such efforts to establish new trade routes with Russia/DPRK and the desire to link with European markets point to regional interests in the Arctic's transportation potential and provide an opportunity for the north-eastern provinces to make use of the emerging Polar Silk Road.

The discussion concerning SNGs' political motivations is closely linked to the national strategy contexts. Whereas the Chinese SNGs' Arctic activities take place under the umbrella of the BRI, Hokkaido's activities are connected to Japan's Arctic policy. Whereas the BRI is one of the main pillars of China's foreign policy, Japan's Arctic policy can hardly be described as the cornerstone of its international relations in general. It is, however, worth recalling that even if the Arctic may be described as a peripheral issue in Japan's foreign political doctrine, relations with Russia and the unresolved territorial dispute have been high priority issues in recent years. Here, Hokkaido is a major stakeholder whose international and national role may be strengthened through cooperation with the Russian SNGs, many of which are at least partly located in the Arctic.

Alaska and Finnish Lapland have recently considered the Northern Forum's status as an observer in the Arctic Council to be sufficient motivation to re-enter this organisation. Hokkaido has also been invited to re-strengthen its role in the NF, and one informant (personal communication, June 11, 2017) within the NF argued that Japan's

MOFA would like to see Hokkaido join the organisation again. However, although it feels a moral obligation to continue as the business partner through HIECC and not turn its back completely on the organisation, Hokkaido Government seems to prefer waiting for further changes within the NF. Because it does not consider membership in an international organisation as an end in itself, Hokkaido is wondering what added value could be gained through the multilateral cooperation that is not gained through its bilateral ties with regions currently participating in the NF (personal communication, December 5, 2017; personal communications with Sapporo City Office and HIECC, April 2019). According to the NF (2015), Heilongjiang might also be reconsidering its participation in the forum so as to take advantage of the opening of the Arctic region (see also Arctic Portal 2018). Although no Chinese sources have been found to support this claim, such a movement would make sense. It could support Heilongjiang's Arctic aspirations and cooperation with Russian SNGs, as well as strengthen its position among the Chinese SNGs interested in the Arctic and the Russian Far East. Although it has a member from South Korea, the NF currently lacks any other membership from East Asia.

When the Hokkaido Government established the Hokkaido-Russia Inter-regional Cooperation Team, the objectives, ranging from the need to solve economic and social problems arising from its northern geographical position to the protection of the fragile natural environment (Hokkaidō 2019b), echoed in many ways the aims of the Northern Regions Plan. However, this kind of 'finding solutions to common problems' approach seems to be weaker in Arctic-related matters. One explanation may be that while Hokkaido keeps identifying itself as a northern region, it is not an Arctic region. Therefore, the Arctic can be seen as a relatively nearby entity with which Hokkaido could interact but not belong to. A similar kind of understanding concerning differences in cultural identity seems to be present in the Chinese provinces researched. Rather than having a

shared identity of some kind, the Arctic appears as a distinctly different, yet geographically proximate, region with whom one can develop cooperation.

The lack of cultural similarity and the emphasis on economic incentives does not mean that cultural interaction and exchange would be completely abandoned. Rather, the importance of cooperation in Arctic research and education should be highlighted because the leading universities in the examined regions have been active in these fields. Hokkaido University has an Arctic Research Center that manages the national Arctic flagship project and the Japan Arctic Research Network Center (together with the National Institute of Polar Research and Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology) and cooperates closely with both the regional and central governments. Hokkaido University is also the only Japanese member university in the University of the Arctic (UArctic). Furthermore, Hokkaido University, together with Niigata University, launched an ambitious Human Resource Development Platform for Japan-Russia Economic Cooperation and Personnel Exchange (HaRP), which has strengthened cooperation among the Hokkaido-based actors and supported academic projects in the field of Arctic studies.

There are also several universities and research institutions in China's north-eastern provinces—including Dalian Maritime University (DMU) in Liaoning, Jilin University in Jilin and Harbin Engineering University (HEU) and the Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT) in Heilongjiang—which are actively involved in Arctic research and international cooperation. Whereas DMU, for example, is concentrating on Arctic law, transportation and strategy (DMU 2015), HEU operates a polar science and engineering research centre that supports research on Arctic shipping (Sina 2017). HIT and the Far Eastern Federal University in Vladivostok announced the establishment of the Sino-Russian Polar Engineering Research Center in 2016 (HIT 2016). HIT also joined the

UArctic in 2018 and established the UArctic-HIT Training Centre in 2019 as the first UArctic Regional Centre outside the eight Arctic countries. The mission of the Centre was to strengthen understanding and collaborations between scientists of the Arctic and non-Arctic universities (HIT 2019). The importance of this joint training centre was underlined by the presence of Heilongjiang provincial and municipal leaders at the unveiling ceremony (Liu 2019). To further solidify its position as one of China's forerunners in polar research, HIT established a Polar Academy cooperating with institutions from the Arctic states in 2019 (HIT 2019a; HIT 2019b).

In 2018, HEU established the Arctic Blue Economy Research Center, with the aim of building an international think tank that would promote cooperation between China and Russia in the fields of sustainable development, education and science and technology in the Arctic (MIIT 2018). After that, HEU organised several Sino-Russian Arctic and Polar seminars (Chen 2018; HEU 2019). The university's focus on Arctic/polar technology development is in line with the objectives of Heilongjiang's leadership to transform the province into an Arctic technology cluster (personal communications with a Chinese Arctic specialist 2018). This, in turn, aligns with broader national plans that dictate that China should focus on the development of domestic polar technology (Chen 2017; Xinhua 2018e). According to Chinese sources, polar technology development will help China combat climate change, achieve great power status and ensure the successful implementation of the BRI (Zhao 2017).

The Arctic in central-local governments' relations

The attitude of Japan's central government toward Hokkaido's Arctic initiatives has been positive, and Hokkaido has actively approached decision-makers in Tokyo. For instance, when the minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism visited Hokkaido in

May 2014, the representatives of local industry and commerce expressed their wish for governmental support of Hokkaido's efforts in relation to the NSR (Kawai 2014, 150–152). Similarly, actors from Hokkaido have continuously exchanged ideas with the representatives of MOFA. Although there are limitations in these cooperative efforts—for instance, MLIT cannot support one Japanese port over the others on NSR-related issues (T. Abe, personal communication, April 13, 2017)—Hokkaido's contribution to Japan's Arctic policy has been recognised at the leading international forums. For example, when Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs Kōno Tarō (2018) gave a speech about Japan's Arctic involvement at the Arctic Circle event in October 2018, he mentioned Hokkaido as a gateway from Asia to the NSR (MOFA 2018).

The recent developments suggest that the central government will most likely continue to support Hokkaido's initiatives. If the administration of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō is actively encouraging Japanese companies to participate in the Russian Arctic projects, as recently proposed by a specialist on Japan's Arctic policy (Kumpert 2019), this might indicate a similar type of support for Hokkaido's ambitions vis-a-vis the Arctic and Russia. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry's (METI) decision to hold the 7th Japan-Russia Meeting Concerning Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) Cooperation in Sapporo—for the first time since the start of these meetings in 2014—may be seen as a step in this direction. METI's decision may be building on the results of the cooperation with Hokkaido-based corporations, whose recent projects in Russia the Hokkaido Bureau of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI Hokkaido) has supported (Hokkaidō Kensetsu Shinbunsha 2019).

The BRI and the emergence of the Polar Silk Road represent national strategies that provinces in north-eastern China hope to use to support their economic revitalisation (Li, Xu and Guo 2016). Likewise, during his recent inspection tour of the northeast,

President Xi Jinping stressed that the entire region should actively foster new growth engines and better integrate itself with the BRI (Xu 2018). Although the 2018 Arctic policy paper did not mention any SNGs, there is no reason to believe that Chinese leadership would obstruct the activities of Chinese provinces with regard to the Arctic. This claim is supported by statements made by the CCP branch in Heihe in Heilongjiang in 2018, in which the municipality is seen as a transportation node within the BRI and a major platform for the Sino-Russian cooperation on the Polar Silk Road. Given these developments, Chinese SNGs can be seen as international actors with their own proposals and plans (Li 2014). However, these need to remain within the boundaries and strategic considerations of the Party Center (Kossa 2019).

The lack of collisions and conflicts between Japanese and Chinese SNGs and national governments regarding Arctic matters can be interpreted in many ways. This situation may indicate larger consensus among SNGs and the representatives of the central government concerning the desirable or acceptable behaviour. In fact, with regards to China, it can be argued that local government's attempt to challenge the central government would be against the nature of its political system. Yet, it is tempting to speculate whether the Arctic initiatives are also pointing towards SNGs' freedoms to be active in issues that do not lie at the heart of the national foreign and security policy. Further studies about paradiplomacy in Japan and China are, however, needed before argument concerning SNGs' greater leeway in certain types of issue areas or spatial contexts can be made.

Adding issues to national Arctic agenda but still waiting for the efforts to bear fruit

The question concerning the results and consequences of paradiplomacy is currently somewhat difficult to answer. It is clear that Hokkaido, Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning have all been active with respect to the Arctic. All of them have recognised opportunities, set objectives and taken concrete steps to achieve their goals. Although it is still not easy to identify the benefits that these East Asian SNGs would gain through engagement in the Arctic, it is equally apparent that none of them have given up their hopes. Although the intensification of Japan's engagement in Arctic affairs would most certainly have happened without its northernmost prefecture's active role, Hokkaido's activity has supported Japan's role as an Arctic player. Hokkaido has been able to incorporate new content, especially in the Arctic shipping and submarine fibre optic cable related matters, into the national Arctic agenda and cooperation on Arctic-related issues has strengthened the ties among the regional government, local academia and business. Even if the economic opportunities may not have materialised yet, it seems that the emergence of the Arctic on the agenda has contributed to the revitalisation of the old Northern Regions Plan tradition, which is also present in the cooperation with Russian SNGs. Whereas the paradiplomatic activities of the past may have helped revitalise the connections with other northern regions—now under the banner of the Arctic—one should not oversimplify the role of existing sister-city agreements, for example, solely as a positive force behind new types of cooperation. As Hokkaido-based informants have pointed out, the pressure or the moral obligation to cooperate with old partner cities that are not located within the core areas of the current projects may have actually formed an obstacle hindering the new initiatives (Personal communication with the International Relations Department of the City of Sapporo, April 19, 2019).

While China's Arctic engagement is primarily driven by policies emanating from Beijing, Chinese SNGs see the benefits of supporting these policies. By diversifying their developmental strategies to include Arctic economic opportunities, China's north-eastern provinces could see growth in sectors such as shipping, logistics, port development, shipbuilding, insurance and e-commerce. This, in turn, could reconfigure their economies and turn Chinese north-eastern port cities into international logistics centres servicing Northeast Asia (Liu 2017). For example, in Liaoning, besides the port of Dalian, there are other ports in the province, such as Yingkou, that have seen shipments through the Arctic region and that have the capacity and goods to continue sending ships to Europe via these lanes (China Water Transport 2018).

Additionally, there are high hopes in the region that the BRI initiative will help revitalise the stagnant local economies. By merging with the BRI, Jilin province is positioning itself as 'an important BRI window opening to the north' (Xinhua 2017c). This includes the promotion and development of shorter shipping routes in the Arctic Ocean (Wan 2017). On the other hand, Heilongjiang—besides the promotion of infrastructure projects that link it to the Russian Far East (such as the Heilongjiang Amur River Bridge from Heihe to Blagoveshchensk) and the Sea of Japan (Primorye 1)—can also make use of its developing polar technology capabilities. As Zhang (2019) points out, current Western sanctions present an opportunity for Heilongjiang province to collaborate with Russian entities in the development of Arctic-specific technological solutions, especially in the areas of drilling and the exploration of the continental shelf.

Therefore, the paradiplomatic activities of Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning vis-à-vis the Arctic should be seen as a specific form of provincial state-building in which participation in external relations—underpinned by a central-subnational coordination—allows provinces to exploit domestic opportunities for economic growth (Tubilewicz

2017). In short, provincial activities with regard to the Arctic may be beneficial for the central leadership because they may alleviate some of the economic issues that the north-eastern provinces are facing and help promote the image of China as a Polar Great Power.

Discussion: A joint East Asian subnational Arctic approach?

Hokkaido and Heilongjiang are prime examples of the East Asian SNGs that started cooperating with the circumpolar SNGs before the Arctic region began to draw the current degree of attention. However, the East Asian SNGs' engagement in Arctic affairs has clearly intensified in recent years. We argue that these initiatives have mainly been based on economic objectives, especially those connected with new transportation routes. The scientific cooperation that is emphasised in Japan's and China's national Arctic policies has, likewise, played an important role in the SNGs' Arctic involvement. Located in the north of their respective countries, these SNGs have actively promoted their Arctic-related initiatives and exchanged ideas with the central governments, which have, in general, been supportive of the SNGs' international activities vis-a-vis the Arctic. Although it is obvious that the East Asian SNGs have been able to cooperate with different types of Arctic actors, the question arises as to whether they have been interested in and capable of cooperating with each other. Therefore, Mia Bennett's visionary ideas concerning mini-lateral cooperation in the Asian-Arctic or the North Pacific Arctic region, put forward in 2014, are worth revisiting.

Bennett (2014a) suggested that some polities within the North Pacific were more closely connected with each other than with their more distant domestic counterparts, and she described the NF as a manifestation of the Asian political integration into the North at the subnational level. Furthermore, she introduced the Baltic Sea Area and the Barents

region (with the Barents Euro-Arctic Council as its intergovernmental body and the Barents Regional Council as its interregional body) as illustrations of the post-Cold War processes that have brought the Arctic and/or sub-Arctic areas together and initiated region-building in previously unthinkable areas. When describing the obstacles hindering the region-building process in the North Pacific Arctic region, she paid special attention to the Arctic Council member states' attitude towards such an effort, along with the existing distrust within the North Pacific area.

But how do these ideas relate to the situation that the East Asian SNGs are currently facing? Much has transpired in recent years, and it is possible to discern signs of cooperation. Japan, China and South Korea have held annual Trilateral High-Level Dialogues on the Arctic since 2016 at the national level (MOFA-ROK 2019). In addition to this mini-lateral forum for the central governments, the three countries are involved in an SNG-level forum called the Association of North East Asia Regional Governments (NEAR, membership includes Jilin and Heilongjiang, but not Hokkaido or Liaoning), established as early as 1996 (NEAR 2019). Furthermore, Japanese, Chinese and South Korean universities and research institutions interested in the Arctic are cooperating with each other and with the relevant institutions located in the Arctic. There is even an entity called the North Pacific Arctic Research Community (NPARC), which has held conferences since 2011.

However, the three above-mentioned initiatives, all of which incidentally originate from South Korea, may also cause some pessimism due to their relatively modest achievements, as well as their lack of domestic and international impact. All in all, it may well be questioned whether we are any closer to the establishment of an effective international governance mechanism in the North Pacific Arctic area today than we were in 2014. The fact that there are currently no Japanese or Chinese members in the

NF may indicate that the East Asian SNGs are relying on bilateralism rather than multilateralism in their interaction with the Arctic SNGs. It may also be questioned whether the completion of the Yamal LNG project, the emergence of the Arctic LNG 2 project, the beginning of commercial destination shipping via the NSR and various infrastructure projects along the NSR are actually promoting cooperation or, on the contrary, competition among the East Asian SNGs. Furthermore, although the manifestations of tension and suspicion among the East Asian actors, as pointed out in 2014, may differ from the more recent cases, there are still unresolved issues at the national level (long-standing conflicts between Russia and Japan, Japan and China and Japan and South Korea over the disputed islands, along with the conflict between South Korea and Japan over forced labour, etc.) that impact the regional-level contacts as well.

Nevertheless, the cooperation among the SNGs located at the northern edge of East Asia may, indeed, be imperative if they want to play a role, for example, in the future development of the NSR. As the recent analysis of potential gateway ports in East Asia (undertaken in anticipation of case container shipping potentially developing in the future) shows, the winners of the competition may well be the huge container ports located in the central or southern parts of East Asian countries—that is, if the smaller northern ports fail in their attempts to attract cargo from other ports and the hinterland (Abe 2019).

Endnotes

1. The Arctic Council is the leading intergovernmental forum that promotes cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States (Finland, Sweden, Norway,

Denmark, Iceland, Canada, the US and Russia), Arctic indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues (such as sustainable development and environmental protection).

2. A Japanese term used to refer to the four disputed islands that are often understood to be a part of the Kuril Islands.
3. The Primorye 1 plans to connect Harbin with the Russian Asia-Pacific ports Vladivostok and Nakhodka. The Primorye 2 plans to connect Changchun, Hunchun with the Russian Asia-Pacific port of Zarubino.

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Map 1. East Asian SNGs and the Arctic (The authors have modified the Relief Map of Far Eastern Federal District.jpg released into the public domain, Wikimedia Commons)