

Narrative Strategies of China South Korea and Japan in Arctic and Antarctic Governance

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Abstract

This paper examines the medial and political narrative strategies of China, South Korea, and Japan in relation to the Arctic and Antarctic, focusing on how each country frames its activities to enhance its influence in these regions. Motivated by opportunities in scientific research, resource access, and geopolitical influence, China, South Korea, and Japan have increasingly pursued interests in both polar areas. As “Near Arctic” countries, they aim to assert a role in Arctic governance despite lacking direct access to the North Pole. Japan’s narrative emphasizes energy security, shipping, and environmental protection, positioning the Arctic as vital for economic stability and global status. South Korea highlights scientific diplomacy, business and sustainable development, presenting itself as a leader of a “green change.” China’s approach frames the Arctic as a “common good,” prioritizing security, resource acquisition, and strategic science, including its Beidou navigation system. The hypothesis of this study is that these countries’ narrative strategies are diversified, however they share an aim of creating a positive image in low-conflict areas such as environmental protection, scientific research, and raw material diversification, to foster international influence and domestic support. The research questions focus on understanding these countries’ narrative strategies, identifying key areas of Arctic interest, and analyzing how these strategies shape the international environment. The methodology involves comparative analysis of policy documents, media representations, and official communications to assess how these strategies influence international relations and public perception. Findings suggest that each country’s narrative serves as a diplomatic tool and means of soft power.

Keywords: Antarctic, Arctic, East Asia, narrative, polar engagement

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Introduction

The Arctic and Antarctic regions are no longer perceived as remote peripheries of international politics; instead, they have become central to a range of global discourses concerning climate change, resource governance, and emerging geopolitical realignments. While traditionally dominated by circumpolar states, the governance of the polar regions is increasingly influenced by non-littoral actors who seek to redefine their roles through scientific cooperation, economic initiatives, and normative engagement (Brady, 2017; Stephens, 2018). Among these, China, South Korea, and Japan stand out for their strategic and carefully calibrated approaches, which blend scientific legitimacy with geopolitical interest in both the Arctic and Antarctic.

This article examines the narrative strategies employed by these three East Asian states as they attempt to shape their image and role in polar governance frameworks. Rather than relying solely on material presence, these countries invest in constructing discourses around sustainability, peaceful cooperation, and scientific diplomacy to gain legitimacy in regions where sovereignty and governance remain contested. By analyzing policy documents, diplomatic statements, and media representations, the paper identifies the commonalities and divergences in their approaches, shedding light on how narrative framing functions as a tool of influence in contemporary international relations.

Research Scope and Objectives

The Arctic and Antarctic regions, though polar opposites in geography and governance regimes, are increasingly intertwined within shared discourses on climate change, scientific diplomacy, and strategic competition. The Arctic is an ocean surrounded by sovereign states, where melting ice is opening new shipping routes and economic opportunities (Solli et al., 2013), while the Antarctic remains governed by a treaty-based system focused primarily on scientific cooperation (Tonami, 2014). Despite their physical remoteness, both regions have become focal points for states aiming to craft international influence through normative engagement.

This study conducts a comparative analysis of narrative strategies employed by China, South Korea, and Japan in shaping their presence in both polar regions. While the Arctic is prioritized due to its more accessible institutional frameworks (evident through observer status in the Arctic Council) and economic potential (China and Korea's investment in Northern Sea Route development) (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2020; Solli et al., 2013), the Antarctic is examined where narrative legitimacy via the Antarctic Treaty System is salient—particularly in Japan's case (Tonami, 2014). These states, lacking formal sovereignty in either region, lean on narrative tools to assert soft power and legitimacy.

The central research question reads: How do Chinese, South Korean, and Japanese state narratives function as instruments of soft power and international legitimacy in polar governance? Specifically, it investigates the mechanisms through which these countries frame their polar engagements to resonate with global environmental norms, scientific credibility, and domestic policy aims.

To address this question, the study sets out to:

1. Map the principal narrative devices—such as metaphorical framing, issue-linkage, and value appeals—present in official documents, diplomatic communications, and media discourse.
2. Compare how each state aligns Arctic and Antarctic activities with strategic goals such as energy security, climate leadership, environmental responsibilities, or maritime connectivity.
3. Examine the consistency between the rhetorical positioning and actual institutional or material investment in polar affairs, such as research infrastructure or participation in multilateral forums.
4. Evaluate the implications of these narrative strategies for the evolution of international norms, multilateral cooperation, and potential geopolitical contestation in polar regions.

This inquiry is both timely and essential, as China, South Korea, and Japan navigate spaces of limited sovereignty by leveraging discourse to secure normative footholds and global credibility—thereby transforming narrative into a potent diplomatic and strategic resource.

Methodology and Source Base

This research employs a qualitative, comparative methodology focused on narrative analysis. Rather than examining material capabilities or policy implementation, the study analyzes how China, Japan, and South Korea construct and communicate their polar engagement through language. The emphasis lies on the performative and symbolic dimensions of statecraft—how Arctic and Antarctic regions are framed in official discourse to signal intentions, values, and strategic positioning (Everett & Halašková, 2022; Tonami, 2014).

The source base includes polar strategy white papers, government policy documents, official speeches, national media coverage, and public-facing institutional outputs from 2013 to 2024. Particular attention is given to recurring narrative devices such as metaphors, value appeals (e.g., peace, science, sustainability), and issue linkage with broader foreign policy goals, including energy security, environmental stewardship, and regional connectivity. To assess coherence and divergence, the analysis triangulates state rhetoric with national media and expert commentary, revealing both common themes and country-specific narrative architectures.

Stability Through Science and Trade in Japan's Polar Narrative

Japan's approach to polar governance is grounded in a narrative that emphasizes economic pragmatism, scientific responsibility, and legal multilateralism. The Arctic, in particular, is framed as a strategic corridor essential to Japan's long-term economic security. As a resource-scarce nation with significant dependence on energy imports, Japan portrays Arctic stability as directly linked to uninterrupted access to energy resources and the development of new maritime trade routes (Kim & Stenport, 2021). The Northern Sea Route (NSR), frequently referenced in Japanese policy discourse, is seen as a promising alternative to traditional shipping lanes, with potential to reduce shipping times to Europe by up to 40% (Exner-Pirot & Murray, 2017). This economic rationale underpins Japan's participation in ventures such as the Yamal LNG project in Russia, where companies like Mitsui and Japan Oil, Gas and Metals National Corporation (JOGMEC) played instrumental roles in supporting Arctic natural gas development (Gao & Erokhin, 2020).

Simultaneously, Japan's polar narrative strongly emphasizes adherence to international norms and peaceful cooperation. As a consistent advocate of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and a non-Arctic state observer in the Arctic Council since 2013, Japan actively supports multilateralism and rule-based order in polar affairs (Everett & Halašková, 2022). This posture mirrors Tokyo's broader foreign policy identity, which underscores legalism and institutional engagement in maritime governance (Lomaeva & Saunavaara, 2022). Statements by officials such as former Foreign Minister Taro Kono, who publicly framed Japan's Arctic involvement as promoting peace, sustainability, and scientific cooperation, reflect this diplomatic branding (Arctic Institute, 2020).

Scientific diplomacy remains central to Japan's narrative strategy. Through institutions such as the National Institute of Polar Research and the Arctic Challenge for Sustainability (ArCS II), Japan maintains a continuous research presence in both polar regions (ArCS II, 2022; NIPR, 2023). Its long-term operation of Syowa Station in Antarctica and its regular Arctic research expeditions generate high-quality climate data while also projecting soft power. Japan's emphasis on science as a tool of legitimacy reinforces its image as a non-threatening, environmentally conscious actor (Le Mièr, 2014). This narrative resonates especially with European and Nordic stakeholders, for whom climate responsibility is a prerequisite for Arctic legitimacy (Everett & Halašková, 2022).

Japan's recognition of Indigenous rights, although less foregrounded, complements its image as a socially aware stakeholder. By referencing Indigenous inclusion in Arctic dialogues, Japan seeks to align itself with liberal-democratic norms without challenging regional power dynamics (Storey, 2016). In contrast, the Antarctic plays a peripheral role in Japan's political narrative. Its engagement remains anchored in the Antarctic Treaty System, with a narrow focus on scientific cooperation and logistical contributions. Politically sensitive issues such as commercial whaling—especially after Japan's 2019 withdrawal from the International Whaling Commission—are now largely absent from official polar rhetoric, further diminishing the Antarctic's narrative salience (Stephens, 2018).

Sustainable Innovation and Middle-Power Responsibility in South Korea's Polar Narrative

South Korea frames its engagement in the Arctic and Antarctic through a narrative of sustainable innovation, scientific diplomacy, and responsible middle-power leadership. Unlike countries that emphasize territorial claims or security logics, South Korea constructs its legitimacy through environmental stewardship, high-tech expertise, and alignment with global climate governance frameworks. Central to this narrative is the country's positioning as a technologically advanced, eco-conscious actor capable of contributing to the "green growth" of polar regions (Kim & Stenport, 2021).

The 2018 *Basic Plan for Arctic Policy*, issued by the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, marked a significant step in articulating South Korea's polar vision. It linked sustainable development with scientific advancement, stating that Korea would "contribute to the international community through Arctic research and eco-friendly shipping development" (MOF, 2018). The policy emphasized the economic potential of the Northern Sea Route and stressed the role of green technology in Arctic logistics. This rhetoric dovetailed with broader domestic climate initiatives, such as the 2020 Green New Deal, which embedded Arctic engagement within South Korea's low-carbon economic strategy (Chowdhury, 2021).

Scientific diplomacy forms the backbone of South Korea's narrative legitimacy. Through the Korea Polar Research Institute (KOPRI), South Korea operates two Antarctic research stations—King Sejong and Jang Bogo—and continues to expand its Arctic research programs (KOPRI, 2023). These scientific efforts are strategically framed not only as contributions to global climate knowledge but also as instruments of soft power. For example, then-Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha publicly described Korea as a “responsible middle power” and emphasized its commitment to transparent, collaborative polar governance during international fora (Mo, 2016). In this context, South Korea presents science as both a diplomatic language and a geopolitical equalizer.

Importantly, South Korea's polar discourse includes a strong economic-technological dimension. Its globally competitive shipbuilding industry—centered around companies like Hyundai Heavy Industries—plays a key role in developing Arctic-class vessels, including icebreakers and LNG carriers (Lee, 2024). South Korean media outlets such as *The Korea Herald* and *The Korea Times* often celebrate these achievements as evidence of Korea's rising leadership in Arctic logistics and green shipping infrastructure. The state leverages this narrative not only to justify economic engagement but also to strengthen its presence in multilateral polar governance bodies.

In the Antarctic, South Korea maintains a lower media profile but a steady policy presence. Activities remain rooted in scientific contributions and treaty compliance under the Antarctic Treaty System. However, recent publications from South Korean government and academic sources have pointed to growing interest in Antarctic mineral resources and potential energy exploration—framed carefully within environmental norms (Kim & Stenport, 2021). This dual framing—economic opportunity within environmental responsibility—reflects South Korea's balancing act between strategic ambition and normative alignment.

China's Narrative Strategy Centered on Global Commons and Technological Leadership

China frames the Arctic as a “shared space” or global commons, a narrative explicitly articulated in its 2018 Arctic Policy, which emphasizes peaceful cooperation, multilateralism, and equal access to polar resources (Beeson & Xu, 2019). This framing aligns with China's self-positioning as a “near-Arctic state” that supports inclusive Arctic development without asserting sovereignty claims (Lanteigne, 2018). Foreign Minister Wang Yi reiterated these themes at the Arctic Circle Assembly, underscoring China's commitment to dialogue, scientific cooperation, and stable governance of the polar regions (Wang, 2024).

At the same time, China's narrative integrates strategic ambitions focused on resource access, shipping route development, and the concept of military-civil fusion. The expansion of the Xuelong (Snow Dragon) icebreaker fleet is emblematic of this approach, facilitating China's dual use of polar spaces for scientific research and resource exploration, while hinting at possible security applications (Kopra & Puranen, 2023). The Arctic dimension of China's Belt and Road Initiative, dubbed the Polar Silk Road, was emphasized by President Xi Jinping during the 2019 Belt and Road Forum, illustrating Beijing's intent to embed polar infrastructure within its broader geopolitical strategy (Zreik & Derendiaeva, 2025).

In the Antarctic, China similarly projects a narrative of responsible stewardship and treaty compliance, as highlighted in its 2018 White Paper on Antarctica. This document reiterates China's support for the Antarctic Treaty System and underscores environmental protection as

a key pillar of its Antarctic governance (Kobzeva, 2019). During his 2018 United Nations address, President Xi Jinping stressed global cooperation on climate change, framing China as a proactive actor in polar environmental governance (UN, 2018).

Technological innovation is a core pillar of China's polar narrative. The China National Arctic and Antarctic Administration regularly promotes advances in polar icebreaking capabilities and navigation, such as the deployment of the Xuelong 2 icebreaker and the Beidou satellite navigation system, which enhances China's operational autonomy in the high latitudes (Lanteigne, 2018). Official reports, including the 2017 China Arctic and Antarctic Research Report, emphasize these technological achievements to bolster China's image as a scientific leader and legitimate stakeholder in polar affairs (Cui & Chen, 2019). This narrative serves to normalize China's expanding presence while advancing its geopolitical, economic, and scientific interests in the polar regions.

Shared Narratives and Divergent Strategies in Polar Governance

China, Japan, and South Korea converge on several narrative strategies that emphasize scientific research and environmental stewardship to mitigate perceptions of geopolitical competition in the Arctic and Antarctic. All three states foreground sustainability and global cooperation, aligning their polar policies with dominant international discourses on responsible environmental governance (Keskitalo et al., 2016; Østerud & Hønneland, 2014). Japan uniquely incorporates Indigenous peoples' rights into its narrative, highlighting a socially conscious dimension alongside ecological concerns (Nakashima et al., 2018). These shared thematic pillars serve to frame their polar ambitions within a broadly acceptable diplomatic language of peace and collective responsibility.

Nevertheless, notable strategic divergences emerge in how each country communicates its polar priorities. China's narrative centers on strategic infrastructure development, such as expanding its icebreaker fleet and promoting the Polar Silk Road, with state-owned enterprises actively pursuing resource access (Emmerson, 2019; Kopra & Puranen, 2023). This reflects a more assertive vision of Arctic engagement, aimed at securing economic interests and enhancing China's global influence. Japan's discourse, by contrast, stresses adherence to international law and multilateral governance frameworks like the Arctic Council and Antarctic Treaty System, positioning itself as a custodian of a rules-based order (Kaneko, 2021; McCreath, 2017). South Korea situates itself as a "responsible middle power," emphasizing green growth, scientific diplomacy, and technological innovation, especially in maritime logistics and icebreaking capabilities (Kim & Stenport, 2021). While all three countries increasingly engage with Antarctica, their narratives for the southern polar region remain less elaborated than those for the Arctic, though evolving alongside their growing scientific and diplomatic footprints (Brady, 2017).

From a linguistic and semantic perspective, official strategic documents and scholarly discourses reveal utopian visions of the polar regions as exceptional spaces—almost ideal arenas for technological progress, scientific advancement, and peaceful coexistence among diverse geopolitical actors (Dodds & Nuttall, 2016; Weber, 2020). The Arctic and Antarctic are portrayed as conflict-free zones whose neutrality and international status foster collaboration, knowledge exchange, and responsible management of global challenges such as climate change (German Arctic Office & AWI, n.d.). This rhetorical framing is characterized by recurring metaphors and evocative language: phrases like "common heritage," "laboratories of the future," "bridges of cooperation," and "global corridors of

innovation” underscore the regions’ symbolic roles as catalysts for humanity’s shared progress (Exner-Pirot & Murray, 2017).

Such narrative strategies function as legitimizing tools, particularly for states geographically distant from the poles, allowing them to justify their presence on moral and global-benefit grounds (Huebert, 2013; Østerud & Hønneland, 2014). Yet, beneath these harmonious depictions lie subtle tensions: the language also contains latent motifs of competition and strategic positioning, evident in nuanced shifts toward discourses on technological rivalry, resource security, and influence projection (Emmerson, 2019; Heininen, 2018). Consequently, the documents often embody a dual discourse—one promoting cooperation and harmony, the other more covertly signaling ambitions to consolidate power and strategic advantage under the guise of collective good (Brady, 2017). This interplay of utopian and pragmatic language reflects the complex dynamics shaping polar governance narratives, revealing how states negotiate their interests in sensitive global commons through carefully calibrated diplomatic rhetoric (Weber, 2020).

Conclusions and Policy Implications

The narrative strategies employed by China, South Korea, and Japan in the polar regions serve critical functions in legitimizing their engagement, justifying their presence, and enhancing their international status. By framing the Arctic and Antarctic as arenas of scientific cooperation, environmental stewardship, and peaceful diplomacy, these countries effectively utilize the polar spaces as low-conflict platforms for soft power projection. This approach enables them to assert influence in global governance without provoking direct confrontation with established Arctic powers. Moreover, their polar narratives intersect with broader Indo-Pacific geopolitical dynamics, suggesting that polar engagement is an extension of wider regional strategic positioning. While the Arctic remains the primary focus of strategic narratives, the Antarctic discourse among these Asia-Pacific actors is less developed but evolving, particularly through scientific cooperation and treaty participation. This nascent narrative dimension warrants greater scholarly attention to understand how emerging polar stakeholders negotiate their roles in the southern polar governance framework.

Importantly, these narrative strategies are not mere communication tools but are embedded within diplomatic and policy frameworks that shape international perceptions and legitimacy. By foregrounding themes of science, environmental responsibility, and multilateral cooperation, China, South Korea, and Japan cultivate a positive image that facilitates their participation in polar governance and creates low-risk avenues for expanding influence. Future research should critically examine the extent to which these narratives translate into concrete policy outcomes within polar institutions. Tracking shifts in official discourse may reveal strategic recalibrations in response to changing geopolitical or environmental conditions. Such analyses are essential to assess whether narrative legitimacy leads to substantive engagement and collaborative governance, or if it remains primarily symbolic.

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