

Cheng Baozhi: How Can China Effectively Participate in Arctic Affairs after Becoming a Member of the Arctic Council

Reporter: SHAO Yifan



Cheng Baozhi

PhD in international law, Wuhan University; Associated Fellow of Shanghai Institutes for International Studies; Director of European Law Research Society of Chinese Association for European Studies; Director of the Chinese Society of France Studies; and member of the EU Arctic Forum Advisory Committee; Mainly engaged in studies on the Arctic governance and international law- related issues.

The issue of climate change and environmental protection in Arctic could be a powerful, convincing argument for China to participate in the Arctic affairs. In terms of the Arctic affairs, it is not a taboo for us to talk about the benefits implied. Instead, what we need to consider is how to more effectively make contributions to the Arctic governance.

Reporter: When did Asian countries start to pay attention to the Arctic and participate in Arctic affairs?

Cheng Baozhi: Asian countries, mainly China, Japan and South Korea, their involvement in Arctic affairs started with a set of researches and expeditions. In the 1990s, Japan had done frontier researches on shipping in Arctic. And we can say that the shipping industries of Japan and South Korea have paid great attentions to and are very concerned about the opening of the Arctic waterways, and they did very in-depth researches. In terms of China, its first involvement in Arctic affairs can be traced back

to its 1980's expedition. Therefore, China is not a newcomer at least from the perspective of the Arctic expedition. But instead, it is leading in the world in some areas in Arctic expeditions after decades of development. From the social science perspective to watch the Arctic, China's first such concern came in 2007 when Russia planted flags on the seabed of the Arctic Ocean. After the incident, the domestic social science academics started Arctic researches from two aspects - international law and international relations. From the international law aspect, it mainly focuses on the legal status of the Arctic Ocean; and from the international relations aspect, it involves the Arctic countries attitude towards Asian countries participation in Arctic affairs and the development of bilateral and multilateral relations.

Reporter: Arctic matters involve territorial disputes, resource development, channel use, and environmental protection, etc. Then, in your view, what is the entry point for China to participate in Arctic affairs?

Cheng Baozhi: It has been more than two years since five Asian countries including China officially became observer countries of the Arctic Council. For the next step, how to make effective, full substantive participation in the Arctic Council and the Arctic governance process should be the issue that we urgently need to consider. I think we should mainly start with the issues of climate change, shipping, and Arctic resource. Especially from the point of view of environmental protection, it is not just an issue that should only be considered by the Arctic countries. Studies have shown that: the melting of sea ice caused by climate warming has far-reaching implications on the entire ecology, the environment, and the economic and social development of countries in East Asia. And some of influences will last even long-term but cannot be easily felt or watched. For example, the global sea level rise caused by melting Arctic icebergs will cause a direct impact to China's coastal cities, such as Shanghai. Therefore, although China seems very far away from the Arctic Circle, and seems nothing to do with the Arctic affairs, in fact/reality, the North Pole impact is true to China's development. Thus, the issue of climate change and environmental protection

in Arctic could be a powerful, convincing argument for China to participate in the Arctic affairs. In terms of the Arctic affairs, it is not a taboo for us to talk about the benefits. But instead, what we need to consider is how to more effectively make contributions to Arctic governance."

Reporter: Does the Arctic Council have any concerns in regards to China and other Asian countries' participation of the Arctic affairs? If so, how should we do to mitigate their concerns? Regarding this, what is the next Chinese research focus on Arctic issues?

Cheng Baozhi: Polar Regions are also being included in maritime power strategy of China when this strategy was put forth. Arctic and Antarctic is an important part of China's national maritime strategy. Currently, our investment in polar affairs is huge, and funds, personnel and logistics are adequately assured. In such circumstance, the State also raised higher requirements for relevant scholars engaged in research of international law and international relations. Singapore and South Korea, for example, they had all put forward their interpretive documents on Arctic policy. Putting it simply, it is the documents to state what their countries would do in the Arctic. But in China, we have not yet relevant documents issued. As a scholar, the next step we should do is to consider how to offer advices and suggestions, joint our wisdom withour country's needs and strategies, to explain more clearly our policy objectives, making it more easily understandable for people, and pave the way for China to participate in Arctic affairs. Anyway, despite the Arctic countries hold a positive attitude towards Asian countries involvement, but due to the fact that Arctic is close to their home, this always make them feel uncomfortable. Especially, with the enhancement of China's comprehensive national strength, our country's participation is inevitably making the international community get concerned.

It should be noted that legal system of the eight Arctic countries, except Russia, are very soundly established, and their human rights standards, labor standards and

environmental standards are very strictly imposed. At the same time, some of provincial and state governments of the Nordic countries and United States and Canada have also developed a lot of local laws and policies concerning on the Arctic. So, our study should not be limited to international or national laws and mechanisms; but probably these regional standards and laws may be in our next focus of research.

In all, I think we should not only need to clearly explain our own Arctic policy, but also should clearly and thoroughly understand relevant policies and regulations of other countries and regions.

Reporter: Different from the mechanism of Antarctic which relies mainly on the "Antarctic Treaty" to settle disputes, the disputes over the Arctic is primarily solved through international laws and the "United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea". How do you think of the international legal system?

Cheng Baozhi: In order to enable our country more effectively participating in Arctic affairs, a new concept is raised by some Chinese scholars, "Near-Arctic State". The rationale behind is because China is situated in the middle latitudes of Northern Hemisphere, so they think China should not be defined as a "Non-Arctic State". In fact, their purpose is to demonstrate that China is not a general non-Arctic country. However, the western countries do not think so, they do not agree with the so-called concept "Near-Arctic State", they don't buy the plausible to count you as an "Arctic country". This phenomenon also reflects a fact that Western countries tend to have more powers on voices on international affairs. This is mainly because the international laws and the existing system and ideas of the international laws are all originated from the West. What we can do so far is to make good use of existing rules of international law. But after all, these rules are their game rules that were developed by their countries. So, to engage in this kind of study, it is indeed more difficult for our domestic scholars. In addition, the overall level of China's international law study cannot fully meet the requirements in such a context that China has rapidly increased

its influences on international affairs.

Reporter: Is there any mutual communication mechanism built between the observer States of the Arctic Council? And as an observer country, is there any mechanism established between China and the Arctic countries?

Cheng Baozhi: Although China has officially become an observer State, the Arctic Council has strictly provisions on observer countries, for example, when in a meeting, the observer countries can only be sited in designated areas with no voting rights. Put it in a hard sense or an ugly way, it is only when it required observer States to make contributions or to fulfill their obligations, they will miss the observer countries.

Some observers of the Arctic Council, such as Poland, are trying to organize meetings between the observer countries for communication. However, cooperation and communication channels between the observer countries are still less in number.

In terms of the ties with the Nordic countries such as Finland, Norway and Iceland, it should be said that China has smooth communication channels with them, for example, The Centre's Secretariat of the China-Nordic Arctic cooperation is just such an institution located in Shanghai. In recent years, we also went to Helsinki and Reykjavik to participate in several international conferences such as the Arctic Shipping Forum, the Arctic Frontiers, and the Arctic Circle conferences. It should be said as I mentioned before, the Nordic countries hold a more positive attitude towards non-Arctic countries' participation in Arctic affairs, which is different from the United States and Russia. However, the Nordic Member States stresses more on observer states' contributions, but not on things like the so-called rights. In addition to the Nordic countries, China scholars studying the Arctic policies have also established corresponding communication mechanisms and platforms with scholars of the United States, Russia and other countries.

Reporter: As the Arctic sea ices are melting, the media attentions on Arctic waterways are keeping rising. How do you look at the strategic value of it for our country at the present stage?

Cheng Baozhi: Actually, to open Arctic waterways, it still faces challenges and problems of uncertainty ice conditions, lack of shipping infrastructure, higher requirements for the ship vessels (preferably with some icebreaking capability), pre-crew training inputs, lack of the ability to search and rescue, and marine insurances. Even in completely ice-free summer times, the annual shipping days they can achieve are not more than 100 days, therefore, it still cannot completely replace the Suez Canal, the Strait of Malacca and other traditional routes, at best it can only play a supplementary role. At this Stage, it is not included in China's "the Belt and Road " initiative, but on the longer term, the potential value of Arctic waterways will constitute an important strategic support in the process of carrying out our strategy.