

U.S. RETREAT FROM ARCTIC RESEARCH: A STRATEGIC OPENING FOR JAPAN AND SOUTH KOREA

by
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As the United States [retreats](#) from its engagement in Arctic research, with drastic funding cuts, mass firings, and a troubling de-prioritization of climate science, Japan and South Korea stand at a critical juncture. This shift is not merely a crisis for American polar science; it is a transformative opportunity for both countries to assert themselves as legitimate and influential Arctic actors. By stepping into the vacuum left by U.S. retrenchment, Japan and South Korea can both advance scientific discovery and enhance their geopolitical stature, furthering their long-term goals of technological leadership and global influence.

Vacuum in U.S. Arctic Research

Recent developments in the United States have sent shockwaves through the global scientific community. The U.S. government's sweeping cuts have decimated funding for research into climate change and Arctic studies, a move that could undermine the very foundations of American polar science. With [over 10 percent](#) of the National Science Foundation's staff dismissed, including numerous experts whose specialized knowledge is critical for monitoring and understanding the rapidly changing Arctic environment, the nation has effectively sidelined one of the most pressing scientific endeavors of our time.

This retreat is particularly concerning given the existential threats posed by climate change, while the Arctic [occupies](#) center stage in the global dialogue on environmental security.

Strategic Opportunity for Japan and South Korea

In this context, Japan and South Korea are uniquely positioned to step forward. Both countries have advanced research infrastructures, high levels of investment in science and technology, and a strong

interest in the Arctic's environmental and geopolitical significance. Japan, with its [long-standing](#) expertise in polar research, and South Korea, with its state-of-the-art icebreaker [Araon](#) and investment in Arctic logistics and infrastructure, have the necessary tools to take on a more prominent role in Arctic research. Scientific initiatives in the Arctic are not just about research—they are also a means of exerting geopolitical influence.

In an era where technological prowess is a core element of national and regional security, Arctic research presents a critical opportunity to integrate scientific excellence with strategic imperatives. By expanding their Arctic presence, Japan and South Korea can strengthen their credentials as key players in the region, contributing to both scientific discovery and broader security dynamics.

Strengthening Ties with Nordic States

The Nordic countries have long been at the forefront of Arctic affairs. Their established presence and deep-rooted connections to the region provide a natural partnership for Japan and South Korea. Collaboration with Nordic states would allow both countries to leverage their operational experience, local knowledge, and well-honed scientific networks. Such cooperation is not only pragmatic but essential.

By joining forces, Japan, South Korea, and the Nordic states can create a formidable consortium dedicated to Arctic research and, perhaps even more importantly, digital research infrastructure such as high-performance computing and climate modelling.

Moreover, working with Nordic partners can help Japan and South Korea avoid duplicative efforts and fragmented policies. A unified approach to Arctic research would promote a more coherent strategy that transcends national boundaries, reinforcing their credibility as serious Arctic stakeholders. This kind of multilateral engagement aligns with both countries' broader foreign policy goals, allowing them to act independently while drawing strength from strategic alliances.

Expanding Global Cooperation

While the immediate focus should be on strengthening ties with Nordic states, Japan and South Korea should also look beyond. The current vacuum in Arctic research presents an opening for other non-Arctic democracies with significant technological and scientific capabilities. Enhanced collaboration with the European Union and Canada would enrich the scientific output of Arctic research and contribute to a broader coalition of like-minded democracies committed to transparency, collaboration, and sustainable development.

Such an inclusive approach would transform Arctic research into a truly global enterprise. By working together, these nations can set international standards, share critical data, and jointly develop technologies that benefit all. Japan and South Korea's engagement in the Arctic can serve as a model for how non-Arctic states can contribute meaningfully to the region while advancing their strategic interests.

Conclusion

The stark reality of U.S. cuts in Arctic research, while alarming, presents a unique strategic opportunity.

Japan and South Korea have the capacity, resources, and institutional expertise to step into this void and establish themselves as key players in Arctic affairs.

By harnessing their research excellence, forging deep partnerships with Nordic states, and extending collaboration to other non-Arctic democracies, they can not only advance scientific understanding of one of the planet's most critical regions but also enhance their own geopolitical standing.

This is a moment for Japan and South Korea to demonstrate that leadership in the 21st century requires both scientific innovation and geopolitical foresight. In a world where science and security are increasingly intertwined, both nations must seize this opportunity to shape the global dialogue on Arctic research, paving the way for a more secure, prosperous, and cooperative future for all.

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