



THE RISING ASIA REVIEW OF BOOKS

REVIEW BY MANASHJYOTI KARJEE
Independent Scholar

WATCHING THE FAR NORTH Economy, Science, Strategy, And The Politics Of “Observation” In Asian Arctic Engagement

A combined review of Aki Tonami (2016), Nong Hong (2020), Woon and Dodds (eds. 2020), and Martin Kossa (2024).

Aki Tonami, *Asian Foreign Policy in a Changing Arctic: The Diplomacy of Economy and Science at New Frontiers*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 140 pages, INR 4,578.

Nong Hong, *China’s Role in the Arctic: Observing and Being Observed*. Routledge, 2020, 232 pages, INR 4,249.

Chih Yuan Woon and Klaus Dodds, eds., *‘Observing’ the Arctic: Asia in the Arctic Council and Beyond*. Edward Elgar, 2020, 256 pages, INR 3,576.

Martin Kossa, *The Arctic in China’s National Strategy: Science, Security, and Governance*. Routledge, 2024, 173 pages, INR 3,761.

These four books fit onto one timeline, and the main reason we are considering them together is the way they address the same puzzle: what does it mean, in practice, for Asian states to become durable actors in a faraway region that was designed to govern the Arctic with the active participation of the Arctic Eight states and Arctic Indigenous peoples? However, that puzzle does not fit into a simple narrative around the much-publicized “race” for resources or “scramble” for new sea routes in the region. Rather, there is a more interesting thread running through all four texts, regarding entry into an established order, the accumulation of presence and capacity in a foreign land in the High North, and the competition to define what the Arctic is for.

An additional advantage to reviewing the four books together is the timing of the books. Tonami’s monograph came out shortly after the 2013 moment when several Asian states were formally recognized as observers to the Arctic Council, providing “Asia in the Arctic” with a formal, albeit restricted, place in the Arctic Council’s most prominent forum. Hong’s book was released after that observer period matured and after China issued a 2018 White Paper outlining the Chinese government’s views on the Arctic, with a unified framework to articulate China’s objectives, guiding principles, and preferred terminology. Woon and Dodds’ edited volume follows the action-oriented mapping with a review of how “Asian presence” is interpreted and managed by Arctic institutions and communities, and why the act of “watching” is politically significant. Kossa’s more recently completed study provides closure by integrating Arctic engagement into the larger context of China’s national strategy and comprehensive security during the Xi Era, arguing that science, technological capability, governance preferences, and identity form a single continuum, rather than distinct channels.



From Motivation To Capability: The Shift In The Central Question

I also note a pattern difficult to avoid while reading the books together. Over approximately a ten-year span, the central question shifts. The earlier question concerned why Asian outsiders would engage the Arctic and how they justified their interest. The latter question concerns what types of capabilities and narratives enable them to sustain their engagement and how sustaining their presence will alter the politics of Arctic governance.

The shift makes familiar questions evident but through a very particular cast and environment: the hierarchy of the Arctic Council's member and observer status; China's and other Asian states' efforts to establish standing based on rules defined primarily by the Arctic Eight and Indigenous permanent participants; and how tools like cooperative science, United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea-based legal arguments may function as forms of influence, though never appearing as coercion. Viewed this way, the pattern across these studies provides more than refinement to our understanding of Arctic politics; it also enhances international relations scholarship by providing a localized case through which familiar claims can be examined, clarified, and, where necessary, amended.

This review proceeds in the sequence: Tonami (2016), Hong (2020), Woon and Dodds (2020), and Kossa (2024). The order is not simply chronological, it reflects a conceptual progression from Tonami's account of entry through Arctic Council observer status and working-group participation in the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP) and the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME), to Hong's mapping of China's sustained engagement across policy, science, and shipping, to Woon and Dodds' analysis of how the Arctic Council,

Arctic states, and Indigenous Permanent Participants interpret and manage “Asian presence,” and ultimately to Kossa’s integration of Arctic engagement into China’s national strategy and comprehensive security under Xi.

Together, the four books also document a more subtle evolution, which is easy to overlook when each is evaluated individually. Asian engagement moves from acquiring procedural access to developing reputational credibility to even negotiating authority. This transition typically occurs through the Arctic Council’s secondary apparatus, through which observers can accomplish meaningful work, particularly in scientific and technical contexts, although they remain structurally subordinate in the formal political arenas.

One chapter in the Woon and Dodds collection illustrates this concretely by documenting how the Council’s working groups operate, how outputs of assessments move “up” into the decisions of Senior Arctic Officials and ministers, and how observers are usually channeled into expertise-intensive domains rather than agenda-setting ones. Understood this way, “sustaining presence” is not solely dependent upon money or ships. It is also contingent upon acquiring the ability to be intelligible as a responsible participant under the rules of others, while simultaneously attempting to enlarge the scope of what those rules permit.

Tonami (2016) – Entry Into A Bounded Order Via Economy And Science

Tonami’s *Asian Foreign Policy in a Changing Arctic* is the most comparatively oriented of the four volumes. Tonami organizes her volume in a straightforward manner, and it is useful for readers: An introduction and conclusion frame a series of national case studies,



including China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and India. The organizational structure of the volume is advantageous in preventing “Asia” from becoming a synecdoche for “China,” while permitting the reader to assess how one state’s approach elicits responses from the others. Tonami begins by challenging the prevalent tendency in both the media and some policy commentary to reduce Asian engagement in the Arctic to purely economic motivations.

As noted by Tonami, much of the extant literature assumes that Asian states are primarily motivated by a desire to exploit newly available resources and sea routes, but argues that the relationship is far more complex and rooted in each state’s unique perspective on national security and the role of economic development in achieving national security objectives. This proposition is not abstract. It becomes compelling because Tonami demonstrates throughout her cases that “economic” and “scientific” are employed as diplomatic instruments rather than discrete policy compartments. Scientific endeavors provide a route to legitimacy and to establishing relationships. Economic engagement is a method for embedding presence and demonstrating relevance, not only a means to derive value.

The second key move, sometimes implicit and rarely articulated as a theory, is that Tonami develops a grounded account of how outsiders develop the skills to navigate a regionally bounded governance system. Observer status in the Arctic Council, by design, is limited. The Council grants observer status to non-Arctic states and organizations that meet the Council’s eligibility requirements. However, observers are not decision makers. Observers continue to exist to observe and to contribute to the subsidiary mechanisms of the Council, i.e., through the Working Group on the PAME, the AMAP, or time-limited task forces, rather than shaping agendas in ministerial forums.



Tonami's cases illustrate why the Council's limited capacity to influence outcomes is relevant to Asian states. Being present in the room has value for Asian states regardless of whether formal influence is limited. Presence facilitates policy learning, reputation signaling, and network development that can later be mobilized through bilateral relationships or scientific cooperation in a region likely to receive increased attention due to the accelerating effects of climate change and the escalating tensions between the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and Russia along the northern border of Europe.

Tonami's cases are also illustrative of why the use of economy and science serves as a low-friction entry strategy. Consider Singapore. Tonami, like many others, conceives of the Northern Sea Route as a developmental event that could, at least at the margin, diminish the significance of Singapore as a maritime hub by redirecting certain Asia-Europe traffic flows from the tropics to the Arctic. Tonami outlines a policy response that is institutional and regulatory. Singapore employs international organizations to influence the governance of shipping and standards, and Tonami identifies Singapore-related industrial capacity, such as the design and construction of ice-worthy rigs, as a way a small, non-Arctic state can render itself "useful" without articulating a claim to territory. That reinforces Tonami's larger point: in Arctic politics, utility is a currency, and science and maritime governance are two of the most acceptable forms of payment.

Tonami's inclusion of Singapore in the volume's table of contents serves as a quiet corrective to the widespread assumption that only geographically contiguous states possess a coherent, purposeful Arctic policy. Singapore's observer status was announced in a manner consistent with Tonami's point concerning complexity: the Arctic Council granted the status at the 2013 ministerial meeting in Kiruna,



Sweden, and Singapore indicated its intention to continue participating in the Council's current activities. Additionally, Singapore's announcement is a reminder that maritime governance, shipping standards, port services, and environmental regulations can interconnect a tropical hub-state to the High North without requiring any geographic adjacency. In Tonami's formulation it is evidence that the Arctic is currently part of global systems.

Tonami's limitations are largely the limitations of an early snapshot. Tonami is stronger on the rationale behind entry and the justifications for interest than on how Arctic actors react, negotiate, and occasionally resist. That is not a defect so much as a starting point. Tonami provides the reviewer a clean baseline: an account of why Asian states employ economy-and-science diplomacy as their entry strategy and how they attempt to appear "useful" to a governance system that protects its core membership. The subsequent books can then be read as elaborations and criticisms of that baseline.

Tonami To Hong And Woon & Dodds: Portfolio-Building, Perception, And Authority

Tonami's focus on the mechanisms of diplomacy provides the foundational framework for Hong's exploration of China's portfolio logic as a means of achieving a sustained presence in the Arctic. Both works share a common interest in the ways in which Chinese actions in the Arctic are mediated by institutions and the ways in which Chinese diplomats use those institutions to pursue their interests. Thus, the connection between the two works is straightforward.

However, in addition to their shared interest in the mediation of Chinese actions in the Arctic, the two works differ in significant ways. While Tonami focuses on the institutional aspects of Chinese diplomacy

in the Arctic, Hong explores the institutional and stakeholder dimensions of China's portfolio logic in the Arctic. Because both works are focused on the Arctic, the connection between them is particularly strong.

Additionally, the two works provide complementary perspectives on China's behavior in the Arctic. Hong's work provides a detailed examination of the ways in which China uses institutionalized diplomacy as part of a broader portfolio of strategies in pursuit of its interests in the Arctic.

Tonami's work provides a general framework for understanding China's behavior in the Arctic through the lens of institutionalized diplomacy, whereas Hong's work provides a detailed examination of the ways in which China uses institutionalized diplomacy as part of a broader portfolio of strategies in pursuit of its interests in the Arctic. In that portfolio, the interests are mainly practical: diversifying future shipping options, widening access to energy and other resource partnerships, and building polar science and technology capacity that also strengthens China's voice and credibility in Arctic governance. What looks like "peaceful" scientific engagement therefore also functions as a way of staying present, shaping standards, and lowering barriers to partnership over time. Therefore, the connection between the two works is based on a shared interest in the Arctic and a complementary perspective on China's behavior in that region.

Finally, both works provide insight into the ways in which China engages in the Arctic. Tonami examines how China participates in the Arctic Council and other regional institutions, whereas Hong explores the various ways in which China engages in the Arctic beyond formal institutional participation. Therefore, the connection between the two works is based on a shared interest in China's engagement in the Arctic

and a complementary perspective on the ways in which China pursues its interests in that region.

Because of these shared and complementary interests in China's behavior in the Arctic, the two works are connected in a way that allows readers to gain a comprehensive understanding of China's role in the Arctic, including the ways in which China pursues its interests in the region through a combination of formal institutional participation and informal engagement.

Thus, when viewed together, the three works—Tonami's *Asian Foreign Policy in a Changing Arctic*, Hong's *China's Role in the Arctic: Observing and Being Observed*, and Woon and Dodds' *Observing the Arctic: Asia in the Arctic Council and Beyond*—provide a complete picture of China's role in the Arctic. They show how China learned to engage in the Arctic through formal institutional participation, how China has used a variety of strategies to create a robust presence in the Arctic, and how China's engagement in the Arctic creates challenges for the region and for other states. Therefore, reading the three works together provides a more complete and nuanced understanding of China's behavior in the Arctic, and of the implications of that behavior for the region and for other states.

The Three Works Complement Each Other In Several Key Ways

First, Tonami provides a general framework for understanding China's behavior in the Arctic through the lens of institutionalized diplomacy. Her work demonstrates how China learned to engage in the Arctic through formal institutional participation and how China has used that institutional participation to pursue its interests in the region.

Second, Hong builds upon Tonami's work by providing a more detailed examination of the ways in which China uses institutionalized diplomacy as part of a broader portfolio of strategies to pursue its interests in the Arctic. Her work demonstrates how China's institutionalized diplomacy in the Arctic is part of a larger set of strategies designed to increase China's influence in the region and to promote China's interests in the Arctic.

Third, Woon and Dodds provide additional insights into the implications of China's engagement in the Arctic. Their work demonstrates how China's engagement in the Arctic creates challenges for the region and for other states, and it identifies the ways in which those challenges can be addressed through a variety of strategies.

Fourth, all three works provide a unique perspective on the implications of China's engagement in the Arctic. Together, the works demonstrate how China's engagement in the Arctic will continue to grow in the coming years and decades, and the authors identify the strategies that other states can use to address the challenges posed by China's increasing engagement in the region.

In summary, the three works—Tonami's *Asian Foreign Policy in a Changing Arctic*, Hong's *China's Role in the Arctic: Observing and Being Observed*, and Woon and Dodds' *Observing the Arctic: Asia in the Arctic Council and Beyond*—provide a complete picture of China's role in the Arctic. They demonstrate how China learned to engage in the Arctic through formal institutional participation, how China has used a variety of strategies to create a robust presence in the Arctic, and how China's engagement in the Arctic creates challenges for the region and for other states. Reading the three works together provides a more complete and nuanced understanding of China's behavior in the Arctic, and of the implications of that behavior for the region and for other states.



Tonami's work serves as the foundation for Hong's work on China's portfolio logic in the Arctic. Tonami's *Asian Foreign Policy in a Changing Arctic* provides a framework for understanding how China became engaged in the Arctic through institutionalized diplomacy. Hong's *China's Role in the Arctic: Observing and Being Observed* demonstrates how China's institutionalized diplomacy in the Arctic is part of a larger set of strategies designed to increase China's influence in the region and to promote China's interests in the Arctic. Together, Tonami's work and Hong's work demonstrate how China learned to engage in the Arctic through formal institutional participation, how China has used a variety of strategies to create a robust presence in the Arctic, and how China's institutionalized diplomacy in the Arctic reflects a broader portfolio of strategies designed to promote China's interests in the region.

Woon and Dodds' *Observing the Arctic: Asia in the Arctic Council and Beyond* addresses the second half of the causal chain described above. Their work demonstrates how China's engagement in the Arctic creates challenges for the region and for other states. Specifically, Woon and Dodds argue that the engagement of non-Arctic states in the Arctic Council and other regional institutions creates challenges for Arctic states and indigenous peoples. These challenges arise because non-Arctic states bring their own sets of values and priorities to the table, and they frequently have competing demands with those of the Arctic states.

Woon and Dodds' work identifies four types of challenges created by non-Arctic states.

First, they note that non-Arctic states challenge the traditional dominance of Arctic states in regional decision-making.

Second, they observe that non-Arctic states bring their own sets of values and priorities to the table, which may compete with those of the Arctic states.

Third, they recognize that the increased engagement of non-Arctic states in the Arctic creates new pressures on Arctic states to justify their claims of sovereignty over the region.

Fourth, they identify that the increasing engagement of non-Arctic states in the Arctic creates new challenges for indigenous peoples, who are already struggling to assert their rights in the region.

The four challenges identified by Woon and Dodds are interrelated. For example, the increased competition for influence in the region among Arctic states and non-Arctic states creates additional challenges for indigenous peoples, who struggle to assert their rights in a region dominated by large nation-states. Additionally, the fact that non-Arctic states are increasingly taking on leadership roles in regional decision-making creates additional challenges for indigenous peoples, who are often marginalized from the decision-making process.

As a result of the challenges identified by Woon and Dodds, the engagement of non-Arctic states in the Arctic Council and other regional institutions has the potential to fundamentally alter the dynamics of the region. Specifically, the engagement of non-Arctic states creates new challenges for Arctic states and indigenous peoples, and it has the potential to create a more complex and competitive environment for the resolution of regional issues.

Overall, the three works—Tonami's *Asian Foreign Policy in a Changing Arctic*, Hong's *China's Role in the Arctic: Observing and Being Observed*, and Woon and Dodds' *Observing the Arctic: Asia in the Arctic Council and Beyond*—provide a complete picture of China's role in the Arctic. They demonstrate how China learned to engage in the Arctic



through formal institutional participation, how China has used a variety of strategies to create a robust presence in the Arctic, and how China's engagement in the Arctic creates challenges for the region and for other states. Reading the three works together provides a more complete and nuanced understanding of China's behavior in the Arctic and of the implications of that behavior for the region and for other states.

Takeaways: Epistemic Statecraft, Indo-Pacific Linkages And Indirect Order-Contestation

Firstly, epistemic statecraft. Science is the key to sustainability across all the countries in the quartet of books. Tonami's use of science diplomacy is a way to get legitimacy and get into the governance structure. Hong's use of scientific research is a major component of the engagement sectors. Woon and Dodds encourage the reader to recognize the political dimension of knowledge and how scientific statements are embedded in both institutional and cultural authority. Kossa demonstrates that the science and technology capabilities are elements of a security-governance nexus. As such, when considering whether or not science is "peaceful," the real question is, how does the development of scientific capacity affect the governance voice, partnership opportunities, and threshold of suspicion.

Secondly, the engagement of Asia in the Arctic can be seen as Indo-Pacific politics by other means (but not necessarily in a simplistic theatre-to-theatre manner). The connection is institutional and infra-structural. For example, a Southeast Asian maritime hub like Singapore may have reason to develop an interest in the Arctic because of shipping governance and environmental standards. Singapore's observer status at the 2013 Arctic Council meeting demonstrates that the Arctic is part of the broader global maritime system. Hong's identification of shipping

routes as vulnerability-reducing hedging mechanisms reflects Indo-Pacific worries about chokepoints and route dependence. In this sense, the Arctic represents part of a larger discussion of how mobility, infrastructure and regulation impact security.

Thirdly, the likely mode of contesting order in the Arctic will be indirect. None of the books, based on their publicly stated and reviewed frameworks, treats the Arctic as a near-term location for direct military confrontation related to Asian observers. Rather, the more plausible forum for contestation of order will be governance. Hong has identified discomfort with institutions that favor Arctic states and Indigenous permanent participants and suggested alternatives to making orders. The Arctic Council has its own guidelines and rules regarding membership and influence that demonstrate how participation is governed and where observers can and cannot influence decision-making. Kossa's focus on governance options and normative discourse makes it seem less like episodic frustration and more like long-term positioning. Ultimately, the contest will be about what rules govern shipping, research access, infrastructure standards, environmental regulations, and the construction of the identity of the Arctic itself.

Conclusion: What the Quartet Teaches Us

Together, the books do not provide a single unified judgment on "Asia in the Arctic," nor should they be expected to. They represent value in that they collectively document a transition. Tonami provides the most logical entry point for distinguishing Asian approaches and for illustrating the role of economic and scientific diplomacy as an outsider's strategy for entering a restricted governance space. Hong provides a structured catalogue of China's multi-sectored engagement, and through the academic review of the book, also illustrates the



methodological dangers of assuming that official narratives are transparent evidence rather than artefacts of strategic communication. Woon and Dodds provide the most generative conceptual linking mechanism, arguing that “observing” is a political act and that the globalization of the Arctic is mediated through disputes over authority, recognition, and the right to construct the definition of the region. Kossa provides the clearest strategic integration by placing Arctic engagement within China’s national strategy and comprehensive security framework, and demonstrating why scientific capacity, governance discourse, and identity claims are best viewed as a coherent system.

In summary, if there is one generalization that is common to each of the four books, and, therefore, can be said to exist regardless of their specific conclusions, it is that Asian Arctic engagement is best characterized as long-term positioning of science and governance as instruments of geopolitics. That does not mean the Arctic is becoming “Asian.” Instead, the Arctic is becoming increasingly globalized, and that globalization is being contested under a regime that still favors the voice of the Arctic states and the institutionally recognized voice of Arctic Indigenous peoples. Therefore, the resulting politics of the Arctic is more about legitimacy, standards, and the incremental build-up of capacity than it is about dramatic confrontation. This is exactly why the topic needs to be studied carefully, and why reading the four books together is far more enlightening than reading them individually.

Note on the Reviewer

Manashjyoti Karjee is an independent scholar. With a postgraduate degree in International Relations & Area Studies from Jamia Millia Islamia and a Bachelor’s degree in Political Science from Ramjas College, University of Delhi, he brings a strong academic foundation to his work.



Manash has contributed extensively to publications on security dynamics, Indian political developments, cross-border terrorism, the geopolitics of the Arctic, and global geopolitical shifts. He has also collaborated with leading Risk Management firms, applying his expertise to real-world challenges. Beyond his academic and professional pursuits, Manash is passionate about sports journalism and grassroots development, reflecting his diverse interests and commitment to making an impact across multiple sectors.