

Promote Active Diplomacy in the Arctic Circle

By **KAWAI Masao**

The five coastal states of the Arctic Ocean held conference of Foreign Ministers in Greenland on May 27-29. In recent years, due to global warming, Arctic sea ice is melting very rapidly. It is estimated that the Arctic Ocean could be ice-free as early as the summer of 2013. The Arctic meltdown has given birth to a scramble among the Arctic states for seabed resources and sea lanes which will become accessible in the future. Russia and Norway applied to the UN Commission on Limits of Continental Shelf for their rights on continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean, while Canada announced the establishment of military facilities on an island of the Arctic Ocean.

Japan should have stronger concern about these developments. It is because the development of natural resources and sea lanes would be important for Japan from the viewpoint of securing resources and marine transportation. It is estimated that the Arctic Circle region holds a plenty of oil, natural gas, and mineral resources. The Northern Sea Route, if it is opened, would halve the distance between North European countries and Japan, compared with the route via the Suez Canal. Although it is not very well known, Norway is the third largest exporter of oil in the world and its production of natural gas is expected to increase in the future. The Northern Sea Route will make it possible for Japan to import these natural resources directly from Norway.

In fact, the Nippon Foundation of Japan, Fridtjof Nansen Institute of Norway, and Central Marine Research and Design Institute of Russia carried out an experimental voyaging by using Russian ships as a part of their joint research projects. It was the navigation guided by an icebreaker and calling at ports on the Russian coast. Although the navigation of this route is technically possible only during the three months of summer under the current level of marine technology, it might become possible throughout the year in the future. In addition, concerning the development of natural resources in the Arctic, there is a special treaty on Norwegian Svalbard Islands, so-called the "Svalbard Treaty." There used to be territorial disputes over these islands. However, parties to this treaty have recognized Norwegian sovereignty over the islands while all parties have been also granted equal rights for commercial activities on the islands. Along with other 13 countries, Japan is a founding member of this treaty which was signed in 1920. This is the evidence suggesting that Japan paid considerable attention to

the Arctic issues even before the World War II.

I visited these islands, which are located at 80 degrees north latitude and are covered by ice even during the summer, by invitation of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I found many countries engaged in various activities there. While Japan has been conducting an observation of the Arctic Circle by stationing researchers, Russia has been producing coals in several mines. Japan has a long history of interest in the Arctic Circle. Japan should put more emphasis on the economic activities in this region and seek to participate in international debates.

(This is the English translation of an article written by Ambassador KAWAI Masao, Visiting Professor of Hakuoh University, which originally appeared on the BBS “Giron-Hyakushutsu” of GFJ on April 22, 2008.)