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India in the Arctic: Exploring strategic opportunities

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Abstract

The Arctic region has recently gained significance due to the melting of ice, climate change, global warming, and various environmental vulnerabilities. Nonetheless, the region is experiencing significant attention from various stakeholders. Due to the presence of two major powers, namely the USA and Russia, the region is increasingly positioning itself to play a major role in international affairs, thereby contributing to a redefinition of the global perspective on the Arctic region. Recent studies indicate that the Arctic region could face ice-free summers by the 2050s, potentially unlocking a range of economic avenues, including the establishment of new shipping and transportation routes, as well as opportunities for the exploration of diverse resources such as minerals, oil, and gas. Given the heightened significance of the region, all states, particularly those in the Arctic, are formulating their policies, plans, and strategies for engagement in the region. India has launched its official Arctic policy and aims to extend its participation in the region. Therefore, the paper aims to examine the strategic interests of India in the Arctic. Therefore, the study conducts an in-depth analysis of various government reports, expert interviews, and research articles to provide a comprehensive understanding of the geopolitical dimensions of the region.

Keywords: Arctic Region, India, Northern Sea route, China, Arctic Council

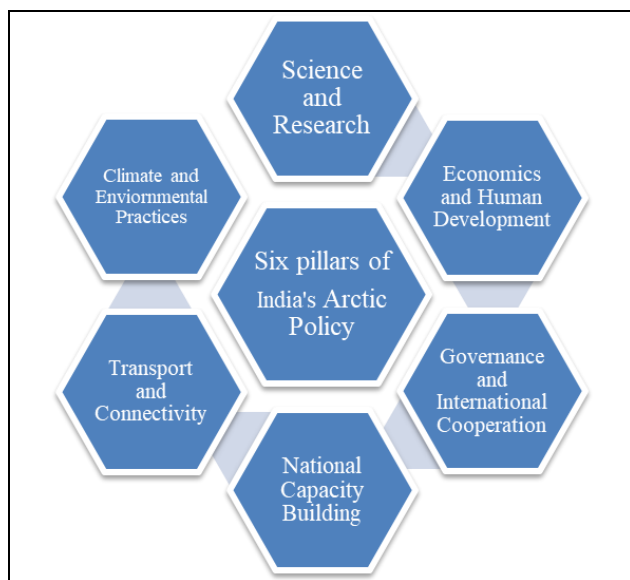
Introduction

The Arctic region located on the northernmost extremity of earth, encompassing the Arctic Ocean, its surrounding seas, and territories belonging to Finland, Canada, Denmark, the United States, Iceland, Norway, Russia, and Greenland. The changes in the Arctic environment, such as melting ice, changing weather patterns, and the wider effects of global warming, have had a huge impact on the region's ecosystem. The vulnerabilities have opened up opportunities that have resulted in the emergence of diverse economic potential, capturing the interest of all significant stakeholders. The geostrategic narrative regarding the Arctic is evolving, mainly due to commercial opportunities like the exploration and extraction of natural resources, energy reserves, and the development of new shipping routes. Recent studies indicate that the Arctic region could encounter ice-free summers by the 2050s, potentially facilitating a range of economic avenues, including the emergence of new shipping and transportation routes, as well as opportunities for energy exploration, among others. The region consists of abundant resources, encompassing rare minerals, oil, and gases. Given the heightened importance, all states are unveiling their strategies for engagement in the region. The region is currently experiencing a New Cold War like situation as a result of the recent geopolitical upheavals, which include the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO. Rightly stated by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that the region has the potential to become a "Terrain of Power and Competition" due to the inherent presence of two significant powers, namely the United States and Russia. Additionally, the increasing involvement of other nations, particularly China, raised concerns regarding the security dynamics of the region. In 2018, China published a white paper that outlined its policy for engagement in the region, identifying itself as a "near Arctic state." This stance is raising a lot of serious concerns and anxieties for the arctic states.

However, the claim was contested by United States by saying "that there are only two categories First, Arctic states and second non-Arctic states, and no third category exists and claiming otherwise entitles China to entirely nothing". With the increased presence of different players in the Arctic, there is an enormous growth in the scale of military drills and exercises.

The military presence is giving rise to the various threats on non-traditional aspects of security, such as, environmental degradation including climate security. Also, there is no specification related to the energy exploration which can create economic and strategic disparities between the Arctic states. Because of which it may eventually lead to increased tensions in the region, although Arctic states are committed to keep the region as 'Zone of Peace'. However, the increased militarization is giving alarming signals for the future because the Arctic states as well as all the observer states (Singapore, India, Japan, Netherland Spain, France, Poland, Italy, China, South Korea, United Kingdom, Switzerland and Germany) are looking for opportunities for upgrading their military capability and presence in the region. Considering all the factors, it is very important for a country like India which is the third largest energy consuming nation in the world and a nation which is moving to play a greater role in international arena to register its presence in the region. In the current article, an analysis of the strategic relevance of the Arctic region for India is presented, along with the identification of potential partners for the purpose of strengthening the collaboration with the Arctic nations.

Indian Engagement in Arctic



Source: India's Arctic Policy

India's engagement in the Arctic region dates back to 1920's when India signed the Treaty of Spitsbergen/ Treaty of Svalbard as a colonial state under British Empire. This, treaty gives leverage to all the signatories to enjoy same rights to all the natural resources. Despite this India remained aloof from the North Pole and focused its attention on the South Pole for the polar research and scientific expeditions. While India was conducting regular expeditions in Antarctica since 1981, Arctic didn't get any attention from the Indian government till fourth International polar year program (2007). The fourth International polar year (2007-2008) brought the limelight to the connection between Polar Regions and other parts of the earth. Indian scientist joined the international Polar year program in 2007. Soon after which research station called 'Himadri' was established in Ny-Aalesund in 2008 to draw connections between Arctic and Indian Weather. After which in 2013

India got observer status in the Arctic council which was renewed for another five years in 2019. India came up with its official Draft of Arctic Policy in January 2021 which stated that it is keen to invest in the region and outlined its interest in terms of scientific, techno-logical, environmental and other aspects related to research and development. After which very recently on 17 March 2022, India came up with its official Arctic policy titled 'Building a Partnership for Sustainable Development' the policy is divided into eight chapters based on Six Pillars.

**The strategic motivations for India in Arctic
Countering China in Arctic**

The strategic rivalry between India-China can be seen since 1947 in various areas such as Boundary disputes, economies competition, showing sea power and trade disputes. Energy rivalry between India-China began in Central Asia and then moved towards Africa, the Arctic region will outspread the rivalry into newer dimensions such as Energy exploration and access to the new sea routes. Arctic is regarded as New Great Game by many authors around the world. The power tussle in the Polar region began in 2013 when the two Asian giants (India and China) were given membership in the Arctic council as Observer states. Both states have their own motivations, China's interest in Arctic can be classified into three parts Strategic, Economic and ambition of acquiring polar great power status. China has been very active from almost a decade in carrying out its interest in various fields by making significant investments in the Arctic region specifically for energy exploration and infrastructural development. Since, 2012 China has invested around 90 billion dollars in Arctic. Furthermore, China is the only country besides Russia to be working on constructing a Nuclear Icebreaker. Since, China is determined to build a blue water army which will be competent enough to operate around the globe thus, the Arctic Sea routes are of extreme importance for China. In 2014, President Xi Jinping declared that in order to be a maritime global power, it has to focus on becoming a great polar power. Economic ambitions, China looks at Arctic region as a major source for energy exploration and is keen to invest in resource exploitation of abundant natural resources available in the region such as minerals, oils, natural gas, fisheries etc. lastly, China perceives Arctic as a new area for global power competition specifically due to the natural presence of two superpowers USA and Russia. Therefore, China doesn't want to miss out to the opportunity of having a strong say in the region. Whether by calling Arctic region as a "Global Common" or its claim of "Near Arctic state", China has invested its heavy diplomacy in carrying out its Arctic strategy.

Whereas, Indian approach towards the north has been passive since 1920's and it is often argued that Chinese active approach towards the Arctic has triggered India to join the Great Game of North. Therefore, very recently on 17 March 2022 India launched its official Arctic policy. Till now India has a leverage in the Asia Pacific region and in any case hostility from China India can constraint the Chinese by blocking the Malacca strait and cut off the energy supply routes to China. But, now with the melting of Ice caps in the Arctic, China gets access to vast energy resources from Arctic region and also China can use the Northern Sea route for transportation all the resources. Also, it is quite important for India to have strategic construct and

counter China in the Arctic region.

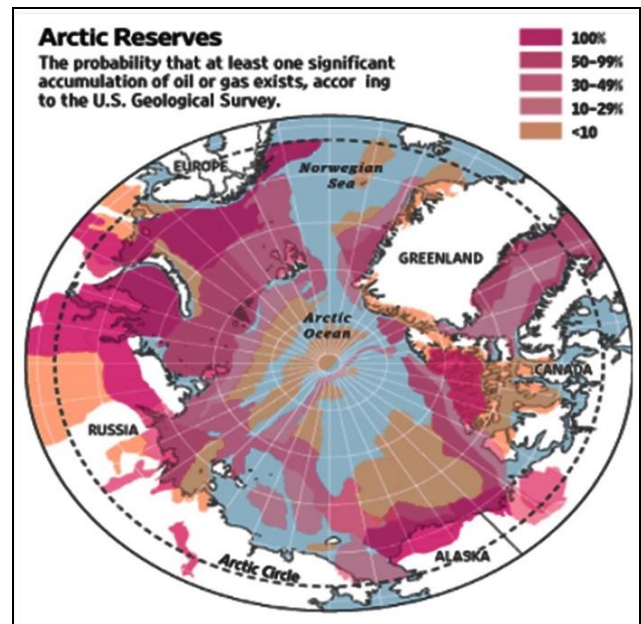
Extending Partnership with Russia

India’s engagement in Arctic can serve as an extension of India’s Act East policy which is signaled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his speech in twentieth India-Russia Annual summit 2019. Where for the first-time joint statement reflected India’s willingness to play a significant role in Arctic and Arctic Council. In the joint statement issued by both the countries “India-Russia energy partnership can bring stability in global market”. With the geopolitical upheavals such as the Russia-Ukraine crisis and the Western sanctions on Moscow, Russia is extending its partnership towards Asian countries, majorly with India and China. These tensions have presented India with opportunities to enhance its energy supplies in partnership with Russia, as well as to collaborate extensively on the Northern Sea route. This route offers significant benefits to India, including reduced travel time and cost-effectiveness. According to the Department of Commerce of India, the bilateral commerce between India and Russia hit a new high of US\$65.70 billion in the fiscal year 2023-24. This figure includes India's exports worth US\$4.26 billion and imports from Russia equivalent to US\$61.44 billion. During the month of August 2024, India had a trade imbalance of \$3.07 billion due to the fact that it sold \$505 million to Russia and bought \$3.58 billion totalling \$3.58 billion. When compared to the same time period in 2023, India's exports climbed by 42.7 percent while imports decreased by 39.9 percent. This demonstrates India's higher export volumes and decreased dependency on Russian imports, notably in the energy sector. The data indicates that both nations are making preliminary attempts to enhance the partnership in the Arctic; but, in order to accomplish this goal, however this will require a lot of financial aid and serious efforts from both governments. Indian geopolitical or geostrategic interest in Arctic can be via extending look east policy can be classified into two categories first, Opportunities for energy exploration and secondly by extending international north and south corridor to Russia and other Nordic countries.

Opportunities for energy exploration

The US geological survey estimates that the Arctic region has around 22% of the World’s total undiscovered oil and gas reserves, vast deposits of economically valuable mineral resources such as phosphate, bauxite, diamonds, iron ore, gold, silver, copper and zinc. Therefore, for India with second largest population and the third largest in energy consuming nation in the world, it is quite important to balance its energy requirements along with its environmental concerns. The importance of the exploration and extraction of natural resources, in the Arctic region has begun to draw attention of India. This ice packed region is far more than just a distant wasteland; it is a storehouse of resources that offers both potential and challenges for India. Exploration and exploitation of these resources holds major impact. To begin with, the Arctic is believed to be rich in hydrocarbon resources such as oil and natural gas. These potential precious metals treasure is of vital importance for India, a nation with growing energy demand driven by rapid economic growth and development. The primary objective of this research is on analyzing the feasibility and sustainability over time of India's engagement in Arctic

energy exploration. The intricate aspect refers to the geopolitics associated with the extraction of resources, the technological challenges involved, and environmental consequences associated with tapping these natural resources. In addition, the significant amount of minerals in the Arctic region serves as an additional factor that attracts researchers. The existence of significant quantities of valuable minerals, such as rare earth elements, in the region is widely acknowledged.



Source: US Geological Survey Report

These minerals play a crucial role in contemporary electronics and environmentally friendly technologies. Even though, the Arctic policy commits to engagement with the Arctic states and Arctic region in accordance with the sustainable development goals. However, this will require a lot of financial aid and series efforts from the Indian Government.

Extending International North and South Corridor



Source: Japan Forward

In order to travel from East Asia to Western Europe the shortest route is via Malacca strait to Indian Ocean to gulf of Aiden to Suez Canal which is approx. 21000 km and takes

roughly 48 days to reach. But if we look at the Northern Sea route it cuts down the travel distance to just 12800 and reduces the time journey by 12-15 days, which can save a lot of time and reduces the travel cost. However, the only problem with the Northern Sea route is the sea ice due to which the Northern Sea route is accessible only for 2-4 months in whole year. If somehow, the Northern Sea route is cleared, then it will become an uninterrupted maritime highway between Asia and Europe throughout the year. Since, the Northern Sea route lies within the Russian Arctic coast, Russia enjoys predominance and influence in the region, and it is called as Russian Backyard.

In order to connect with the northern sea route India needs to extend international north and south transport corridor (INSTC) beyond its termination point in St. Petersburg and expand it further towards north and west by both waterways and railways by connecting it with the European rail networks such as Northern Sea-Baltic Trans European Transport (TENT-T), Core Network corridor and Scandinavian Mediterranean Tent core network corridor. This would act as a milestone for India, as it will be the fastest and most direct ways for India to reach Arctic and have leverage over the emerging trade routes in Arctic region. However, this will require a lot of financial muscle and serious efforts from Indian government.

Conclusion

India's engagement in Arctic dates back to more than 100 years but its active involvement in the region began in the 21st Century with its participation in the Scientific expedition in 2007. India gained access to the Arctic council as an observer state in 2013 that attenuated its Political and Economic interests in the region. There has been a divide amongst Indian Scholars over the nature and type of India's Participation in the region. In the changing global context, it is quite important for India to line up its national priorities in the Arctic region. However, in order to enhance its engagement India needs to build its national capacity and capability and promote its strategic interests with participation in various events, projects and activities related to region. It is also crucial for India to play active role as an observer state without losing sight of important issues such as climate change, energy security and sustainable development.

With the ongoing geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West, it is quite evident that the region is no longer a 'zone of peace'. This animosity could give rise to renew and more intense geopolitical tensions in the region. In this context, extra regional players such as India could have an important role to play in resolving disputes within the region. India should also put forth alternative mechanisms based on its traditional philosophies like Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (World is a family) and Multiculturalism to foster stability and peace. India's active role in maintaining peace and tranquility would promote its own national interests and build credibility in approaching new and emerging areas.

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