ENVIRONMENT

Challenges to India's Arctic policy amid great power rivalry

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As the Arctic geopolitics has recently witnessed growing big power involvement and rivalry, India's Arctic Policy has both challenges and limitations.

By KM Seethi

Challenges to India's Arctic policy: The Arctic region is becoming strategically significant for several reasons. While the Antarctic is seen as relatively free from political and military interferences, the Arctic has become geopolitically sensitive with big powers staking their claims and counter claims. The North and South Poles are interconnected with the ecosystem of lives and livelihoods across the vast stretches of the Earth, with the oceans and seas, and with nations and their collectivities. While the Antarctic in the southernmost part is an uninhabited continent of land surrounded by a rim of sea ice, the Arctic in the northernmost part is essentially an Ocean surrounded by inhabited land.

The Antarctic does not have any indigenous population (except seasonal research staff), but there are approximately 10 million people living in the Arctic region, and nearly 10% of the total population is indigenous. Indigenous population consists of more than 40 different ethnic groups spreading over the 8 Arctic states — the US, Russia, Ca Denmark, Norway, Finland, Sweden and Iceland. This makes the Arctic region more socially sensitive and

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geopolitically significant. Consequently, the emerging geopolitical realities — with big powers having increasingly involved and invested in Arctic affairs — tend to have an impact on even the scientific research activities in the region.

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A crucial question to be addressed is how far are the major players in the Arctic willing to negotiate within a global governance architecture in the region. We must also look at the potential and constraints of India as an emerging player in the region within these broad parameters. Admittedly, contemporary discussions about Arctic geopolitics have different dimensions.

However, the Arctic has been an important focal point of the foreign policies of major powers for more than two decades. There are historical and ideological undercurrents in the making of the Arctic strategies of these powers and, naturally, the narratives about the Arctic region continue to reflect the different perceptions of policy makers as well as the emerging Arctic scholarship in different disciplines.

What is important is that besides the vast ambit of scientific exploration and research, questions of ecosystem management, human development, sustainable livelihood of indigenous communities, natural resources management, shipping and transportation, sovereignty, national and regional security—all call for greater attention and intervention from the angle of global governance architecture.

There is a transregional governance architecture in the Arctic called the Arctic Council which is an intergovernmental forum with 8 Arctic countries (following the Ottawa Declaration in 1996). There are also observers like China, Japan, India, Singapore, South Korea, Italy, Germany, France UK, Spain, Netherlands, Poland, Switzerland and UNEP, UNDP, and NGOs like International Arctic Science Committee (IASC), International Arctic Social Sciences Association (IASSA) etc. The Council is a platform for addressing and negotiating issues of the Arctic states within the framework of international law.

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Great power rivalry in Arctic

The Arctic is a problematic terrain, mainly due to its geopolitical characteristics and its proximity to the major powers like Russia, the United States, Canada etc. Russia and the US have different perceptions of security in the Arctic. The US sees Russia as having challenged the maritime rules in the Arctic and expressed deep reservations about Russia's military activity in the region. Russia, in turn, challenged the US and the NATO's motives in deploying military across the region.

The US, on the other hand, accused Russia of accumulating unprecedented military might in the Arctic and testing its newest weapons in the region (in a bid to secure its northern coast and open up a key shipping route from Asia to Europe). The US is also uneasy about Russia's attempts to influence the Northern Sea Route (NSR)—a shipping lane th[illegible]xpected to reduce the travel time for shipping containers to reach Europe from Asia via the Suez Canal. The volu[illegible] of cargo shipping along the NSR is expected to increase to 100 million tonnes in a few years.

China has also been staking high claims in Arctic affairs — assuming itself as a 'near-Arctic state', though the shortest distance between China and the Arctic is more than 1400 kilometres. Sensing this scenario, The European Union had already expressed its concerns and anxieties over the expanding role of China in the geopolitical terrain of the Arctic region and the collaborative activities between Russia and China. While the major powers have been recalibrating their Arctic strategies, India also came out with its (draft) Arctic policy recently. But its policy responses need to be placed within a larger context of the emerging geopolitical challenges.

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What attracts the major powers in the Arctic is evidently its rich deposits of oil and natural gas, besides its international maritime connectivity. The region is well endowed with a variety of minerals and rare earth elements. The region's oil and gas deposits constitute nearly 13% of the world's unexplored petroleum resources and 30 per cent of the untapped natural gas resources.

When the Arctic is strategically important, the Northwest Passage becomes the most profitable shipping lane between Europe and Asia. Experts say, shipping time could be reduced by 40 per cent if the Northwest and Northeast passages were ice-free all year. China realised the importance of this potential shipping route and in its Arctic Policy published in January 2018, Beijing referred to the trans-Arctic passage as the "Central Passage." Calling itself as a "Near-Arctic State,' China noted that "the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road (Belt and Road Initiative) are important for the country in the coming years.

Russia and China collaborate in the emerging Arctic geopolitics in different ways. While China is fast expanding its Arctic strategy, Russia is also reinforcing its military capability in the Arctic with its Northern Fleet being located in the region where its strategic submarines — essential to maintain Russia's status as a nuclear power — are maintained.

The US Congressional Research Service recently sounded alarm that given the growing Russian military capabilities in the region, the Arctic would become "a region of military tension and competition." During the Cold War, the Arctic was a terrain of military rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union when both countries maintained nuclear-powered submarines, long-range bombers, and tactical combat aircraft in the region. Though there was a respite for this rivalry after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the situation began to take a new dimension during the last decade, particularly after Russia asserting that some parts of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) pass through are its internal waters and hence it has a right to regulate commercial shipping.

This triggered a dispute between the U.S and Russia, which would have implications for other parts of the world as well, and thereby it would even undermine the universal application of international law on international waters. This assumes strategic significance given the fact that five of the eight Arctic states—the United States, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, and Norway—are members of NATO and three of them—Denmark, Finland, and Sweden—are members of the European Union (EU). During the Cold War, Norway and its contiguous sea areas were reckoned to be the northern flank of NATO's defensive line against potential aggression by the Moscow-led alliance.

The CRS Report also seriously viewed China's growing engagements with the Nordic countries, like Iceland and Greenland. China has polar-capable icebreakers and is planning to develop a huge nuclear-powered icebreaker also. It was at a time when the major powers began to recalibrate their Arctic strategies that India came out with its draft Arctic policy in early January 2021.

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SciTech power and India's Arctic Policy

India's Arctic Policy has come as a significant milestone in the country's Science Diplomacy. It is also in line with India's fast expanding scientific-technological ('SciTech' power) status. India's Arctic contacts began a century ago with its signing of the 'Svalbard Treaty' in February 1920 in Paris. A breakthrough in India's Polar research came in 1981 when the country joined the nations engaged in the Antarctic exploration. However, its engagements did not make much

headway till 2007 when the scientists undertook India's first Arctic expedition. In the following year, India set up a research station 'Himadri' at the international Arctic research base at Svalbard, Norway.

In 2013, Indian scientists set up another facility which was India's first multi-sensor moored observatory called 'IndArc' – a model of Indo-Norwegian scientific and technical cooperation in addressing the global climate change. It was in the same year that India became an Observer in the Arctic Council—a great recognition of India's contribution to the Arctic Studies. Another atmospheric laboratory was established in 2016 with the aim of initiating studies on clouds, precipitation, long-range pollutants, and other background atmospheric parameters.

India's proposed Arctic policy underlined that the Arctic research has helped to initiate studies on glaciers in the Himalayan region. This has tremendous implications for the agro-climatic conditions of countries like India whose food security itself is dependent on ecosystem stability. The policy says that "there are several synergies between polar studies and the study of the Himalayas. Arctic research will help India's scientific community to study melting rates of the third pole–the Himalayan glaciers, which are endowed with the largest freshwater reserves in the world outside the geographic poles."

According to the note attached to India's Arctic Policy (IAP), "India seeks to play a constructive role in the Arctic by using its vast scientific pool and expertise in Himalayan and Polar research. India would also like to contribute in ensuring that as the Arctic becomes more accessible, the harnessing of its resources is done sustainably and in line with best practices formulated by bodies such as the Arctic Council.

India's Arctic Policy is articulated with five major areas of engagements—(i) Science and research; (ii) Economic and human development cooperation; (iii). Transportation and connectivity; (iv) Governance and international cooperation; and (v) National capacity building. It is clear that the AP, apart from underlining the significance of science and research, sees the Artic region as a potential area of engagement in diverse areas of human development and commercial activities.

The document says: "India seeks to engage in economic development in a manner that is sustainable and is of value to the Arctic residents, especially indigenous communities." India sees the Arctic as "the largest unexplored prospective area for hydrocarbons remaining on earth" besides its vast reserves of mineral deposits. It also keeps in perspective India's investment in Russia which amounts to $15 billion in oil and gas projects.

The policy document is also confident of utilising India's expertise in the digital economy for facilitating establishment of data centres for commerce in the region. It further explores "opportunities for investment in Arctic infrastructure in areas such as offshore exploration/mining, ports, railways and airports." This inevitably calls for encouraging participation by Indian public and private sector firms with an expertise in these sectors. India's chambers of industry and commerce will be encouraged to enhance private investment in the Arctic and explore the public-private-partnership model. The draft policy also indicated that Indian companies will be encouraged to obtain membership of the Arctic Economic Council.

Another area where India has leverage in the Arctic region is human development. The document says: "the Arctic's indigenous inhabitants are being inevitably impacted by climate change. This is similar to the socio-ecological-economic predicament of the Himalayan people. The disruption of unique ecosystems and erosion of traditional knowledge are common to both. India has substantial expertise in addressing such issues and is uniquely placed to make a positive contribution in assisting the Arctic's indigenous communities cope with similar challenges."

In the realm of transportation and connectivity, India has vital stakes. According to India's Arctic Policy, "India ranks third in the list of seafarer supplying nations catering to almost ten per cent of global demand. India's maritime human resources could contribute towards meeting the growing requirements of the Arctic." India expects that ice free conditions in the Arctic would soon result in the "opening of new shipping routes and thereby lowering costs and reshaping global trade.

Traffic, especially through the Northern Sea Route, is rising exponentially and is projected to multiply in a few years. Th[illegible]t policy also seeks to "explore the possibility of linking the International North South Transport Corridor with the Unified Deep-Water System and its further extension to the Arctic." India expects that "the North-South

connectivity will result in lowering shipping costs and overall development of the hinterland and of indigenous communities more than East-West connectivity."

India knows that the Arctic governance is very crucial in the geopolitical milieu and the region itself is "governed by numerous national domestic laws, bilateral agreements, global treaties and conventions and customary laws for the indigenous peoples." However, the major focus of 'capacity building' is on science and technology, the draft document does not seem to have given importance to social sciences (including strategic) component in the making of India's Arctic policy even as the four of the 'five pillars' IAP outlined deal with these social areas.

India notified its IAP at a crucial time of global and regional power realignments. It was in 2018 that China notified its Arctic policy as a 'White Paper.' Though China does not have territorial sovereignty and related sovereign rights in the Arctic, it has been so eager to establish a foothold in the region with its self-assumed identity as 'near-Arctic state.'

The strategic significance of China's Arctic Policy cannot be underestimated. It underscores that the Arctic is a region having "global implications and international impacts." It says that the geopolitical scenario "goes beyond its original inter-Arctic States" having a vital bearing on the interests of States outside the region and the interests of the international community as a whole.

China has also gone to the extent of conceding, perhaps for the first time, that its interests in the Arctic region cannot be limited to 'scientific research' but would move to a broad range of commercial activities. This obviously becomes a part of its project to build a 'Polar Silk Road' that links China with Europe through the Arctic and fits in with the new 'blue ocean passages' extending from Beijing's Maritime Silk Road (MSR), put in place in 2013.

China became more assertive in its maritime policy and it apparently believes in the argument that "Whoever controls the Arctic Sea route will control the world economy and a new internationally strategic corridor." A decade back, a Chinese admiral said that the Arctic "belongs to all the people around the world, as no nation has sovereignty over it." Such statements cannot be dismissed as mere rhetoric given the new tempo of Chinese maritime strategies today.

Insofar as the Arctic is rich in resources, it has become so sensitive over years, and the region is warming far more rapidly than anywhere else on the planet. It certainly calls for extreme vigilance when powers like US, Russia and China think about transforming the Arctic into a terrain for rivalry. In the emerging scenario, India's Arctic policy has great constraints in engaging the broader geopolitical issues of the region, especially when New Delhi has strategic ties with Russia and the US, on the one hand, and a very complex and uncertain pattern of relations with China, on the other.

At the most, its basic approach—which underlines the value of 'sustainable engagement' through its 'Sci-Tech' power—has great value. India is well aware of the "vulnerability of the Arctic to unprecedented changes in the climate." Hence its emphasis on 'rule-based governance architecture' in the region is in line with India's science diplomacy and science and technology policy regime.

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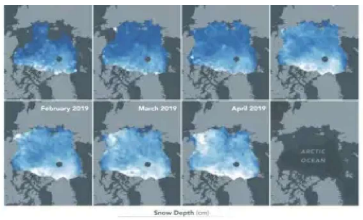

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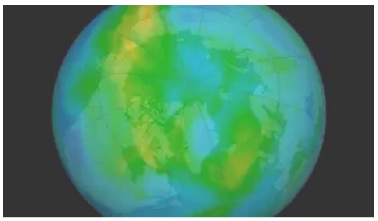

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