



Policy Brief

The Arctic Council: Is There a Case for India

*Dr Vijay Sakhuja**

It is an acknowledged fact that the melting of the Arctic sea-ice is offering both opportunities and challenges for the international community. The opportunities accrue in the form of newfound oil and gas deposits, unexploited marine living resources and shorter shipping routes connecting the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans. The challenges arise from the adversarial impacts of the melting ice on the livelihoods of the peoples and communities of the Arctic, disturbance in the delicate marine biodiversity of the region and the shrinking of the permafrost (permanently frozen soil) that would release large volumes of greenhouse gases which could further aggravate global warming. The challenges also arise from competing territorial claims by the littoral states over the Arctic sea-ice, safety of shipping routes, restructuring of militaries to defend Arctic territory which have a major geopolitical and geostrategic focus. At another level, several non-littoral states are exploring opportunities to get engaged into the evolving politico-economic-strategic dynamics of the Arctic region.

The Arctic Council

Established in 1996, the Arctic Council is an intergovernmental group of Arctic states i.e. Canada, Denmark (Greenland and Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, the US and the Arctic Indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants. The Council ‘promotes cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, on common Arctic issues, in particular issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic’. The Council members meet biannually, and the Chairmanship of the Arctic Council rotates every two years. However, it has no regulatory powers for compliance

and enforcement mechanisms.

There are six working groups (a) Arctic Contaminants Action Program (ACAP); (b) Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP); (c) Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF);(d) Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR); (e)Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME); and (f) Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG).

The Council has provision for observer status for states and is open to (a) Non-arctic states; (b) inter-governmental and inter-parliamentary organizations, global and regional; and (c) non-governmental organizations.

The five permanent observers are: Britain, France, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain. There are four ad hoc observers i.e. China, Italy, the EU and South Korea whose presence at each meeting must be approved by member states. In 2009, the Arctic Council had rejected a bid by the ad hoc members to become permanent observers at the Council meetings but "decided to continue discussing the role of observers in the Arctic Council." The next full ministerial meeting of the Arctic Council is due in 2011 in Denmark.

The Arctic littorals have established research stations for scientific studies on climate, weather, geology and atmospheric sciences. Besides, non-littorals such as China, India, Japan, and South Korea have also set up scientific research stations at Ny-Alesund, Norway.

The Arctic littorals through the Arctic Council, have engaged in bilateral and multilateral discussions to devise strategies to mitigate the adversarial impact of the Arctic ice melt and develop framework for cooperation. At a recent meeting on March 30, 2010, the Foreign Ministers from the Council member countries met and discussed issues relating to shipping regulations, maritime boundaries, search and rescue responsibilities, and negotiating territorial disputes in the Beaufort Sea and the Barents Sea.

Ad hoc Observers Take the Lead

China has engaged in Arctic studies since 2000 and Chinese scientists, scholars, policy makers and legal experts have participated in international seminars and conferences focusing on commercial, legal and geopolitical issues relating to the Arctic. Some Chinese scholars have openly advocated that the government must adopt proactive policies to understand the politico-

strategic impact of the Arctic sea-ice melt and prepare for the 'commercial and strategic' opportunities that would arise. In one such articulation it has been argued that "any country that lacks comprehensive research on Polar politics will be excluded from being a decisive power in the management of the Arctic and therefore be forced into a passive position." Professor Guo Peiqing of the Ocean University of China has observed that 'Circumpolar nations have to understand that Arctic affairs are not only regional issues but also international ones.' In essence China is actively participating in Arctic affairs and thus attempting to establish its strategic position. It has successfully managed to engage Canada and Norway in a formal bilateral dialogue on Arctic issues.

The EU has watched with interest the scramble for the Arctic resources and the possibility of commercial transport. It has so far exhibited a low profile on current territorial disputes. Since 2008, EU has been striving to obtain permanent observer status in the Arctic Council. However, it has faced stiff opposition from Canada due to EU policy of banning seal products.

In 2002, Republic of Korea established a research station Dasan at the Ny Alesund and has been actively engaged in research on issues relating to climate and marine species ecology. A South Korean ministry official has observed "Being an observer of the Arctic Council will help us enter the discussion among the Arctic nations over preservation and development of the area. That will also help our government brainstorm policies on development of marine transportation,"

Japan filed for Arctic Council membership in April 2009. An official at the Foreign Ministry's Ocean Division has stated that "If Japan is admitted as an observer of the council, we'll have the advantage of being able to collect information on matters of concern to each country related to the utilization of the Arctic Circle...We aim to join the council [with observer status] at its ministerial meeting in two years' time."

Indian Initiatives

India's engagement in the Arctic dates back to nearly nine decades when it signed the

‘Treaty between Norway, the United States of America, Denmark, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Great Britain and Ireland and the British overseas Dominions and Sweden concerning Spitsbergen’ on February 9, 1920 in Paris which entered into force on August 14, 1925. The Treaty is also referred to as the ‘Treaty concerning the Archipelago of Spitsbergen’ or the ‘Svalbard Treaty’. At that time, India was part of the British overseas dominions and The Right Honourable the Earl of Derby, K.G., G.C.V.O., C.B., Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United Kingdom had signed the treaty at Paris.

India has watched with interest the evolving climate change induced developments in the Arctic region. On July 30, 2007, India established a scientific research station *Himadri* at Ny Alesund which conducts its operations under the guidance of the National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research (NCAOR), under the Ministry of Earth Sciences. So far India has undertaken seven expeditions to the Arctic. It has also placed orders for a dedicated vessel for polar expedition which is expected to join the NCAOR in 2012.

No	Expeditions	Period
1	1st Expediton 2007	06.08.2007 to 06.09.2007
2	1st Expediton 2007-08 (Winter)	03.03.2008 to 31.03.2008
3	2nd Expediton 2008-09 (Summer I)	16.06.2008 to 17.07.2008
4	2nd Expediton 2008-09 (Summer II)	28.07.2008 to 28.08.2008
5	3rd Expediton 2009-10 (Summer I)	18.06.2009 to 16.07.2009
6	3rd Expediton 2009-10 (Summer II)	03.08.2009 to 31.08.2009
7	3rd Expediton 2009- 10 (Winter)	22.03.2010 to 19.04.2010

Source: National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research (NCAOR).

Policy Options

The world is looking towards the Arctic as an arena of great opportunity. Further, the effects of ice-melt showcase the beginning of new politics in the Arctic region pivoting on resources and routes. The claimant states are beginning to take hardened positions due economic and strategic interests. Non-Arctic states too are devising proactive policies for the Arctic by establishing scientific research stations, resource assessment and exploitation studies,

acquisition of ice capable ships, northern sea route transportation planning, and studies in Arctic politics, law and diplomacy.

The Arctic cannot be at the margins of India's mental map and New Delhi must find its way to the center of the evolving Arctic order and issues which will challenge and define the High North politics in the 21st Century: oil and gas to ensure energy security, marine living and non-living wealth for resource security, new shipping routes shaping global trade patterns, great power competition and above all climate change, global warming and its consequences that will result in melting of sea ice and permafrost and impact on people and ecosystems even in the tropics.

By virtue of the Svalbard Treaty, India is a 'stakeholder' in the region. It will be prudent for New Delhi to:

- (a) Forge relationships with the Arctic Council members and argue for a permanent membership of the Council by virtue of the 1920 Svalbard Treaty.
- (b) Broaden cooperation with Nordic countries and establish bilateral dialogues and discussions to understand the evolving politico-strategic developments in the Arctic region.
- (c) Engage in policy related research on the politics of the 'High North' and formulate an 'Arctic Strategy'.
- (d) Undertake Arctic resource assessment and exploitation studies.
- (e) Regular expeditions to the Arctic and consolidate scientific research.
- (f) Develop technological capability to exploit Arctic living and non-living resources.
- (g) India is a strong advocate of global nuclear disarmament and can play a vital role in promoting the idea of a nuclear free Arctic.

**Dr Vijay Sakhuja is Director (Research) Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*