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In September 2012, the Arctic ice shrunk to its lowest since its recordkeeping which started in 1979. It is believed that the Arctic could be ice free during summers by 2030. The phenomenon has been attributed to global warming, unprecedented release of heat trapping methane gas, increasing commercial activity in the region, and growing human footprint. There are concerns among the Arctic littoral states that have closely monitored the ongoing developments in the region. They have taken a number of proactive measures for the governance of the region through the Arctic Council to ensure that various scientific, environmental, commercial and human activities take place in a sustainable manner so as to preserve the pristine environment of the Arctic, to promote polar science, ensure peace and security in the region and work together towards a shared future. Several Asian states are aggressively jockeying for political influence in the Arctic region and making a strong bid to join the Arctic Council as a permanent observer.

In the above context, this paper attempts to highlight the interest of a number of Asian countries in joining the Arctic Council. It begins by highlighting the evolution of the Arctic Council, membership issues and its working groups. The paper notes that Asian countries are eagerly waiting to join the Arctic Council and participate in the politico-strategic-economic dynamics of the region. The paper also examines the Indian narrative on the Arctic and argues that it is important to monitor the evolving developments in the Arctic region.

Arctic Council

The idea of a pan-Arctic body to deal with the affairs of the region was first mooted in 1944 by the US.¹ Over the years, other Arctic states actively contributed to the discourse on the region through scientific papers, conferences and discussions. A number of ideas such as the Canadian proposal of an 'Arctic Basin Council' to coordinate efforts in the region were made; but it was the famous speech by Mikhail Gorbachev's in Murmansk where he argued for making the North Pole 'a Pole of peace', set in motion the debate on making the "Arctic habitable for the benefit of the national economies and other human interests of the near-Arctic states, for Europe and the entire international community".²

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By 1996, there was consensus that a multilateral body for the Arctic be established and on 19 September 1996, the eight Arctic member states and the three aboriginal permanent participants signed the *Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council* in Ottawa, Canada. Canada also assumed the position as the first Chair and agreed to establish the Arctic Council secretariat. The Chair is rotated after every two years among the eight Member States.³ Sweden is the current Chair and Canada will assume responsibility in 2013.

The Arctic Council is a high level intergovernmental forum but does not have regulatory powers for compliance and enforcement. The decision making is based on the principle of 'consensus'. It consists of eight Member States i.e. Canada, Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russian Federation, Sweden, and the United States of America, and six organisations representing Arctic Indigenous Peoples who enjoy the permanent participant's status and actively engage in the activities of the Council. There are six non-Arctic states (France, Germany, The Netherlands, Poland, Spain and UK), nine international organizations, and eleven non-governmental organizations who are Observers in the Council. These can observe the functioning of the Council but any active participation can be only through the Working Groups of the Arctic Council. The activities of the Council are conducted through the six Working Groups whose members comprise of government agencies, expert level representatives from sectoral ministries and researchers. Few states have been classified as ad hoc Observers which include China, European Union, Italy, Japan, and South Korea who can join to follow the proceedings of the Council through prior permission but cannot actively contribute.

The Council has been successful in promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States on common Arctic issues particularly those relating to sustainable development, biodiversity, environmental protection, shipping, search and rescue, the interests of the Indigenous Peoples, etc. Besides, it encourages bilateral/multilateral arrangements to discuss various issues relating to the Arctic region.

Asian Countries and the Arctic Council

A number of non-Arctic countries have expressed interest to participate in the activities

of the Arctic Council as permanent Observers. Among the Asian countries, China, Japan and Republic of Korea have filed application to the Arctic Council for a permanent Observer status and their applications are pending. Their interest is driven by a number of factors including scientific studies, resources, routes and regional influence. These states believe that they are responsible stakeholders and can play a constructive role in the Arctic affairs.

China has been the most active Asian country and its scientists, policy makers and legal experts have closely observed geopolitical and geostrategic developments in the Arctic region. Significantly, some Chinese scholars have openly advocated that the government formulate proactive policies to take advantage of the melting Arctic sea-ice 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'.⁴ 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'.⁵ In essence China is pursuing an aggressive strategy to secure a place among the permanent Observers of the Arctic Council through politico-diplomatic engagements and trade and investment sops to a number of Arctic Council Member states. Significantly, it has received strong support from these countries.

In the past, Japan has been invited as ad hoc observer to several Arctic related meetings including Senior Arctic Officials (SAO) meetings and working groups meetings. It 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 utilisation of the Arctic Circle...We aim to join the council [with observer status] at its ministerial meeting in two years' time.⁶ Earlier, in 2008, Japan was urged to join the shipping regime in the Arctic Ocean.⁷ Japan continues to accord great importance to the developments in the Arctic region and in 2010 the Japanese government constituted a government task force to prepare grounds for its membership bid at the May 2011 council meeting. Yoichi Fujiwara, a spokesman for the Japanese Embassy in Ottawa observed 'We are interested in environmental programmes, and transportation or passage through the Arctic area, and development of resources in the Arctic Circle.'⁸

Likewise, in May 2008, Republic of Korea submitted its application to the Arctic Council for decision to be taken in 2009. A few months later, in August 2008, during a visit by the Korean delegation to the Arctic Research Station Dasan, the Korean Deputy Minister for International Organisations, Global Issues and Treaties Oh Joon had approached the Norwegian government for support to join the Arctic Council as an observer.⁹ A Korean ministry official observed that '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.'¹⁰

Singapore too has watched with interest the

changing political and strategic landscape of the Arctic region. Being a major shipping nation and a global maritime hub connected to more than 600 ports in over 120 countries, it is naturally concerned about the likely shift in sailing routes through the Northern Sea Route and displacement in port services to other hubs closer to the Arctic region in the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. It is also exploring the possibility of joining the Arctic Council as an Observer state.¹¹

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Response from the Arctic Council

In 2009, the Arctic Council met at Warsaw to discuss the applications for permanent Observer status in the Arctic Council.¹² It was decided to devise uniform criteria for accepting such applications and the issue was kept on hold. It was hoped that the Arctic Council would consider positively the proposal of membership of non-Arctic states to the Council during their meeting on May 12, 2011. Interestingly, it was noted that non-Arctic states

could be included as permanent observers in the Council provided they 'give up all pretensions that the region will be a 'global common'.¹³ The Russian delegation noted 'many countries that have no relation to the Arctic, now have the desire to get a piece of the Arctic pie...If given the green light early in the Council one hundred observers will require more and more rights, and then want to convert the Arctic into a heritage of humanity'.¹⁴ Similarly, the Canadian delegation argued 'Remember the failure of the climate conference in Copenhagen. The more members of the club, the harder it is to agree. And in the Arctic there are problems, particularly environmental, that must be ad-

dressed urgently.¹⁵ However, an extreme view notes that ‘If the current Arctic Council members say they can do without non-arctic countries, like the EU or China, and refuse to admit them, a serious conflict will ensue in the United Nations’.¹⁶

India and the Arctic Council

India’s engagement in the Arctic is based on the ‘Treaty concerning the Archipelago of Spitsbergen’ or the ‘Svalbard Treaty’ signed by

The Right Honourable the Earl of Derby, K.G., G.C.V.O., C.B., His Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary had signed the treaty at Paris as the Emperor of India on February 9, 1920 in Paris. The Svalbard Treaty awarded sovereignty of the Archipelago of Spitsbergen to Norway and other member countries of the Treaty could access the natural resources. The membership of the Treaty has expanded over the years and in 2010, there were 40 signatories.

The Arctic Council has been successful in promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States on common Arctic issues particularly those relating to sustainable development, biodiversity, environmental protection, shipping, search and rescue, the interests of the Indigenous Peoples, etc.

So far, India’s interest in the Arctic has been limited to scientific studies and it has established a research station ‘Himadri’ on Svalbard. India has undertaken several scientific expeditions and is now planning to acquire an ice class vessel to support its polar research and studies programme. There are 14 national research institutions that support India’s polar programme which is coordinated by the National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research (NCAOR) in Goa, under the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES), Government of India.

There is a small constituency in the Indian strategic community who follow the ongoing po-

litical, strategic and economic developments taking place the Arctic region. The Indian narrative on the Arctic region is therefore still in its infancy and evolving. Although there is no dominant discourse, but few critiques merit illustration.

It has been argued that the Polar Regions (Antarctica is a continent and the Arctic is an ocean) merit to be considered as the ‘global commons’ and the international community should make

earnest efforts to preserve the ecologically sensitive and pristine nature of these spaces. Further, the governance of the Arctic cannot be the exclusive right of a few states; instead, India should carefully assess if it wants to join the Arctic Council because that would tantamount to accepting ‘the sovereign rights of the Arctic Council members over the Arctic Ocean’.¹⁷ It will be prudent for India to argue that the polar regions be declared as ‘global commons’ to place this issue ‘on the U.N. agenda during India’s term

in the Security Council and initiating international action on it could be a historic contribution by India in its role as a responsible global power’.

Another congruent narrative argues that the Arctic ‘is a global common and a common heritage of mankind’¹⁸ and therefore it should be accessible to one and all and to prevent a select few like the Arctic states to enjoy control over the region. Also, the Arctic matters should not be left to the developed world; instead ‘developing countries like India must begin to play an active role, as they are doing in negotiations over space and climate change.’

The third narrative persuasively argues that India is an important stakeholder in the evolving dynamics of the Arctic and it is necessary for New Delhi to develop a more robust understanding of the evolving politico-legal-strategic developments in the Arctic region.¹⁹ It should engage in policy related research and formulate an ‘Arctic Strategy’. India should also develop technological capability to exploit Arctic living and non-living resources. Being a strong advocate of nuclear disarmament, India should advocate for a demilitarized and nuclear-free Arctic.

Likewise, it is argued that India cannot afford to be oblivious of the dynamic changes taking place in the Arctic and ‘India should remain engaged with the leading organisations like the Arctic Council where many important decisions on the future of the Arctic region will be taken’.²⁰

The fourth view pivots on the idea that a multifaceted and globalized Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) can be a model for governance and contribute to the democratization of the Arctic governance and the ‘presence and participation’ by Asian countries ‘as observers will further strengthen the legitimacy, authority and effectiveness of the Arctic Council’.²¹

However, an official view notes that India is “seeking an observer status in the Arctic Council as we want to undertake scientific studies from Antarctica to the Arctic,”²² Reportedly, in April 2012, India joined the International Arctic Science Council, a working group of the Arctic Council, as an observer. Meanwhile, the Indian Minister of Defence has observed that “possible melting of the polar ice caps will have

tectonic consequences to our understanding of what maritime domains constitute ‘navigable’ oceans of the world. Specific to Asia and the IOR – there may be a need to re-assess concepts like choke points and critical sea lines of communication – the SLOCs.”²³ Apparently, a foreign ministry official has stated that “India will apply for being a permanent observer in the Arctic Council,”²⁴

In essence, the Arctic narratives in India present a mixed bag of views. Some proponents advocate pronouncing the Arctic as ‘global commons’ and ‘common heritage of mankind’, others would like to see India participate in the unfolding dynamics of routes and resources, while a section of the Indian government would like to pursue only scientific studies related to the polar regions. The Indian government cannot be caught in an ‘Arctic dilemma’ and should take initiatives to be a permanent observer in the Arctic Council.

India's interest in the Arctic has been limited to scientific studies and it has established a research station 'Himadri' on Svalbard. India has undertaken several scientific expeditions and is now planning to acquire an ice class vessel to support its polar research and studies programme.

Conclusion

It is evident that Arctic developments are not at the periphery of the Asian politico-strategic-economic discourse and some Asian states are keenly waiting to join the Arctic Council as permanent observers. They believe that as important stakeholders they can be a part of the dialogue since they have extensive experience in polar research and possess great knowledge in areas including the environment and climate. They would also like the Council to be more inclusive after all the climate induced changes can be observed across Asia in terms of weather changes, monsoon patterns and sea level rise.

The Arctic Council members can be expected to be reluctant to expand the Council keeping in mind that the ongoing global climate change debate has already become complex and has moved in the direction where the developed and the developing countries are pitted against each other and have taken rigid positions with regard to carbon emission cuts.

End Notes

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