



India and the World

Perspectives from Northern Europe on India in world affairs. Issued on a regular basis by the Project for Nordic-India Relations at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI). For previous issues please visit www.ui.se/english/research/asia/pnir



#18 2024-06-13

India and the Arctic

India's engagement in Arctic affairs is growing. There are several reasons for this, but two dynamics stand out when we take a closer look at New Delhi's Arctic approach.

First, there is mounting scientific evidence that a rapidly warming High North with melting polar sea ice most likely will alter the pattern of the Indian monsoon and lead to rising sea levels along the subcontinent's coastlines. This could, in turn, have a massive and incalculable impact on the livelihood of hundreds of millions of Indians and cause severe damage to India's economy. Second, and somewhat paradoxically, receding sea ice in the Arctic region also lay bare economic opportunities that India hopes to avail, in the form of new trade routes, attainable natural resources, and rich fishing waters.

As the effects of a melting Arctic region are ambiguous but sure to be profound, New Delhi has been developing ideas on what role the country should play and with whom to engage. From 2017, India has begun to diversify its initially science-based approach in favour of a more comprehensive regional and strategic outlook. Given this evolving approach, it is now the National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR), the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES), and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) that oversee India's Arctic engagements. As of 2022, India has also developed an Arctic Policy to guide and define engagements. The policy acknowledges, in addition to changing weather patterns and the economic opportunities mentioned earlier, the need to study linkages between the "third pole" of Himalaya, and the two poles of the Arctic and Antarctic, as well as the

risks involved for the world's most populated country, of pandemics caused by the spread of viruses surfacing in areas currently in a state of permafrost.

Clearly, the fact that China has invested in its Arctic presence for some time, adds to the sense of urgency in New Delhi to develop India's approach to the Arctic region. With regards to China, the reasoning on New Delhi's part is again twofold.

First, as the region holds great potential for future economic growth which China has already invested in, India believes it must do so as well, to not be out competed. Second, since the major Arctic economic development projects are currently concentrated in Russia, a close partner country of both India and China, India must provide an alternative source of funding to Moscow to prevent Russia's development undertakings from becoming overly dependent on China. Moscow's role as a balancing force between New Delhi and Beijing is thus attracting the attention and potentially investments in the Arctic region from both Asian countries. In contrast to China, India's direct involvement in Russian Arctic development projects, however, has been limited. India's most pronounced role is currently as a customer. During the first seven months of 2023, 35 percent of cargo shipped from the Russian port of Murmansk was bound for India along traditional westward routes.

The possibility of time saving for transports through new sea routes in the Arctic is an important factor for countries in Asia to engage with regional stakeholders. Yet distance savings of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) may be less significant for India than it is for China. However, it does present an opportunity to diversify supply routes and lessen the dependence on the Suez Canal, which is more sensitive to climate and technical related disruptions. Additionally, the NSR could be linked to the proposed (but not yet realised) Eastern Maritime Corridor. India's interest in a steady supply of Russian hydrocarbon resources indirectly makes New Delhi interested in the development of the NSR into a functioning transport corridor. A number of high-level meetings have been held to discuss various aspects of Arctic undertakings but the plans remain unrealised as New Delhi is yet to invest.

As of now, India is an observer in the Arctic Council. The US, however, does not include India in its Arctic strategy. Nevertheless, as Washington and New Delhi increasingly see eye-to-eye on a number of issues, it is not unlikely that the US will attempt to involve India in Arctic matters in the future. This would serve to strengthen the US agenda by putting distance between New Delhi and Moscow, whilst legitimising India's Arctic presence. Due to various sensitivities, Nordic stakeholders have historically been reluctant to bring geopolitics into the mix of Arctic affairs. But climate change, deepening cooperation between China and Russia, and the economic needs of rising powers such as India adds additional aspects to Arctic affairs, which the Nordic countries must now navigate.

The authors would like to acknowledge Erik Mollestam's research contribution to this report.



Dr Henrik Chetan Aspengren
Senior Analyst and Project Lead, UI
Henrik.aspengren@ui.se
+46(0)708986797

Mihir Swarup Sharma
Director, ORF
Mihir.swarup.sharma@orfonline.org