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Seeking a Seat at the Table: India Turns to the Arctic

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Abstract: *India defines its interests in the Arctic as being scientific, environmental, commercial and strategic. This expansive definition is meant to keep India's options open. On the one hand, Indians are concerned about untrammelled exploitation of Arctic resources and would like an international treaty to keep the Arctic Ocean off-limits – an idea rooted in its experience with the Antarctic Treaty System in the twentieth century. On the other hand, India does not want to be left out of commercial opportunities that may arise as the Arctic ice recedes. For now, India is content to have a seat at the table. This impulse best explains India's Arctic engagement, in particular, its successful pursuit of observer status in the Arctic Council.*

In 1903, Indian nationalist leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak published *The Arctic Home in the Vedas*, a highly speculative 500-page tome that argued that the Arctic, and not central Asia, was the original homeland of the Indo-European peoples. However, Tilak's book - a mishmash of geology and references from ancient texts - brought the Arctic into the imagination of modern India only briefly (Tilak 1925).

A more substantial legal connection was born in 1923 when India's British rulers ratified the Svalbard Treaty, (Ingimundarson 2018: 7). effectively making it one of the High Contracting Parties. In the decades after independence in 1947, political and diplomatic elites would only show episodic interest in the polar regions. The first such burst of interest came in the 1950s but was centred around Antarctica. Indeed, as we shall see, India's engagement with the Antarctic would inform its approach to the Arctic in the early twenty-first century.

Antarctic Entanglements

Under the leadership of its first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, newly independent India tried to fashion a distinct foreign policy of its own, one that sought to "bridge the ideological differences that divided East from West, capitalist from communist"(Bhagavan 2013: 1). India was one of the organisers of the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955 that brought together newly independent states from Africa and Asia. The following year, concerned about the spread of the Cold War and its attendant atomic rivalries into Antarctica, India played an active part in discussions over the future of the continent (Dodds 2006: 65). In a memorandum

submitted to the UN General Assembly in February 1956, India's permanent representative Arthur S. Lall argued for discussions on the Antarctic to be brought into the Assembly's provisional agenda. Lall warned that since "the development of rapid communications" could make extraction of its mineral resources feasible, it was imperative that any activities on the continent be peaceful and not "accentuate world tensions"(Chaturvedi 1986: 355).

While Lall made no mention of the competing territorial claims in the Antarctic in his memorandum or in a subsequent proposal that October, there was heated reaction from two of the claimants, Chile and Argentina, which did not want the issue to be discussed in the UN (Chaturvedi 2013: 305-311). A note sent out by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) to Indian Embassies and High Commissions attempted to explained India's position:

"Although there are no populations on the Antarctica it is possible that it might become a field for international war, which in atomic age would be disastrous. Even atomic experiments and explosions in this region may have very harmful results on the climate of the whole world." (Chaturvedi 2013: 306)

India withdrew its proposal, later that year, citing the dual crises in Hungary and the Suez, which by then was dominating the diplomatic agendas of both Delhi and the UN. In 1958, India briefly took up the issue again before shelving it. The following year, twelve nations with a physical presence on the southern continent met in Washington, DC, resulting in the Antarctic Treaty. By then, India, which was not part of this group, had already been marginalised. However, it could take some solace in the fact that the treaty addressed its key concern by insulating Antarctica from the Cold War's military rivalries (Chaturvedi 2013: 311-313).

India's next burst of polar activity came more than twenty years later in 1981, when secretive preparations were made for an Antarctic voyage. The decision to mount an expedition was made at the highest levels of government under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. A 5,000-tonne polar-class vessel, the Polar Circle was discreetly chartered from a Norwegian firm. On 9 January 1982, the 21-member crew of scientists and naval personnel reached Queen Maud Land, a region claimed by Norway, after a month-long voyage (Bobb 1982).

While the expedition was scientific, it obviously had other implications. The very decision to mount it in secrecy shows India anticipated possible opposition from countries with an established presence in the continent. It also prompted speculation about whether India was planning to join the Antarctic Treaty system and give up the "common heritage of mankind" formulation popular among many developing countries (Reinhold 1982).

India's intentions soon became clear. A second, more elaborate expedition set out in 1982-83, to put in place some of the logistics for a permanent base. It was followed by an 81-member expedition in 1983-84 that set up the base and left behind a 12-person team to operate it. In between the second and third expeditions, India applied for and received "consultative status" under the Antarctic Treaty on grounds that it had conducted substantial scientific activity on the continent (Chaturvedi 1986: 370-371).

Economic and strategic considerations were undoubtedly among the drivers of Indira Gandhi's Antarctic adventure. India may not have been satisfied with the Antarctic Treaty, but a futile attempt at challenging it would have simply left it out of any future negotiations. Furthermore, the prospect of new negotiations did not seem remote at that time since the new UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (which India signed in December 1982) had potential conflicts with the Antarctic Treaty (Joyner 1983).

While India did not want to be left out of a scramble for the Antarctic's resources, its ecological concerns were always significant. As the lead scientist on the first expedition pointed out, the Indian Ocean was only connected to Antarctica, unlike the Pacific and Atlantic oceans which were connected to both polar regions. This meant a greater knowledge of the Antarctic was crucial for a better understanding of Indian Ocean ecology. (Chaturvedi 1986: 368) Similarly, one of Indira Gandhi's biographers points out that her main motivations for the Antarctic expedition were "greater knowledge of the Indian Ocean and the monsoons, life in ice-bound regions, and marine biodiversity." (Ramesh 2017, Chapter VI) The two research stations India operates in Antarctica are evidence of that commitment.

India's Arctic Journey

Scientific Beginnings

India's presence in the Arctic had modest origins. In August of 2007, a team of five scientists visited the International Arctic Research base on Ny-Ålesund, part of the Svalbard archipelago, and then home to research facilities from ten countries (Ministry of Earth Sciences, n.d.). Once there, the expedition began studies in microbiology, geology, and atmospheric sciences. Launched in cooperation with Norway, the Indian expedition was led by Dr Rasik Ravindra ("India to Set Foot on the Arctic," 2007), then the head of the National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research (NCAOR), and a seasoned veteran of the Antarctic (National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research, n.d.). Following a visit by another Indian team in March, India set up its research station in Ny-Ålesund, the Himadri ("abode of snow" in Sanskrit), under the auspices of the Svalbard Treaty ("India Sets up Permanent Research Base," 2008). On 1 July 2008, India's science and technology minister Kapil Sibal inaugurated the station. His visit was followed by those of his successors, Prithviraj Chavan in 2010 and Pawan Kumar Bansal in 2011. External affairs minister Salman Khurshid also visited Himadri in June 2013, (MEA 2017: 4) just weeks after the Arctic Council ministerial meeting in Kiruna, Sweden during which the Arctic Council granted observer status to six countries, including India.

Setting up the research station in Svalbard increased India's research output on the Arctic, even if its impact was initially limited. One study found the number of scientific research papers on the Arctic by Indian authors went up more than three times between 2005 and 2012 - with research station Himadri clearly driving the new research. However, international collaboration was limited, since nearly two-thirds of the articles published during that period featuring only Indian authors (Stensdal 2012: 12-16).

Interest in the Arctic among Indian scientists stems from a recognition that climate change links the fortunes of the High North and the Indian Ocean Region. In a 2016 article, two of the Indian scientists involved in Arctic research pointed out that "signals or clues that signify climate change are so much stronger" in the region (Rajan and Krishnan 2016: 43). They added that the connection between Arctic precipitation and the Indian subcontinent's monsoons needs to be understood better. The scientists describe three types of studies. The first is biogeochemical studies of Kongsfjorden, an inlet in nearby Spitsbergen, where seasonal shifts offer opportunities to study both the marine environment and possible effects of climate change. The second is atmospheric studies of precipitation in the Arctic. The third is cryosphere studies meant to better understand the tidewater and mountain glaciers around Svalbard (Rajan and Krishnan 2016: 45-46). In 2014, an Indian team, helped by its Norwegian hosts, deployed a moored underwater observatory in the Kongfjorden inlet at a depth of 192 metres. The observatory's oceanographic sensors collected data on sea temperatures, salinity, and other variables (Press Information Bureau 2014a).

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That India's scientific endeavours in the Arctic had political implications could not be lost on Indian decisionmakers. The Antarctic Treaty formalised the connection between scientific activity and politics by making it a prerequisite for accession. Eric Paglia argues that by stressing environmental linkages to the Arctic, Asian states not only justify the presence of their research stations but are also able to create "a basis for embedding themselves in relevant international organizations that further solidify their stakeholder status." (Paglia 2018: 198)

Unsurprisingly, as India's scientific engagement expanded, the debate over how to engage the Arctic politically heated up in 2012. Speaking at a maritime seminary in Delhi that February, defence minister A.K. Antony said melting polar ice caps would have "tectonic consequences for our understanding of what maritime domains constitute 'navigable' oceans of the world." Antony's concern was the loss of Indian leverage over its rival, China. "Specific to Asia and the Indian Ocean Region, there may be a need to reassess concepts like chokepoints and critical sea lines of communication". (Shukla 2012) The chokepoints Antony was referring to were the Malacca and Sunda straits in southeast Asia. These two narrow waterways, through which about a quarter of the world's merchandise goods pass, give Delhi some leverage over Beijing since, since India could theoretically block or otherwise disrupt Chinese commercial shipping during a conflict or crisis. However, an increasingly navigable Arctic would not only cut some shipping times for China but also reduce its dependence on the Malacca and Sunda straits.

Antony's remarks glossed over the complex realities of Arctic shipping and the challenges involved in scaling it. However, his words came months before a severe summer in which Arctic sea ice cover retreated to its minimum recorded since 1979 (NASA 2012). That April, Chinese premiere Wen Jiabao visited Iceland and Sweden (which then held the rotating chairmanship of the Arctic Council) and reportedly won Swedish backing for observer status.(China claims Swedish support," 2012) Chinese officials also began to refer to their country as a "near-Arctic state" (SIPRI 2012).

Despite these developments, not everyone was convinced India should also join the Arctic Council. Weeks before Antony's remarks, an influential former foreign secretary, Shyam Saran, wrote a column urging India to show caution before applying for observer status. Concerned about an ecologically devastating scramble for the Arctic Ocean's resources, he instead advocated India "press for the Antarctic Treaty template where the territorial claims of States have been shelved for the duration of the Treaty." (Saran 2012) While Saran was echoing concerns shared widely among Indian observers, his proposal was in contrast to the Arctic Council's stance which relies on existing laws, including the Law of the Sea. (Arctic Council 2012)

Notwithstanding Saran's reservations, India applied for observer status in November 2012. The reasons it chose to apply are partly a matter of conjecture. Speaking at a conference in 2015, India's former ambassador to Denmark, Ashok Kumar Attri, said the application was made at the last moment. (Tonami 2016: 109-110) However, having made the application, the Indian side energetically lobbied Nordic countries. Barely a month before the Kiruna meet, India's received Iceland's President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson in Delhi. Soon after that, India's external affairs minister Salman Khurshid met his Swedish counterpart Carl Bildt in Almaty, Kazakhstan, during the Heart of Asia conference (Bagchi 2013). This lobbying was thought to be necessary because of reported objections from Canada and because relations with Denmark were at an all-time low (Delhi had downgraded diplomatic ties with Copenhagen

after a spat over extraditing a Danish national to India to face terrorism charges) (Ramachandran 2013).

There are broad parallels evident between India's application to the Arctic Council and its decision to accede to the Antarctic Treaty. As in the 1980s, India began by establishing a scientific presence. Also like in the 1980s, decisionmakers in Delhi were faced with a choice amid rapidly changing circumstances: to challenge an existing system about which they had misgivings or to join the system and remain a relevant voice. In both cases, India picked the pragmatic option.

Searching for Rationales

India and five other countries, most notably China, were admitted as observers in the Arctic Council during ministerial meeting in Kiruna, Sweden on 15 May 2013. While India's admission was widely welcomed at home, the rationales offered for engaging with the Arctic Council were varied. *The Hindu* quoted an anonymous government source as saying India's Arctic-related scientific output was proof of its priorities. “Unlike China and South Korea which are going for commercial benefit[sic], our interest is purely scientific." However, the same story acknowledged that India would also look to partner with Russia on hydrocarbons but added the warning that India would have to "take a firm political stand on the Lomonosov Ridge and the Mendeleev Ridge which Russia claims are an extension of its continental shelf." (Menon and Dikshit 2013) This was a rather outlandish claim, one that suggests at least some Indian officials were still grappling with the complexities of the Arctic.

While India seemed unclear about what it wanted from its new status in the Arctic Council, it was determined to remain part of the conversation. Veteran diplomatic correspondent Indrani Bagchi summed up Delhi's thinking: "Although India is not an Arctic state, as one of the rising economies of the world, it believes it has a stake in the Arctic Ocean and would like to be in the tent, to influence the decisions taken by the permanent members." (Bagchi 2013)

India's admission into the Arctic Council as an observer provided an opportunity for the government to present its view on how India should approach the Arctic. In June of 2013, the Ministry of External Affairs issued a 1,000-word briefing that remains the most significant formal public communication from the government on India and the Arctic. The briefing is alive to the complexities of the contemporary Arctic, noting that the region plays "an increasingly greater role in shaping the course of world affairs." It acknowledges the economic attractions of the region - mineral and living resources, and shorter shipping routes - but equally notes the negative impacts that come from melting Arctic ice on indigenous communities, local ecosystems, and global climate change. In line with this sweeping assessment, it defines India's interests in the region as being "scientific, environmental, commercial as well as strategic." (MEA 2013a)

This expansive definition of India's interests allows it to keep its options open while the Arctic undergoes unprecedented changes. However, it is worth looking into how India has pursued these interests since 2013.

Scientific and environmental interests: India's scientific endeavours are meant primarily to understand the connections between the Arctic and the climate systems of the Indian Ocean region. Scientists from India have been able to build on their expertise in the Antarctic. Cooperation between India and Norway has roots in the 1980s and spans both the Arctic and Antarctic. Scientific training between the two countries has also risen, with India's Ministry of Earth Sciences funding Indian PhD students at the Norwegian Polar Institute and a Norwegian

grant supporting Indian students at the University Centre in Svalbard (Norway in India, n.d.). As a sign of the growing importance of the Arctic, in July 2018, India renamed the National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research - the organisation that runs the polar research stations - National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research. India was also reportedly in talks with Canada and Russia to set up some observation capabilities (Koshy 2018). Finally, there's also a long-delayed project to acquire a polar research vessel worth 10.50 billion rupees (about $150 million) (Press Information Bureau 2014b) that can cut through ice (Somashekhar 2018).

Commercial interests: India is located far too south to benefit from Arctic shipping routes. However, if some Asian shipping through the Strait of Malacca were to shift to the Arctic, Indian ports would miss out on commercial opportunities. India has sought hydrocarbon opportunities in Russia's Far East and Arctic even before Kiruna. In 2010, it looked at acquiring a stake in a Russian company developing the Trebs and Titov oil fields in the Arctic ("OVL hopes to ink pact," 2010). During a 2012 visit to India by President Vladimir Putin, the Indian side expressed its interest in exploring more such projects through the state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Videsh Limited (OVL) (MEA 2012). It reiterated this in 2013 when India's then Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh visited Russia (MEA 2013b). Speaking at the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok in September 2019, current Prime Minister Narendra Modi mentioned India's interest in the Arctic (MEA 2019a). A joint statement added that India was following developments in the Arctic and looked forward to cooperating with Russia in the region (MEA 2019b). So far, Delhi's outreach has had limited effect in the Arctic. However, India is also interested in Russia's Far East, especially Sakhalin island off Russia's eastern coast. At present, OVL owns a fifth of the Sakhalin-1 consortium operated by ExxonMobil ("OVL, partners to pay $230 million," 2018). As part of Modi's visit, two Indian companies, H-Energy and Petronet LNG, also signed agreements to buy liquified natural gas (LNG) from Russian gas producer Novatek, which operates in the Arctic ("H-Energy, Petronet sign deals," 2019). Despite such agreements, the Arctic will remain a difficult region to operate in for the foreseeable future. Any significant expansion of India-Russia energy cooperation in the Arctic will depend both on whether Moscow wants to rope in India to balance off other players, and whether India sees the Arctic as a useful source for the diversification of its energy imports.

Strategic interests: India will be affected by events in the Arctic in the decades to come. Even as major powers jostle in the High North, environmental and commercial considerations will become strategic ones as sea levels rise and shipping routes are rewired (even if modestly). In recent years, Delhi has focused on managing ties with Arctic countries. In April 2018, it co-hosted an India-Nordic prime ministerial summit in Stockholm along with Sweden. The meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the prime ministers of the five Nordic countries was about much more than the Arctic - indeed, their joint statement did not mention the region - but it no doubt helped bolster India's profile in the region (MEA 2018). Since that summit, Denmark's Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen has visited India, helping to repair relations after the strain caused over the extradition row (Roche 2019). India's President Ram Nath Kovind also visited Iceland soon after it took over chairmanship of the Arctic Council, to meet President Guoni Johannesson ("President Ram Nath Kovind holds bilateral talks," 2019).

Despite some success with Nordic countries, India has had a more difficult time navigating relations with the larger powers. The downswing in US-Russia ties after Russia's annexation of Crimea and its alleged interference in the 2016 US presidential elections has made it more challenging for India to engage one without upsetting the other. Simultaneously, the upswing in Russia-China relations has forced India to worry about Russia's long-term intentions. Amid these changes, the Arctic is now a part of India's grand chessboard, even if only at the periphery.

Constraints, Debates, Prospects

India's foreign policy elites do not lack ambition. Like their counterparts in many other major states, Indian elites often consider their country to be exceptional and having something unique to offer the rest of the world. Consequently, Indian diplomacy went global within years of independence, with missions on every inhabited continent (Cohen 2002: 36-65). Yet India's self-conception is also accompanied by a sophisticated tradition of statecraft; one in which, in the words of Stephen P. Cohen, "Pragmatism, realism, and idealism exist side by side" (Cohen 2002: 53).

This combination of self-regard, idealism, and an ability to play pragmatic politics can explain much about Delhi's engagement with the Arctic: the conviction that the circumpolar regions matter to India, the simultaneous urges to protect the environment and explore commercial opportunities, and the desire to be seen as a responsible stakeholder.

However, if the Indian worldview explains its Arctic ambitions, the shortcomings of its foreign policy apparatus offer an equally powerful explanation for why its engagement with the region is likely to face constraints. India's Arctic diplomacy since 2013 has been respectable but has none of the energy and coherence needed to become a major player.

One reason for this is that the Arctic is low on the list of priorities for India's political class. It is important but not urgent. On the other hand, India has it hands full managing relations with states in its immediate and extended neighbourhoods as well as with major powers. That means India's leaders have little time or energy left to drive a sustained Arctic policy.

A more fundamental reason for India's underperformance is its lack of capacity. The country's diplomatic corps is dominated by the Indian Foreign Service or IFS, an elite cadre of about one thousand personnel, two-thirds of whom are spread across 180 missions abroad. While IFS officers are generally held in very high regard by their foreign counterparts, they are spread thin. As Teresita C. Schaffer and Howard B. Schaffer put it, "IFS officers complain that they have to do the same work as four of their Brazilian or seven of their Chinese counterparts." (Schaffer and Schaffer 2016: 85-86) This is not a structure that lends itself to specialisation or long-term planning.

A Maturing Debate: Over the last ten years, there has been a robust public debate in Indian think tank circles about how to approach the Arctic. In 2009, strategic affairs expert Arvind Gupta wrote an article titled "Geopolitical Implications of Arctic Meltdown" (Gupta 2009). Gupta was writing for *Strategic Analysis*, a journal of the Ministry of Defence-funded think tank Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) and his commentary reflected the tenor of the debate in 2009. It warned of melting ice, a navigable Northwest Passage, territorial disputes, and an emerging scramble for resources. While Gupta acknowledged the fundamental political and geographic differences between the northern and southern circumpolar regions, he suggested that the way out was for non-Arctic countries to push for an Antarctic-style treaty that would preserve the region primarily for scientific research.

Anxiety about the environmental impact of resource extraction similarly dominated the arguments Shyam Saran, the former foreign secretary, in a 2011 column. "Should five countries, which, as an accident of geography, form the Arctic rim, have the right to play with the world's ecological future in pursuit of their economic interests?" Saran asked (Saran 2011).

A very different line of thought came in 2010, from Vijay Sakhuja, a former navy officer, and then director of research at the Indian Council of World Affairs, a think tank funded by the

Ministry of External Affairs. In a policy brief titled "The Arctic Council: Is There a Case for India?", Sakhuja made a series of recommendations. The most audacious of these was pushing for India's permanent membership of the Arctic Council based on the Svalbard Treaty. Other recommendations included building capabilities for Arctic mining and fishing, as well as championing the idea of a nuclear-free Arctic (Sakhuja 2010).

While these initial writings diverge considerably in their assessments of the threats and opportunities, they all make great demands of India, whether it be to change the Arctic's governance structure or build a polar fishing fleet. In the years since then, Indian writing on Arctic politics has become far more voluminous but has also grown in nuance and tends to make much more modest proposals. Evidence of this can be found in a special issue of Strategic Analysis in 2014 that brought together Norwegian and Indian researchers - and was republished as a book (Sinha and Bekkevold 2015), as well as an edited anthology co-edited by Vijay Sakhuja (Sakhuja and Narula 2016). A more recent instance is a paper from Observer Research Foundation, a privately funded think tank (Nanda 2019).

Proposals for India's Arctic engagement have either maximalist or minimalist tendencies. As India grasps the complexities of the Arctic region, those maximalist proposals are likely to die a natural death while the minimalist options survive. Describing the Arctic as the "common heritage of mankind" will only stir resistance among Arctic littoral states. Proposals for a nuclear-free zone - an idea lifted from the Antarctic - will run into the reality that US and Russian ballistic nuclear missile submarines patrol the Arctic Ocean. There's also little incentive for Indian companies to develop Arctic mining and fishing capabilities by themselves when they can simply partner with foreign firms with greater experience in these endeavours.

India's Arctic Prospects: Over the next decade, India's approach to the Arctic is likely to be largely minimalist by default. Given its constraints, India would be well served to look back to the 2013 Ministry of External Affairs note and identify scientific and environmental interests as being paramount. On natural resources, the government ought to restrict itself to facilitating commercially viable projects that are generally seen as responsible. To secure its strategic interests India can pursue regular interstate diplomacy (at which it remains competent) while relying on think tanks and academics to develop expertise in monitoring Arctic geopolitics.

Such a minimalist approach allows room for imaginative proposals. For instance, Sanjay Chaturvedi makes concrete suggestions for the way ahead. (Chaturvedi 2014: 77-79) These include putting together an Arctic policy that is embedded in a wider polar strategy, participating actively in the Arctic Council's working groups, and collaborating with Asian observer states to promote polar science. Chaturvedi recommends India appoint a "polar ambassador" to coordinate these initiatives and present its case internationally. Such an approach to the Arctic would reflect the blend of pragmatism, realism, and idealism that characterizes India's foreign policy at its best.

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