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## India and the Arctic

June 10, 2013

Arctic region, the enormous area around the North Pole spreading over one-sixth of the earth's landmass (approximately the size of Russia, China and India put together!), is increasingly being effected by external global forces - environmental, commercial and strategic and in turn is poised to play an increasingly greater role in shaping the course of world affairs.

By far Climate Change and the resultant rapid melting of the Arctic Ice cap is the most important phenomenon that is redefining the global perspective on the Arctic. Current scientific consensus indicates the Arctic may experience nearly ice free summers as early as 2030's opening up enormous opportunities as well as challenges not only for the littoral states but also the international community as a whole. While the attraction of Arctic oil and gas reserves, unexploited marine living resources and shorter shipping routes connecting the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans is undeniable, the adversarial impact of melting Arctic Ice cap on the indigenous communities, the marine ecosystems and aggravation of global warming is equally undeniable.

Antarctica, though uninhabited, is governed by the 1959 Antarctic Treaty ensuring that it is used for exclusively peaceful purposes. There is no similar international regime for the Arctic. This was perhaps because of the particular characteristics of the Arctic but also because of the Cold War. In the Post Cold War era a move towards cooperative arrangements for managing the Arctic region led the establishment of Arctic Council.

The Arctic Council is a high level intergovernmental body set up in 1996 by the Ottawa declaration to promote cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States together with the

indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants. The Council has the eight circumpolar countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Denmark (Greenland and Faroe Islands), Canada, US and Russia) as member states and is mandated to protect the Arctic environment and promote the economies and social and cultural well-being of the indigenous peoples whose organizations are permanent participants in the council. Observer status in the Arctic Council is open to Non-governmental organizations, Non-littoral states as well as to Intergovernmental and Inter-Parliamentary organizations. With 6 new countries inducted as observers in May 2013 the Arctic Council currently has 12 observers.

The Council members meet biannually and the Chairmanship of the Arctic Council rotates every two years. There are six working groups a) Arctic Contaminants Action Program (ACAP); 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). On the agenda of the Arctic Council are issues relating to shipping regulations, maritime boundaries, search and rescue responsibilities and to devise strategies to mitigate the adversarial impact of the melting of Arctic ice cap.

## India and the Arctic

India's engagement with the Arctic dates back to nearly nine decades when it signed the 'Treaty between Norway, US, Denmark, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Great Britain and Ireland and the British overseas Dominions and Sweden concerning Spitsbergen' also called the 'Svalbard Treaty' in February 1920 in Paris.

India has been closely following the developments in the Arctic region in the light of the new opportunities and challenges emerging for the international community due to global warming induced melting of Arctic's ice cap. Today India's interests in the Arctic region are scientific, environmental, commercial as well as strategic.



India initiated its Arctic Research Program in 2007 with thrust on climate change in the circumpolar north. The major objectives of the Indian Research in Arctic Region are as follows:

1. To study the hypothesized tele-connections between the Arctic climate and the Indian monsoon by analyzing the sediment and ice core records from the Arctic glaciers and the Arctic Ocean.
2. To characterize sea ice in Arctic using satellite data to estimate the effect of global warming in the northern polar region.
3. To conduct research on the dynamics and mass budget of Arctic glaciers focusing on the effect of glaciers on sea-level change.
4. To carry out a comprehensive assessment of the flora and fauna of the Arctic vis-à-vis their response to anthropogenic activities. In addition, it is proposed to undertake a comparative study of the life forms from both the Polar Regions.



India launched its first scientific expedition to the Arctic Ocean in 2007 and opened a research base named "Himadri" at the International Arctic Research Base at Ny-Alesund, Svalbard, Norway in July 2008 for carrying out studies in disciplines like Glaciology, Atmospheric sciences & Biological sciences. India has also entered into MOU with Norwegian Polar Research Institute of Norway, for cooperation in science, as also with Kings Bay (A Norwegian Government owned company) at Ny-Alesund for logistic and infrastructure facilities for undertaking Arctic research and maintaining Indian Research base 'Himadri' at Arctic region.

A number of scientists from different national institutions have participated in our Arctic programme. A sum of over US\$12million has been committed for financial investments in Arctic Studies for the next 5 years. India was elected to the Council of the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) in 2012.

It is in recognition of this contribution to Arctic Studies that India's application for Observer Status in 2012 received widespread support from all member countries and India was granted observer status to the Arctic Council at the Eighth Biennial Ministerial meeting of the Arctic Council in Kiruna, Norway on May 1, 2013 under the Chairmanship of Sweden.

The impact of rapid changes in the Arctic region goes beyond the littoral states and any legitimate and credible mechanism to respond to these challenges calls for active participation of all those actors who have a stake in the governance of global commons. The interplay between science and policy has the

potential to contribute to the better handling of the complex issues facing the Arctic. India which has a significant expertise in this area from its association with the Antarctic Treaty System can play a constructive role in securing a stable Arctic. India in its new role as a permanent observer in the Arctic Council is committed to contribute to the deliberations of the council to develop effective cooperative partnerships that can contribute to a safe, stable and secure Arctic.

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