INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE HIGH NORTH: NAVIGATING TENSIONS AND PRIORITIZING PARTNERSHIPS IN THE ARCTIC GEOPOLITICAL ARENA

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Abstract

The Arctic, once isolated, has transformed into a critical front line of global competition due to accelerated melting, revealing vast resources and lucrative new shipping routes. This rapid transition has ignited a geopolitical "gold rush" involving the United States, Russia, and China. Against this backdrop of heightened tension, India is deliberately pursuing a path of strategic autonomy in the Arctic, driven by both climate security concerns and economic interests. This article analyzes the Arctic strategies of the three major global powers (Russia, China, and the US) and evaluates India's priorities for establishing connections to safeguard its long-term strategic, economic, and environmental interests.

Keywords

India's Strategic Autonomy, Arctic Geopolitics, Great Power Competition, Arctic Council and Governance, Northern Sea Route, Climate Security and Polar Politics, Multipolar World Order, Energy Security, Arctic Shipping, Rare Earth Minerals.

Introduction: The Arctic as a New Centre of Global Power

The vanishing ice cap in the Arctic, accelerating by nearly 60% since the 1990s, is reshaping global power dynamics. The region holds an estimated 20% of the world's untapped fossil fuel reserves, over 400 discovered oil and gas fields, and vast deposits of rare earth minerals essential for 21st-century technologies. Moreover, melting sea ice exposes new maritime pathways, such as the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which are faster and cheaper than existing global trade arteries like the Suez Canal.

India's interest in the Arctic is multifaceted, recognizing that what happens at the top of the world directly affects its own destiny. Climate changes in the Arctic are intrinsically linked to the Indian monsoon and water cycles, posing risks to food security and threatening coastal regions from rising sea levels. To protect its future, India has evolved its engagement from purely scientific endeavours to strategic pursuits. India gained observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013 and unveiled its comprehensive Arctic Policy in 2022, built around six pillars including science and research, energy security, and international cooperation.

The Geopolitical Crucible: Great Power Perspectives

The Arctic Council, initially formed in 1996 to promote cooperation and conservation among the eight Arctic nations, is now operating in what analysts describe as a "new cold war".

-Russia: The Arctic Fortress and Northern Lifeline

Russia, commanding over half of the Arctic coastline, views the region not as a frontier but as its fortress. Its ambition is concentrated on leveraging the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a critical maritime highway connecting Asia and Europe, which is nearly two weeks shorter than the Suez route. Russia is the dominant military player in the High North, having reopened dozens of Soviet-era bases and currently possessing the most icebreakers (around 41).

Following the conflict in Ukraine and subsequent Western sanctions, Russia increasingly sees the Arctic, especially through its partnership with China, as an insurance policy and a crucial northern lifeline. Moscow has invited India to help develop infrastructure along the NSR, positioning the route as an energy and logistics corridor. Russia’s policy officially states it aims to ensure the Arctic remains a zone of peace and cooperation, a declaration that contrasts sharply with its escalating military presence.

-The United States: Countering Rivalry and Securing Interests

The United States (US), after a long absence from Arctic geopolitics, is determined not to allow Moscow and Beijing to unilaterally shape the polar order. Washington views the Arctic through the lens of ‘great power competition’. Key US strategic points include the

major military base at Thule, Greenland, which is crucial for satellite tracking and missile early warning. The US has argued that Greenland is vital for international security.

Despite this strong rhetoric and policies aiming at advancing US security interests, the US presence in the region has been characterized as minimal compared to other players, as its strategic focus has recently been pulled toward the Indo-Pacific. Nevertheless, the US continues to warn against increasing Chinese influence and Russian militarization. The US aims to confront Russian and Chinese activities without turning the Arctic into a new theater of conflict like Ukraine.

-China: The Near-Arctic State and Polar Silk Road

China, despite being geographically distant, claims the status of a "near Arctic state" and considers the Arctic central to its Polar Silk Road (PSR), an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beijing's strategy involves quietly building a "dual use" presence—part research, part strategic—through investments in Nordic countries and a growing partnership with Russia.

China's primary interest is commercial: access to shipping routes and Arctic minerals [. Chinese companies have engaged in energy partnerships with Russia, most notably the Yamal LNG project. However, analysts find that the scale of actual Chinese investments is often highly exaggerated, as many proposed projects in Greenland and Nordic countries have been halted or failed due to geopolitical obstacles and security concerns related to their potential dual-use applicability. The US and Canada are particularly wary of China's growing capacity in satellite surveillance and naval technology, viewing it as a challenge to the rules-based order.

-India’s Strategic Autonomy in the High North

For New Delhi, the Arctic is a crucial test of whether it can pursue great power diplomacy without being forced to align definitively with either the West or Russia. India’s underlying strategic pursuit is to position itself as an ‘independent pole in a multipolar world’.

India’s interests in the Arctic extend to its blue economy and maritime vision, as new shipping links could complement the existing International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Furthermore, India's technological capabilities in space and satellite monitoring can contribute significantly to polar monitoring and climate science, enhancing its global technological profile.

India faces a twofold strategic challenge: (1) managing the West’s return to the Arctic, which complicates its traditional alignment with Russia; and (2) navigating overlapping alliance memberships, such as the Quad and BRICS, without losing credibility.

Prioritized Partnerships for India’s Arctic Interests

To realize its objectives, India must prioritize connections across various geopolitical spheres, balancing economic opportunity with strategic risk.

Three important points should be considered by New Delhi in its approach to the Arctic Prioritized Connection ,Rationale and Interests Served ,and Strategic Considerations

-- Russia (Energy and Connectivity) - Russia has historically been India's "gateway to the Arctic," facilitating decades of cooperation in oil, gas, and nuclear energy. Partnership focuses on investments in large Arctic energy ventures (like the Vostok oil project). The Vladivostok–Chennai maritime corridor is a critical initiative linking Russia’s Far East to India’s ‘Act East’ policy and potentially extending north into the Arctic. India must manage the risk of being perceived by Western partners as propping up Moscow’s Arctic ambitions. While Russia provides resource access, India must avoid dependence.

-- Nordic/Western States (Science and Governance)- Access to critical governance forums is achieved through India’s observer status in the Arctic Council. India is deepening ties with Norway, Finland, and Denmark to explore collaboration on green shipping, offshore wind, and polar research, leveraging Nordic expertise with Indian scale. India’s potential lies in ‘science diplomacy’, using research collaborations (like its station in Svalbard) as a non-threatening entry point for influence. India plans to set up additional research stations in Greenland, Canada, and Alaska. Cooperation with Western Arctic states helps balance India’s alignment with Russia and mitigates risks associated with rising Chinese influence in the region.

-- Asian Coalition (Arctic South)-India should engage with Japan, South Korea, and Singapore—fellow Arctic observer states—to build an "Arctic coalition in the South". Japan and South Korea share similar primary motivations concerning the Northern Sea

Route and have already invested in polar shipping and scientific research. This approach strengthens India's overall strategic position by building consensus among non-Arctic but highly interested economies, complementing India's Indo-Pacific push and providing leverage in international forums.

Conclusion

India’s Arctic foray is no longer optional; it is essential for climate security, resource access, and economic diversification. The objective of India’s Arctic policy is fundamentally one of ‘strategic autonomy’, allowing it to carve out its own path rather than joining a geopolitical bloc. India must leverage its traditional relationship with Russia for energy and connectivity, particularly through the Chennai-Vladivostok corridor. Simultaneously, it must expand research and governance ties with the Nordic countries and the broader Western bloc to maintain credibility and enhance scientific capacity. Finally, developing an "Arctic South" coalition with key Asian partners will strengthen its collective voice and industrial foothold in areas like polar shipping and resource exploration. By prioritizing this multifaceted engagement, India aims to ensure that it claims a seat at the polar table before critical decisions shaping its economic and environmental future are finalized.

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