



DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

TOPIC

**EXPLORING INDIA'S ARCTIC
POTENTIAL**

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EXPLORING INDIA'S ARCTIC POTENTIAL

Context

- As global trade undergoes a fundamental shift, nations are adapting to new strategies that account for geopolitical tensions, supply chain disruptions, and climate change.
 - ♦ The Arctic region is rapidly transforming due to climate change and geopolitical shifts, and now emerging as a critical trade and energy hub.

About Arctic Region

- It is one of the most fragile and crucial ecosystems on Earth, covering the northernmost parts of the planet.
- It includes the **Arctic Ocean, parts of Canada, Russia, Greenland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, and the United States (Alaska).**
- The Arctic is **warming at nearly four times the global average**, causing environmental and economic shifts that influence policies and territorial claims.
- According to NASA, Arctic ice in the Arctic region is **shrinking 12.2% per decade**.

Current Framework for Arctic Governance

- **Arctic Council:** It was established in 1996 through the **Ottawa Declaration**.
 - ♦ It is composed of eight nations (U.S., Canada, Russia, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland), and aims to promote environmental protection and scientific cooperation.
- **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS):** It governs maritime boundaries and resource rights in the Arctic Ocean.
 - ♦ It provides a legal framework for resolving disputes but does not address broader issues like climate change or indigenous rights.
- **Svalbard Treaty (1920):** It grants **Norway sovereignty** over the Svalbard archipelago while allowing other signatories to access its resources.
 - ♦ It is one of the few binding agreements related to the Arctic but is limited in scope.

Significance of Arctic Region

- **Natural Resources:** According to the U.S. Geological Survey, the region holds about **13% of the world's undiscovered oil and 30% of its natural gas**.
 - ♦ With ice caps retreating, these resources are becoming increasingly accessible, fueling competition among nations seeking to exploit them.
- **New Navigational Routes:** These include routes such as the **Northern Sea Route (NSR)** and the **Northwest Passage** are becoming viable **alternatives to the Suez and Panama Canals**.
 - ♦ The exponential rise in cargo shipments along the NSR, from 41,000 tonnes in 2010 to 37.9 million tonnes in 2024, underscores its growing significance as a global trade route.

Strategic Importance of the Arctic for India

- **Northern Sea Route (NSR):** India's interest in the NSR aligns with its long-term goals of enhancing maritime trade and reducing freight costs.
 - ♦ The NSR, **linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans**, is the **shortest trade route** between **Europe and Asia**.
- **Energy and Resources:** The Arctic holds vast reserves of oil, gas, and rare earth minerals, which could support India's energy security and technological advancements.
- **Geopolitical Leverage:** India has been an **Observer in the Arctic Council** since 2013, and can advocate for equitable resource sharing and sustainable development in the region.

India's Engagement with the Arctic

- **Early Involvement:** India signed the **Svalbard Treaty**, marking its initial engagement with the Arctic.
 - ♦ It is one of the few developing nations with an **Arctic research base—Himadri, established in 2008** in Svalbard, Norway.
- Indian researchers have studied the impact of Arctic ice loss on monsoon patterns and agricultural outputs, highlighting the interconnectedness of global ecosystems.
- **Scientific Contributions:** India through the **National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR)** conducts scientific studies on climate patterns, marine biodiversity, and glacial dynamics.
- **India's Arctic Policy (2022)**, titled 'India and the Arctic' by the **Ministry of Earth Science** for building a partnership for sustainable development.
- **Arctic Circle India Forum, 2025 (Expected in May 2025):** It offers a unique opportunity to align India's Arctic policy with regional and global interests.
 - ♦ The discussion could pave the way for **appointing a 'Polar Ambassador'**, strengthening India's Arctic representation.

Challenges & Concerns

- **Environmental Concerns:** The Arctic is one of the most fragile ecosystems, and increased activity could exacerbate climate change impacts.
 - ♦ **Nature Climate Change** revealed that global temperatures **breached the 1.5°C threshold** above pre-industrial levels in 2024 that signals a potential long-term deviation from the **Paris Agreement's goals**.
 - ♦ India must balance its commercial interests with its commitment to global sustainability.
- **Infrastructure Development:** Navigating Arctic waters requires specialized ice-breaking fleets and polar-ready ships.
 - ♦ The **Union Budget 2025-26** allocated \$3 billion for maritime development, including investments in Arctic-specific shipbuilding.
- **Territorial Disputes:** Under UNCLOS, nations can extend their claims to the seabed **beyond the 200-nautical-mile EEZ** if they can prove that the area is a natural prolongation of their continental shelf.
 - ♦ Russia, Canada, and Denmark (via Greenland) have all submitted claims to extend their seabed sovereignty under the **UNCLOS**.
 - ♦ The **US, which has not ratified UNCLOS**, faces limitations in asserting its claims. Meanwhile, Russia has used legal maneuvers and strategic military positioning to reinforce its claims, challenging Western interests.

India's Strategic Dilemma

- **Partnership with Russia:** Russia, with its extensive Arctic expertise, is a natural partner for India in exploring the NSR.
 - ♦ Initiatives like the **Chennai-Vladivostok Maritime Corridor** could serve as a gateway to NSR ports such as Pevek, Tiksi, and Sabetta.
- **Geopolitical Implications:** Aligning with Russia may inadvertently support **China's Polar Silk Road**, a northern extension of its **Belt and Road Initiative**.
 - ♦ It could enhance China's control over Arctic routes, bypassing chokepoints like the Malacca Strait.
- **Balancing Western Interests:** Partnering with the U.S. and Western allies could alienate Russia, jeopardizing India's stake in Arctic resources.
 - ♦ A balanced approach involving Japan and South Korea could counter growing Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic.

Way Forward

- **Streamlining Arctic Policy:** India's Arctic Policy (2022) should focus on actionable goals, including capacity building and technological innovation.
- **Promoting Sustainable Practices:** India must advocate for eco-friendly resource extraction and climate-resilient infrastructure in the Arctic.
- **Strengthening Research and Development:** Expanding Arctic research programs can provide valuable insights into climate change and its global implications.
- **Multilateral Collaboration:** India should engage in multilateral dialogues to strengthen partnerships with Arctic states and other Observer nations.
 - ♦ Collaborating with countries like Russia, Japan, and South Korea can enhance India's strategic presence in the region.

Conclusion

- India's potential in the Arctic region is vast, encompassing trade, energy, and scientific research.
- By adopting a balanced approach that prioritizes sustainability and multilateral cooperation, India can position itself as a key player in shaping the future of the Arctic.

Source: TH

Mains Practice Question

[Q] How can India strategically balance its economic ambitions and environmental responsibilities while exploring its potential in the Arctic region, and what role could multilateral collaborations play in shaping India's Arctic strategy?

