

## India Officially Ventures into the Arctic

Claudia Chia and Zheng Haiqi

### Summary

*The Arctic has a few but prominent players with key resources – Russia, the United States, Canada and the Nordic countries. India has now added an official Arctic policy into its foreign policy mix. The policy titled ‘India and the Arctic: Building a Partnership for Sustainable Development’ was released by India’s Ministry of Earth Sciences on 17 March 2022. This announcement followed the public circulation of a draft version in January 2021. By articulating an official Arctic policy, India is signifying its readiness and commitment to playing a larger role in the Arctic region and combating climate change.*

India’s association with the Arctic is over 100 years old; it was one of the original high contracting parties to Svalbard (formerly Spitsbergen) Treaty in February 1920. The first signs of serious Indian engagement in the region surfaced between 2007 and 2008, when India launched the Arctic Research Program, conducted its first scientific expedition to the Arctic and established the Himadri research station in Svalbard, Norway. Over the years, India has primarily focused on scientific research work on monsoon patterns, climate change, flora and fauna and polar science in the Arctic.

In 2013, India gained observer status in the Arctic Council, along with Italy, China, Japan, Singapore and South Korea. The following year, India successfully [deployed](#) its first multi-sensor moored observatory to the region with technical support from the Norwegian Polar Institute. Furthermore, with the advent of a “Polar Silk Road” and China’s designation of itself as a “near Arctic state”, global interests in a new possible geopolitical game in the Arctic has grown. Consequentially, India’s policymakers have begun to pay more attention to the Arctic and increase their engagement with Arctic countries. One example was the elevation of [India-Denmark relations to a “Green Strategic Partnership”](#) in 2020, where both sides stressed the need to strengthen research cooperation and collaborate within the framework of the Arctic Council to fight climate change.

So far, India has membership in several Arctic committees such as the International Arctic Science Committee and the Asian Forum for Polar Sciences. Over 25 institutions in India are pursuing Arctic research. The [draft version](#) of its Arctic policy, which was released briefly to garner public comments in January 2021, referred to the region as a “common heritage of mankind”, emphasising the scientific angle to India’s Arctic approach through think tanks, scientists and academics and focusing on building collaborations with Arctic institutions. In the [official Arctic policy](#) unveiled on 17 March 2022, India stated six tenets of its Arctic mission: science and research; climate and environmental protection; economic and human development; transportation and connectivity; governance and international cooperation; and national capacity building. The previous rhetoric of a “common heritage” has been dropped; the new text illustrated that the Arctic pursuit is guided by the Indian philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world is but one family). Nonetheless, the idea of the Arctic as a shared space and India’s commitment to contribute to “the global good” evokes

the message of being a responsible provider to global commons, similar to its perception of the [Indo-Pacific](#).

As an agriculture-reliant country, Indian environmental concerns are intertwined with the Arctic's climate change concerns, especially rising sea levels and unpredictable monsoon patterns. The level of sea ice in the region has been [reducing](#) by 13 per cent per decade; a further worsening of the climate conditions and glacial melting could be disruptive for the indigenous communities and wellbeing of the Indian rural sector.

Crucially, the melting of Arctic ice also entails the opening of new shipping routes which could redraw global trade flows and maritime navigation. India has the intention to develop the International North-South Corridor with Moscow and link it to the Arctic to build trans-Arctic shipping routes and decrease shipping costs. Another reason for India to engage the Arctic is to achieve [energy security](#) by diversifying energy supplies. Previously, [Russia](#) – a leading Arctic power with vast Arctic resources – was an important partner to India's energy strategy. Indian firms and political leaderships have inked agreements and memorandums of understanding with Russian counterparts to cooperate on oil and gas projects.

However, given the present Ukraine crisis, India's cooperation with Russia may be substantially reduced, and the development of transport connectivity projects may have to wait. That said, the crisis highlighted the importance of diversifying energy supplies and trade in order to avoid overt reliance on a single external partner. The announcement of the official Arctic policy is also opportune in this context, as resource exploration in the Arctic region emerges as a priority for the Indian government.

The official Arctic Policy also notes "several synergies" between the Himalayas – the 'third pole' – and polar studies, in which Indian scientific expertise and experience could potentially aid scientific advancements in the Arctic. Further, India has identified that it could leverage its strength in digital connectivity and fill the gap of low digital connectivity in the region by providing satellite-enabled communications and knowledge sharing. Considering that India is a latecomer to the Arctic, it will face a rising great power rivalry on natural resources and military value. India has to be prepared for the competition with China in the Arctic, as both countries increase research and expedition efforts. India's commitment to this distant region, coupled with its lack of a polar vessel, is also in doubt. Moving forward, India could consider inking free trade agreements and expanding its cooperation with more Arctic states. Digital connectivity, infrastructural development and unique research expertise from the Himalayas are areas where India has the competence and could bring value to the table.

.....

Ms Claudia Chia is a Research Analyst at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She can be contacted at [claudiachia@nus.edu.sg](mailto:claudiachia@nus.edu.sg). Mr Zheng Haiqi is a PhD Candidate in the School of International Studies, Renmin University, China, and a Non-Resident Fellow at ISAS. He can be contacted at [zhenghaiqi@ruc.edu.cn](mailto:zhenghaiqi@ruc.edu.cn). The authors bear full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.