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View Point

Arctic Council Must Warm Up to Non- Arctic States

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It is true that climate change has resulted in shrinking of the Arctic ice cap. The average ice extent for May 2010 was 480,000 square kilometers and during the period 1979 to 2010 it witnessed a linear rate of decline of -2.41% per decade. Further, the permafrost (permanently frozen soil) is shrinking thus releasing large volumes of trapped greenhouse gases which has aggravated global warming. This is a phenomenon that has global consequences and its impact is visible as far as in the southern hemisphere.

Given the transnational and transoceanic nature of climate induced impacts in the Arctic, non-Arctic states have argued for their legitimate interests in the region. They consider themselves as important stakeholders in any discourse, development and policy formulation relating to the Arctic and are keen to participate in the meetings of the Arctic Council (Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russian, Sweden, and the US), a body that was established in 1996 and has been engaged in addressing common issues of 'sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic'. Besides, non-Arctic states' have established research stations, dispatched research vessels and also instituted polar research studies in their respective countries on climate change, weather patterns, flora & fauna, ecology, environment, human habitat, sustainable resource exploitation, geological studies and new shipping routes.

Some Arctic Council members appear to be warming up to the idea of inviting more countries into the Council. In his speech titled '*Norwegian Arctic and High North Policy: Opportunities and Challenges*' at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin delivered on June 22, 2010, Jonas Gahr Støre, the Norwegian foreign minister observed

that the character of the Arctic region is global in nature and ‘the Arctic is and must remain an open region’. Further, there was a need to address the ‘legitimate interests of non-Arctic states’ such as China, Japan, India and South Korea.

Meanwhile, Erik Lorenzen, Denmark's Ambassador to Canada has noted that several countries (China, Argentina, France and Italy, European Union) want permanent observer status on the Arctic Council (Canada, the United States, Russia, Iceland, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Norway). In order to make the Council strong, “giving other nations some kind of formal observer status on the Arctic Council may be the best way to ensure its continuing influence- allowing other countries inside the tent may be the best way to keep it standing.”

Apparently, Danish Ambassador’s remarks come in the wake of Canada’s attempt to exclude Iceland, Sweden and Finland and the aboriginal groups, who enjoy observer status, from an exclusive summit meeting on ‘northern issues’ held in Chelsea, Quebec. From the Canadian perspective, the five Arctic coastal states are geographically contiguous to the Arctic and “will be most directly affected by new public safety challenges and other issues arising in an era of rapidly retreating ice cover.” It for this reason, that they were invited to the summit.

In this regard the U.S. perspective is noteworthy and Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State has observed that “Significant international discussions on Arctic issues should include those who have legitimate interests in the region... and I hope the Arctic will always showcase our ability to work together, not create new divisions.” Also, “We need all hands on deck because there is a huge amount to do, and not much time to do it. What happens in the Arctic will have broad consequences for the earth and its climate. The melting of sea ice, glaciers and permafrost will affect people and ecosystems around the world...and understanding how these changes fit together are a task that demands international co-operation.”

Among the Asian countries, China, India, Japan and South Korea have established research stations at Ny-Alesund, Norway to conduct scientific studies. Among these, China and South Korea are ad hoc observers in the Arctic Council while Japan’s case is still pending. India has not yet sought ad hoc observer status to the Arctic Council though it is a signatory to the 1920 ‘Treaty concerning the Archipelago of Spitsbergen’ or the

Svalbard Treaty. At that time, India was part of the British overseas dominions. Today India has a sophisticated scientific research station *Himadri* at Ny Alesund and its scientists have undertaken seven expeditions to the Arctic.

Non-Arctic states argue that they are responsible stakeholders and have expressed their keenness to participate as observers in the Arctic Council. It is their belief that such an arrangement can help them play a constructive role in the debate and discussions related to the Arctic. Further, the desire to exploit hydrocarbons, marine living resources and seabed minerals is high on their agenda. However, a large proportion of these resources lie under the national jurisdiction of the Arctic states and can only be exploited through international cooperation. Further, there are several boundary disputes among the Arctic states and this may preclude international joint ventures. At another level, using the Arctic sea route is also gathering momentum in the Arctic strategy of China, Japan and South Korea.

It is important to make the Arctic Council more inclusive and multilateral so that perspectives of both Arctic and non-Arctic stakeholders are taken into account. After all, climate change is a transnational issue and transcends national boundaries and necessitates comprehensive norms and regulations. Further, climate change induced impacts in the Arctic affects the lives of the people in the tropics and some such as the Maldives, are on the verge of becoming 'climate refugees' due to rising sea levels.

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