



India and the Arctic: Beyond Kiruna

*Dr. Vijay Sakhujia **

Five Asian states - China, India, Japan, Republic of Korea (RoK) and Singapore - were accorded permanent observer status at the eighth ministerial meeting of the Arctic Council held at Kiruna, Sweden in May 2013. The eight-member Council comprising of Canada, Denmark (Greenland and Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the US, is the most influential and important high-level discussion forum on Arctic affairs including the indigenous people. Since its inception in 1996, the Arctic Council has addressed issues relating to climate change, polar environment, sustainable use of natural resources of the region, shipping routes and promotion of scientific research. However, its decisions are not legally binding.

Initiatives by New Observers

The new Asian observers have welcomed the decision and affirmed their commitment to the work of the Arctic Council. At the national level, these states have initiated a number of activities to support the objectives of the council. China is by far the most proactive and has exhibited its interest in three domains, i.e. science, resources and routes. Its 'science' diplomacy involves a number of initiatives including establishment of an Arctic research facility at Svalbard, scientific expeditions by icebreaker Xuelong, and engagements in a number of science related committee and spends nearly 20 per cent of its polar programme budget on the Arctic. China's resource diplomacy in the Arctic addresses the issue of exploitation of non-living (oil &

gas, metals and minerals) and living (fish) resources including joint ventures with companies in Russia, Norway, Canada, Iceland and Greenland. Interestingly, a number of Arctic states have encouraged China to invest in resource development projects. China dispatched the first ever container vessel through the Northern Sea Route in September 2013 and also received a consignment of iron ore from Kirkenes, Norway. Nordic and Chinese Think Tanks have begun joint research projects on climate change, Arctic economic development and shipping.

Japan was the first Asian country to be involved in Arctic scientific and environmental research and undertook projects to determine the viability of the Northern Sea Route. In recent times, it has moved from ‘involvement to engagement’ and the Japanese Government is now formulating an Arctic policy with a long-term perspective focusing on both opportunities and challenges. The policy is expected to focus on scientific and environmental research, but also address economic engagement through access to resources and energy which can potentially provide greater energy security, particularly after the Fukushima nuclear accident. It has plans to use the Northern Sea Route which can partially address the issues of safety and security of its long and often vulnerable sea lines of communications through the Indian Ocean. Though not an Arctic littoral, Japan is closely following the Arctic politico-strategic developments in the region including the potential military modernization by the claimants.

RoK’s Arctic policy focuses on ‘building partnerships with other countries, stepping up research in the Arctic, and creating new businesses opportunities’. It has an active Arctic science programme, has set up a research station ‘Dasan’, operates the research icebreaker ‘Araon’, established the Korean Arctic Science Council (KASCO), is a member of the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) and participates in the Svalbard Integrated Arctic Earth Observation System (SIOS) project. RoK has followed the energy related developments in the Arctic and the Korea Gas Corporation (KOGAS), the world's largest corporate buyer of LNG, has 20 per cent stake in Canada’s MGM Energy gas reserve. RoK also has the advantage of its sophisticated shipbuilding industry which constructs modern ice-strengthened cargo ships and tankers. These are expected to play a major role in the future as Arctic states develop energy resources. RoK also has interest in the Northern Sea Route and the government has announced incentives for Korean vessels that sail across the Arctic.

Singapore, a small island state, has economic interests in the Arctic. It has technological edge in marine industries particularly in shipbuilding, management of ports and development of offshore marine and engineering industry. However, Singapore does harbour fears that in case the Northern Sea Route reaches economical fruition, it may lose some of the container transshipment and energy transit revenue and refining market. Be that as it may, Singapore is known to be formulating its Arctic policy.

India: Post Kiruna

India's entry into the Arctic Council is a welcome development and is a natural extension of its three decades of Polar research programmes in the Antarctic. The government remains committed to scientific and environmental research activities and the draft approach paper for the 12th Five Year Plan (2012-2017) of the Ministry of Earth Sciences notes that Indian scientists would focus on the study of the warming trend on the Arctic ice cap. It is also important to study the likely impact of the changes in the Arctic on the Monsoons given that India is an agrarian economy. Likewise, the impact of melting of the Arctic permafrost on the Tibetan plateau which is home to important glaciers that supply water to a number of Indian rivers merits attention. It is useful to mention that India lies on the leeward (from the Arctic) of the Himalayan ranges and any changes in the mountain ice cap can have devastating effect on the Indo-Gangetic plains such as the recent floods in Uttarakhand. India's energy requirements are expected to grow in the future and the Arctic region has the potential to enhance its energy security.

The climate induced changes in the Arctic are likely to dominate the discourse, but political and strategic developments in the Arctic cannot be at the margins of India's mental map. As the year 2014 unfolds, it is important to develop a sophisticated Arctic policy that would not only address scientific and environmental issues but also include politico-diplomatic, strategic and economic dynamics in the Arctic region. New Delhi would need to develop sophisticated diplomatic tools to understand the Arctic dynamics and participate as a responsible stakeholder. It is for these and several other reasons that New Delhi should consider:

- (a) **Establishing bilateral dialogue mechanism with the Arctic littorals.** This will help India to support the mandate of the Arctic Council, foster cooperation and advance its

interests in the Arctic as a responsible stakeholder.

- (b) **Appoint an Envoy for Arctic affairs** who would represent India at the Arctic Council meetings. He would be pivotal for obtaining foreign policy inputs to the scientific, economic and strategic interests in the Arctic which would help develop a comprehensive Arctic policy. Some Asian permanent observers (Singapore and Japan) have taken the lead and appointed Arctic ambassadors. This could be complemented by designating a 'Polar Desk' at the Ministry of External Affairs.
- (c) **Designate a Think Tank for research on the Arctic politico-diplomatic and strategic developments.** Arctic is a complex region and the evolving dynamics need good understanding of the region. This would require a proactive research and publication programme and joint research projects with foreign think tanks for developing a comprehensive view of the Arctic which can provide valuable inputs for the Arctic Envoy, Polar Desk and other policy makers.
- (d) **Participation in international conferences** such as Arctic Frontiers, Arctic Circle, etc. which are important platforms for scholars and analysts to exchange views and would offer an opportunity to share India's perspective on Arctic issues.
- (e) **Lead the Asian view of the Arctic** based on the argument that changes in the Polar ice cap will contribute to sea level rise and affect weather patterns in regions as far as the Equator. These will adversely impact on agricultural production and development goals of individual nations.
- (f) **Include Polar issues at multilateral forums such as BRICS and EAS** as most of the member states are engaged in Polar scientific research either in Antarctica or the Arctic or both.
- (g) **Incorporate Arctic issues in Track 1 discussions with Canada, China, Denmark, EU, Japan, Norway, RoK, Russia, US and others to share** India's Arctic perspectives and explore potential areas for cooperation.

- (h) **Polar scientific research could be an agenda for India-Pakistan dialogue** since Arctic induced changes in the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau affect socio-economic development in both countries. Pakistan and India can also cooperate in Antarctica where they have scientific research stations.
- (i) **Active participation in the development of the Polar Code** is critical, given that India is a maritime nation, possesses a large pool of skilled and trained human resources for navigation and engineering duties onboard ships operating in the Arctic.

** Dr. Vijay Sakhuja is Director (Research) Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*