

WHAT BEIJING'S GROWING POLAR SILK ROAD MEANS TO INDIA?

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In its 14th Five Year Plan released in March this year, China has pledged to build a Polar Silk Road (PSR) over the period 2021–2025.¹ Following this declaration, just a few months later in September, the Chinese ice-breaker *Xuelong 2* returned to the Shanghai port from a 79 days' expedition after successfully completing China's 12th Arctic scientific expedition.² Although the Chinese state media reported it as a purely scientific exercise focused on understanding the effects of climate change on the Arctic ecology, however, considering China's latest pronouncements in the 14th Five Year Plan and its previous statements on the importance of Arctic region in China's national security, it remains to be stated that these expeditions are meant for more than scientific knowledge.³ Beijing's growing foreign policy interests in the Arctic have raised eyebrows amongst the Euro-Asian community, including India which is aiming to make its presence counted in the Arctic region. New Delhi has exhibited significant interest in the Arctic affairs. In 2013, New Delhi acquired the observer status in the Arctic Council and in January 2021, it proposed India's Draft Arctic Policy elaborating its stand on the Arctic.⁴ What China's growing inroads into the Arctic and its ambition to execute a Polar Silk Road means to India?

China's interests in the Arctic are threefold—execute strategic ambition, enhance economic supremacy, and acquire polar great power status. Such interests are well-orchestrated and aimed to steadily build Beijing's Polar Silk Road that would correspond with its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In many ways, the speech delivered by President Xi Jinping in 2014 in Australia arrived as a prelude, clearly articulating Beijing's intent to incorporate the polar regions within China's greater maritime strategy, explore their resources and subsequently emerge as a polar great power.⁵ As an exercise in this direction, four years later, Beijing published a white paper to forcefully project itself as a significant stakeholder in the region and propound its focus areas in the Arctic. In a bid to validate China's claims on Arctic resources, the document termed China as a "near Arctic state" and insisted on "respect" and recognition of China's rights and freedom in the region. Highlighting China's commercial interests in Arctic shipping routes, resource exploration and tourism, the document explicitly outlined the core areas Beijing intends to venture into in the coming years.⁶

China's strategic interest in the Arctic is related primarily to its maritime aspirations. Since Beijing is striving to build a blue water navy which will be capable of operating globally, the polar regions are seen as crucial elements to realise such a capability. Upholding this vision, President Xi Jinping in 2014 declared the process of becoming a polar great power as an important component in China's becoming a maritime great power. Consequently, the Arctic and the Antarctic were formally integrated into maritime affairs to amplify these regions' centrality within the overall maritime strategy.⁷ Moreover, Beijing expects that PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy) presence in inter-continental transit corridors of North Sea Route and Transpolar Sea Route will not only help to challenge perceived US dominance in the Pacific but will also maintain China's strategic ability to counter if and when Washington increases pressure in the South China Sea.⁸ As a precursor to China's future actions, the PLAN recently deployed four ships to the Alaska's Aleutian Islands conveying to the US, Beijing's determination to protect its maritime interests in the Arctic and elsewhere.⁹

From an economic perspective, China sees the Arctic as a major source of energy security and thus has a keen interest in exploiting its natural resources like polar minerals, oil, natural gas and fish stock along with utilising it for trade, transportation and tourism. In this regard, the White Paper overtly exhibited Beijing's interest by asserting China's freedom or rights of scientific research, navigation, overflight, fishing, laying of submarine cables, pipelines and resource exploration.¹⁰ Further, to expedite China's future exploratory activities, the Chinese government even prepared and published Arctic resource maps displaying its natural gas and oil basins. It is noteworthy that these maps are available only in Chinese-language internet, thus demonstrating China's reluctance to give away its intentions to the international community.¹¹

Lastly, in China's view, control of one of the "Global Commons" and its resources is important to augment China's international status. The presence of the US and Russia in the Arctic Council makes it all the more imperative for China to enter the ranks of the powers that manage Arctic affairs. Although the word "status" is rarely used in the public domain, Chinese scholars and experts routinely talk about "China's right to speak" for cultivating China's identity as an Arctic state and its intent to "protect" and "govern" the Arctic.¹² The vertical maps published by China are noteworthy in this regard. The maps depict the Arctic as the central ocean and place China at the center of the world order, visually dominating the Asia-Pacific, sidelining the US and dwarfing Europe.¹³

China perceives the Arctic as the new frontier of great power competition and is anxious about losing out in that competition. Its internal discourse on the Arctic, describe the region as an ungoverned space and point towards the military and economic endeavours undertaken by the major powers like the US, Russia and Canada to assert control. Therefore, Chinese strategists and experts argue that in order to secure unfettered strategic and economic access to the Arctic, China should move rapidly.¹⁴

As part of its Arctic strategy, China has invested heavily in its Arctic diplomacy that aims to enhance China's economic opportunities and its legitimacy as a stakeholder in the region. Therefore, Beijing has adopted a multifaceted approach that includes developing scientific and economic partnerships with the Nordic countries, collaborating on institution-building and engaging in Track-II level dialogues to shape perception of the Nordic states and dispel fears about Chinese intentions.¹⁵ Through financial contribution to Arctic Council's projects and sharing of information and scientific expertise, Beijing has made itself quite active within the council.¹⁶ It has also strived to increase its visibility in regional affairs through its participation in regional debates, scientific and academic representation in Arctic Circle and Arctic frontier conferences. Further, China is trying to develop dialogue forums from its own end to showcase its scientific and business expertise in the region.¹⁷

Beyond these endeavours, Beijing has also engaged in capacity-building in the Arctic and accumulation of knowledge about the region to strengthen its strategic claims *vis-à-vis* the US and Russia. The existing literature on China's Arctic activities list several initiatives that are underway, like construction of nuclear-fuelled ice-breakers, scientific expeditions by the PLA to study sea-ice changes, launching of imaging satellites for observation and monitoring Arctic shipping routes, establishment of unmanned ice station in the Arctic and scientific facilities in Nordic states.¹⁸ These initiatives are primarily aimed at building China's military capability in the Arctic region. Particularly interesting is China's research on Arctic acoustics to understand sound propagation under Arctic waters. According to Chinese scientists, knowledge about Arctic acoustics is an important military capability to ensure future submarine patrols for nuclear deterrence and navigational safety of Chinese warships in the Arctic.¹⁹

India's Arctic links go back to 1920 when British India signed the Svalbard Treaty.²⁰ However, post-independence, India focused primarily on conducting research activities in the Antarctic,

beginning its scientific expedition in 1981. The worrisome impact of Arctic warming on Indian monsoons shifted New Delhi's attention to the Arctic. India undertook its first scientific expedition to the Arctic in 2007.²¹ Thereafter, it has been involved in mainly scientific research and technical collaboration with Arctic countries. In 2008, New Delhi inaugurated its Arctic research station "Himadri" in Norwegian Arctic, Svalbard to study life-forms in Arctic and impact of climate change on the Arctic ecology.²² Following this feat, within six years India in collaboration with Norway deployed an underwater moored observatory named IndARC to collect real-time data on Arctic.²³ India's endeavours achieved a major milestone when in 2013 it gained the observer status in the Arctic Council.²⁴ Since then, India has pursued a steady Arctic engagement with an eye to promote bilateral and multilateral convergence on climate change, strategic and economic issues. India's activities have ranged from participating in India–Nordic Summit in 2018²⁵ to jointly organising virtual bilateral summits with countries like Finland, Sweden and Denmark in 2020 to discuss issues of trade, investment and climate change. On the other hand, India's NITI Aayog also signed a MoU with Ministry for Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic in 2019 to deepen India–Russia trade and economic cooperation in the Arctic region²⁶, followed by New Delhi signing MoUs with Norway, Sweden, Canada and Finland on various issues like biodiversity conservation, education and polar research.²⁷ Affirming India's commitment towards the region, the former Minister of Earth Sciences, Dr Harsh Vardhan declared during the 3rd Arctic Science Ministerial in 2021 that India will continue to play a positive role in the Arctic through observation, research, capacity-building and international cooperation.²⁸

Nonetheless compared to China's efforts in the Arctic, India's endeavours are still at a nascent stage. Meanwhile, China's rapid rise in the Arctic raises a number of questions regarding India's geo-political and economic security. For instance, in what ways China's rise in the Arctic will increase geo-political pressure on India? Should there emerge a China–Russia–US nexus in the future on the Arctic, how will that impact India's geo-political standing? If the proposed PSR trade route becomes popular, will that adversely affect India's trade through the International North South Trade Corridor? Also, if China entrenches itself as a polar power, will China exercise access denial strategies against India during political or military tensions? These questions might be easier to answer as the situation progresses in the Arctic. However, in light of growing global ambition and resource needs on both the sides, the Arctic could become another theatre of India–China competition. There is also a fundamental difference in the approaches of the two countries—China seeks a hegemonic position in the Arctic, both militarily and in terms of its governance, while India is more inclined towards scientific collaboration, research and joint natural resource exploration with Arctic countries. This is likely to engender conflict of interest and widen the scope of disagreement between the two countries regarding its governance and utilisation of resources.

Therefore, besides accelerating its engagement with the Arctic states, India should also look into opportunities of deepening its participation in governance, institution building, infrastructure development and resource exploration. This in turn will help India strengthen its voice within the Council and resist China's hegemonic policy moves in the future. Simultaneously, to counter China's soft power manoeuvres in the Arctic, India should also invest in image building amongst the Arctic states. For instance, to highlight India's polar identity, the notion of the Himalayas being the Third Pole²⁹ should be promoted more actively within the Nordic states through informational programmes. Correspondingly, the planned joint projects on scientific and technical knowledge sharing in the Arctic should be fast-tracked to demonstrate India's involvement and interest in collaboration. Building partnerships with non-Arctic states like Singapore, Japan and South Korea will also be beneficial to India in the long-run for adding to its weight within the Arctic Council decision-making. Furthermore, India can also seek to strengthen its Arctic linkages on the basis of shared political values like democracy, respect for human rights and promotion of inclusive international order and women empowerment. To that end,

acknowledgment of these values as basis of India–Nordic cooperation in the 2018 India–Nordic Joint Press Statement was a positive outcome.³⁰ More cultural and civilian exchanges and dialogue forums between the concerned stakeholders would help in further strengthening India–Nordic partnership.

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