

India's Arctic Engagement: Emerging Perspectives

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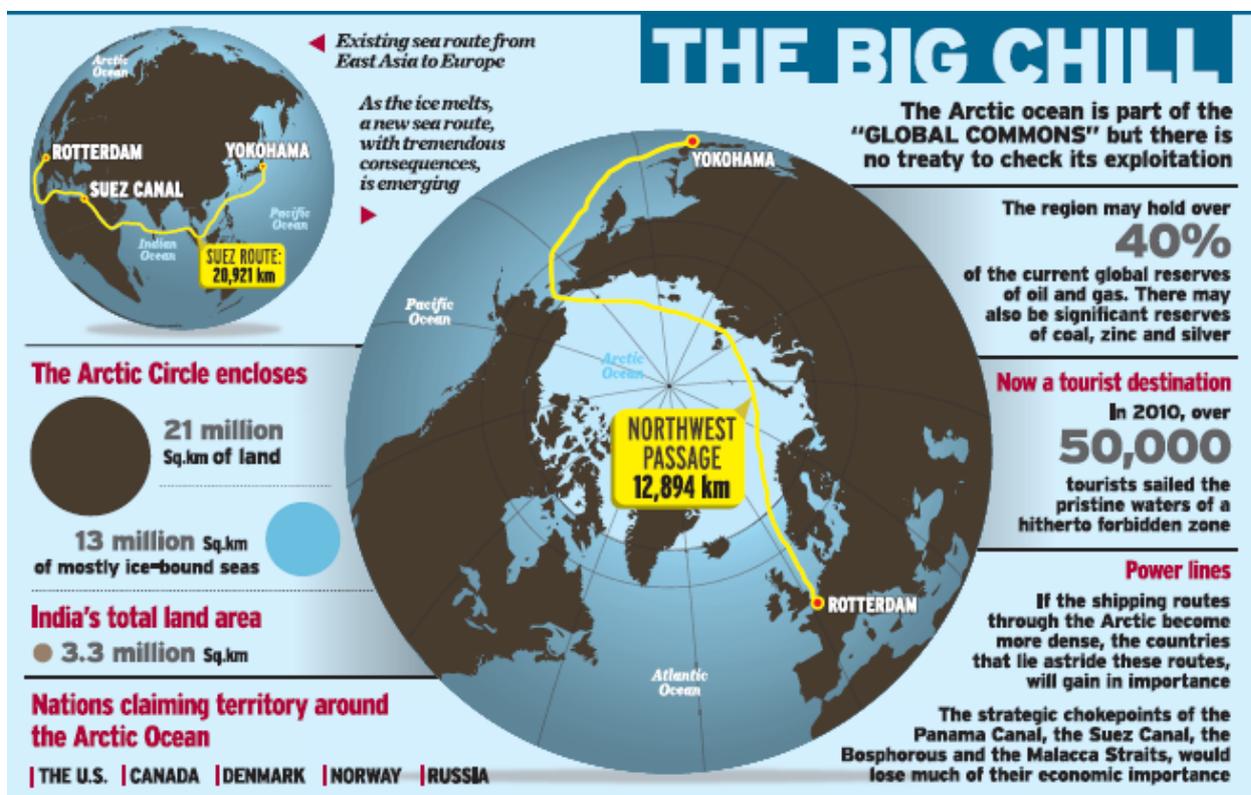
This article examines critically examines the writings of five Indian commentators: Indian Council of World Affairs research director Vijay Sakhuja, former foreign secretary Shyam Saran, retired Army colonel P.K. Gautam and Navy commander Neil Gadiboke, and political scientist Sanjay Chaturvedi of Punjab University. It subsequently assesses India's perspective and potential strategic and policy directions in the Arctic region. Indian policy discourse has yet to produce a coherent or "dominant" opinion on the country's place in Arctic affairs. Nevertheless, several trends are evident, including an emphasis on a 'polar race' narrative; a view of Arctic as a "common heritage of mankind" in need of protection; and a geo-economic perspective that seeks strategic positioning for future resource exploitation and shipping accessibility.

Asia's growing interest in the Arctic region has attracted global attention. Most international media and academic commentary fixates on China, given its dramatic economic rise and the widely held misperception that it claims some portion of the Arctic Ocean (Jakobsen and Peng 2012; Manicom and Lackenbauer 2013; Solli et al, 2013). With increased Asian pressure for access to circumpolar discussions, questions abound whether the existing suite of Arctic governance institutions is sufficiently robust and inclusive to deal with regional challenges in the twenty-first century.

India's Arctic ambitions have attracted less academic and popular attention in the Arctic states. In light of the south Asian country's recent accession to "permanent" observer status, its perceived Arctic interests warrant careful consideration. Indian scholars and commentators are cognizant of the changes in the Arctic environment and interested in these changes but there is disagreement among them about how regional governance in the Arctic should look and what India's role should be. They are suspicious of Arctic littoral states' "narrow" national interests and want to strengthen cooperation and coordination through enhanced multilateral and bilateral relationships. Accordingly, this article begins to address three main questions. On what grounds do Indian commentators claim a right to participate in Arctic governance? What are India's

interests in the region? Finally, what are India's concerns with Arctic governance in its current form and how do these relate to its polar and foreign policy goals more generally?

Non-Arctic states, including India, have legitimate interests in (and can make substantive contributions to) the Arctic region. Although the Arctic states' sovereignty and sovereign rights to exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and extended continental shelves are clearly scripted in international law, other aspects of Arctic governance continue to evolve. Indian political scientist Sanjay Chaturvedi, a leading international expert on geopolitics and the polar regions, notes that "the movers and shapers of Arctic governance discourse in general, and the Arctic Council in particular, can afford to dismiss or underplay the concerns of 'outside' stakeholders (as the 'Asian century' unfolds in all its complexities) only at the cost of undermining the legitimacy, authority and efficacy of their efforts." He places equal importance on having Asian actors' critiques and actions "dictated and driven by a well-informed understanding and analysis of the complex and fluid contexts in which the discourse and practices of Arctic governance are being debated and shaped at present" (2012: 240).



Source: Shyam Saran, "India's stake in Arctic cold war," *The Hindu*, 1 February 2012.

<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/indias-stake-in-arctic-cold-war/article2848280.ece>

Indian commentators have hailed their country's successful application for observer status at the Arctic Council (approved by the Arctic member states and indigenous permanent participants at the Kiruna ministerial meeting in May 2013) as an "Arctic victory" and "a major diplomatic achievement" for foreign minister Salman Khursid (Ramachandaran, 2013). Accepting new observers, however, is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. The real question facing the Council is how it will manage the interests of new actors clamouring for a say in scientific research, resource development, transportation, and regional governance more generally (Lackenbauer, 7

May 2013). Most Indian commentators agree that responsible environmental management and cooperative scientific research and exploration are essential to any Arctic governance regime, but they do not offer a unified voice on other issues. What do they mean when they refer to the Arctic as a “global commons”? How do they interpret the relevance of scientific research in the region, Arctic resource assessments, and prospects for investments or new technological capabilities to exploit these resources? How does China’s growing interest in the Arctic, and the most basic question of prestige, factor into India’s Arctic outlook?

To introduce the contours of popular and academic debate on Arctic issues in India, this study critically examines the writings of five Indian commentators: Indian Council of World Affairs research director Vijay Sakhuja, former foreign secretary Shyam Saran, retired Army colonel P.K. Gautam and Navy commander Neil Gadihoke, and political scientist Sanjay Chaturvedi of Punjab University. These Indian commentators, like other Asian observers, tend to view the Arctic through a *polar* lens. Accordingly, they situate Arctic issues in a global perspective rather than the national or regional perspective that dominates most commentaries emanating from the Arctic states (Manicom and Lackenbauer, 2013). For Arctic scholars and policy-makers to better understand what appear to be peculiar (and even confrontational) positions on regional issues, they should look to India’s experiences in Antarctica and Svalbard, broader geostrategic interests, and the corresponding frames that Indian thinkers apply to geopolitics and governance in the Arctic.

Through Antarctic Eyes: India’s Polar Engagement

Indian commentators emphasize that their country has been involved in polar scientific research and governance for decades. Although Sakhuja traces India’s stake in Arctic governance to 1920, when British signed the Svalbard (Spitsbergen) Treaty 9 on behalf of its overseas dominions (Sakhuja 2011), India’s political and research interests have typically focused on Antarctica, given its comparatively close proximity across the Indian Ocean and its link to the country’s geostrategic, resource, and meteorological interests (Dodds 1997: 135-55; Chaturvedi 1990: 161-162).

When engaging the “Antarctica Question” during the Cold War, India repeatedly attempted to internationalize governance on the southern continent – an idea that continues to inform and even frame its polar perceptions and aspirations. The Indian delegation first attempted to bring the question to the United Nations General Assembly in February 1956, on the heels of Jawaharlal Nehru’s unveiling of the non-aligned movement at the Bandung Conference the previous year. Initially, Krishna Menon, India’s representative at the United Nations (and one of the architects of India’s non-aligned foreign policy) proclaimed that sovereignty claims in Antarctica perpetuated European colonialism. He also emphasized Antarctica’s important influence on global climate patterns, suggesting that “any disturbance of the equilibrium of natural forces in this area might lead to incalculable consequences ... involving the deterioration of the conditions for human and other forms of animal and plant life” (quoted in Dey 1992: 173). Furthermore, Indians expressed fears that Cold War rivalries might spread to Antarctica and nuclear weapons testing in the region could disrupt global atmospheric systems. Opposition to India’s proposal for an international trusteeship to oversee the southern continent provoked an uneasy alliance between the British Commonwealth and Latin America. Despite their bitter sovereignty disputes over the Antarctic peninsular region, they shared common concern that a

UN resolution would undermine their claims and could set a dangerous precedent for UN control over sovereignty territory. In the end, this opposition not only undermined any Indian vision for an “anti-imperial” coalition related to Antarctica but also set an important precedent for the Antarctic Treaty signed in 1959 (Howkins, 2008).

The Antarctic Treaty System rendered moot India’s “post-colonial” aspirations (Dodds, 2006) for the South Pole. With its attention diverted to wars with China and Pakistan in the 1960s and 70s, India’s Antarctic attention was confined to individual scientists participating in expeditions mounted by other countries. After its attempts failed to include Antarctica as part of the “common heritage of mankind” during the negotiations related to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III, 1973-82), India decided that if it “wish[ed] to influence the treaty nations ... it needed to join them” (Dey, 1992: 176; also Beck, 1983: 106-7). Given its interest in the southern continent’s mineral resources and its leadership position in the Non-Aligned Movement, India played the leading role in ensuring that the plans of “a select group of developed nations” to exploit Antarctica’s resources did not cut out the Third World (Dodds, 1997: 143). Accordingly, it established a Department of Ocean Development to launch its first mission to Antarctica in 1981. Two years later, India officially acceded to the ATS and was accorded consultative status – the first developing, Asian country to do so, and the second Asian country to complete a scientific expedition in Antarctica. This membership “changed the character of the treaty from one that has to do with an apparently ‘exclusive’ club of rich nations to one that has much wider representation of the poorer nations” (Dey, 1992: 173). While insisting that “the evolving Treaty System should be made more open and responsive to the viewpoints of all states,” India now “robustly defended the ATS and its handling of the management of Antarctic affairs” (Dodds, 1997: 150). Its active participation in the tumultuous negotiations that produced the 1988 Convention on the Regulation of Antarctic Mineral Resource Activities (CRAMRA) and its subsequent positions on mining continued “to be shaped by the competing demands of national interests, the international community and regional concerns in South Asia” (Dodds, 1997: 154).

India launched its Arctic research program and mounted its first scientific expedition to the Arctic Ocean in 2007, with a particular focus on climate change. Its four major objectives are:

1. To study the hypothesized tele-connections between the Arctic climate and the Indian monsoon by analyzing the sediment and ice core records from the Arctic glaciers and the Arctic Ocean.
2. To characterize sea ice in Arctic using satellite data to estimate the effect of global warming in the northern polar region.
3. To conduct research on the dynamics and mass budget of Arctic glaciers focusing on the effect of glaciers on sea-level change.
4. To carry out a comprehensive assessment of the flora and fauna of the Arctic vis-à-vis their response to anthropogenic activities. In addition, it is proposed to undertake a comparative study of the life forms from both the Polar Regions. (MEA, 2013)

The following year, the Indian National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research (NCAOR) opened the Himadri research facility at the International Arctic Research Base at Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard, to conduct work in glaciology, atmospheric sciences, biochemistry, geological mapping,

and paleoclimatology (Sunderarajan, 2008; NCAOR). India also reached an agreement with the Norwegian Polar Research Institute for scientific cooperation and a Norwegian state-owned company for logistical support and maintenance at the research base. The country joined the Council of the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) in 2012 and has committed more than \$12 million (US) to Arctic research over the next five years (MEA, 2013).

India has not articulated an official “Arctic policy.” In June 2013, the Ministry of External Affairs did release a short document outlining the country’s interests. “Arctic region, the enormous area around the North Pole spreading over one-sixth of the earth’s landmass (approximately the size of Russia, China and India put together!), is increasingly being affected by external global forces – environmental, commercial and strategic and in turn is poised to play an increasingly greater role in shaping the course of world affairs,” it notes. “India has been closely following the developments in the Arctic region in the light of the new opportunities and challenges emerging for the international community due to global warming induced melting of Arctic’s ice cap. Today India’s interests in the Arctic region are scientific, environmental, commercial as well as strategic” (MEA, 2013). While identifying climate change as the main driver of international attention, New Delhi offers no specifics on its particular commercial and geostrategic interests.

This reflects India’s pragmatic and cautiously idealistic approach to foreign policy. Despite an understandable fixation on immediate challenges from its neighbours, Sanjay Chaturvedi (2012a: 50-51) explains, India’s developing geopolitical vision is not rooted in a “strategic culture,” thus precluding “institutionalization of the country’s foreign policymaking.” Without a grand strategy to “provide the nation’s multiple policy strands a cohesive form, consistency and orientation,” it is unsurprising that this inconsistency is reflected in India’s emerging Arctic policy discourse (see also Brady, 2011). Most commentators perpetuate the popular narrative of an “Arctic race,” anticipating that as the “great game moves north” (Borgerson, 2009) Indian interests will be affected by global shipping through the region, as well as newly accessible energy and mineral resources – although there is no consensus what stance Indians should take on development of the latter. There is general agreement, however, that India can and should play a central role in insisting that the world preserve and protect Arctic ecosystems, given the global implications of climate change. The Arctic also plays into India’s strategic calculations regarding its rivalry with China, its perceived obligations as a spokesperson for non-Arctic states in the developing world, and as an aspiring global power seeking prestige through multilateral engagement.

Pragmatism and Prestige: Vijay Sakhuja

Dr. Vijay Sakhuja, a former Indian naval officer and the director of research at the Indian Council of World Affairs in New Delhi, has been an active commentator on Arctic issues since 2010. His pioneering March 2010 policy brief, “The Arctic Council: Is There a Case for India,” introduced many of the themes which he and other commentators would elaborate upon in subsequent articles. The absence of a question mark is telling. For Sakhuja, the answer is unambiguous: “by virtue of the Svalbard Treaty, India is a ‘stakeholder’ in the region” and thus entitled to a voice in governance. Accordingly, he provides a list of seven recommendations that “it will be prudent for New Delhi” to follow. A brief examination of each reveals underlying assumptions about India’s role and interests:

1. *Forge relationships with the Arctic Council members and argue for a permanent membership of the Council by virtue of the 1920 Svalbard Treaty.* India's right to a governance claim by virtue of historical engagement is dubious, particularly in linking the Svalbard Treaty and the Council, but this statement grounds a perception that India has a longstanding interest in the Arctic. Furthermore, the language of "permanent membership" indicates a superficial understanding of the Council's structure (or may reflect Sakhuja's desire for India to acquire equal status to the Arctic states in this high level forum). The only member states to the Arctic Council are those states with territory above the Arctic Circle (the Arctic-8) and this is highly unlikely to change.
2. *Broaden cooperation with Nordic countries and establish bilateral dialogues and discussions to understand the evolving politico-strategic developments in the Arctic region.* This has also been China's strategy (Alexeeva and Lasserre, 2012), but Sakhuja provides no rationale for targeting the Nordic countries and not Russia, the United States, or Canada.
3. *Engage in policy related research on the politics of the 'High North' and formulate an 'Arctic Strategy.'* This call for research makes sense, given Sakhuja's emphasis that India should take interest in the Arctic region, and his call for an "Arctic strategy" echoes that of Chinese commentators up to 2011 (Jakobson, 2011). Since that time, China has adopted a more cautious approach, downplaying non-scientific research and acknowledging that its release of an explicit "Arctic Strategy" could unduly alarm the Arctic states and lead them to band together to keep "outsiders" away (Jakobson and Peng, 2012).
4. *Undertake Arctic resource assessment and exploitation studies.* This indicates an obvious interest in possible economic opportunities for Asian states to exploit living and non-living resources (see also Sakhuja April-June, 2012), but is vague about what specific resources and where they lie. This research would presumably take place with the consent and cooperation of the Arctic coastal states, given that the vast majority of Arctic resources fall within coastal state jurisdiction (including EEZs and extended continental shelves). Were India to embark on exploration studies in areas under coastal state jurisdiction according to UNCLOS, this would undoubtedly generate tensions.
5. *Regular expeditions to the Arctic and consolidate scientific research.* As was the case with India's accession to the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), commentators recognize that India's experience in polar research, its icebreaking capabilities, and its Himadri station are compelling reasons for Arctic states to engage it in regional affairs. Once again, there are strong incentives for Indian researchers to collaborate with scientists from other countries (particularly Arctic states).
6. *Develop technological capability to exploit Arctic living and non-living resources.* In subsequent writings, Sakhuja urges India to seek strategic investments in "deep-sea-cold-climate oil" and mineral extraction (9 April 2010) and to contemplate "sophisticated resource diplomacy and infrastructure capacity" to exploit energy and "new fishing grounds" in Arctic waters (19 August 2010).
7. *India is a strong advocate of global nuclear disarmament and can play a vital role in promoting the idea of a nuclear free Arctic.* This position flows from India's support for global nuclear disarmament and for the use of Antarctica for "peaceful purposes only," where military

personnel and equipment are only permissible for scientific research and other peaceful activities. While the idea of a nuclear-free Arctic deviates from the official positions of Arctic states (several of which rely on strategic deterrent capabilities deployed in the region), Sakhuja's position does resonate with some Western disarmament groups and commentators (eg. Wallace and Staples, 2010; Axworthy and French, 2010). His recommendation that the Indian Navy should develop Arctic "sea legs" through training and "ice condition operations" indicates that he is not opposed to non-nuclear military operations in the region (15 October 2012).

Sakhuja's subsequent writings have expanded upon these themes, advancing general arguments for India to develop "an Arctic strategy that goes beyond scientific, atmospheric and oceanographic research" (19 August 2010). He is particularly attentive to China's interests in Arctic resources, shipping, and military developments (9 April 2010; 16 August 2010), casting China and India as competitors for energy, fish, and bilateral relationships with Arctic states (19 August 2010; September 2011). Given India's geostrategic situation, Sakhuja emphasizes opportunities associated with the Russian Northern Sea Route and concomitant resource development (29 July 2010), clearly advocating a pro-development posture. An Antarctic lens is clear in his most recent studies (29 April 2013; 18 May 2013), which highlight opportunities for India and other non-Arctic states to "challenge exclusivity" and "breach the monopoly" on Arctic governance – a message that resonates with India's historical criticisms of the exclusivity of the ATS (Beck, 1986: 106).

“A Common Heritage of Mankind”: Shyam Saran

In June 2011, Shyam Saran, former foreign secretary of India and now Chairman of the National Security Advisory Board and a Senior Fellow with the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, laid out a different case for why the Arctic Ocean is important to India. "Developments in the Arctic Ocean will redraw the geopolitical map of the world, and emerging countries like India and China should place this region on the international agenda," he asserts. Citing the common themes of climate change, the emergence of new shipping routes, and newly exploitable energy and mineral deposits, he anticipates that Arctic developments could "redistribut[e] power and influence among countries even while threatening the fragile life sustaining systems of our Planet Earth."

Saran (2012) suggests that, if current trends remain unchecked, the main beneficiaries of this power reorientation will be the five Arctic coastal states. His logic flow is revealing:

These five states do have territorial disputes among them, but are united in rejecting the view that Arctic Ocean constitutes a common heritage of mankind. The role of any international agency in the management of a very fragile ecology is also rejected. This is despite the fact that any alteration in that ecology will have significant impact across the globe. There is no counterpart to the Antarctica Treaty (to which India is a party), which constitutes a global compact to preserve the pristine ecology of the southern ice-continent by forswearing any resource exploration or exploitation.

The language of the "common heritage of mankind," a principle of international law suggesting that certain territorial areas should be held in trust for all humanity and protected from national or corporate exploitation (see Hardin, 1968; Baslar, 1997), is deeply engrained in India's

approach to Antarctic governance. For example, Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee proclaimed in 2007 that the southern continent “being a common heritage of mankind and the foremost symbol of peaceful use and cooperation needs to be protected for posterity.” As Chaturvedi observes (2012: 50), this concept finds favour with Indians who believe that their country should “act as a major catalyst for critical post-colonial engagement with the southern polar region” and democratization of the Antarctic Treaty System “in the best interests of entire humankind.” On the other hand, it also resurrects external concerns and frustrations about India’s past attempts to act as a revisionist actor seeking to undermine developed states’ national interests in Antarctica and impose a global trusteeship model.

In accusing the Arctic coastal states of rejecting international authority over the Arctic environment, Saran (12 June 2011) envisages a critical leading role for India in protecting an ecologically “pristine” zone. In his view, the benchmark of responsible management is the Antarctic Treaty. Ironically, nowhere does Saran make any mention of the Arctic Council despite its obvious role in existing Arctic governance and its alternative model to the ATS. By overlooking this existing reality, setting up the Arctic states as self-interested actors, and encouraging India, China, and “other emerging countries” to place the Arctic “on the international agenda” (suggesting the next G-20 Summit to do so), Saran constructs a governance vacuum that non-Arctic states must fill as responsible global stewards.

In emphasizing an internationalizing role for non-Arctic countries, he also plays up the idea that heightened regional stability may actually threaten Indian interests. The settlement of Arctic boundary disputes – such as the maritime delimitation agreement between Russia and Norway in 2010 – opens the door for resource development “in a resource-constrained world.” With concomitant increases in shipping traffic, he anticipates that “the importance of countries that lie astride these routes will be enhanced” (Saran, 12 June 2011). If their agenda proceeds as expected, “the Arctic or Northern Tier countries, including the US, Canada, Russia, Norway and newly emergent Greenland,” will benefit from new infrastructure, modern ports and harbours, and military and naval facilities designed “to safeguard these new and expanding economic assets.” In turn, Arctic development will become a major driver of global climate change. Melting Arctic ice would raise sea levels, change ocean chemistry and current, and disrupt weather cycles (including “tropical monsoons vital to [India’s] own survival”). Furthermore, access to fossil fuels from the Arctic will shelve and even derail “the shift to renewable and clean sources of energy,” rendering moot broader multilateral negotiations to reverse climate change. In this light, Saran depicted the Arctic states as direct threats to Indian and global interests:

Should five countries, which, as an accident of geography, form the Arctic rim, have the right to play with the world’s ecological future in pursuit of their economic interests? If there are significant shifts in the world’s shipping and, therefore, trade patterns, what will this mean for countries like India? Will the exploitation of energy resources in the Arctic improve India’s energy security or complicate it even more than currently is the case? There is currently a shift in the centre of gravity of the global economy from the trans-Atlantic to Asia Pacific. Will there be a reversal of this shift back to the trans-Atlantic via the Northern Tier? Will Russia re-emerge as a major power?

Expanding on his analysis of “India’s stake” in the “Arctic Cold War” in *The Hindu* on 1 February 2012, Saran began with the peculiar and misleading question of whether the Arctic “will ... be the

next geopolitical battleground or remain the common heritage of mankind?” Contrasting the Arctic and Antarctic experiences, he alleged that northern coastal states “are keen to monopolise the resources of the region, shutting out any interlopers including China.” Rather than emphasizing the perils of Arctic state cooperation, his new narrative emphasized “sharpening tensions arising out of long-standing territorial disputes among the Arctic countries” as a reflection of a “current scramble” for prospective economic and strategic benefits. By contrast, he depicted the Antarctic as a tranquil realm thanks to the 1959 Antarctic Treaty which shelved competing territorial claims. Although Saran acknowledges the basic differences between Antarctica (a continent) and the Arctic (an ocean), he quickly notes that both are covered in a thick layer of ice, hold vast hydrocarbon and mineral reserves, and are threatened by global warming. Given these similarities, Saran suggested that “what happens in the Arctic may well trigger a negative change in the Antarctic” – a disconcerting prospect to India given its longstanding interest in the southern continent.

In linking his discussion to climate change, Saran uses the Arctic as a broader example of why India and other non-Arctic countries had to assert their right to manage a “global commons” vital to the earth’s ecosystem. Alleging that industrialized countries preached a low carbon growth strategy to developing countries while “intensifying their own carbon intensive life styles,” Saran insisted that the Arctic coastal states could not claim “exclusive privilege” in managing the circumpolar world. By drawing an analogy between the Arctic and the Amazon basin, central Africa, and Indonesia, he insists that “the preservation of the extremely fragile ecology of the Arctic, whose disturbance may adversely affect the survival of peoples across the planet, is of vital concern to the international community.” Accordingly, he asserts that the Arctic Ocean was “as much a ‘global commons’ as is the Antarctica,” and urges India to “mobilise international public opinion in favour of declaring the Arctic a common heritage of mankind and sponsoring an international legal regime on the lines of the 1959 Antarctic Treaty.” The Arctic states had explicitly rejected this model in their 2008 Ilulissat Declaration, which insisted that “the five nations that border the Arctic Ocean have the primary responsibility to managing activities in the region, including both development and environmental protection.”

Saran (1 February 2012) is both skeptical and vague about the existing governance regime. Nowhere does he mention UNCLOS (upon which the Arctic states base their sovereign rights in the Arctic basin) or other international agreements relevant to regional issues. Given his apprehensiveness about the motives of the Arctic states, he encourages India to “consider carefully whether it should pursue its reported application to join the Arctic Council as a permanent observer.” His main wariness surrounds criteria obliging new observers to explicitly accept the sovereign rights of the Arctic coastal states “over the Arctic Ocean.” Instead, he encourages India to “press for the Antarctic Treaty template where the territorial claims of States have been shelved for the duration of the Treaty,” asserting that the underlying rationale behind the international community’s support for the treaty is “even more compelling and urgent with respect to the Arctic. Placing this on the U.N. agenda during India’s term in the Security Council and initiating international action on it could be a historic contribution by India in its role as a responsible global power.”

In the end, Saran promotes Arctic activism as a form of idealistic, prestige politics for India, perpetuating longstanding polar aspirations originally developed for the Antarctic. This idealism also crosses into his assessment of potential economic benefits from Arctic resource

development. “There may be voices in this country who may argue that India should follow China in seeking a share in the exploitation of Arctic resources to fuel its continuing economic growth,” Saran notes (1 February 2012). “This would be short-sighted. It ignores the much greater damage compared to any possible benefits that India may have to bear if the Arctic continues to be ravaged by unchecked human greed.” He also reveals a more pragmatic justification for why India should seek to freeze Arctic development. As a relative latecomer to the so-called Arctic “race,” Saran conceded that “India possesses neither the financial nor technological capabilities to match the countries in the forefront of the current Arctic scramble. The available pickings may prove to be meagre.” Although wrapped in the righteous language of global interest, the former foreign secretary’s commentaries also reinforce Indian self-interest and realpolitik.

The Arctic as Geostrategic Pivot: Colonel (retd) P.K. Gautam and Commander (retd) Neil Gadihoke

Indian commentators, often echoing Western commentators who suggest that the Arctic coastal states have “militarized” the Arctic (eg. Borgerson, 2008; Huebert et al, 2012; Huebert, 6 May 2013), have begun discussing the strategic implications of the melting sea ice for Asian security. Their narratives also intersect with broader critiques about governance, resources, and the Arctic states’ perceived inadequacies in defending the environment while “militarizing the Arctic in pursuit of their narrow national interests” (Gautam, 2011: 1).

In a 2011 issue brief from the Indian Institute of Defense Studies and Analysis, Colonel (retired) P.K. Gautam laments that the Arctic-5 countries and the Arctic Council dominated and skewed the current Arctic discourse. “The Arctic deserves to be treated as a global common and a common heritage of mankind,” he asserts, rather than as the private preserve of coastal states whose interests only extended to “claiming Exclusive Economic Zones so that resources can be exploited, rights and resources for sea passage and the like.” Alleging that they relegated environmental protection to the sidelines, Gautam predicts that “their business as usual attitude towards global warming combined with the prospects of the pollution of the Arctic due to increased shipping is likely to further degrade the ecology of the region.” Accordingly, he advocates assertive Indian leadership on the Arctic file:

Instead of leaving the issue of the Arctic’s future to the developed countries, developing countries like India must begin to play an active role, as they are doing in negotiations over space and climate change. It is time that a policy on this issue is debated and evolved in India. The first step in this regard will be for India to become an ad hoc observer to the Arctic Council. At the same time, India’s ‘strategic community’ needs to take the lead in articulating the debating the idea of including the Arctic in the discourse on global commons (2011: 9-10).

Gautam’s discussion of global warming, sovereignty claims, and potential new sea routes draw largely upon general American sources that emphasized geopolitical and security considerations. Ironically, his portrait of rampant regional militarization rests on a simple “race for resources” narrative that omits the main findings in several of his key sources (eg. Brosnan et al, 2011; Titley and St. John, 2010). By confusing and distorting the available evidence, Gautam produces an unbalanced and highly alarmist portrait of a region on the precipice of conflict. For example, Canada has allegedly “beefed up its coastguard with four armed icebreakers,” when in reality it

has only committed to building one civilian icebreaker and an unspecified number of ice-strengthened offshore patrol vessels. He also suggests that Canada “is setting up military bases and a deep water port on the shore of the northwest passage with military facilities 595 kilometres from the North Pole. It is also raising a force made up indigenous and Inuit Indians [sic] to patrol the northern borders” (2011: 6). In reality, Canada has begun refurbishing an old deep water docking and refueling facility and announced a small Arctic warfare training centre co-located with a civilian research facility in Resolute in the High Arctic. The Canadian Rangers, the largely indigenous military organization to which Gautam referred, was not new at all: it has existed since 1947 (Lackenbauer, 2013). Thus, while calling upon India’s “strategic community” to “take the lead in articulating...the idea of including the Arctic in the discourse on global commons” (Gautam, 2011: 10), Gautam’s own limited knowledge indicated that India might not be well positioned to engage the Arctic states on regional military and security developments.

What happens in the Arctic will, however, have broader geostrategic effects. Retired Indian naval commander Neil Gadihoke’s commentaries on the geostrategic implications of the changing cryosphere emphasize how “Arctic melt” may impact India’s outlook – particularly in the maritime domain. Embracing the “new great game” narrative, he points to the Arctic as an emerging shipping “highway,” petroleum province, and source of planetary sea level rise. Given that Arctic sea lanes could divert maritime traffic away from Indian ports, the country would have to factor regional developments into its long-term planning. In human security terms, India’s large coastal population could be at risk from rising sea levels. Furthermore, its neighbour Bangladesh would likely “generate a steady flow of displaced people” forced from their homes and seeking access to India (Gadihoke, 2012: 7-8, 11).

Gadihoke’s concerns about strategic impacts on the military domain also reflect the “lingering mistrust of Chinese military expansion” in Indian security circles since the 1962 border war. What if Arctic militarization diverted the US Navy from the Indian Ocean, leaving a regional power vacuum? Given the balance of air and army assets between the two Asian powers, Gadihoke anticipates that maritime forces would play a decisive role. China’s dependence on sea lanes to carry energy imports from the Middle East and Africa represented a vulnerability that India could exploit in a conflict. “Were the Chinese vulnerability to lessen due to the Arctic route,” he argues, “then China may get more assertive not only with India, but with other countries in the region,” with concomitant impacts on regional security and broader geopolitics. On the other hand, the Malacca dilemma could be supplanted by a “‘Bering Straits’ dilemma subject to more focused strategic leverage by the Arctic rim states, with all of whom Indian enjoys an excellent relationship” (Gadihoke, 2012: 5-6, 9).

Senior Indian defence officials are aware of transnational and transoceanic implications of Arctic change. A.K. Antony, the Indian Minister of Defence, stated at an international maritime seminar in New Delhi in February 2012 that the “possible melting of the polar ice caps will have tectonic consequences to our understanding of what maritime domains constitute ‘navigable’ oceans of the world. Specific to Asia and the Indian Ocean Region, there may be a need to reassess concepts like chokepoints and critical sea lines of communication (SLOCs)” (quoted in Shukla, 28 February 2012). As Gadihoke notes, no one knows how environmental changes and development will play out. “The plethora of Arctic imponderables – uncertainties inherent in any “future” – will give rise to many geopolitical questions.” Although unanswered at present, he emphasizes that “the peril will be greater if they were left unasked” – a clarion call to the Indian

strategic community to engage “the major players” and join in discussions about the evolving Arctic (Gadihoke, 2012: 10-11).

Imaginative Geographies and Post-Colonial Polar Engagement: Sanjay Chaturvedi

Political scientist Sanjay Chaturvedi, an expert on the theory and practice of geopolitics, is the leading Indian scholarly commentator on polar issues. At the core of his analysis lies the “Arctic paradox”: that the main driver of climate change, which is transforming the physical and cultural environment, is the oil and gas that is the primary catalyst for international interest in the region. In articulating his own “imaginative geography” of the changing Arctic, he seeks to open space for a positive “geoeconomics of hope” to supplant negative imagery “driven by unfounded politics and geopolitics of fear” (Chaturvedi, 9 May 2013). His recent writings reflect the influence of both his idealist aspirations to democratize the Antarctic Treaty System and encourage “post-colonial engagement” with the southern continent, as well as his critical appreciation of the challenge and dilemmas posed by globalization and the “rise of Asia” (Chaturvedi, 2012a: 50-51). He also criticizes the “new great game” thesis between India and China that some other commentators have extended to the polar regions (Chaturvedi, 10 December 2012).

Despite his aversion to narratives of fear, it is global warming’s “unprecedented challenge” to the planet that, in Chaturvedi’s view, “makes [the] Arctic a place where the entire humanity has a very legitimate right to get interested and involved.” Nowhere is the “materiality” of climate change clearer than at the three poles: the Arctic, Antarctica, and the Himalayas – the latter an obvious touchstone to indicate Indian experience and competency in understanding massive change. Accordingly, his postcolonial ideals shape his mental map of the Arctic’s inherent “circumpolarity.” In his assessment, the region’s artificial division into sovereign state jurisdictions produce “internal colonialisms” akin to other parts of the world, thus diminishing its “exceptionalism” as it becomes increasingly intertwined in the “international geopolitical economy” and geostrategic discourse. While Mikhail Gorbachev promoted the Arctic as a “zone of peace cooperation” in 1987, setting the tone for positive regime-building through the 1990s, the discursive return to language of a new Arctic Cold War leads Chaturvedi to conclude that “there is no denying that we see trends which will lead to, unfortunately, greater securitization and militarization of the circumpolar north.” Just as the emerging concept of the Indo-Pacific blurs the boundaries between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, he sees energy security and sea lanes of communication are drawing the Arctic into broader maritime geopolitics (Chaturvedi, 9 May 2013). Like climate change itself, this problematizes the delineation of what lies within or outside the region, producing broader, international, vested interests in what is happening in this evolving space.

Chaturvedi also characterizes the Arctic as a “complex space,” alluding to the idea that it is also a *place*. “Sometimes people forget that Arctic geographies are humanized geographies,” he observes, and the indigenous social-cultural changes also are transforming the region (Chaturvedi, 9 May 2013). In a profound “think piece” on Asia and the Arctic, he concludes:

On the note that as the rising Asian powers prepare and push their cases for observer status in the Arctic Council, it is vitally important that they give due space

and attention to the ‘human dimension’ of Arctic governance. In most reasoning advanced so far, what is missing by and large is the engagement with indigenous peoples of the circumpolar north; their knowledge systems, world-views and aspirations. It is useful to be reminded that ‘Arctic’ (both on land and at sea) is not a ‘strategic void’ and it is the *lived in* geographies of the Circumpolar North that are in the front line of adverse climate change consequences. What might appear as ‘opportunities’ offered by climate change may in some cases pose serious ‘threats’ to the livelihoods of Arctic communities; especially the indigenous peoples. It is vital in other words that the Asian efforts at confidence-building and alliance-making go beyond the state actors in the Arctic Council (Chaturvedi, 2012b: 251)

This message echoes that of the Permanent Participants to the Council, who identify “a pressing need for enhanced international exchange and cooperation in relation to the Arctic, particularly in relation to the dynamics and impacts of climate change and sustainable economic and social development” (Cochran, 2009). Nevertheless, Chaturvedi concedes that northern indigenous peoples have “some very genuine concerns” about Indian and Chinese interest in the Arctic – although he does not elaborate on what these are or how they can be resolved.

More generally, Chaturvedi points to a trust deficit in Arctic geopolitics. He laments that Arctic states and indigenous groups ask the question: “Why should India be trusted in the Arctic?” Reminded of the reaction to India’s application for consultative status in the ATS in early 1980s, he raises the counter-question: Can Asian states trust the Arctic states? Perhaps not. Similar to Chinese commentators (eg. Peiqing, 2012), Chaturvedi problematizes the Arctic Council member states’ insistence that new observers recognize Arctic coastal state sovereignty when the Arctic states themselves cannot reach consensus on outstanding legal disputes over straits and continental shelves. Although he upholds the Law of the Sea as a “solid foundation for responsible management of this ocean,” he is clearly wary of Arctic states’ exclusionary predilections – particularly in the “Asian century.” Accordingly, Chaturvedi appeals for Sino-Indian cooperation and collaboration on Arctic issues. Yet his narratives also fixate on China’s voracious appetite for energy, minerals, and fish and how this will “create its own geographies of excess and scarcity” (Chaturvedi, 9 May 2013). Accordingly, his intervention produces its own paradoxes related to the political, human and cultural geographies of a region in transition.

Final Reflections

“The Indian narrative on the Arctic region is ... still in its infancy and evolving,” Vijay Sakhuja (October 2012: 6) observes. Accordingly, Indian policy discourse has yet to produce a coherent or “dominant” opinion on the country’s place in Arctic affairs. Nevertheless, several trends are evident. Indian commentators seem to rely heavily on the “polar race” narrative, anticipating regional tension and even conflict, rather than expectations of a “polar saga” promoted by other Western commentators (Lackenbauer, 2009; Brigham, 2010; Vasiliev, 14 January 2013). Thus setting up a straw man argument of Arctic state-generated securitization, militarization, and exclusionary politics, Indian commentators insist on the need for non-Arctic intervention to arrest the coastal states’ “rampant economic [and territorial] greed and consequent degradation of the region” (Kumar, 2013). Some promote the idea that India, as a strong advocate of nuclear disarmament, should advocate for a military – or nuclear-free Arctic (akin to the situation in Antarctica). Others encourage India to anticipate and prepare for strategic impacts of the melting Arctic ice on South Asian regional security.

Most Indian commentators envisage the Arctic as a “global commons” or a “common heritage of mankind” in need of protection. Accordingly, India insists that it has a right to conduct scientific research and contribute to responsible environmental management. Although this concept resonates with India’s experiences in Antarctica, it bristles against the perspectives of Arctic coastal states and Northern peoples who exercise sovereignty and sovereign rights to Arctic lands, waters, and seabed resources in conformity with international law. Saran’s warnings that Arctic Council observer status is tantamount to accepting “the sovereign rights of the Arctic Council members over the Arctic Ocean” (1 February 2012) is misleading insofar as these rights are derived from UNCLOS and customary international law, not the Council. The extent to which the “global commons” envisaged by Indian commentators seeks to diminish Arctic state rights – both geographically and functionally – remains unclear.

Some Indian commentators suggest that international efforts should be directed towards stopping Arctic resource development, slowing climate change, and preserving the region. In his latest intervention, Saran (15 July 2013) urges the United Nations “to set up its own Arctic body” and suggests that India and other developing states might “put the Arctic on the agenda of the ongoing multilateral negotiations on Climate Change under the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change” and thus “ensure that the activities undertaken there do not harm the well-being of the vast majority of people around the world.” He reiterates his earlier arguments that:

[I]t is hypocritical of the developed, industrialized countries, in particular, the rich Arctic states, to preach low carbon development strategies to poor, developing countries, while they themselves, rush headlong into ensuring the perpetuation of their own carbon and fossil fuel intensive patterns of production and consumption. This hypocrisy lies at the heart of the relentless spoilage and ravaging of one of the last pristine frontiers of our endangered planet. If we keep silent and look away because of the prospect of sharing in this unseemly Gold Rush, India’s credentials as a responsible member of the international community and as a champion of the principle of equitable burden-sharing and inter-generational equity, would become deeply suspect.

Other commentators indicate that India needs to enhance its knowledge and devise a robust strategy to exploit Arctic resources, prepare for impacts that new Arctic shipping routes may have on existing trade networks, and pursue opportunities for multilateral and bilateral cooperation with Arctic states within the existing legal and governance regime. In raising the question of why non-Arctic states (such as India) should trust the Arctic states, Chaturvedi reverses the question frequently posed by established regional actors and highlights the trust deficit that persists amongst and towards the “outsiders” lobbying for a more central role on the Arctic stage (2012b: 232).

India will have to decide whether it believes it can achieve more by proposing “solutions” as the “conscience-keeper of the world” (Sikri, 2009: 89) that go against the expressed wishes of the Arctic states (akin to the leadership that it tried to assert in Antarctic affairs) or by emphasizing its willingness to cooperate, collaborate, and participate within the existing Arctic regime. In recent years, Chinese officials have deliberately avoided contentious issues (particularly resource development and sovereignty) to allay Arctic state concerns about China as a “rising power,” instead focusing on climate change and opportunities for scientific collaboration (Jakobson and Peng, 2012). Several Indian commentators also stress that their country’s Arctic strategy should

be primarily directed towards scientific research, allowing officials to leverage decades of polar research experience in articulating India's role in Arctic governance (eg. Rajan, 2013). Although critics see participation in the Arctic Council as a form of "selling out" to the established, Arctic-state-dominated order, particularly in light of the new criteria for observers, supporters see it as a "toehold in the region" which India can use to "gradually scale up its capabilities" (Sinha, 2013).

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) appears to accept that an Antarctic vision cannot be projected onto the Arctic. Officials have indicated that they considered applying a southern polar template to the northern circumpolar region, but decided that it would be inappropriate given the inherent difference in an uninhabited, continental land mass and an ocean surrounded by nation states (Mitra 2012). "India has already been working closely with the Arctic Council members," Navtej Sarna, additional secretary with the Ministry of External Affairs, stated in May 2013. "We will be putting a lot of stress on our scientific work in the region. We have been asked to send more people to the Arctic, and we plan to do so." He also notes that India plans to "fruitfully engage with the indigenous people of the region and work with them on environmental issues" (quoted in Taneja, 20 May 2013). Whether Indian scholars and pundits will embrace this position as moderate and prudent, or dismiss it as evidence of the Arctic regime "co-opting the post-colonial critics" (Dodds, 2006: 65; Chaturvedi, 2011a: 53), remains to be seen. As it becomes increasingly engaged, the Indian government's challenge in charting an Arctic course will lie in navigating the traditional waters of idealism and pragmatism, with due consideration for how circumpolar dynamics affect the Arctic region – and the entire world.

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