Why an Arctic foray is essential for India

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An ‘Indo-Arctic’ construct through a Vladivostok-Chennai maritime route can bring Russia’s Far East in tune with India’s Act East

Two developments which took place in September demand that India takes a closer look at the Arctic and pursue a larger construct to achieve its strategic interests. Early this month, Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Russian President Vladimir Putin at Vladivostok for a bilateral summit, where both converged on the Arctic.

The Arctic may be the northernmost part of the world, geographically far from India. However, the impact of climate change across the coasts of India and the economic fallout should bring up the Arctic more in discussion. Politically and strategically, the Arctic can no longer be perceived as too far.

The second development took place last week when Polarstern, a German research ship, quietly left Tromso in Norway to study the North Pole.
In this context, India will have to look at the Arctic — both from the prism of climate change and also as a strategic construct. The former cannot happen without the latter. Given the region’s size, economy and partners (or the lack thereof), India will also have to work with other countries to establish a strong presence in the Arctic.

An ‘Indo-Arctic’ initiative, as a strategic construct, could provide a platform for India. It could open political space for New Delhi to work with like-minded countries to expand its footprint in the Arctic through its coasts by the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean and the Bering Sea.

**The Vladivostok opening**

The recent visit of Modi to Vladivostok and the discussions/agreements between Modi and Putin provide an opening for India to pursue a grandiose Arctic plan.

Modi was in Russia to take part in the 20th annual summit between India and Russia, besides taking part in the Eastern Economic Forum (EEF). Hosting the bilateral summit in Vladivostok, Russia’s Far East, instead of Moscow or St Petersburg, can be perceived as a strategic discussion. The agreements signed there too exemplify a larger process.

The fact that the Indian business community is also looking at Russia’s Far East should provide a larger space for New Delhi to act not only from a political prism but also expand its economic and business footprints.

The joint statement of Modi and Putin explicitly mentions India’s interest in the Arctic and New Delhi’s willingness to cooperate with Russia over the polar region. The statement also mentions India’s willingness to play “a significant role in the Arctic Council.” India has been an observer
member of the Arctic Council since 2013.

Moscow could provide the much-needed opening for New Delhi to step into the Arctic, so to speak. Linking the coastal city of Chennai to Vladivostok with a maritime route essentially means Russia’s Far East would extend to India as well. This also provides an opportunity to expand India’s ‘Act East’ approach into Russia, and then further north into the Arctic. But, how to operationalise this idea?

India does not have deep pockets. Neither does Russia. Moving forward, India and Russia will have to work with partners across the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean in South-East Asia and East Asia. Singapore, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan could be the natural partners to this endeavour.

China has deep pockets, but it also has its own plan in the form of Belt and Road Initiative. Separately, China has formally enunciated a ‘Polar Silk Route’ initiative and has moved ahead to operationalise the same. Beijing has invested in polar shipping — from ports to trade routes across the Arctic. It has built polar vessels called *White Dragons*, which include snow cutters. It has also supported research on the Arctic and proactively encouraged Chinese institutes to work with European ones for the same. China also hosted the Arctic Forum this year.

Both India and Russia need partners. The ‘Indo-Arctic’ policy could provide a framework for such a push. The Indo-Arctic should have a focus broader than achieving the bilateral interests of individual countries. Climate change can be one primary focus of the Indo-Arctic construct. From Bangladesh and Myanmar in India’s immediate east to Japan and South Korea in the Far East, invariably the entire coast is vulnerable to what happens in the Arctic. From rising seas to cyclones, the North Pole unites the South and the East.
India should look at the Arctic from the following perspectives: scientific research, climate change, the ‘Look East’ policy and a larger construct with Russia.

Politically, Indo-Arctic should be an extension of India’s ‘Act East’. New Delhi’s ‘Look East’ during the previous decades was limited to South-East Asia. In this decade, India expanded it to East Asia and Australia. The Arctic should be the natural extension during the next decade.

The Indo-Arctic will also strategically balance the US and China. India is working with the US in developing the Indo-Pacific region. Many smaller countries are apprehensive or less enthusiastic about the Indo-Pacific in South and South-East Asia. Russia has also not been enthusiastic about India’s engagement with the Indo-Pacific.

An Indo-Arctic construct would complement India’s Indo-Pacific push, and enable New Delhi to work with Moscow closely.

Scientifically, India will have to expand its footprints in the Arctic. What is in it for India in the Arctic should be an irrelevant question. If the leadership in the 1940s would have asked this on India’s ambitions in space and in the 1980s about the Antarctic, India would not have become a global power in these two fields. India has established a National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR); but we still have to go a long way in actively taking part in the Arctic activities — research and beyond. India will have to be a part of not only the Arctic Council, but take part in various international forums relating to the Arctic that are led by US, Canada, Norway and Russia.

The Arctic Forum, for example, could see a strong delegation from India to its annual meetings, with an aim to host the Forum in the country in the near future.
Outside Polar research, India should also make a grand plan on other areas. Polar shipping, trade and maritime routes could also bring the countries from Chennai to Vladivostok, and beyond across the Barents and Norwegian Seas to Tromso in Norway and Reykjavik in Iceland. For East Asian countries, especially South Korea and Japan, the Polar trade route would be economically beneficial and viable to reach northern Europe via the Arctic.

The Chennai-Vladivostok route is a beginning and a means. An Indo-Arctic policy should be New Delhi’s endgame. India and Russia should begin work with other countries in South, South-East and East Asia to in order to move forward.

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