



Prospects for Russian–Indian Cooperation in the High North: Actors, Interests, Obstacles

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The paper examines emerging prospects for Russia–India cooperation. While the two countries can collaborate in various areas of mutual interest, the paper identifies possible challenges and effects on the cooperation in the Arctic region. The sanctions imposed by the West could impede Russian energy projects in the Arctic. This could force the state to find a way to replace Western technologies through enhancing capacities of national industry and developing cooperation with other states, including Asian countries. This shift is also bolstered by the political interest to strengthen the position of Russia in the Asian region as a whole, and to increase the country's energy security. The paper provides an overview of the Russian and Indian interest and policy in the Arctic, and presents the perspectives and challenges for both countries.

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Introduction

In recent years, development of the Arctic region has become a subject of attention from Arctic (Russia, Canada, the United States, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway and Iceland) and non-Arctic countries, including India. In May 2013, the latter was granted observer status to the Arctic Council (AC). The increased attention to the Arctic region is caused by the region's scientific significance and economic perspectives, including emerging opportunities for exploitation of hydrocarbon deposits and navigation along the Northern Sea Route (NSR). According to an assessment conducted by the US Geological Survey, "the Arctic holds an estimated 13% (90 billion barrels) of the world's undiscovered conventional oil resources and 30% of its undiscovered conventional natural gas resources".¹

Moreover, navigation along the NSR creates opportunities for diversification of trade routes and cost reduction, since shipping through the Arctic Ocean along the NSR reduces time for delivering cargos as compared to the traditional routes via southern seas and oceans, including the Suez Canal and the Panama Channel. The desire of India to join the AC is also dictated by its interests to be integrated in decision-making process on Arctic governance with regard to scientific and economic issues. In addition, India is taking measures that are aimed at developing bilateral relations with the Arctic states, including Scandinavian countries and Russia. However, diverse approaches to the AC enlargement exist among the Arctic states and the countries hold different views on involving non-Arctic countries in the discussions. Scandinavian countries take a more open position and support the AC enlargement, whereas Russia follows a rather cautious approach, based on the states' economic and security interests in the region.

The aim of the article is to examine current state of affairs, as well as opportunities and challenges that Russian–Indian collaboration in the Arctic presents. The article begins with an outline of Russian state interests and policy in the region. It also provides an overview of India's Arctic interests and the existing debate within the academic and political community of India on different approaches to the state policy development. Finally, the article examines future directions for the two states to collaborate in various areas, by identifying mutual interests, actors, possible challenges and effects of cooperation on the policy of both states in the Arctic region.

Russian Interests and Policy in the Arctic

The importance of the Arctic for Russia is determined primarily by socioeconomic and national security interests. The region's value for the state's socioeconomic development is primarily due to its vast amounts of natural resources. The Russian Arctic is rich in biological and mineral resources, including gold, copper, diamond, nickel, cobalt, rare earth minerals, oil and gas. The initial amount of recoverable resources in the Russian Arctic is estimated at 106 billion tons of oil equivalent, including 69.5 trillion cubic metres of gas.²

The Russian economy continues to be dependent on oil and gas exports. It is estimated that oil and gas revenues will account for 51% of Russia's federal budget in 2015.³ Natural resource production is also associated with the socioeconomic development of Russia's Northern regions. For example, the launch of oil and gas production at onshore and offshore fields, including the Barents and Kara Seas and the Yamal Peninsula, has led to the development of transport infrastructure, integration of new technologies, creation of working places, and investment in the relevant regions.

Russia is also interested in developing shipping through the NSR. One of the core goals of the *Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and National Security for the Period up to 2020*, released in February 2013, is the development of an integrated Arctic transport system as a national shipping route, operating year round.⁴ The Russian state links an increase in shipping through the NSR with national economic growth and the Northern territories' development by including the regions in a united economic and security space.

Apart from economic reasons, natural resource production and shipping are linked to Russian geopolitical interests and have led to a military presence in the Arctic. For instance, the new strategic military command established in December 2014 is charged with the task of protecting Russia's Arctic oil and gas facilities, fishing and state sovereignty. The Arctic region is also important for Russia's nuclear deterrence strategies, and a naval base is located on the Kola Peninsula.

The present Russian Arctic policy is primarily determined by several key documents: *The Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period up to 2020 and Beyond* (2008), *The Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and National Security for the Period up to 2020* (2013) and *Plan of Measures Aimed at Realization of the Russian Arctic Strategy 2020*

(2013). The complementary official documents defining the Russian Arctic policy include: *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation for the Period up to 2020* (2001), *Russian Maritime Activity Strategy until the Year 2030* (2010), *Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (2014), *Socio-economic Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation for the Period until 2020* (2014) and *New Rules of Navigation on the Water Area of the Northern Sea Route* (2013).⁵

In practice, because of the high importance of the region for the state's economy and security, the Russian state has always pursued a rather rigid stance with regard to foreign involvement in its economic activities, and has been trying to preserve the Arctic region only for the Arctic states. However, the state is now facing a dilemma to balance its economic and security interests. Currently, "Russia is bolstering its military capacity in the Arctic by re-establishing military bases and re-equipping its forces to guarantee human safety and protect its sovereignty in the region".⁶ For instance, Russia is reopening abandoned military bases, including the ones in the Novosibirsk islands and Alakurtti, and is planning to build 13 air bases in the region. At the same time, due to the lack of knowledge and technology to conduct offshore drilling in the Arctic, and the scarcity of funds to develop robust infrastructure for oil and gas extraction and shipping on its own, the Russian government has increased steps to enhance collaboration with the Arctic states. In particular, in 2010, Russia legally resolved a long-standing maritime border dispute in the Barents Sea with Norway. At the business level, the state-owned energy companies Gazprom and Rosneft have signed deals with Western energy companies such as the French Total, Italian Eni, American ExxonMobil and Norwegian Statoil, aiming to develop offshore oil and gas projects in the Russian Arctic. However, the changing geopolitical situation, marked by tense relations with Europe and the US over Ukraine and the sanctions on Russia, has restricted the export of oil- and gas-related equipment for Arctic offshore and shale projects in Russia. This has hindered project implementation and has forced Russia to expand its relations with Asian countries.

Indian Interests and Policy in the Arctic

Unlike other observer states in the Arctic Council such as France, Great Britain and Poland, India does not have a long-standing history of polar research. However, in 1920, as a part of the British Empire, India signed the Spitsbergen Treaty that defined an international status for the Norwegian archipelago. And yet, it was not until 2007

that India launched its Arctic research program with a special focus on climate change, and organised its first expedition to the Arctic region, which coincided with the launch of the International Polar Year 2007–2008. The official reason for launching Arctic research was declared to be the existing wide gap in knowledge about the Arctic and climate change, specifically a connection between the polar region and monsoon intensity that is critical for the Indian agriculture and economy.⁷ In 2013 Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that the major focus of the Indian scientific research in the Arctic included the following:

1. “To study the hypothesized teleconnections 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”.⁸

Moreover, India has undertaken several research expeditions to the region. In 2008, India opened the research base “Himadri” at the International Research Base Ny-Ålesund on Svalbard to carry out scientific research in atmospheric sciences, biology and glaciology. India also became a member of the Ny-Ålesund Science Managers Committee (NySMAC) which is responsible for enhancing cooperation and the coordination of scientific and research activities at Ny-Ålesund. The research base is operated by the National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research (NCAOR), located at Goa. NCAOR was established in 1998 as an autonomous institute under the Department of Ocean Development, and is responsible for coordination and implementation of all of India’s Antarctic and Arctic scientific research programs. At present, NCAOR is working under the Ministry of Earth Sciences, which was established in 2006, and one of its tasks was to develop an Arctic research programme. Until now, 57 scientists from 18 national institutions, organisations and universities have participated in the Indian Arctic Program.⁹ For instance, two members from Geological Survey of India (GSI) participated in the first expedition to the Arctic. Also, representatives from the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, the Indian

Institute of Tropical Meteorology and the Department of Geology at Lucknow University took part in the first expedition to the Arctic region.¹⁰ Other institutes that conduct scientific research in the region include: the Space Applications Centre, Bhabha Atomic Research Centre and National Geophysical Research Institute.¹¹

Furthermore, with the launch of Arctic scientific activities, several think tanks, such as the Indian Council of World Affairs, Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis and National Maritime Foundation, began researching the issues of Arctic geopolitics, governance and Asian policy in the Arctic region.

Despite the research that has been conducted, India has not developed an official policy with regard to the Arctic. Just after the Kiruna Ministerial Meeting in 2013, the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, released an official document briefly indicating the country's Arctic interests as scientific, environmental, commercial and strategic.¹² At present, India seems to have interests in the Arctic that are mostly limited to research of the polar region. However, it is likely that the country is trying to assess its interests and stakes in the various possible scenarios of the Arctic region's development, and, therefore, holds a cautious stance concerning its official political position on the Arctic.

During the official visit of the Indian President, Shri Pranab Mukherjee, to Norway in 2014, the Special Secretary at Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of India, Shri Navtej Sarna, stated: "...I would like to underline that our focus at the moment is scientific and technological and earth sciences-oriented...I certainly would not foreclose any possibilities in regard to whatever benefits the Arctic might offer to the world".¹³

At present, different approaches exist within the Indian scientific and political community concerning the country's future policy in the region. There are several researchers and officials who advocate that the Arctic region should be a common heritage of mankind. In addition, deriving from the country's general international stance on nuclear non-proliferation, it is likely that New Delhi would like to play a role in making the Arctic region a zone of peace and stability. Former Foreign Secretary and senior fellow with the Centre for Policy Research Mr. Shyam Saran shares a view that rather than applying for observer status in the AC, the country should assert a role in Arctic governance by pressing the Antarctic template for the Arctic Ocean.¹⁴ In line with Saran's opinion, Col. P.K. Gautam, a research fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies, argues in his work *The Arctic as A Global Common* that the

*current discourse on the Arctic is dominated by the Five Arctic states and the Arctic Council... Their focus is limited to issues such as claiming Exclusive Economic Zones so that resources can be exploited, rights and resources for sea passage and the like.*¹⁵

He therefore calls on developing countries to take an active role in the decision-making process over Arctic issues, to include them in the discourse on the global common, and not to leave them to be decided by the developed states. And the first step for India is to become an observer at the AC.¹⁶

However, by joining the AC in 2013, India confirmed its position on the sovereignty of the Arctic states' and their sovereign rights. In addition, at present India is also keeping a low profile concerning the existing territorial claims over the continental shelf between Canada, Russia and Denmark, and the US, in case Washington ratifies the United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), 1982. Article 76 of the Convention gives right to a country to extend its marine borders beyond 200 nautical miles. There are several reasons for such a cautious Indian stance. The first reason deals with the existing uncertainties concerning the future of Arctic natural resource extraction, including a lack of geological survey data, high costs, environmental risks and offshore projects' economic feasibility. Secondly, India ratified UNCLOS in 1995, and therefore the country is bound by the provisions of the Convention for settling its marine boundary disputes. In particular, India and Bangladesh recently resolved their maritime boundary based on the legal mechanisms under the UNCLOS. Thus, the state's assertive position on the existing territorial disputes in the Arctic could possibly undermine its own territorial claims.

Another existing approach calls for the state's limited stance: the conduct of scientific research related to the polar region.¹⁷ In the official statements, the importance of being involved in Arctic scientific research is highly emphasised. The statements are also complemented by the official policy. For instance, India has already spent US \$3 million on developing "Himadri" station.¹⁸ Annual visits of Indian governmental officials to the station show the importance of the research conducted in the polar region. After India joined the AC, official statements were made with regards to India's plans to build an icebreaker to conduct scientific explorations in the polar regions.¹⁹ In October 2014, the Indian Government finally approved the acquisition of a research vessel for the Ministry of Earth Sciences, at a

cost of approximately US \$171 million, in 34 months.²⁰ The vessel will perform the dual functions of research and logistics in both polar regions. In addition, in 2013, the country also announced plans to commit US \$12 million for Arctic studies over the next 5 years.²¹

The third approach to Indian Arctic policy implies a resource-oriented policy in the Arctic region.²² India is the world's fourth largest oil consumer, "importing 80% of its crude oil and 18% of its natural gas demand",²³ with the major import (around 61% of the crude oil) coming from the Middle East, including Iran and Iraq. In order to protect itself from future geopolitical risks, and to strengthen its national energy security, the Indian government is trying to diversify its energy imports. Therefore, in the long term, involvement in Arctic energy projects is a likely option for the country to diversify its energy sources.

Despite the lack of an official policy for the Arctic region, several directions of the current Indian policy in the region are identifiable. Firstly, at the regional level, India tries to engage in the work of the leading organisations, where important decisions regarding the future of the Arctic are taken. New Delhi has declared its intention to be involved in the region "by having a strong presence in the Arctic Council".²⁴ Currently, the Arctic states hold the prerogative in decision-making and the role of an observer is limited. But India, with its scientific expertise, can contribute to the six working groups of the AC. However, given the state's possible increase of economic involvement in the region, India may insist on a more decisive voice with regards to the future of the Arctic region and, therefore, may suggest the need to revise the decision-making process of the AC. This step will most likely be met with strong resistance from the Arctic states, especially Russia. Therefore, in order to avoid a possible clash of interest in the future, the first step might be an elaboration of new mechanisms for observers' participation in the work of the AC.

As part of dealing with the Arctic issues, India also tries to cooperate on a bilateral level with the Arctic states. The visit by Indian President Shri Pranab Mukherjee to Norway and Finland last year is a testimony to the importance of bilateral cooperation on Arctic issues. India currently has friendly relations with these countries in economic, technological and scientific areas. As for Arctic cooperation, New Delhi received political support from both states to join the AC. In relation to specific bilateral relations on Arctic issues, India perceives Norway as one of its main scientific partners. In 2009, the country entered into a "Memorandum of Understanding" with the Norwegian Polar Institute "for collaborative research on such scientific themes

such as shallow ice-core drilling, ice dynamics and monitoring of glaciers/ice cap margins in polar regions to understand the climate variability over both the high latitudes in the last millennia”.²⁵

As for Finland, India has an interest in cooperating in the field of technology, and the Nordic country sees in New Delhi “a large market for its products and a favourable investment destination for its high technology industries”.²⁶ Given New Delhi’s decision to acquire an icebreaker, the cooperation between the states is likely to expand. As for the other Nordic states, the issue of Arctic was discussed during the official meetings of Indian and Icelandic officials. With the current increasing political activity of Iceland, it is likely that cordial relations will develop further between the two countries on Arctic issues.

Despite the existing obstacles for collaboration, including territorial disputes, there are perspectives for establishing cooperation on issues related to the Arctic region among the Asian states, including China, Japan, South Korea and Singapore. For instance, research collaboration is mostly likely to be beneficial for all states. A first step was taken in this direction in 2004, when South Korea took the lead and organised the Asian Forum for Polar Sciences (AFoPS), with China and Japan as founding members. In 2006, India and Malaysia joined the Forum. The main goal of the AFoPS is to exchange information and strengthen polar collaboration within the Asian research community. Additionally, in the future, the countries can develop a united stance to promote their interests in the AC, including the future legal regime in the Arctic.

As part of its involvement with the Nordic states, India could establish cooperation on the Arctic with Russia. Considering the fact that Russia and India have always had good relations, it is assumed that “Russia provides the most convenient door way to the Arctic for New Delhi.”²⁷

Russian–Indian Relations: Perspectives and Challenges

The Russia–India strategic partnership has addressed several core areas, including economics, politics, civil nuclear energy, defence and cooperation in counter terrorism. Bilateral cooperation in the Arctic region can further strengthen the existing partnership in various other areas.

One of the prospective areas for enhancing Russia–India bilateral relations in the Arctic is science. The joint statement released during the December visit of Russian

president Vladimir Putin to India outlined the agreement to foster scientific cooperation and to conduct research related to ice melting, climate change, marine life and biodiversity.²⁸ Vijay Sakhuja, Director of the National Maritime Foundation, also notes that given India's considerable expertise in remote sensing it could contribute to scientific data collection and dissemination. Russia, on the other hand, could promote and contribute to the research of the NCAOR, which is considering publishing a composite geological map of the Arctic.²⁹

In addition to scientific cooperation, Russia is likely to expand its energy partnership with New Delhi in the Arctic. The involvement of Indian companies in oil and gas projects in the Arctic region has received political support from Russian officials. Russian Deputy Minister of Energy Mr. Yuri Senutin stated that "for the first time ever, Russia has suggested to the Indian companies to participate in projects for development and production of hydrocarbons in Russia, including in the Arctic and in East Siberia".³⁰

There are several factors supporting the increased interest in promoting a Russia–India partnership in the Arctic region. For Russia, this cooperation may help to diversify its energy export markets and to strengthen collaboration with other Asian states. This will help Russia to reorient itself away from the Western markets and to find international support to avoid political and economic isolation. Additionally, energy cooperation with India may allow Russia to avoid overdependence on China; the relations with the latter have been developing alongside the deterioration of Russian relations with the US and the European Union. At the business level, the partnership may provide critical investment in large-scale energy projects in the region. The imposed sanctions have halted Rosneft's partnership with ExxonMobil and Statoil, and the Russian oil companies require the much-needed expertise and technology for offshore oil and gas projects. Therefore, the Russian companies have to find new partners to replace their dependence on Western technology, expertise and investment. For India, the partnership may ensure diversification of its oil and gas imports and would help meet its growing energy demands. In addition, participation in the Arctic energy projects will provide India with an opportunity to broaden its presence in the region.

The first steps have already been taken towards establishing cooperation between the two states. In 2012, Gazprom Marketing and Trading, Singapore, signed a deal with Indian company GAIL for the annual delivery of 2.5 million tons of liquefied natural gas (LNG) over a period of 20 years.³¹ Additionally, in 2014, Rosneft and the international

division of the state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation ONGC Videsh Ltd. (OVL) signed a memorandum of understanding for cooperation in exploration, appraisal and hydrocarbon production on Russia's continental shelf. Moreover, Rosneft and OVL are partners in the offshore energy project Sakhalin-1 in the Okhotsk Sea, where the Indian company has held a 20% stake since 2001. In addition to offshore projects, Indian energy companies are interested in participation in onshore oil and gas projects in the Arctic. In particular, when in 2011 the Russian private gas producer company NOVATEK announced its plans to attract partners to the Yamal liquefied natural gas project (Yamal LNG),³² a consortium of three Indian companies (OVL, GAIL and Petronet LNG) expressed interest in a 15% stake in the project.

However, in 2013, NOVATEK negotiated a deal with the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) on the purchase of a 20% equity share in the Yamal LNG project by the Chinese company, and an annual supply of 3.5 million tons of LNG to China. There were several reasons for this decision, such as securing and diversifying their energy export markets. At the same time, the deal with CNPC will provide financial assistance for the project from relevant Chinese financial institutions. According to Mr. Gennady Timchenko, a member of the Board of Directors of NOVATEK, Chinese banks are planning to invest more than US \$10 billion in the Yamal LNG project.³³ However, in 2013, in order to attract additional financial assistance for the project, NOVATEK announced the decision to sell a 9% stake in Yamal LNG. A consortium of Indian companies (OVL, Indian Oil and Petronet LNG) has been announced among the potential partners.

Despite the existing political support and interest expressed by both sides, there are some uncertainties with regards to the development of the Russian–Indian energy collaboration in the Arctic region, which may influence the Indian company's decision to postpone or turn down participation in the projects. First, the imposed sanctions and dropping oil prices may negatively influence the Arctic energy projects' implementation. For example, the sanctions may postpone the plans of Imperial Energy Group, a subsidiary of OVL, to drill for shale gas in the Bazhenov shale formation in Siberia, since the US company Liberty Resources was contracted to drill exploratory wells in the formation.³⁴ Second, challenges related to natural resources extraction may also have a negative impact on the Indian companies' decisions concerning Russian Arctic project participation. For instance, OVL, after carrying out risk assessment of the project in 2014, announced its decision to leave the negotiations on the Yamal LNG deal.

In the current situation, the Russian energy companies want potential Indian partners to make much-needed investment in the risky Arctic projects. Indian companies are likely to take a stake in the projects, while assessing the profitability of investment and requesting additional tax relief. In addition, Russia and India also need to negotiate ways to deliver energy to India. In that case, Chinese companies seem to be more attractive partners. For instance, in November 2014, Rosneft and China National Oil & Gas Exploration and Development Corporation (a CNPC subsidiary) signed a framework agreement on the purchase of a 10% share in Rosneft's biggest production asset, the Vankor oilfield³⁵ project, from which gas is delivered to China as per the accord signed between Rosneft and CNPC in 2013. Despite the preliminary negotiations, during the Russian President's visit to India, no agreement was signed on ONGC purchasing a stake in Vankor field, since India wanted a 25% stake, while the Russian company was offering only 10%. Therefore, during the Russian President's visit, no official documents were signed on the Arctic projects. According to Vladimir Putin, Gazprom and Rosneft, along with their Indian partners, are working on Arctic shelf development projects.³⁶ Currently, Russian–Indian energy cooperation in the Arctic is at the negotiation and assessment stage; however, based on both countries' interests and political support, the conclusion of bilateral deals can be expected in the mid-term time frame.

Conclusion

The Russia–India cooperation in the Arctic region presents prospects and challenges for both sides. There are certain areas where the interests of Moscow and New Delhi align, but, at the same time, the countries hold different views on several other issues. From the Russian side, there is political support and interest from business to promote collaboration with India in the Arctic. The partnership with India is likely to bring Russia economic and political benefits. It will diversify its export markets, attract foreign investment, and avoid political isolation, which is critical given its deteriorating relations with the US and Europe. For India, the cooperation can potentially mean diversification of its oil imports, a way to increase share in the Russian energy sector and to widen its interests in the Arctic region. In general, the Russia–India collaboration in the region is likely to counterbalance the forming Russia–China cooperation in the High North. In addition, the cooperation can also enhance bilateral relations in other areas.

There are several challenges for establishing Russia–India cooperation in the Arctic. First is the uncertainty of Indian official policy in the Arctic region. For now, India pursues a cautious approach and has declared its focus on scientific interests. However, in the long term, New Delhi might develop an assertive policy by advocating the Arctic region as a common heritage. Such a stance will be in conflict with the Russian position and interests in the region.

At the business level, Russian and Indian interests face certain challenges. While Russian companies are interested in financial partners and export markets, Indian companies seem to be not so eager to invest in the high-risk Russian projects. Also, falling oil prices, imposed sanctions and overall negative sentiments on the conditions for investment in Russia make the projects less attractive. In addition, neither Russia nor India has enough experience and technology to work offshore, and it is likely that in order to proceed with the offshore projects, the countries will need to continue cooperation with the relevant Western energy companies.

Overall, it is likely that Moscow will continue making steps towards promoting cooperation with New Delhi on Arctic related issues. As for India, in the near term, it is unlikely that many energy deals between Russian and Indian companies will be signed. In the mid-term, however, based on the states' interests and the existing long-standing partnership between the two countries, an involvement of Indian companies in the Russian energy projects in the Arctic region can be expected.

Notes

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