



ARCTIC AMBITIONS: CHINA, INDIA, AND THE ARCTIC COUNCIL

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May 14-15, 2013, the Arctic Council will decide on whether to admit India and China as observers to the organization. India and China consider the Arctic as a region of increasing global importance, and both are seeking to establish a strong presence there through substantial investments in research, resources, and infrastructure. Admitting India and China provides a valuable opportunity to acknowledge their presence and engage with their interests. Keeping the door closed will push India and China to turn to other forums such as the International Maritime Organization and the UN, shifting the center of Arctic governance away from the Arctic Council and its members. If the Arctic Council wants to consolidate itself as the central institution for Arctic governance, it will have to give China and India a seat at the table.

Whether India and China will receive observer status in the Arctic Council will be decided at its ministerial meeting in Kiruna, Sweden, on May 14-15, 2013. India's and China's efforts to gain a seat have so far been greeted with a mixture of both enthusiasm and hesitation by the Arctic Council's members, which consist of eight states that each have part of their territories located in the Arctic and the permanent participants comprising of Arctic indigenous peoples' organizations. Those supportive of a more inclusive Arctic Council include Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. The main objector to new observer states joining is Russia. The other states (U.S., Canada, and Denmark (through Greenland) have not yet, publicly at least, made it known which way they will vote; the decision will be made by consensus vote.

Established in 1996, the Arctic Council deals with issues of environmental protection, sustainable development, human security, and search and rescue capabilities. Admitting or refusing China and India will have consequences for the Council's position as the main institution for Arctic affairs. It is now time for it to choose whether it wishes to be an exclusive regional club or an inclusive organization wielding greater international authority.

Arctic Ambitions

India's and China's involvement in the Arctic dates back to 1925, when both countries signed the Svalbard Treaty

on governance of the Svalbard archipelago. More recently, both countries have conducted regular scientific expeditions to the region and have established research stations on Svalbard. China already has one icebreaker at its disposal and is planning to build a second ship, while India is waiting for its first vessel to become operational. China is looking to expand its mining operations throughout the Arctic and both countries hold licenses to operate onshore and offshore gas and oil fields in the region. In sum, their strong interest in the Arctic is based on the region's energy and mineral reserves, new shipping routes, and the influence of climate change in the Arctic and its impact on the Asian climate. Furthermore, with one-third of the world's population, India and China feel they have a right to access the Arctic and exploit its resources.

Three Scenarios

The Arctic Council's upcoming decision will lead to one of three scenarios. In the first scenario, only India or China will be accepted. In the second one, both will be refused admission. In the final scenario, the Arctic Council may decide to admit both countries as observers. Such a status would entitle them to speak at the Arctic Council's ministerial meetings and participate in its Working Groups. Each scenario entails different outcomes and therefore should be carefully considered.

The first scenario would hardly be beneficial for the



Arctic Council. Its admission criteria for new observers (such as a respect for the values, interests, culture, and traditions of the Arctic indigenous peoples and other Arctic inhabitants) should, in theory, apply equally to both China and India. Excluding one of the two countries based on arguments that are in fact applicable to both may lead to suspicions that political and strategic reasons, rather than objective criteria, are behind the decision.

If one of the countries is rejected, it could give up its attempts for cooperation and opt for more strategic behavior. Granting only one of the countries observer status could also increase the rivalry between the two countries. After all, India and China have a similar set of interests in the Arctic and both consider it legitimate to pursue these interests. China would not lightly accept India as an Arctic Council observer, harboring as it does its own ambitions. Likewise, China's admission at India's expense would be a symbolic blow to New Delhi's own great power aspirations.

The second scenario, where both countries are refused observer status, brings up the dilemma of efficiency versus inclusiveness. A small and exclusive Arctic Council, as in its current formation, consisting of members with a similar vision on how the region should be governed is a more efficient one. The Arctic Council has so far governed relatively harmoniously, in spite of its members' previous and ongoing disputes over coastal delimitations and territorial waters. Bringing in outsiders might make it harder to advance on issues such as sustainable development, environmental protection, and human security. Indeed, the Council's permanent participants (arctic indigenous peoples) fear that indigenous views and interests, such as subsistence hunting and land rights, would lose influence with the admission of major global players such as India and China with less interest in these issues.

However, the advantage of being small and exclusive does not outweigh the disadvantages of excluding India and China. Keeping the door closed to them will only push them to lobby their views on Arctic issues in other major international forums such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the UN Security Council (UNSC). This could shift the center of Arctic governance from the Arctic Council to the IMO or the UNSC instead. If India and China are not accepted, the now cautiously voiced arguments that the Arctic should be common heritage with equal access to non-Arctic states will be reinforced. This

may call into question the key principles for Arctic governance: state sovereignty and the Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS, governed by the UNSC). According to these principles, the Arctic is not common to all and the Arctic states wield ultimate authority over it through their sovereign powers. If India and China find new allies and lobby the "common heritage" argument within the IMO or the UN, the Arctic Council may see these key principles fundamentally challenged by a large group of countries.

The "Nordic" Perspective

The Arctic Council has more to win by an inclusive approach than it has to lose. On the one hand, bringing in more players might indeed diminish the efficiency of the Arctic Council. However, an Arctic Council pushed to the margins of Arctic governance and challenged by other institutions is a far greater loss for all of its members.

Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden (with the notable exception of Denmark which has not voiced a strong opinion) have realized this and support the third scenario where India and China are granted observer status. At the Arctic Frontiers gathering in January 2013, the Norwegian foreign minister Espen Barth Eide and his Swedish colleague Carl Bildt stated that: "We want people to join our club. This means they will not start a new club." They consider applications from countries to become observers as essentially positive as it will confirm the Arctic Council's status as the main forum for dealing with Arctic issues.

Furthermore, India and China are already establishing a strong presence in the Arctic through significant investments. Even if they are not accepted as observers, they cannot be ignored: India and China have arrived in the Arctic and are there to stay. In any case, observer countries (which also include France, Germany, and the UK, among others) to the Arctic Council do not have decision-making powers—as much as India and China may covet this—and therefore admitting them does not run the risk of them vetoing any of its decisions.

An inclusive policy will be the most beneficial one for the Arctic Council in the long run. Admission will provide a valuable opportunity to acknowledge India's and China's presence and engage with their interests. It will give both countries the possibility to participate in and influence (but not decide) the workings of the Arctic Council, a role they



feel they are entitled to. A policy of inclusion will also serve to reinforce the Arctic Council's central position, in the eyes of the world's major powers, in affairs concerning what is an increasingly important region.

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