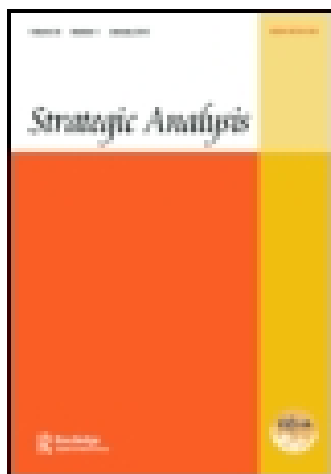


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COMMENTARY

**Geopolitical Implications of Arctic Meltdown**

Arvind Gupta

**T**he Arctic Ocean is melting at an alarming pace. In 2005, the extent of summer-time ice in the Arctic was the lowest in the last 50 years, and in 2007, it was 38 per cent lower than the average since 1978. During 1996–2007, summer-time ice in the Arctic declined at an annual rate of 11 per cent. At this rate, the Arctic Ocean may become totally free of ice in summer in a few years, maybe even by 2013. Scientists link the melting of ice in the Arctic Ocean to global warming. The meltdown in the Arctic is dramatic proof of the dire implications of climate change and also an indication of the worsening health of the planet.

The implications of the Arctic meltdown are many. The ecological balance in the region will change with the thinning of the ice. There will be implications for the global climate too. The waters of the Arctic Ocean, devoid of the ice cover, will absorb more heat from the sun, thereby introducing more energy into the ocean. This could affect the thermohaline currents which wrap around the world's oceans, transporting heat from the tropics to the Northern latitudes. These currents keep America and Europe warm. The disruption of the thermohaline currents could lead to bitter colds in the Northern latitudes.

There are serious geopolitical implications of the Arctic's melting. For the first time in human history, the fabled Northwest Passage, which connects the Pacific Ocean with the Atlantic Ocean, is opening up. This will make the Arctic Ocean navigable throughout the year. The sea route linking the North American continent with Europe and Asia will shorten the shipping distance between Europe and Asia by over 4,000 kilometres and will lead to changes in the pattern of global trade and shipping. It will save billions of dollars in shipping costs.

Even more significant, a scramble for the hidden resources of the region has begun. According to the US Geophysical Survey, the Arctic may hold a quarter of the world's undiscovered oil deposits. That has a huge incentive for oil companies to undertake exploration of the Arctic Ocean for hydrocarbons. Ironically, many people see this as the 'beneficial' effect of global warming. In fact, if oil is discovered in the Arctic, this will contribute to a rise in global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

The Arctic is beginning to get huge international attention. The five countries in the Arctic Circle – Norway, Denmark, Russia, the United States, and Canada – are

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engaged in laying sovereignty claims on the new territories as well as the continental shelf of the Arctic Ocean. The North Pole is claimed by Russia, Denmark, and Canada.

In 2001, Russia formally presented to the UN Commission for Limits of the Continental Shelf (UNCLCS) its claim to the approximately 1.19 million square kilometres of the maritime region of the Arctic. Its reasoning was that the 2,000 kilometre long Lomonosov Ridge, an underwater mountain range in the Arctic, is connected to Russia's Siberian continental shelf and hence, under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) rules, belongs to Russia. The Russian claim was rejected. Undeterred, a Russian expedition planted a Russian flag, made of titanium, on the ocean floor under the North Pole in 2007, to buttress its claim. The Russian move was considered highly provocative and was strongly criticized by other countries that in turn intensified their own efforts in claiming the Arctic Ocean.

In September 2008, the Russian Security Council considered an ambitious plan for the development of its Northern regions adjoining the Arctic shoreline. Its strategic bombers have started flying over the North Pole. Russia's renewed interest in the Arctic coincides with its assertive foreign policy and worsening relations with the West. The Russian President has declared that Russia would like to convert the Arctic region as a 'resource base' for Russia in the twenty-first century.

The other states are not far behind. Canada is trying to strengthen its presence in the Arctic region. Canada also claims the Lomonosov Ridge, like Russia. It is building military facilities in the Northern parts of its territory to support its claims. It has plans to start naval patrols in the region and is building six new patrol vessels. It is also setting up a cold weather training base at Resolute Bay in the Arctic. Canada claims that the Northwest Passage passes through its territorial waters. This is contested by the United States.

Denmark is also mapping the Arctic Ocean bed to gather evidence in favour of its own sovereignty claims in the region. It is examining whether the contested Lomonosov Ridge is connected with Greenland, which is Danish territory. If so, Denmark can then claim the vast stretches of the Arctic's maritime region. Denmark has launched new naval projects to provide its navy with the capabilities in hydrological survey, surveillance, patrolling, and training. It has a serious dispute with Canada over Hans Island which is located between Ellesmere Island and Greenland. Presently, the island has been occupied by Denmark.

The United States has a presence in the Arctic through Alaska. Under an arrangement with Denmark, it maintains an air base in the north of Greenland in Thule. In an agreement with Canada, the United States can station its troops on Canadian soil, including the Arctic region, for fighting terrorism. It has also proposed a North American Defense Command which would integrate the Caribbean to the Arctic. The United States is seriously concerned over the Canadian claim that the Northwest Passage passes through Canadian territorial waters, because this will affect US freedom of manoeuvre in the Arctic Ocean. Both countries have tried to resolve the issue but without success so far.

Norway has its own plans for the Arctic. It is a world leader in offshore oil technologies. With the oil and gas production in the North Sea declining, Norway's attention is shifting to the Arctic. It has developed a giant gas plant at Melkoeva in the Northern Arctic Circle, from where Liquefied Natural Gas is to be shipped. Like Russia and Denmark, Norway also has eyes on the North Pole. Russia and Norway have an old dispute over Svalbard in the North. The Norwegian companies are interested in the development of Russia's giant Shtokoman gas field in the Barents Sea. The two countries also have a dispute in the Barents Sea.

The opening of the Arctic Ocean is likely to lead to major disputes over territory, resources, transportation, etc. There is as yet no mechanism to deal with the issues of sovereignty claims among the countries of the region. Left unattended, these potential disputes could lead to tensions and even armed conflicts.

The nearest treaty that may be able to handle these issues is the UNCLOS. Under UNCLOS rules, a country's territorial waters extend up to 12 nautical miles from its shoreline. It can also have rights of development over 200 nautical miles of water in a zone called the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The United States has not ratified the treaty. Opinion is building in the United States that it should ratify the treaty, as otherwise it will have no means of dealing with the ticklish issues arising in the Arctic.

An altogether new agreement may be required to deal with the Arctic Ocean's opening. There is talk of dividing the Arctic Ocean among the five Arctic Circle countries, either through the 'sector' or the 'median' methods. The division of the sea will also have implications for international navigation. But experience in the Caspian Sea shows that it is difficult to reach agreement on division of seas among claimants.

The changes in the Arctic have speeded up diplomacy over the Arctic Ocean. Denmark organized a ministerial meeting of the five Arctic Circle countries in Ilulissat in Greenland in May 2008. Ilulissat is the location of Greenland's fastest melting glacier and has attracted considerable international attention for that reason. It is now a UN World Heritage Site.

The conference, dubbed the Arctic Ocean Conference, issued the Ilulissat Declaration which stated categorically that the five Arctic Circle countries are in a 'unique position' to take care of the Arctic and resolve their overlapping claims, in accordance with international law as embodied in the UNCLOS. They signalled clearly that non-Arctic countries do not have a role in Arctic matters. Further, the Declaration ruled out the need for a new agreement in the Arctic as suggested by many experts who feel that the Arctic should have a treaty like Antarctica to rule out its militarization.

It is interesting that the representatives of the eight-member Arctic Council, a body set up in 1991 which has representation from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), were also not invited to the Ilulissat ministerial meeting.

Another meeting, organized by the Nordic Council, was held in Ilulissat in September 2008 which was also attended by China and South Korea. The Nordic Council is an inter-governmental forum of countries set up after the Second World War to discuss issues of mutual concern. It has a membership of over 80 countries and has begun to focus on the Arctic issues. The September 2008 meeting was organized to discuss the European Union's policies towards the Arctic. The European Union sees the Arctic as a potential source of oil and gas which would reduce its dependence upon imports from Russia.

China and South Korea have also realized the importance of the Arctic, and attended the Ilulissat meeting in September 2008. South Korea is seeking observer status in the Arctic Council.

Where does this leave India? India sent its first scientific research expedition to Svalbard, Norway in 2007 to study the bacterial life there and to understand the reasons behind the melting of Arctic glaciers and whether there is a link with the melting of the Himalayan glaciers. In 2008, India announced the setting up of its first Arctic research base, Himadri, with Norwegian assistance in Ny-Alesund in Norway. India became the 11th country to have a research base in the Arctic and has access to Svalbard under a treaty with Norway. China, Japan, and South Korea are the other Asian countries who have research bases in the Arctic.

With a scientific research base in the Arctic, India has the opportunity to reflect over the future of the Arctic region. The growing rivalries in the Arctic and the competition for resources will affect India also in the long run, though indirectly. One question that India needs to consider is whether it should support an Antarctica-like treaty for the Arctic so as to prevent the Arctic region from becoming a preserve of the few coastal countries and to prevent its militarization.

In the face of several countries staking their sovereignty claims over the Arctic and its resources, there is a need for studying the issue in depth. Antarctica, the continent where the South Pole is located, is governed by an international agreement, the Antarctic Treaty, which regulates international activity in Antarctica. The treaty, signed by 12 countries in 1959, came into force in 1961. Presently, it has 46 members, including India. It declares that Antarctica will be used for peaceful purposes only. The treaty allows the freedom of scientific investigation and cooperation, as well as free exchange of information and personnel. It does not recognize past disputes and territorial sovereignty claims, and prohibits any new claims. The treaty-state observers have free access to any area and they may inspect any station, installation, or equipment and the treaty parties hold regular consultative meetings. Militarization of the region is prohibited although military personnel and equipment can be used in the region for peaceful purposes.

Antarctica differs from the Arctic in that it does not have any settled human population, while the Arctic has an indigenous population. The Arctic was also the scene of intense military rivalry during the Cold War years. The question that needs to be examined is whether the Arctic, like Antarctica, should be made accessible to the whole of humankind for peaceful purposes. The exploitation of the region for hydrocarbons will only make the existing rivalries acute. Ironically, the exploitation of the region for hydrocarbons will make the problem of global warming even worse. Non-Arctic countries should join hands to push for an Arctic region which is accessible to all countries for peaceful and mostly scientific purposes. Thus, serious consideration should be given to charting an international regime which is similar to the Antarctic Treaty.