

Standing Committee Report Summary

India's Role and Presence in the Arctic and Antarctic Regions

- The Committee on External Affairs (Chairperson: Dr. Shashi Tharoor) submitted its report on 'India's Role and Presence in the Arctic and Antarctic Regions' on July 30, 2026. The Committee examined India's presence in polar regions, and progress on scientific research. Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:
- **India's Arctic strategy:** India is an Observer State of the Arctic Council, the inter-governmental forum promoting cooperation in the Arctic. The Committee observed that India's current 'observer' status limits: (i) participation in decision-making, (ii) financial contribution, and (iii) undertaking research directly. It recommended that the government seek full-fledged membership of the Council, whenever there is a review of the Council.
- The Committee noted that other Asian states, such as China, Japan, South Korea, and UAE have stronger ties with Arctic states as compared to India. It recommended that India deepen bilateral ties with other members and observers. It recommended: (i) a quadrilateral agreement between India, Japan, Singapore and South Korea, and (ii) engaging with Arctic ethnic groups and locals.
- **Instituting a Polar Ambassador:** The Committee noted that members and observers of the Arctic Council, such as China, Japan, and South Korea, have institutional mechanisms to deal with polar issues. These could be dedicated Ambassadors, or a Polar or Arctic Affairs Desk. The Committee recommended that India also appoint a Polar Ambassador for improved polar diplomacy.
- **Management of global commons:** Currently, the Arctic is under the sovereign control of eight territorial states. It is not treated as 'global commons', unlike Antarctica. Global commons are resources that lie outside the political control of any single country. The Committee recommend that India pursue recognition of the Arctic as a "Quasi-Global Commons".
- **Development of northern sea route:** The Committee noted that polar ice melt has increased the navigability of the Arctic Ocean. For India, the Northern Sea Route (NSR) could be a cost-effective alternative to the Suez Canal. It could reduce shipping time and help ships avoid piracy hotspots. India and Russia have set up a joint working group to develop the NSR, and increase cargo volume through the route to five million tonnes by 2030. The Committee recommended that the working group expedite their feasibility study.
- **Exploitation of marine resources:** The Committee noted that India is preparing provisions to permit participation in krill fishing near Antarctica. It noted that the density of krill, an essential part of the Southern Ocean food chain, may have decreased by 80% since the 1970s. It also observed that India has actively promoted sustainable fishing in the southern ocean. It recommended that India: (i) participate in krill fishing after evaluating its environmental risks, and (ii) pursue the creation of Marine Protected Areas in East Antarctica and the Weddell Sea.
- The Committee observed that critical minerals required for manufacturing active pharmaceutical ingredients and air conditioners are available in the Arctic. It recommended that the supply of mineral resources should be a crucial component of India's dialogue with Arctic states.
- **Barriers to research:** The Committee observed challenges faced by India in polar research, such as: (i) research restrictions as most Arctic territory is under sovereign jurisdiction, (ii) limited access to the Arctic Ocean, (iii) logistical challenges in accessing Research Stations, (iv) inadequate budgetary allocation, and (v) inadequate scientific and technical staff. The Committee recommended increasing the outlay for the ongoing polar research scheme by 30%, and creation of additional permanent posts at the National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research. In particular, the Committee noted that the Norwegian government had imposed restrictions on research on Svalbard, where India's Himadri research station is situated. It recommended that the Ministry of External Affairs engage directly with the Norwegian government to address these restrictions.
- **Research infrastructure:** The Committee observed that India lacks its own ice-class vessel, and remains dependent on expensive chartered foreign ships for logistics and research. It recommended expediting the manufacturing of a dedicated polar research vessel, with ice breaking capacity. It also recommended expediting the completion of the Maitri-II station in Antarctica, as the current Maitri station has exceeded its intended 10-year lifespan.

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