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Indo-Arctic Strategic Construct

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This article is based on "Why India's foray into the Arctic matters" which was published in The Hindu Business Line on 28/09/2019. It talks about Indo-Arctic, which can be a natural extension of India's Act East Policy.

Recently, the Indian Prime Minister at **Eastern Economic Forum (EEF)**, mentioned India's willingness to play "a significant role in the Arctic Council." It provides an opening for India to pursue a grandiose Arctic plan. India has been an observer member of the **Arctic Council** since 2013.

Why should India be concerned about the Arctic?

- India will have to look at the Arctic — both from the prism of **climate change** and also as a **strategic construct**.
- **Climate Change Aspect**
 - The impact of climate change across the coasts of India and its economic fallout should bring up the Arctic more in the discussion.
 - Global warming is leading to the melting of permafrost, which will release an unprecedented amount of carbon dioxide in nature.
- **Scientific Research**
 - Study and research regarding warming of the arctic will help India to develop an understanding of fast-melting glaciers in the Himalayas, which is referred to as the Third Pole.
 - India in this pursuit has **established Himadari base station** for arctic research In Svalbard, Norway.
- **Arctic Paradox**

As the Arctic region witnessed an unprecedented rate of ice-melt because of global warming, **new routes are being opened**, paving the way for untapped hydrocarbon and mineral resources to be exploited.

- **Politically, Indo-Arctic should be an extension of India's 'Act East'.**
 - India's 'Look East Policy' 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 a natural extension during the next decade.
 - 'Indo-Arctic' initiative, as a strategic construct, could provide a platform for India.
 - It could open political space for India 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.
- **Geo-Strategic Aspect:**
 - The Indo-Arctic will also strategically balance the US and Russia.
 - India is working with the US in developing the Indo-Pacific region.
 - An Indo-Arctic construct would **complement India's Indo-Pacific push**, and enable **India to work with Russia closely**.

How India can implement Indo-Arctic Policy?

- 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's help can be taken in this regard which has enunciated its own 'Polar Silk Route' initiative.
- Scientifically, India will have to expand its footprints in the Polar Research.
- Outside Polar research, India should also make policies on other areas like Polar shipping, trade and maritime routes.
- Unlike Antarctica, the **Arctic is not considered a 'global commons' (the principle of sovereignty prevents external players from exacting significant gains in the region)**.

Therefore, India should steer away from advocating for an Arctic commons and instead, it must ensure that the environment is strongly considered at the centre of all debates at the Arctic Council.

The Arctic may be the northernmost part of the world, geographically far from India. However, Politically and strategically, the Arctic can no longer be perceived as too far.

Drishti Mains Question

Discuss the environmental and strategic importance of the Arctic region for India.