



BRICS, Russia and the Arctic: India's Options



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BRICS, Russia and the Arctic: India's Options

Overview

Russia assumed the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India and China Grouping) Chairmanship on the first day of 2024, the 4th time in 16-year history of the multilateral forum.

BRIC – Early Years

The acronym BRIC was first used in 2001 by Goldman Sachs, projecting that the four economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China would be amongst the world's largest economies in the next 50 years.¹ Even though the first summit of BRIC, as it was known then, was held on 16 June 2009 in Yekaterinburg, Russia, the groundwork had commenced earlier in 2006, after the leaders of Russia, India and China met in St. Petersburg, Russia, on the margins of *G8 Outreach Summit* in 2006.² The grouping was later formalized during the *1st meeting of BRIC Foreign Ministers* in New York in 2006. It was later agreed to expand BRIC into BRICS with the inclusion of South Africa in 2010.³ Even before the addition of five new members during the 15th summit at Johannesburg on August 23, 2023, BRICS already constituted a major economic, territorial and demographic

1 <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/BriefonBRICS2023.pdf>

2 <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/BriefonBRICS2023.pdf>

3 <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/BriefonBRICS2023.pdf>

bloc, accounting for more than a quarter of world's GDP, spanning almost a third of the world's land surface and encompassing more than 40 percent of its total population.⁴ Presently, their share in global GDP is more than the *Group of Seven (G7)* in terms of purchasing power parity, and in the past decade, BRICS member states have doubled their investment in the global economy, while their total exports have reached 20 percent of the global total.⁵

BRICS Expansion

With the addition of Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, UAE, Egypt and Iran with effect from 01 January 2024, BRICS has now doubled its strength to 10 members.⁶ In the expanded BRICS, its share in global merchandise trade will rise from 20 percent to 25 percent, share of global services trade will increase to 15 percent from 12, and the share in the global forex reserves will increase to 45 percent. In respect of commodities and mineral resources, the new configuration includes a third of the world's gold production, the entire range of rare earth metals, about 80 percent of aluminum production and about half of the global production of wheat and rice.⁷ The grouping would now cover 30 percent of World's GDP and 46 percent of the global population. However, the biggest impact of the enlarged grouping would be on the share of global oil production that will increase to 40 percent from the current 18, while its share of oil intake will jump from 27 to 36 percent.⁸

A recent report by SBI Research states that the expanded BRICS would

4 Size, population, GDP: The BRICS nations in numbers.

5 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72089>

6 <https://valdaiclub.com/multimedia/video/russia-s-chairmanship-of-bricsv/>

7 <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-on-the-way-to-brics-chairmanship/>

8 How BRICS+6 Triumphs Good Global Economics, SBI Research, 29 August 2023.

be a lynchpin of a new global order, offering a credible alternative to the hegemony of the Global North when it comes to global affairs, trade, currency, and energy security.⁹

Select Indicators: BRICS vs G7

Global Share	BRICS	NEW BRICS	G7
Land Area (%)	29.5		
Population (bn)	3.2	3.7	0.8
Population (%)	40	46	10
GDP (%) (PPP)	32.1		29.9
Gross National Income (PPP) (\$ Tn)	42.4		42.1
GDP (\$ Tn)	30.8	33.9	45.9
Annual Growth GDP (1990-2022) (%)	4.5		1.5
Merchandise Trade (%)	20	25	
Services Trade (%)	12	15	
FOREX Reserves (%)		45	
Oil Production (%)	18	40	
Gold Production (%)		33	
Aluminum Production (%)		80	
Wheat & Rice Production (%)		50	

Expanded BRICS would be a lynchpin of a new global order, offering a credible alternative to the hegemony of the Global North when it comes to global affairs, trade, currency and energy security... SBI Research August 2023

Russian Chairmanship of the BRICS

Upon assuming the BRICS Chair, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that under the motto of ‘Strengthening Multilateralism for Equitable Global Development and Security’, Russia will promote BRICS partnership in three key areas: politics and security, economy and finance, and cultural and humanitarian contacts.¹⁰ Russia’s priorities include promoting cooperation in science, high technology, healthcare, environmental protection, culture, sports, youth exchanges, and civil society.¹¹ As part of the chairmanship agenda, Russia has planned over 200 events to be held in different Russian cities and culminating with conduct of the BRICS

9 BRICS+6 to control 30% of global GDP, 46% population, The Economic Times, Aug 29, 2023.

10 Address by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on the start of Russia’s BRICS Chairmanship January 1, 2024.

11 Ibid.

Summit in Kazan in October 2024.¹²

Russian Invite to BRICS on Arctic

On 6 April 2023, Alexey Chekunov, Russia's Minister for Development of the Far East and Arctic stated that the State-owned Arktikugol (Arctic coal) Company will develop, with the BRICS counterparts, an international scientific station on the Svalbard Archipelago.¹³ A year earlier, the Russian Government had ordered the Ministry to undertake management of the company which has been providing for Russia's presence on Svalbard since 1931. Owning an area of 251 sq. km in Svalbard, the Minister stated that the two Russian settlements in Svalbard had the potential to become an important international tourist, scientific and transport hub.¹⁴

Subsequently, in December 2023, the Russian News Agency TASS reported about Arktikugol's plans to organize an international scientific and educational center for the BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) countries at the Russian Pyramiden settlement on the Svalbard Archipelago.¹⁵ Pyramiden, one of the two Russian settlements, and the largest on the Svalbard Archipelago, had been abandoned in 1998 in favour of Barentsburg, primarily on account of shrinking coal production. Presently, Arktikugol's CEO was quoted as saying that China, Brazil, India, Turkey and Thailand had expressed interest in the project.¹⁶ He also talked about plans to upgrade the port infrastructure at the Russian

12 Address by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on the start of Russia's BRICS Chairmanship January 1, 2024.

13 Minister: Russia will develop international scientific station on Spitsbergen, 6 APR 2023.

14 Minister: Russia will develop international scientific station on Spitsbergen, 6 APR 2023.

15 Arktikugol plans international scientific center on Spitsbergen, 7 DEC 2023.

16 Arktikugol plans international scientific center on Spitsbergen, 7 DEC 2023.

settlements for these to become transport hubs in that region.¹⁷

Commencing with cooperation in scientific research, Russia wants to gradually enhance engagements with BRICS and SCO countries in the Arctic in the following areas:-¹⁸

- Science and Education;
- Environmental Protection and Combating Climate Change;
- Development Of Arctic Resources;
- Green Energy;
- Support For Indigenous Peoples;
- Transport And Logistics;
- Sustainable Tourism.

Mechanisms Proposed for Enhanced BRICS Cooperation in the Arctic

Presently, there are already existing platforms and mechanisms in the BRICS which can be used to undertake BRICS cooperation in the Arctic without creating any new structures.¹⁹ Some of these are: -

- Since 2015, BRICS environment ministers have been organizing meetings to discuss common goals, areas of cooperation, principles and initiatives in the field of sustainable development. A *Working Group on Environment*, to identify and discuss priority areas of cooperation, facilitate exchange of environmentally sound

17 Arktikugol upgrades port infrastructures on Spitsbergen, 7 DEC 2023.

18 Based on inputs from and discussions with Strelnikova Irina Aleksandrovna, Associate Professor, Department of Foreign Regional Studies, Faculty of World Economy and International Politics, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow.

19 Ibid.

technology (EST) and its best practices has been established. Also, a *BRICS Environmentally Sound Technology* (BEST) platform was launched with the aim to facilitate an exchange of ESTs and to achieve sustainable development goals (SDG).²⁰

- As part of the BEST platform, in 2016, Russia proposed to implement the umbrella program ‘BRICS Clean Rivers’.²¹
- *BRICS Working Group on Ocean and Polar Science and Technology* aims to promote cooperation between BRICS member countries in the field of ocean and polar science and enabling technologies through joint activities of governments, universities, research institutions and industry, as relevant, in order to generate new knowledge, train human capital, develop new technologies and applications, and improve public understanding of ocean and polar sciences.²² The first meeting of the Working Group was held in 2018.²³
- Financing ‘green’ projects is one of the priority areas of the BRICS operated New Development Bank (NDB), set up in 2015. To date, the NDB’s loan portfolio includes 90 projects amounting to more than USD 30 bn.²⁴

20 <https://content.iospress.com/articles/environmental-policy-and-law/epl220067#:~:text=Also%2C%20BRICS%20Environmentally%20Sound%20Technology,BRICS%20countries%20was%20set%20up>

21 <https://brics2021.gov.in/environment#:~:text=A%20Memorandum%20of%20Understanding%20on,Climate%20Change%2C%20Waste%20Management%20and>

22 <https://brics.land-ocean.ru/>

23 <https://brics.land-ocean.ru/>

24 <https://indiafoundation.in/articles-and-commentaries/brics-expansion-and-currencies/>

- The *Memorandum of Cooperation and Understanding in the field Of Science, Technology and Innovation* aims to establish a strategic system for cooperation among the BRICS countries.²⁵
- A *Memorandum of Understanding on Environmental Cooperation* was signed between the BRICS countries in 2018 to facilitate exchange of experiences, best practices and technical know-how through both public and private sectors in priority areas like air quality, water, biodiversity, climate change, waste management and SDG.²⁶
- The Moscow Declaration of the BRICS 2020 Summit, which, among other things, established the *Research and Innovation Network Platform of the BRICS Countries* in five areas of scientific and technical cooperation, with each country being responsible for one of the areas.²⁷
- The *BRICS Network University* (BRICS NU) is a network of the BRICS member countries' higher education institutions.²⁸ It is an educational project aimed at developing bilateral/multilateral short-term joint training, Master's and PhD programmes along with joint research projects in various knowledge fields.
- The *Science, Technology and Innovation Framework* (BRICS STI FP), which aims to support research in priority areas is to be

25 <https://brics2023.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Memorandum-of-Understanding-on-BRICS-Cooperation-In-Science-Technology-and-Innovation-2015.pdf>

26 <https://brics2021.gov.in/environment#:~:text=A%20Memorandum%20of%20Understanding%20on,Climate%20Change%2C%20Waste%20Management%20and>

27 <http://www.brics.utoronto.ca/docs/201117-moscow-declaration.html>

28 <https://we.hse.ru/en/brics/>

addressed through a multinational approach. The initiative should facilitate cooperation among the researchers and institutions in the consortia which consist of partners from at least three of the BRICS countries.²⁹

- *The BRICS Energy Research Co-operation Platform* (BRICS ERCP) found a mention in the Xiamen Declaration of 2017, and was agreed upon and acknowledged in the Johannesburg Summit Declaration in 2018.³⁰ Meetings of BRICS ERCP commenced in 2019 and presently it is a global platform for promoting energy based sustainable development. The platform also aims at creating synergies in BRICS energy co-operation across various platforms —Academic Forum, BRICS Science, Technology and Innovative Initiative, Program of Economic Co-operation and New Development Bank.³¹
- As part of its BRICS Chairmanship priority, Russia is also looking to prioritize accelerated development of the *International North-South Transport Corridor* (INSTC), which will connect Russian ports in the northern seas and the Baltic Sea with sea terminals in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, and in the future will be able to facilitate annual transit of up to 30 million tons of cargo.³² Towards this, Russia is seeking to establish a permanent BRICS transport commission, which would deal not only with the INSTC, but also on a broader scale with the development of inter-regional

29 <https://dst.gov.in/callforproposals/brics-6th-call-proposal-2023#:~:text=The%20BRICS%20STI%20Framework%20Programme,three%20of%20the%20BRICS%20countries.>

30 <https://brics2021.gov.in/energy>

31 Ibid.

32 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72089>

and global logistics and transport corridors.³³

Russian Arguments for Greater BRICS+ Participation in the Arctic³⁴

Due to the strategic importance of the Arctic to Russia itself, its own predominance in the Arctic, and as the only Arctic Council member country in the BRICS, Russia brings several pluses to the table in the context of multilateral cooperation in the Arctic within the BRICS framework. There is a relatively high degree of interest of the BRICS countries in Arctic/Polar cooperation, as well as existing bilateral relationships within the framework. It would also correct the present largely west centric international cooperation which limits the external countries interaction to only with the countries of the region.

In the presently restrictive and fragmented Arctic geo-politics, Russia also sees the proposed opening up of additional opportunities as a platform for multilateral cooperation for the non-Arctic countries' involvement in regional interactions. Taking into account the recent doubling of BRICS membership to 10 countries, Russia sees relevance of overlap, within the BRICS framework, on the issues of international cooperation, not only in the Arctic but also in the Antarctica and the Himalayas. Combining the technological capabilities, accumulated knowledge and experience in studying all three polar regions of the individual member countries, Russia seeks to form a common effective Polar Agenda for the BRICS+ countries (Arctic- Antarctica-Himalayas).

Russia and the Arctic

The Arctic region is of most strategic significance to Russia and is its number one foreign policy priority. Ever since Vladimir Putin first became

33 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72089>

34 Strelnikova, Irina Aleksandrovna.

the President, Arctic has evolved into an increasingly important arena of Russian foreign, military, and economic policy. Approximately half (and more in some cases) of the Arctic in terms of its area, coastline, population, mineral wealth and hydrocarbons lies in the Russian Federation's (AZRF) Arctic Zone.³⁵ The Arctic territory coastline of 24,140 km accounts for 53 per cent of the Arctic Ocean's coastline³⁶ and its two and a half million Arctic inhabitants constitute over half of the population of the Arctic region.³⁷ The Russian Arctic (5.5 million sq. km) constitutes almost a third of Russia's entire land area (17.1 million sq km). Despite housing a mere 1.5 per cent of its population, the Arctic's contribution to Russia's GDP is pegged between 12 to 15 percent, and accounts for almost 20 percent of the country's exports including 80 percent of Russian gas and 17 percent of its oil.³⁸

At about 19 percent of the total global reserves³⁹ and nearly 6.2 percent of the global oil reserves⁴⁰, Russia has the largest proven natural gas reserves in the world; in 2021, the two constituted almost 48 percent of Russian

35 Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, and Paul Stronski, "Russia in the Arctic— A Critical Examination," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2021, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Rumer_et_al_Russia_in_the_Arctic.pdf

36 "Russia," at <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/countries/russia/> (Accessed November 15, 2021).

37 "The Russian Federation," at <https://arctic-council.org/about/states/russian-federation/> (Accessed November 15, 2021).

38 Nivedita Kapoor, "Russia and the Future of the Arctic", October 28, 2021 at https://www.orfonline.org/research/russia-and-the-future-of-the-arctic/#_edn96

39 "Leading countries by proved natural gas reserves worldwide in 2010 and 2020," at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/265329/countries-with-the-largest-natural-gas-reserves/> (Accessed November 22, 2021).

40 "Oil and gas regulation in the Russian Federation: overview," at [https://uk.practicallaw.thomsonreuters.com/0-527-3028?transitionType=Default&contextData=\(sc.Default\)&firstPage=true](https://uk.practicallaw.thomsonreuters.com/0-527-3028?transitionType=Default&contextData=(sc.Default)&firstPage=true) (Accessed November 22, 2021).

exports.⁴¹ The Russian Arctic is the source for about 80 percent of this oil and virtually all of the natural gas.⁴² By 2050, deposits in the Arctic Shelf are expected to provide between 20 percent and 30 percent of Russia's total oil production, thus becoming the country's most important source for hydrocarbons.⁴³ Vital significance of the AZRF for Russia, therefore, can be easily understood.⁴⁴ The Russian Arctic also has vast deposits of cobalt, copper, diamonds, gold, iron, nickel, platinum, high-value rare earth elements, titanium, vanadium and zirconium.⁴⁵ The Arctic zone accounts for 90 percent of Russia's nickel and cobalt production, 60 percent of copper, and over 96 percent of platinum metals.⁴⁶ Most of the rare earth products are related to strategic areas, viz., defence, fibre optic communications, space, nuclear energy, etc.⁴⁷

Russia's Arctic Policy up to 2035 was released on March 6, 2020, establishing the goals, main areas, tasks and mechanisms of implementing Russia's state policy in the Arctic.⁴⁸ Russia's main national interests in the Arctic, *inter alia* have been defined as: *to ensure Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity; develop the Russian Arctic as a strategic resource base and use it rationally to speed up national economic growth; develop*

41 "Russia (RUS) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners."

42 "Oil & Gas," at <https://arctic.ru/resources/> (Accessed November 15, 2021).

43 Ibid.

44 "Keys To Understanding Russia's Arctic Policy," at <https://natoassociation.ca/keys-to-understanding-russias-arctic-policy/> (Accessed November 15, 2021).

45 "Rare Earths Statistics and Information," at <https://www.usgs.gov/centers/nmic/rare-earths-statistics-and-information> (Accessed November 19, 2021).

46 Semyon Gendler and Elizaveta Prokhorova, "Risk-Based Methodology for Determining Priority Directions for Improving Occupational Safety in the Mining Industry of the Arctic Zone", *Resources* 2021, 10(3), 20, March 2021, at <https://www.mdpi.com/2079-9276/10/3/20/htm>

47 Ibid.

48 "Basic Principles of Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic to 2035," at <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/62947> (Accessed November 20, 2021).

*the Northern Sea Route as a globally competitive national transport corridor.*⁴⁹ In order to implement this Policy, Russia intends to: *a) create the regulatory, legal and organizational framework to protect its national interests in the Arctic; b) create conditions for the implementation of large economic projects in the Russian Arctic; and c) to commence creation of an integrated infrastructure of the Northern Sea Route, a system of hydro-meteorological, hydrographic and navigational support of navigation in its water area and modernization of the icebreaker fleet.*⁵⁰

In its Arctic region, Russia is seeking investments and partnerships in development of navigation safety, infrastructure, ports, railways, hydrocarbon and mineral exploration and production, digitization in connectivity, research, education and trained manpower, environmental protection and bio resources harvesting. Since events in Crimea in 2014 and Russia's Special Military Operations in Ukraine in 2022, US-led Western sanctions have put pressure on the Russian economy, making it difficult for Moscow to finance new energy and infrastructure projects in the Arctic. These sanctions have significantly restricted Russia's ability to access the capital and technology necessary to develop its far northern territories.⁵¹

Post Russia's Special Military Operations in Ukraine

In response to Russia's Special Military Operations in Ukraine on March 3, 2022, seven⁵² out of eight members of the Arctic Council (AC) suspended

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 "The impact of Western sanctions on Russia and how they can be made even more effective," at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-impact-of-western-sanctions-on-russia/> (Accessed November 19, 2021).

52 Canada, Finland, Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and the United States.

their participation in all council activities.⁵³ This occurred during Russia's presidency of the AC, which spanned from 2021 to 2023. Shortly thereafter, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the European Commission and the Barents Euro-Arctic Cooperation (BEAC)⁵⁴ also suspended cooperation with Russia in research, science, and innovation.⁵⁵ Soon after that, the United States decided to terminate various relationships and research collaborations with Russian government-affiliated institutions and individuals in the fields of science and technology.⁵⁶

Arctic Council

With Finland already admitted and Sweden set to join the NATO, both being members of the Arctic Council (AC), it will lead to a scenario where Russia finds itself opposed by seven NATO members within the AC. To support an isolated Russia, China refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the limited resumption of the Arctic Council on October 15, 2022, expressing its intent to continue collaborating with Russia and other Arctic nations in alignment with its interests.⁵⁷

Presently, apart from cooperation between the US Coast Guard and the Russian Border Guard on maritime safety on either side of the Bering

53 Barry Scott Zellen, "The World Needs the Arctic Council Now More than Ever", *The Barents Observer*, 19 April 2022.

54 BEAC member states include Russia, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the European Union.

55 "Commission Suspends Cooperation with Russia on Research and Innovation", *European Commission*, 4 March 2022; "Statements regarding Barents Euro-Arctic Cooperation", *The Barents Euro-Arctic Council*, 4 March 2022.

56 "Guidance on Scientific and Technological Cooperation with the Russian Federation for U.S. Government and U.S. Government Affiliated Organizations", *The White House*, 11 June 2022.

57 Melodv Schreiber, "China Will Not Recognize an Arctic Council without Russia, Envoy Says", *ArcticToday*, 17 October 2022.

Strait⁵⁸, enforcement of treaty-based commitments such as the ban on fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean⁵⁹ and aeronautical and maritime search and rescue in the Arctic⁶⁰, there is a complete lack of engagement between Russia and the West in the Arctic. Much of the research and data sharing between scientists has been put on hold due to restrictions imposed by funding agencies in Europe and the US. Several field experiments originally planned for the region have shifted to the North American or European Arctic. The curbs have led to cutting off data on permafrost research from Russia, a key source of information for climate models that help researchers to predict future warming.⁶¹ The suspension is despite the existence (since 2018) of a legally binding *Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation* between the eight Arctic Council members.⁶² Western cessation of funding and suspension of cooperation in international climate change related scientific research in the Arctic has led to interruption of the continuous measurements at the station since 2013 and will compromise scientists' understanding of the warming trend in the Arctic. Also, since two-thirds of the permafrost region is in Russia, cessation of engagement will cut off our understanding of global changes to permafrost.⁶³

This loss to Arctic Research due to missing Russian data has now been

58 Yereth Rosen, "Despite Ukraine War, US and Russia Continue Emergency Cooperation in the Bering Strait", ArcticToday, 11 April 2022.

59 Melody Schreiber, "A Long-awaited Central Arctic Ocean Commercial Fishing Ban Takes Effect", ArcticToday, 25 June 2021.

60 "Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic", Arctic Council, 2011.

61 "For the Climate's Sake, Keep Arctic Communication Open", Nature, 20 July 2022.

62 "Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation", Arctic Council.

63 Gloria Dickie and Dasha Afanasieva, "Ukraine Conflict Hurts Russian Science, as West Pulls Funding", Reuters, 11 April 2022.

validated scientifically. A new study published in the science journal *Nature* sheds light⁶⁴ on how Russia's exclusion has hampered the collection of scientific data⁶⁵ across the Arctic. The researchers looked at the world's largest network of high-latitude research stations, called the International Network for Terrestrial Research and Monitoring in the Arctic (INTERACT), to determine what biases are introduced into the system when Russian data⁶⁶ is excluded. The scientists concluded that some biases are so significant that it will be hard to distinguish between shifts caused by climate change and those caused by the exclusion of Russian data. This is likely to compromise scientists' understanding of the warming trend in the Arctic and will have global repercussions.

Lately, there is a growing realization in the West that Russia can no longer be ignored in the Arctic, for their own good. On 31 Jan 2024, David Balton, US President Joe Biden's adviser on Arctic issues said at the Arctic Frontiers Forum held at Tromso Norway that "The fact is that the absence of Russian officials and scientists is beginning to be a problem for science.⁶⁷ I hear from US scientists who have colleagues from Russia with whom they can no longer work. This is a problem, including for climate science.⁶⁸ Without any climate data from Russia, it is hard to know how to

64 López-Blanco, E., Topp-Jørgensen, E., Christensen, T.R. et al. Towards an increasingly biased view on Arctic change. *Nat. Clim. Chang.* 14, 152–155 (2024).

65 The data comes from a network of 60 stations located above 59°N, of which 17 stations are located in Russia.

66 To quantify the effort the researchers looked at eight key variables, including annual mean air temperature, total precipitation, snow depth, soil moisture, vegetation biomass, soil carbon, net primary productivity and heterotrophic respiration.

67 Bidens Arctic Advisor: Our Postures in The Arctic Have Changed, High North News, 31 January 2024

68 Ibid.

handle climate change and how to adapt.”⁶⁹ Similar sentiment was echoed by Norway’s Senior Arctic Official Solveig Rossebø during the same event. She emphatically said that “We are not the Arctic 7. We are 8. We are the Arctic. We need multilateral cooperation to combat climate change. To get the full picture, we need circumpolar data, and not only from half the region. The most important thing for the Norwegian chair ship is to ensure that the Arctic Council as a whole with all its eight members remains the most important bilateral forum for Arctic cooperation.” She also praised Russia that it has been “very constructive in Arctic cooperation as it has always been.”⁷⁰

Asian Observers and Inequitable Provisions in the Arctic Council

As an unintended consequence of the suspension of scientific cooperation in the Arctic, the Arctic research of the five Asian Observer countries—India, China, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore—also stand affected. This is because as per the rules for the Observer States, their engagement in the Arctic Council is primarily at the level of Working Groups and they can only propose projects through an Arctic State or a Permanent Participant.⁷¹ If, for example India wants to study the effect of Arctic on the monsoons through the aegis of the Arctic Council, which has a bearing on 58 percent of its population and generates 20 percent of its GDP, it could technically do so only through a member state for whom the monsoon may not be of any relevance at all. Other provisions exclude the Observers from the decision-making processes of the Arctic Council, limit their engagement to the level of Working Groups and restrict their financial contribution to not more than 50 percent of the total project. The Observer States also have to proclaim adherence to the Ottawa Declaration and the Rules of Procedure

69 Ibid.

70 Without Russia, the Arctic Council Will Not Survive, High North News, 31 January 2024.

71 Arctic Council Observers, Arctic Council.

of the Arctic Council and they cannot undertake research directly amongst themselves.⁷² Although technically the Law of the Sea (PART XIII) provides for unimpeded marine scientific research beyond the Exclusive Economic Zones and the Extended Continental Shelves of a littoral state.⁷³

Likely Russian withdrawal from Arctic Council

On 14 February 2024, it was announced that Russia has suspended annual payments to the Arctic Council until “real work” resumes with the participation of all member countries,⁷⁴ Russia’s RIA state news agency reported, citing the country’s foreign ministry. Earlier, Nikolai Korchunov, the Russian Ambassador for Arctic Affairs was quoted as saying that Russia could withdraw from the Arctic Council if its activities do not meet the interests of Moscow.⁷⁵

Earlier, on 21 February 2023, Russia had amended its Arctic policy removing specific mentions for cooperation within the Arctic Council and laying greater emphasis on bilateral relationships based on Russian national interests in the region.⁷⁶ The Policy also removed mentions of “the framework of multilateral regional cooperation formats, including the Arctic Council, the coastal Arctic ‘five’ and the Council of the Barents Euro-Arctic Region.”

India and Russia

72 Ibid.

73 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea PART XIII, MARINE SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH.

74 Russia suspends annual payments to Arctic Council, RIA agency reports Reuters, February 14, 2024.

75 В МИД назвали условие для выхода из Арктического совета, RIA Novosti, February 6, 2024.

76 Russia Amends Arctic Policy Prioritizing ‘National Interest’ and Removing Cooperation Within Arctic Council, High North News, 23 February 2023.

*“The relationship between India and Russia is not just one of politics, of diplomacy or academics or economics. It is something much deeper”*⁷⁷

India-Russia partnership is longstanding and time-tested,⁷⁸ among the steadiest of the major relationships in the world.⁷⁹ No other country has used the veto five times in the UN Security Council (UNSC) in support of India's position.⁸⁰ India's *Treaty of Peace, Friendship & Cooperation* with USSR (signed on 9 August 1971) was the first political treaty India had signed with another nation⁸¹ and perhaps the most consequential international treaty entered into by India since Independence⁸² that had a profound effect on the politics and geography of South Asia.⁸³ Russia is among the select few countries with which India has an Annual Summit meeting as the highest institutionalised dialogue mechanism, with 21 such

77 Address by EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar at his interaction with Indologists in Saint Petersburg, Russia December 29, 2023.

78 “Bilateral Relations: India-Russia Relations,” (Accessed November 10, 2021).

79 “External Affairs Minister's speech on “India-Russia ties in a changing world” at IMEMO, Moscow,” (Accessed November 10, 2021).

80 “Security Council - Veto List- 1957, 1962, 1971,” <https://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick> (Accessed November 11, 2021).

81 “India-Russia: 50 years of a landmark treaty,” at [https:// www.sundayguardianlive.com/news/india-russia-50-years-landmark-treaty](https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/news/india-russia-50-years-landmark-treaty) (Accessed November 15, 2021).

82 “Indo-Soviet Treaty Of 1971-50th Anniversary Commemoration,” at [https:// indianembassy-moscow.gov.in/pdf/Indo%20Soviet%20Treaty_2021.pdf](https://indianembassy-moscow.gov.in/pdf/Indo%20Soviet%20Treaty_2021.pdf) (Accessed November 11, 2021).

83 “1971: When Delhi and Moscow came together,” at <https://www.orfonline.org/research/1971-when-delhi-and-moscow-came-together/> (Accessed November 12, 2021).

meetings having taken place⁸⁴ alternately in India and Russia.⁸⁵

Russia is also among the five countries⁸⁶ with which India has a 2+2 dialogue mechanism. Prime Minister Modi and President Putin have met 20 times since 2014;⁸⁷ PM Modi having made five visits to Russia in this period. The India-Russia Strategic Partnership was elevated to the level of a *Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership*⁸⁸ in 2010, the only country on which India bestows such a status. Defence, energy, nuclear, space and science and technology have constituted the drivers of India's engagement with Russia. The relationship is valued equally by Russia as well. Recently, on January 26, 2024, Russian President Putin stated that Moscow can rely on New Delhi because it knows will not "play any games against Russia ... India pursues an independent foreign policy, which is not easy in the modern world..."⁸⁹.

China and Russia

Several experts have assessed that to counter its isolation in the Arctic Council, Russia is likely to gravitate towards China and India in an effort to balance the A7.⁹⁰ The tilt to China has been evident for some years already. The Joint Statement during the Chinese President's visit to Russia

84 "Focus on Afghanistan, terror in Russia summit; S-400 supplies to continue," at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/focus-on-afghanistan-terror-in-russia-summit-s-400-supplies-to-continue/articleshow/88131393.cms> (Accessed November 13, 2021).

85 "Bilateral Relations: India-Russia Relations", no. 1.

86 US, UK, Japan and Australia.

87 "External Affairs Minister's speech on "India-Russia ties in a changing world" at IMEMO, Moscow", no. 2.

88 "Bilateral Relations: India-Russia Relations", no. 1.

89 'It's under his leadership that ...': Russia's Putin again heaps praise on PM Modi, Times of India, January 26, 2024.

90 Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and United States.

in March 2023 provided several pointers of an enhanced collaboration between the two countries. Growing ties in Arctic mirror their greater, across the spectrum, warming relationship. Share of the Rouble and Yuan in mutual commercial transactions now exceeds 80 percent.⁹¹ The Bilateral trade between them grew by more than 30 percent in 2022 to a record \$ 185 bn and against a set target of \$ 200 bn for 2024, it grew by more than 26 percent in 2023 to \$ 240 bn.⁹²

China has stepped in to mitigate Russia's isolation in the Arctic and this has resulted in a strategic interdependence between the two countries. China has become Russia's primary alternative to trade and cooperation, despite their past adversarial relationship and residual mistrust.⁹³

Arctic and India

Arctic is an arena witnessing intense geo-strategic contestation, involving two of India's closest strategic partners, USA and Russia, and India's principal adversary, China. It is imperative for India to stay engaged and expand its engagement in the Arctic. The global warming induced Arctic ice melt directly affects India's 1382 island territories. The warming Arctic also affects India's monsoons on which almost 58 percent of India's population is dependent (agriculture) and which generates almost 18 percent of India's GDP. The immense hydrocarbon and mineral reserves in the Arctic have the potential to address India's energy security and deficiency in strategic minerals.

India is the only developing country, apart from China, to have a permanent research Station, *Himadri*, at Svalbard, in the Arctic. Recognizing the

91 Over 80 percent of Russia-China settlements carried out in rubles and yuan — Putin TASS, 4 JUL 2023.

92 China-Russia 2023 trade value hits record high of \$240 bln - Chinese customs Reuters, January 12, 2024.

93 Ibid.

potential of the Arctic, the Government has released India's six-pillar based Arctic Policy on 17 March 2022.

Polar Relevance – BRICS and SCO Countries

The table below shows the BRICS and SCO member states and tries to evaluate their relevance to the Arctic and Polar issues. The countries have been evaluated on some of the parameters such as the membership in the relevant organizations and research interests and infrastructure.

Country	Arctic Council Member	Arctic Council Observer	BRICS	SCO	ATCM Consultative	ATCM Non-Consultative	Antarctic Station (Pant)	Antarctic Station (Ty)	Arctic Station	Polar Research Vessel
Brazil			Yes		Yes		Yes			Yes
China		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes		Yes	Yes
India		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes		Yes	#
Russia	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes		Yes	Yes
South Africa			Yes		Yes		Yes			Yes
Egypt			Yes							
Ethiopia			Yes							
Iran			Yes							
Saudi Arabia			Yes							
United Arab Emirates			Yes							
Kazakhstan				Yes		Yes				
Kyrgyzstan				Yes						
Tajikistan				Yes						
Uzbekistan				Yes						
Pakistan				Yes		Yes		Yes		

#Planned for induction by 2028

India's Perspectives and Concerns

*New Orientation for Reformed Multilateralism*⁹⁴ is the title of the Concept

94 New Orientation for Reformed Multilateralism Open Debate, Security Council Report, 13 December 2022

Note in the UNSC Open Debate which India had chaired on December 2022. Here, India had argued that the multilateral structures reflect the existing realities and not those which existed in 1945. This convergence on multipolarity is the core of India-Russia relationship. Russia's BRICS theme of strengthening multilateralism also resonates with India's own outlook. However, within the BRICS, China, at times in concert with Russia, is pushing for the forum towards an anti-Western construct, to become a full-scale rival to the G7. That position is not subscribed to by India, which wants the BRICS to be a forum for pursuing economic interests of the developing countries.⁹⁵

There are increasing indications of the BRICS' alignment with the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁹⁶ This is of concern to India as the BRI violates Indian sovereignty in the form of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which passes through a part of Indian territory. Hence India is not a part of the initiative.

There are also questions whether BRICS, in the diversity of its member states, can achieve the same cohesion as that of the G7. In this aspect, one is reminded of the Russia, India, China (RIC) trilateral. As a strategic grouping, RIC was the idea of former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov as "a counterbalance to the Western alliance"⁹⁷ and it was founded on the basis of "ending its subservient foreign policy guided by the U.S.", and "renewing old ties with India and fostering the newly discovered friendship with China."⁹⁸ But even as several meetings have been held, even at the summit level, the last being in 2019, nothing much

95 China urges BRICS to become geopolitical rival to G7

96 BRICS and BRI: China Aims for Strategic Alignment Antara Ghosal Singh, Aug 17, 2023

97 Russia-India-China Trilateral Grouping: More than hype? Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, 8 July 2019.

98 Ibid.

has come of that.

If the Arctic and Polar interests (including Antarctica and Himalayas) of the BRICS and the SCO countries are critically evaluated, apart from Russia, only India, China, Brazil and South Africa could be considered to have significant stakes. If only the Arctic is considered, that boils down only to India and China. The Russian Arctic can potentially address India's energy security needs as well as her deficiencies in strategic and rare earth minerals.

Russia's increasing isolation in the Arctic benefits China. Yamal LNG, in which Chinese entities have a 29.9 percent stake while over 60 percent of machinery used in construction is said to be Chinese, is an example. This isolation is providing increasing levers to China over Russia. Another example is that of the SCO. The Central Asian constituents of the grouping were all part of the erstwhile Soviet Union and even after its disintegration, Russia continued to hold sway for a long time. Even then, in 2023, China has overtaken Russia as the main trading partner of all the five Central Asian states. Increasing dependence of Russia on China is not beneficial for India. It is in India's long-term strategic interest to wean Russia away from Chinese embrace by providing suitable alternatives in terms of markets, finance, access, manpower and where possible, technology.

China seeks a multipolar world but wants a unipolar Asia.⁹⁹ Two-thirds of China's arms exports are to India's neighbours - Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar.¹⁰⁰ It seeks to contain India within the South Asia. But despite the bilateral relationship, which has really taken a nose-dive after the Doklam standoff in 2017 and the border clashes in 2020, India and China have worked constructively in BRICS, SCO, G20 and the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

99 Asia's Changing Power Dynamics Brahma Chellaney Jan 4, 2010.

100 Author's compilation from SIPRI data.

Russia, having excellent bilateral partnerships with India as well as China, desires the two to have better relations. In the words of Sergei Lavrov, “We have excellent relation with India and excellent relation with China. We are interested in these two great nations to be friends and we are trying to be helpful.”¹⁰¹ One possible option for Russia, with Arctic Council Observers India and China, could be to seek a more inclusive and equitable Council. This would result in better Asian perspective on Arctic and a more balanced Council.

Policy Recommendations

Considering the exponentially increasing multi spectrum Sino-Russian cooperation, including in the Arctic, it is imperative for India not only to enhance its bilateral cooperation with Russia on the Arctic, but also to whole heartedly support the Russian proposal of enhanced BRICS+ engagement in the region. Not only would this provide Russia an alternative to the coercive Chinese embrace, it would also permit Indian scientists access to the Russian scientific laboratories, equipment and data. It would also open the Russian Arctic to Indian industries engaged in telecommunications, mining, oil and gas sectors, coal, diamond, timber, healthcare, remote diagnostics, ports infrastructure, to name a few. Enhanced Indian engagement would also result in diluting the A7 monopoly in the Arctic affairs and help overcome several inequities in the Arctic Council as applicable to an Observer State such as India. It is recommended that India set up a separate Working Group on enhancing bilateral cooperation with Russia in the Arctic under the Economic, Scientific, Technological and Cultural Cooperation (IRIGC-TEC). Such a mechanism was set up between Russia and China in 2017.

It is also recommended that India take up coordinated positions on

101 Want India and China to be friends, can help reduce tensions: Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov The Economic Times, Mar 04, 2023.

Arctic within the BRICS, to prevent getting blindsided at the last minute by jointly coordinated Russian and Chinese proposals. Already, there appears to be some movement on this. During a recent telephone conversation between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi, they agreed to develop a roadmap for further evolution of bilateral cooperation. They also had a useful exchange of views on various regional and global issues, including Russia's Presidency of the BRICS.¹⁰²

It appears that the Russians are keen to engage with India on the Arctic. In the recent Press conference of the External Affairs Minister at Moscow he spoke about discussions with the Russians about connectivity - connectivity from Western India through the INSTC, from Eastern India from Chennai to Vladivostok and the polar route. Various areas where India's polar capabilities could be enhanced in collaboration with Russia were also discussed with his Russian counterpart.¹⁰³

102 Putin, Modi agree to develop roadmap for cooperation, January 15, 2024.

103 Press Conference of EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar with FM Sergey Lavrov of Russia (December 27, 2023).

About the VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

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