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Review article

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## Reflections on Reading: India's Arctic Policy Perspectives

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**Abstract.** The review examines the prospects of cooperation between India and Russia in the Arctic based on the analysis of the monograph by Indian scientists. The cooperation between the two countries, on the one hand, is based on long-standing friendly traditions dating back to Soviet times. On the other hand, modern India has a higher status in international relations and pursues a pragmatic foreign policy course. The US has objectively become a more important partner for India in international politics than Russia, given their common desire to contain China. This means that India's Arctic policy will take into account the US position, balancing secondary sanctions with the benefits of cooperation with Russia. At the same time, India views the rapprochement between China and Russia in the Arctic painfully seeking to realize its own interests in the region.

**Keywords:** Arctic, India's strategy, international cooperation, Russian-Indian relations

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The development of international cooperation in the Arctic is a priority for Russia after the imposition of numerous sanctions and the boycott of Russia in the Arctic Council, organized by the West. The inclusion of Finland and Sweden in NATO has outlined a course for further confrontation between Russia and the coastal Arctic states [1, Konyshchev V.N., Sergunin A.A.]. How and when the return to cooperation with Russia on regional and global issues will restart remains in question. In this regard, the turn of Russia's Arctic policy towards non-Arctic states, on the one hand, allows solving the problems of developing the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF), on the other hand, meets the vital interests of non-Arctic states in access to the rich resources of the Arctic and polar transport routes. If this turn takes place, the boycott of Russia will become a problem for the West itself, since the AZRF occupies about half of the Arctic spaces.

India, due to its historically good relations with Russia, has preferential opportunities for active participation in various cooperation programs in the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation. However, in practice, this cooperation does not correspond to the existing political, scientific, technological and economic potential. Why is this happening?

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The search for answers should begin with identifying India's interests and capabilities in the Arctic. The book by Indian experts Jawahar Bhagwat and Anurag Bisen is devoted to the evolution of the Arctic policy of modern India. A distinctive feature of this study is the unique experience of the authors, based on practical, government and scientific activities. Both of them are veteran submariners, participants in military-technical cooperation projects between India and Russia, who commanded Russian-made submarines for many years. After retiring, J. Bhagwat received a PhD from the University of Mumbai (India) and the St. Petersburg State University (Russia). He has publications in leading Russian and foreign professional journals [2, Bhagwat D.V.; 3, Bhagwat D.; 4, Shaparov A., Sokolova F., Magomedov A.K. and others]. A. Bisen worked in the Secretariat of the National Security Council of the Government of India. He participated in the development of the Arctic Policy of India (published in March 2022). Now A. Bisen is a senior fellow at the Vivekananda International Foundation, one of the leading think tanks in India influencing the foreign policy decisions of the state [5, Bisen A.].

The book by J. Bhagwat and A. Bisen [6, Bhagwat J., Bisen A.] offers a comprehensive vision of the prospects for India's Arctic policy. According to the Arctic Strategy of the state, the priorities are scientific research, climate and environmental protection, socio-economic cooperation, transport and communications, international cooperation and governance, building India's capacity in the Arctic [6, p. 250]. The central question of the study is: what does the Arctic mean for India in geopolitical and geo-economic dimensions? The authors believe that the official strategy should be expanded to ensure India's energy security. Its demand exceeds actual gas supplies by more than 4 times and oil supplies by 1.6 times [6, p. 260]. Despite the diversification of supplies, India benefits from discounts in the case of long-term contracts for energy supplies from the Russian Arctic. India needs to gain a foothold in the Arctic, where there are significant oil and gas reserves, through investment, [6, pp. 261–262]. The prospect of Russia's excessive dependence on China in the Arctic does not meet India's geostrategic interests. Finally, India's presence on the Northern Sea Route is essential because it is becoming an important alternative to the Suez Canal in the context of political instability in the region [6, p. 280].

The authors show that India's general approach to Arctic policy is similar to Russia's vision, which creates the potential for productive cooperation. India supports the Arctic Council's return to resuming interaction with Russia. Like Russia, India is interested in creating a more transparent, inclusive, fair, equitable and multilateral Arctic policy. The authors emphasize that the Arctic should not become hostage to great power rivalry.

The authors analyze the evolution of India's strategic interests in the Arctic, the main areas of Arctic activity, relations with Arctic and non-Arctic states and international organizations. The authors touch upon many Arctic issues, such as the legal status of the Northern Sea Route, global issues and their importance for India, environmental issues and the conservation of biodiversity in the Arctic region. So far, these topics have been considered fragmentarily by Indian authors, and the prospect was seen mainly in the continuation of scientific activity.

This narrow vision can be partly explained by the stereotype associated with Antarctica, where only scientific activities are allowed. India has been conducting research on this continent for a long time, and for many researchers and politicians, Arctic activities are perceived as an extension or analogue of Antarctic ones. Funding for research in Antarctica is twice as much as investment in the Arctic [6, p. 273].

The narrow perspective of Arctic policy is also related to the insufficient study of the Arctic by Indian scientists. They have only one small Himadri station on Spitsbergen, which does not provide year-round research, as well as the experience of several expeditions and projects with Norway and Canada [6, p. 131, 271–272]. As a result, the authors argue that although India has made progress in Arctic research, it lags behind other Asian countries in terms of infrastructure, research potential, and the level of international cooperation in the Arctic.

The authors identify interesting features of India's Arctic policy that are of interest to Russian readers.

Firstly, the Arctic is perceived in India as a source of global prosperity. This position differs from the popular concept of the “global commons”, which is considered by the authors to be a failure [6, p. 259]. While the latter is used to challenge the rights of coastal Arctic states, India recognizes the special rights of coastal states, including Russia. Most Indian experts view Arctic policy through the prism of the idea of “One Earth, One Family, One Future”, which means the interconnection between the Arctic and the rest of the world. Incidentally, this explains why India pays so much attention to environmental issues when it comes to any activity in the Arctic. In India, the global vision of the Arctic is actually mediated by the experience of Antarctic cooperation, where science is the only permitted activity. Therefore, according to J. Bhagwat and A. Bisen, India can play a constructive role in supporting stable multilateral governance and sustainable development in the Arctic.

Secondly, the authors of the book believe that so far, India's overall activities in the Arctic have been very modest and corresponded neither to its capabilities nor to its national interests [6, p. 272]. The Arctic region has been underestimated by both experts and political elites of India. In particular, this concerns the insufficient attention paid to China's economic activism in the Arctic and the clearly growing interest of Japan, South Korea, and Singapore. India still adheres to a traditional foreign policy course, in which political aspects of relations prevail. Of all the departments, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs still dominates in Arctic policy. However, there is a gradual realization that the state's Arctic policy should combine different areas: trade, commerce, technology, research, environment, health, and culture. According to the authors, this logic dictates the need to reorganize the management of India's Arctic policy at the state level, which is currently scattered across various departments.

Thirdly, the authors are optimistic about Russia's resilience to the political, financial, and technological challenges associated with Western sanctions due to the Special Military Operation in Ukraine. The authors also note Russia's strong positions in the Arctic and the declarative nature

of the US military strategies adopted in recent years, which have not been fully implemented. In fact, the US is lagging behind Russia in ensuring a military presence in the region. At the same time, the United States is seeking to compensate for this by increasing the number of NATO exercises in the Arctic, patrolling nuclear submarines in the Barents Sea, using satellite capabilities and unmanned technologies [6, p. 127]. The United States has significantly improved its military-strategic positions by gaining access to military bases in Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland following the signing of bilateral security agreements in 2021–2023.

Fourthly, Indian experts recognize that Russia's national security interests in the Arctic require the presence of advanced naval, air and army forces. They also agree that Russia's military strategy is defensive rather than offensive in the context of the increasing militarization of the Arctic [6, pp. 113–114]. The authors note that the number of Russian armed forces in the Arctic and the Northern Fleet is significantly smaller than during the Cold War. The authors point out that while Russia conducts military exercises in its exclusive economic zone, NATO conducts exercises close to Russia's borders, sometimes without notifying Russian authorities, thereby provoking Russia.

Fifthly, the authors explain that India is dissatisfied with the overly closed ties between Russia and China, as this contradicts the principle of a multipolar Arctic policy. But a deeper concern is that China and India, despite some normalization of relations, are in a state of hostility. At the same time, J. Bhagwat and A. Bisen believe that India and China can cooperate in the Arctic through multilateral mechanisms, as New Delhi and Beijing find common ground and interact in international forums such as BRICS, G20, SCO and climate change conferences. Both countries are using their overlapping interests to shape the rules of international trade to ensure their continued domestic development and economic growth. As the authors note, it was largely China's Arctic activity that prompted India to formulate its own position in the Arctic Strategy 2022 to counterbalance China.

Sixthly, the authors address a number of Arctic policy issues. They believe that the boycott of Russia in the Arctic Council has led to negative consequences for the study of global problems. In particular, the prohibitions on data exchange between Russian and foreign scientists prevent the use of computer models that predict the dynamics and consequences of climate change, including permafrost thawing [6, pp. 86–87]. The authors believe that the Western boycott should not apply to scientific cooperation with Russia [6, p. 127]. In the political dimension, the boycott of Russia by the West has led to its rapid rapprochement with China, which the authors consider a serious challenge to India's strategic interests. The authors express confidence that India, like other non-Arctic states, is objectively interested in cooperation with Russia, since due to the blocking of the Arctic Council, they have virtually no choice but to cooperate directly with the coastal Arctic states. Hence their interest in various projects, including joint scientific research, development of the Northern Sea Route infrastructure, and development of mineral resources. In the current circumstances, the authors believe that it is necessary to raise the status of observer states in the

Arctic Council so that they can independently conduct scientific activities in the Arctic. The authors believe that in order to promote this idea, India needs to actively participate in organizations such as the High-Level Trilateral Dialogue (established in 2015), which unites China, Japan, and South Korea. In addition, it is necessary to develop bilateral ties with Russia, Japan, and the Scandinavian countries [6, p. 288].

However, the authors only cautiously touch upon the problem of secondary US sanctions, which directly hinders cooperation between India and Russia, including even in the scientific sphere. But in this regard, they note that “India does not always manage to balance between Russia and the United States” [6, pp. 137–139]. The desire for balancing is consistent with the traditions of the state’s foreign policy, but does not correspond to India’s actual strategic interests. According to the authors, Indian companies may well expand investment in Russia’s oil and gas sector, avoiding US sanctions, because “India is a major importer of oil and gas from the US” and “the US has selectively lifted sanctions for its allies and partners” [6, p. 261]. The authors’ optimism can only be welcomed, but it remains unclear why the US would encourage Russia as a competitor. Moreover, the US is actively displacing Russia from other areas of Indian import, for example, from the arms trade and military-technical cooperation.

India’s “bifurcation” between the US and Russia, correctly noted by the authors, deserves a more in-depth study and attention from political decision-makers in Russia. This trend, apparently, is of a deeper nature and concerns not only the Arctic, but also the entire range of bilateral relations. Given the observed shift in N. Modi’s policy towards pragmatism, should we re-evaluate the traditional friendly relations between India and Russia as a factor in deepening bilateral cooperation in the Arctic?

After reading the book, it becomes obvious that India and Russia have impressive potential for cooperation in the Arctic. Why is it progressing so slowly? The authors cite some institutional problems as an obstacle. The main actors in the Arctic region are the Ministry of Earth and Natural Sciences, the National Center for Polar and Oceanic Research and the Ministry of External Affairs. However, only the latter interacts with the Arctic Council and other international organizations. The National Security Council is responsible for the overall coordination of India’s Arctic policy. However, there is no overall national approach to developing India’s Arctic policy. A special inter-departmental working group at the ministerial level is needed, but the authors do not undertake to assess how soon it can be created, given that, for example, the draft energy policy of India has been under discussion since 2017 and there is still no final document [6, p. 262].

The authors believe that it is time to develop a roadmap for India’s Arctic policy. The immediate step is to increase public investment in this area to develop expertise in the maritime, legal, environmental, social, political and governance aspects of Arctic policy. Obviously, Russia should be more active in offering various forms of dialogue and cooperation in all these areas.

Overall, the book presents an original vision of how India’s polar policy can be developed to better match India’s growing influence in global politics. The authors’ analysis appears to be

very balanced and free from ideological bias. The book will be useful to anyone interested in India's contemporary Arctic policy. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of Indian perceptions of the Arctic and moves India-Russia relations towards further dialogue.

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