Arctic Council

Mains: *GS II – International Organizations*

Why in News?

Recently, a Parliamentary Committee on External Affairs has recommended appointing a dedicated Polar/Arctic Affairs Ambassador to strengthen India's engagement with Arctic and polar issues.

What is Arctic Council?

- **The Arctic Council** – It is a high-level international group that promotes cooperation on environmental protection and sustainable development in the Arctic.
- **Members** – Core members include Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States.
- **Foundation –** Established on September 19, 1996, via the **Ottawa Declaration.**

- **Permanent Participants –** Organizations representing **Arctic Indigenous peoples.**
- **Observers –** Non-Arctic states (including India) and international bodies focused on regional issues.
- **Focus Areas –** Environmental monitoring, pollution reduction, and ecosystem health via specialized working groups.
- **Working groups** – The functions of the council are performed primarily by six working groups:

- **ACAP** (Arctic Contaminants Action Program) – Reduces pollutant emissions and hazardous chemical releases.
- **AMAP** (Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme) – Monitors climate change, ecosystems, and human health.
- **CAFF** (Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna) – Protects Arctic biodiversity and living resources.
- **EPPR** (Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response) – Deals with environmental accidents, spills, and search-and-rescue coordination.
- **PAME** (Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment) – Focuses on the protection and sustainable use of Arctic oceans and seas.
- **SDWG** (Sustainable Development Working Group) – Improves the living conditions and social well-being of Arctic communities

*Decisions of the Arctic Council and its working groups are made by **consensus of the member countries.***

What are the functions of Arctic Council?

- **Environmental Protection –** Monitoring climate change, tracking pollution, and conserving biodiversity.
- **Sustainable Development –** Supporting social, economic, and cultural well-being for northern inhabitants.
- **Scientific Research –** Coordinating circumpolar scientific assessments through specialized working groups.
- **Emergency Response –** Improving preparedness for search-and-rescue and environmental disasters.

*It operates as a consensus-based forum for **Arctic states** and **indigenous communities**, focusing on scientific research and policy recommendations rather than binding laws or military security.*

What are the challenges faced by Arctic Council?

- **Ruptured Cooperation –** Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led member states to temporarily pause participation, fracturing traditional consensus-based diplomacy.
- **Militarization –** Increased military activities and strategic competition among global powers in the Arctic undermine its status as a zone of peace.
- **Exclusion of Military Issues –** The Council's mandate explicitly forbids addressing military security, leaving a massive governance gap as regional tensions rise.
- **Rapid Warming –** The Arctic warms significantly faster than the rest of the planet, accelerating sea-ice loss and disrupting global weather systems.
- **Ecosystem Stress –** Melting ice opens vulnerable marine areas to heavy shipping, resource exploitation, and pollution risks like oil spill.

What measures could be taken to strengthen Arctic Council?

- **Dedicated Funding –** Establish a centralized, transparent permanent secretariat budget rather than relying heavily on shifting state contributions and project-specific financing.
- **Binding Mandates –** Transition from purely consensus-based soft law recommendations to broader enforceable, legally binding regional agreements on environmental safety and shipping.
- **Resource Allocation –** Increase support for working groups like the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP) to track rapid climate shifts effectively.
- **Pragmatic Science Channels –** Maintain lower-level expert and working-group collaboration even when high-level diplomatic friction strains relations with member states like Russia.
- **Indigenous Integration –** Deepen the permanent active role of Indigenous Peoples' organizations in setting the core agenda and fusing traditional knowledge with empirical science.
- **Observer Engagement –** Better utilize non-Arctic observers and international bodies for technological and financial contributions to sustainable regional development.

India's Role in the Arctic – Parliamentary Committee Recommendations

• **Present status** – At present, Arctic-related matters are handled by the **Polar Cell in the Ministry of External Affairs**, whereas several countries have institutionalised mechanisms with dedicated ambassadors or representatives.
• The Committee also urged the Government to seek an upgrade from Observer Status to Member Status in the Arctic Council whenever membership is reviewed.
• **Limited role** – It noted that current **observer status** limits India's role in decision-making, financial contributions, and direct research activities.
• **Status of other countries** – Arctic Council member states and several observer countries, including Japan, China, Singapore, and South Korea, have dedicated Polar/Arctic Ambassadors.
• It argued that India should adopt a similar approach to enhance international cooperation and policy coordination.
• **Potential of India** – Recognising the Himalayas as the "Third Pole" due to their vast ice reserves and global climatic significance, the Committee emphasised that India has a strong stake in Arctic affairs.
• It concluded that full membership of the Arctic Council would enable India to contribute more effectively to Arctic governance while representing the interests of the Global South.

References

1. The Hindu| Arctic Council & India
2. Arctic Council Organization

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