

Comparative Analysis of the Arctic and the Third Pole Region

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What is the Third Pole?

The term Third Pole was first coined by Marcel Kurz, a Swiss geographer in 1933 to denote the large number of frozen glaciers in the Himalayas which was outside the two poles, the Arctic and the Antarctic.¹ The Himalayas are a new fold mountain that was formed due to the collision of the Indian subcontinent with the rest of Eurasia. It stretches across 2,500 km starting from the Pamir Knot on the northwestern border of Afghanistan-Tajikistan and across the northern part of the Indian subcontinent (South Asia) separating it from the Tibetan plateau. Also, the Himalayas are the tallest mountain ranges in the world comprising more than 100 peaks above the height of 7,300 m over the sea level.² Many major rivers and their tributaries originate from the glaciers in the Himalayas. Because of the high altitude and the presence of large

glaciated terrain the Himalayan region is called the Third Pole.³ *While the Arctic and the Antarctic are clearly defined by their high latitude, the Third Pole is defined by its high altitude.*

While there is no single definition of the Arctic region, it is understood as the overall geographical region around the North Pole. Even though there are multiple ways of defining it, the latitude (66°N), beyond which the sun never rises in mid-winter and never sets in mid-summer, is the generally used as the criterion for state membership of the Arctic Council. However, within the Arctic Council working groups, different definitions are used depending on the focus of the study. The other definitions are based on various other factors such as the temperature, treeline, ice cover, vegetation (high, low, sub-Arctic), political delimitations, etc.⁴

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¹ Xiaoming Wang & Others, 'From the third pole to north pole: a Himalayan origin for the arctic fox,' (22 July 2014) 28 (1787). The Royal Society Publishing DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2014.0893>

² World Atlas, 'The world's tallest mountain ranges' (World Atlas) <<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-world-s-tallest-mountain-ranges.html>> accessed on 02 Aug 2023

³ Anil V Kulkarni and Yogesh Karyakarte, 'Observed Changes in the Himalayan glaciers' (2014) 106 (2) Current science p. 237,237: para 1

⁴ Mary H Durfee and Racheal Lorna Johnstone, 'Arctic Governance in a Changing World' (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019) Pg 23-26; Arctic Centre, 'Basic information about the Arctic: What and where is the Arctic?' (Arctic Centre, University of Lapland) <<https://www.arcticcentre.org/EN/arcticregion>> accessed on 31 July 2023

Similar to the Arctic region, there is no single definition that defines the Third Pole region.⁵ The land area that is counted as the Third Pole region is anywhere between 3.4 million sq. km to 5 million sq. km.⁶

The Imaginary ‘Third Pole’ Region:

According to the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)⁷, the Third Pole-Hindu Kush Himalayan ranges covers 8 countries Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh (6 South Asian Countries), China (East Asia), and Myanmar (South East Asia) that covers the entire mountainous region of **Nepal, and Bhutan**; most of **Afghanistan** (except for Kandahar, Helmand, Nimroz, Farah, and Herat); the Chittagong Hill tracts of **Bangladesh**; parts of the provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan, Gansu, Xinjiang autonomous region, all of the Tibet and Qinghai provinces of **China**; all of Assam, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Manipur, Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh; Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and

Darjeeling district of West Bengal of **India**; the Chin, Shan, Rakhine, and Kachin states of **Myanmar**; the Kyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Balochistan (24 out of 32 districts), Pakistan controlled Jammu & Kashmir (also called as Azad Jammu and Kashmir), Gilgit Baltistan and federally administered tribal areas of **Pakistan** form part of the Third Pole region.⁸ However, ICIMOD excludes the Gorno Badakshan or the Badakshan Mountainous autonomous region of **Tajikistan** which is home to much of the Pamir mountains but expands to cover large portions of China beyond the mountainous regions of the Himalayas and the surrounding glaciated terrain.

The whole of the Third Pole Region as defined by ICIMOD⁹ is not a naturally interconnected region geographically, linguistically, and culturally. The region is extremely diverse in its identity. The Himalayas have been separating the Indian subcontinent from the rest of Eurasia. It has acted as a barrier against invasion and against the harsh and dry winds from Siberia. The Shivalik,

⁵ Simon Marsden, ‘From the High North to the Roof of the World: Arctic Precedence for the Third Pole Governance’, (2016) VIII, The Year Book on Polar Law 56, 58

⁶ ICIMOD: 3.4 million sq. km; Wikipedia: 4.2 million sq. km; Third Pole Environment: 5 million sq. Km;

⁷ ICIMOD is an intergovernmental institution and a knowledge-sharing center that deals with the issues of the Hindu Kush Himalayan region and is based in Katmandu, Nepal.

⁸ ICIMOD, ‘Who we are-Hindu Kush Himalaya: the pulse of the planet’ (ICIMOD), <https://www.icimod.org/who-we-are/the-pulse-of-the-planet/> accessed on 07 Mar 2023

⁹ ibid

Himachal, and Himadri Mountain ranges of the mighty Himalayas acted as a series of huge walls and the passes acted as openings through the Himalayan ranges. The high-altitude tough mountain terrain has not been an easy place to commute, unlike the frozen Arctic Ocean which has played a key role in the movement of the indigenous communities in the region and future explorations by the Vikings, Danish, and Nordic explorers to create settlements in Greenland, Iceland and Faroe Islands. The Indigenous communities in the Arctic also play a key role in unifying the region, as there is a major commonality of being subjugated by the settler colonial powers. On the other hand, there has been no such single unifying factor or common identity amongst the people of the entire Third Pole region.

Historically there has been trading, pilgrimage, and people-to-people contact in the trans-Himalayan border region (that separated China and South Asia). However, it has been only to a limited extent. These limited trading routes that connected the people in the Indo-Tibet (China) border region through the passes (Nathula in Sikkim with Tibet, Lipulekh Pass in Uttarakhand with Tibet, and the

Shipki La Pass in Himachal Pradesh with Tibet) are today heavily militarized zones. The Indian and Bhutanese enclaves in the Tibetan region are also currently under Chinese occupation. Mensar and Darchen-Labrang are of extreme importance to the pilgrims who visit the Kailash Manasarovar yatra (Pilgrimage). These places acted as resting places for the tourist and the taxes collected from Mensar was used to support Mt Kailash and support the facilities for the yatris (pilgrims). Unfortunately, after the occupation of Tibet, India, and Bhutan have neither officially raised the issue with the Chinese nor ceded the territory.¹⁰ Today, post occupation of Tibet by China, the Trans Himalayan connectivity between India and China is extremely limited except for the few religious pilgrimages that take place every year to visit the Kailash-Manasarovar, which is a place of extreme importance to the Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists of India, Nepal, and Bhutan. The trade links and religious connections that exist to a very limited level, will not hold the space together and establish a sense of community. At the same time, the idea of an 'imagined community' like the European Union will be difficult to achieve without a common goal and political will

¹⁰ P Stobdan, 'Resituating Mensar and Darchen-Labrang in the Boundary Negotiations with China', (16 Feb 2018) IDSA < <https://idsa.in/policybrief/resituating-menser-darchen-labrang-in-boundary-negotiations-china-pstobdan-160218>> accessed on 01 May 2023

to engage and resolve border disputes.¹¹ Hence, the Third Pole has never been a single unit (both geographically and politically), thereby making it an imaginary region unlike the Indian subcontinent (South Asia)¹².

Similarities and differences between the Arctic and the Third Pole:

The Third Pole, like the other two poles, is an extremely fragile ecosystem. It has a large number of glaciated water bodies, which is the lifeline of the largely populated states in the region. The Himalayas are new fold mountain ranges, and they undergo a high amount of tectonic activity with the most active seismic zone. The IPCC's Special Report on Ocean and Cryosphere (2019) mentions how the shrinking cryosphere has led to negative impacts on people and ecosystems in both the Arctic and the Himalayas.¹³ This is the primary reason that necessitates scientific data collection, observation, and science-driven policy implementation in the region through a

regional governance mechanism. Also, unlike the Antarctic region, the Arctic and the Third Pole region are inhabited by humans, even though the numbers are vastly different. This necessitates a governance mechanism that would factor in the overall needs and well-being of the people and also look at environmental protection in the respective regions. While the Arctic and Himalayas may find similarities in the need to adopt regional governance mechanisms due to climate impact, there are also solid positions of divergence between these two regions, such as the continuing impact of the separation of the Indian subcontinent into post-colonial nation states, the existence of serious regional boundary disputes, cross-border infiltration of terrorists, and heavy deployments of the military across the state borders, to name a few, which are completely non-existent in the Arctic context.

¹¹ Rakhahari Chatterji, 'Rethinking Regionalism: The idea of China-South Asia Trans-Himalayan Regional Cooperation' (Dec 2019) 228 ORF 1,19 < https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/ORF_OccasionalPaper_228_Regionalism.pdf> accessed on 27 Feb 2023

¹² South Asia or the Indian sub-continent are terms interchangeably used to define, based on geography, an insular India that moved away from Gondwana and merged with Eurasia during the Cretaceous period. This resulted in the creation of the new fold mountains of the Himalayas in the North; the southern region is bordered by the Indian Ocean. The 6 of the Third Pole states (ICIMOD) -Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Pakistan are South Asian states that share geographical, cultural, and civilizational identities.

¹³ IPCC Special Report on Ocean and Cryosphere 2019 Pg 1,15 -16

People and diversity:

There are vast expanses of land with a lesser number of inhabitants in the Arctic, and on the other hand, the Third Pole region has a large population with less land to occupy. Around 4 million people live in the Arctic whereas 236.90 million (2017) live in the Third Pole-Himalayan region. Even though there is cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity in the Arctic, the Third Pole is extremely diverse and much more complex. The region that is called a 'Third Pole' has never been a single unit geographically or politically and hence it is difficult to create an 'imaginary community' that can subscribe to a membership, create influence, to fulfill the needs of people, and develop an emotional connection.¹⁴ In the Arctic, historically, the sea ice-covered oceans acted as connectors for the movement of Indigenous people in winter, and in summer the open seas helped them commute. In fact, for the Inuit, the frozen sea acted as highways¹⁵, while in the Himalayan region, the mountains acted

more as a barrier with narrow passes to commute.

Territorial Disputes, Militarization, and Terrorism:

The Arctic, unlike the Third Pole, is without any major territorial dispute. Since the resolution of the boundary over Tartupaluk (Hans Island) between Canada and Denmark (Greenland) in 2022, there have been no land border disputes in the Arctic region.¹⁶ The militaries of the Arctic states have not engaged in a conflict or skirmishes in recent memory. On the other hand, in the Himalayan region, the militaries are in close proximity and there is also heavy infrastructure development across the Line of Actual Control between India and China. Following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the US and Canada are also looking at increasing the number of icebreakers and upgrading their equipment to expand their presence in the Arctic in order to counter the dominance of Russia and the growing Chinese presence in the Arctic. However, the major

¹⁴ See David McMillan and D. Chavis, 'Sense of Community: A definition and theory' (1986) 14 Journal of Community Psychology Pg 6-23

¹⁵ Inuit Circumpolar Council, 'The Sea ice is our highway: An Inuit Circumpolar Perspective on the transportation in the Arctic' (ICC, Canada March 2008) p I, ii < <https://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/project/the-sea-ice-is-our-highway-an-inuit-perspective-on-transportation-in-the-arctic/>> accessed on 01 Aug 2023

¹⁶ P. Whitney Lackenbauer & Rasmus Leander Nielsen, 'Close, like-minded partners committed to democratic principles: settling the Hans Island/Tartupaluk Territorial dispute' (2022) Arctic Year Book <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2022/2022-briefing-notes/442-close-like-minded-partners-committed-to-democratic-principles-settling-the-hans-island-tartupaluk-territorial-dispute> accessed on 05 August 2023

distinguishing factor in the Third Pole region is in fact the unresolved boundary dispute that has been prolonged for a very long time and continues to disturb the peace in the border areas. While the Arctic has evolved as a society to discuss human security issues, in the case of the Himalayan region, the militarization, threat of infiltration of terrorists, and armed conflict threaten the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the nation-states, which becomes the primary focus of these states. Hence states in the region focus more on military security issues and to secure their borders than focusing on environmental and human security problems in the Himalayan region. What the Arctic currently deals with is not a territorial dispute between neighbouring states, but the invasion of Ukraine (a non-Arctic state) by Russia which has a spillover effect in the Arctic region.

Non-Regional players

The cooperation amongst the Arctic states becomes important to manage regional affairs and Arctic Ocean governance and to ensure that non-Arctic players do not position themselves as near Arctic states and dominate the region. The melting of sea ice facilitates the possibility of new shipping routes and increased potential for

resource exploitation and hence the Arctic states have found it necessary to cooperate with the non-Arctic players and to include them in the Arctic regional cooperation as observer states. But the conditions upon which the inclusion is granted and constrained show the old powers including and limiting the access of the Non-Arctic states, especially the rising Asian Powers.¹⁷ In the case of the Third Pole, these are land territories that are subject to state laws, and there is no space for a non-regional player to play any major role in the region; hence, the warring parties in the region find no serious point to unite and defend the resources in the region.

Rights of Non-Regional players: The Law of the Sea and the Svalbard treaty

Unlike the Antarctic, where land is surrounded by ocean, in the Arctic it is the Arctic Ocean that is surrounded by land masses. In the case of the Himalayan region, these are territories joined together by international land borders or lines of control and with no ocean or sea separating these territories. While the land in the Arctic is governed by the sovereignty of the respective states, the ocean is governed by the law of the sea, such as the

¹⁷ Durfee and Johnstone, n (4) Pg 77

UNCLOS¹⁸, the Polar Code¹⁹, and the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement.²⁰ The law of the sea includes rights and duties for coastal and distant-water States.

Even though the Arctic cannot be claimed as a global commons, certain legal rights are provided equally to both Arctic and non-Arctic states on the high seas (Central Arctic Ocean) as per UNCLOS.²¹ Also, the Svalbard Treaty guarantees certain Economic, commercial and scientific rights in Svalbard and in the territorial waters of Svalbard to the contracting parties to the treaty.²²

Settler Colonies Vs Post-Colonial countries

Some of the Arctic states are settler colonies where the Indigenous peoples continue to be colonized without the right to self-determination. However, many of the Himalayan states are post-colonial states that were under physical occupation of the European colonizers. The Indian subcontinent (South Asia) not only has been subjugated by European colonization

but also has a history of Islamic rule for over 8 centuries. This created a completely complex structure of post-colonial nation-states that were subjugated by back-to-back colonization for around 1000 years. This is further accentuated by the division of the region into nation-states by the European colonizers and coupled with the Chinese dominance over Tibet, hence the region is split in multiple ways.

Ongoing crisis:

The Arctic circumpolar cooperation was made possible initially through the Arctic Environment Protection Strategy (AEPS) and later through the Arctic Council. However, it was only possible at the end of the Cold War era. On the other hand, in the Himalayan region, there are ongoing military standoffs and tense situations across the Line of Actual Control between India and China. Some of the worries in South Asia are related to the increased presence of China in the region. China is accused of deploying its BRI (Belt and

¹⁸ Convention on the Law of the Sea (adopted 10 December 1982, entered into force on 16 November 1994) 1833 UNTS 3 (UNCLOS)

¹⁹ International code for Ships operating in Polar water (Polar code),2017

²⁰ The Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean, 2018

²¹ Convention on the Law of the Sea (adopted 10 December 1982, entered into force on 16 November 1994) 1833 UNTS 3 (UNCLOS), Art 87

²² The Spitzbergen (Svalbard) Treaty, 1920, Art 2,3

Road Initiative) strategy²³ to debt-trap states²⁴ and encircle India. Some of China's initiatives in neighbouring countries have been unilaterally designated as "part of BRI."²⁵ China also intends to develop three major routes in South Asia. India regards the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) route through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (POK) as an explicit violation of sovereignty. While Arctic states such as the US are worried about the increase in Chinese presence in the Arctic, there is a similar concern in India about the penetration of China into the Subcontinent and encircling it through the String of Pearl strategy²⁶. BRI seems to be one area of common concern due to the threat of the increasing presence of non-regional players both in the Arctic and the Indian subcontinent (South Asia). However, due to territorial proximity to the Indian subcontinent and the prevailing boundary disputes, there are more serious concerns about the violent clashes in the border and

Chinese penetration into the Indian subcontinent region through the Himalayas.

Conclusion:

Both the Arctic and Himalayan regions are fragile ecosystems that are impacted by global climate changes, and they are home to some of the world's largest glaciers and freshwater supplies. Even though the Third Pole, is similar to the Arctic in some of these aspects, there are important points of differences between these two regions. The Third Pole region is an imaginary region unlike the Arctic and it lacks a sense of community and belongingness; hence, it becomes difficult to integrate it under a single umbrella. There are no land boundary disputes in the Arctic and on the other hand, a substantial portion of the Himalayan region is heavily militarized with long unsettled borders. These Himalayan post-colonial nation-states have large populations and extremely low

²³ See, NC Bipindra, 'China completes 10 Years of \$1.4 Trillion BRI Project; puts south Asia, barring India and Bhutan, in a bind' (23 July 2023, Eurasian Times) < <https://www.eurasiatimes.com/china-completes-10-years-of-1-4-trillion-bri-project-puts/>> accessed on 21 July 2023

²⁴ Times Now, 'Unforgiving lender: How citizens of poor nations caught in Chinese debt trap are paying the price' (21 May 2023, Times of India) < <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/unforgiving-lender-how-citizens-of-poor-nations-like-pakistan-sri-lanka-caught-in-chinese-debt-trap-are-paying-the-price/articleshow/100397634.cms?from=mdr>> accessed on 16 July 2023

²⁵ Economic Times, 'Controversy erupts in Nepal over China's Belt and Road initiative' (05 Jan 2023, Economic Times) < <https://travel.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/destination/international/controversy-erupts-in-nepal-over-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/96765711>> accessed on 16 July 2023

²⁶ The String of Pearl strategy is a network of Chinese-owned military and commercial ports throughout the Indian Ocean region (IOR). It is criticized as an attempt to encircle India and to strategically gain naval dominance over the IOR, through which 50% of the world's oil trade is carried out.

GDPs in comparison to the Arctic nations, and these states have to deal with poverty, food, and energy challenges. They must additionally fulfill their global commitment to achieve net zero targets. Since, the Third Pole region battles different kinds of challenges than the ones that affect the Arctic region, an integrated engagement and governance mechanism in similar lines to the Arctic would be difficult to achieve. Hence, any regional cooperation model or models planned for the region should be only after careful and holistic consideration of the issues affecting the region and not by merely transposing a model from the Arctic.

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