India and Arctic Council

Why in news?

India was re-elected as an Observer to the Arctic Council in its recent ministerial meeting at Rovaniemi, Finland.

What is the Arctic Council?

- The Arctic Council is an intergovernmental forum for discussing and addressing issues concerning the Arctic region.
- These include scientific research, and peaceful and sustainable use of resources in the region.
- The Council was established by the 8 Arctic States through the Ottawa Declaration of 1996.
- These are Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the US.
- Besides these, 6 organisations representing the indigenous people of the Arctic region is granted the status of permanent participants.
- All decision-making happens through consensus between the eight members, and in consultation with the permanent participants.
What are the objectives?

- The Arctic Council is not a treaty-based international legal entity like the UN bodies or trade or regional groupings like NATO or ASEAN.
- It is only an intergovernmental ‘forum’, to promote cooperation in regulating activities in the Arctic region, a much informal grouping.
- The six working groups each deal with a specific subject.
- Through this, the Arctic Council seeks to evolve a consensus on the activities that can be carried out in the Arctic region.
- It is driven by the overall objective of conserving the pristine environment, and biodiversity.
- The interests and well-being of the local populations are also its focus.

Who are the other participants?

- India had been given the Observer status in 2013, along with 5 other countries - China, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore.
- India, along with 12 other countries now, has the Observer status in the Arctic Council.
- 13 other intergovernmental and inter-parliamentary organisations like the UN Environment Programme, UN Development Programme and 12 other NGOs also enjoy the Observer status.
The Observer status is granted to entities that support the objectives of the Arctic Council. Those which have demonstrated capabilities in this regard, including the ability to make financial contributions, are included. The Observers are not part of the decision-making processes. They are invited to attend the meetings of the Council, especially at the level of the working groups. The renewal of Observer status is just a formality. The status, once granted, continues until the Observer engages in any activities that run counter to the objectives of the Council, and there is a consensus on this.

What is India’s role in the Arctic?

- India is one of the very few countries to set up a permanent station in the Arctic for the purposes of scientific research.
- The polar regions offer some unique opportunities to carry out research related to atmospheric and climate sciences.
- The Himadri research station, located in Ny Alesund, Svalbard in Norway, was started in 2008.
- The Goa-based National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research (NCOAR) is the nodal organisation coordinating the research activities at this station.
- The station has been used to carry out a variety of biological, glaciological and atmospheric and climate sciences research projects.
- [Besides, India’s first permanent station in Antarctica was set up way back in 1983.
- India has almost 3-decade experience in carrying out scientific research in the polar regions of Antarctica.
- India is now among the very few countries which have multiple research stations in the Antarctic.]

Why is it significant to India?

- The Arctic Council does not prohibit the commercial exploitation of resources in the Arctic.
- It only seeks to ensure that it is done in a sustainable manner.
- So countries with ongoing activities in the Arctic hope to have a stake in the commercial exploitation of natural resources there.
- India could derive some commercial and strategic benefits, given the fact that the Arctic region is rich in some minerals, and oil and gas,
- With some parts of the Arctic melting due to global warming, the region also opens up the possibility of new shipping routes.