

India and the Nordics: A new axis in international norm-setting

Abhinav Mehrotra, Bishwadeep Ghose • June 1, 2026,

The Arctic is no longer just an environmental issue. It is becoming a test case for whether international law can regulate emerging geopolitical competition in fragile ecological zones



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store, Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, Icelandic Prime Minister Kristrún Frostadóttir and Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen during the Nordic-India Summit, in Oslo, Norway, May 19. (Image: PTI)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's outreach to the Nordic countries is often framed through the familiar language of trade, technology and clean energy cooperation. Yet the larger significance of India's engagement with Northern Europe lies elsewhere. Beneath the economic agreements and diplomatic symbolism is a deeper story about how international law and global governance are being reshaped in an increasingly fragmented world.

The Nordic region, comprising Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, occupies an outsized role in contemporary international politics. These countries are among the strongest advocates of the rules-based international order, climate governance, maritime regulation, digital rights, and multilateral institutions. India's growing engagement with them is therefore not merely diplomatic expansion; it is

also an attempt to secure a place within the emerging legal and normative architecture of the twenty-first century.

One of the most significant dimensions of this engagement concerns the Arctic. Climate change has transformed the Arctic from a remote environmental concern into a strategic geopolitical frontier. Melting ice caps are opening new shipping routes, increasing access to natural resources and intensifying competition among major powers. While India is not an Arctic state, it has steadily expanded its presence in Arctic governance through scientific missions, research stations and participation in the Arctic Council as an observer.

The Nordic countries are central stakeholders in Arctic governance. India's outreach to them reflects an understanding that future debates over maritime access, environmental protection and resource governance will increasingly shape global politics. International law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), will become crucial in managing competing interests in the region. By strengthening ties with Nordic countries, India is attempting to position itself as a legitimate stakeholder in these conversations before the Arctic becomes fully securitised by great-power rivalry.

This matters because the Arctic is no longer just an environmental issue. It is becoming a test case for whether international law can regulate emerging geopolitical competition in fragile ecological zones. India's participation signals that non-Arctic states, too, seek a voice in shaping the norms governing these global commons.

Another important dimension of Modi's Nordic diplomacy concerns climate governance. Nordic countries have long been pioneers in sustainability regulation, renewable energy transitions and environmental standards. As the global economy moves toward carbon-conscious trade frameworks, these regulations will increasingly influence international commerce and industrial policy.

For India, this presents both an opportunity and a challenge. The European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), for instance, reflects a growing trend in which climate policy and trade policy are becoming deeply interconnected. Environmental standards are no longer merely domestic regulatory choices; they are

evolving into instruments that shape market access and international competitiveness.

India's engagement with Nordic states therefore goes beyond clean energy partnerships. It reflects an effort to understand and influence the legal frameworks that will govern future trade. Whether in green shipping, sustainable infrastructure or carbon accounting, the next phase of globalisation is likely to be regulated through climate-linked legal obligations. Countries that fail to adapt risk exclusion from emerging economic networks.

The Nordic outreach also intersects with another major global debate: digital governance. India has increasingly projected itself as a leader in digital public infrastructure through initiatives such as UPI and Aadhaar-linked governance systems. At the same time, Nordic and European states are shaping global conversations around data privacy, artificial intelligence regulation and digital sovereignty.

This creates both convergence and tension. Europe's regulatory approach, reflected in frameworks such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), prioritises privacy protections and institutional oversight. India, meanwhile, seeks a more developmental and state-driven digital model that balances innovation, public service delivery and strategic autonomy.

The legal questions emerging from these differing approaches are profound. Who controls cross-border data flows? How should artificial intelligence be regulated? Can digital sovereignty coexist with open digital trade? These are no longer technical policy matters; they are becoming foundational questions of international law and governance.

India's Nordic engagement thus reflects an attempt to shape these debates rather than merely react to them. As digital governance becomes central to economic power and national security, partnerships with technologically advanced democracies gain strategic significance.

The geopolitical context of the visit is equally important. The Russia-Ukraine war has fundamentally altered Europe's security architecture. Traditionally neutral Nordic

countries such as Finland and Sweden have moved closer to NATO, reflecting a broader collapse of the post-Cold War assumption that economic interdependence alone could guarantee stability.

India's position in this evolving landscape remains distinctive. New Delhi has sought to preserve strategic autonomy by maintaining relations with both Russia and Western powers. This balancing approach has sometimes generated criticism in Europe, particularly among states that view the Ukraine conflict through the lens of territorial sovereignty and international legality.

Yet India's Nordic outreach suggests that strategic autonomy does not necessarily imply strategic isolation. Instead, India appears to be building flexible partnerships based on issue-specific cooperation rather than alliance politics. This reflects a broader trend in contemporary international relations: the rise of "minilateralism," where states cooperate through smaller, purpose-driven coalitions instead of rigid geopolitical blocs.

Such arrangements may increasingly define the future of global governance. In a fragmented international order marked by weakening multilateral institutions and intensifying great-power competition, middle powers are seeking pragmatic and adaptable partnerships. India's engagement with the Nordic region fits squarely within this evolving diplomatic logic.

Ultimately, Modi's Nordic outreach should be understood not as a peripheral diplomatic exercise but as part of India's larger attempt to navigate a rapidly changing international system. The central contests of the coming decades over climate governance, digital regulation, Arctic access and strategic alignment will be fought as much through legal norms and regulatory institutions as through military or economic power.

For India, the challenge is no longer simply securing a seat at the table. It is helping shape the rules themselves. That is why the Nordic connection matters.

From a legal standpoint, India's approach to Nordic engagement is grounded in principles firmly embedded in international law. India has consistently upheld the sanctity of state sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, and the peaceful

resolution of disputes, all of which are foundational pillars of the United Nations Charter. These commitments are not merely rhetorical; they are reflected in India's decades-long support for multilateral treaty regimes, including UNCLOS, the Paris Agreement and the World Trade Organization's dispute settlement framework.

As one of the world's largest democracies and a founding member of several key international institutions, India occupies a legally legitimate position in advocating for reforms to global governance structures that better reflect contemporary geopolitical realities. The existing international legal order, largely designed in the post-1945 era, increasingly struggles to accommodate the interests of emerging economies. India's engagement with Nordic nations, who are themselves influential architects of international regulatory frameworks, offers a constructive path toward co-authoring more equitable and representative legal norms.

India's legal tradition, rooted in constitutional pluralism and judicial independence, also positions it as a credible partner in advancing rule-of-law frameworks internationally. In a world where the legitimacy of multilateral institutions is under strain, partnerships between established legal democracies and rising powers committed to rules-based conduct are indispensable. India's Nordic outreach is, in this sense, as much an assertion of legal identity as it is a diplomatic one.

(Abhinav Mehrotra and Biswanath Gupta are associate professors at OP Jindal Global University. The views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost's views.)