

Guest Editorial

The European Union: A Key and Reliable Partner in the Arctic and Beyond*

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The Arctic is being qualified as one of the most dynamic areas of geo-politics in the last five years. Nevertheless, in general the Arctic file is not very well-known. The Arctic is mostly associated with the image of ‘polar bears on melting ice’. It is usually not associated with a region of four million inhabitants, parts having vibrant cities, lively communities with a rich cultural heritage, universities and industrial parks, a changing region that has such a global impact, not least on climate change. It is also not well-known that the European Union (EU) has an Arctic Policy and even less that the EU is strongly engaged on the Arctic.

Why is the Arctic of such strategic importance for the European Union? Because the EU is an Arctic entity, parts of the EU being part of the Arctic. In other words, the EU is *in* the Arctic; it is not an ‘outsider’ or ‘near-by’. This is not a purely ideological issue. It implies that EU’s expertise in setting high level standards in areas such as fishing, climate change, the safety of shipping, off-shore drilling, as well as environmental protection, applies to the European Arctic. It means that the EU is playing a constructive role in the Arctic in providing solutions to the many challenges of the Arctic. Moreover, what happens in the Arctic, impacts on the whole Union, and vice-versa. A number of EU activities and decisions leave a foot-print in the Arctic. For example, the EU is a major consumer of fish and energy products from the Arctic, European companies invest in the region and there is increasing tourism. Equally, dramatic effects of climate change on the eco-systems and the people living in the Arctic are negatively impacting the whole EU. And finally, the Arctic is of growing strategic interest, as the geo-economic and geopolitical implications of the warming-up of the Arctic, are impacting directly EU’s internal and external policies.

* To whom it may concern: it is with regret that the publisher and the editors of the European Foreign Affairs Review have received proof of a serious lack of academic rigor by the author of an article published in 2013 (European Foreign Affairs Review, Volume 18, Issue 3, pp. 419–477). In response to this finding, a clear breach of our policies on professional ethics and against our high integrity standards, it has been decided to retract the relevant article from the publication. We are committed to do all that may be reasonably expected to guarantee the quality of the journal contributions and to avoid future similar cases.

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Today, a key element of EU's Arctic policy is in the European Union's Global Strategy of 2016.¹ Under the heading 'A Cooperative Arctic', it explicitly states that 'with three Member States (*Finland, Sweden and the Kingdom of Denmark*) and two European Economic Area Members (*Norway and Iceland*) being Arctic States, the EU has a strategic interest in the Arctic remaining a low-tension area, with ongoing cooperation ensured by the Arctic Council, a well-functioning legal framework, and solid political and security cooperation. The EU will contribute to this through enhanced work on climate action and environmental research, sustainable development, telecommunications and search and rescue, as well concrete cooperation with Arctic states, institutions, indigenous peoples and local communities'. The focus is on constructive cooperation, which is the cornerstone of EU's Arctic Policy.

The EU has a long engagement in Northern and Arctic matters with the Northern Dimension Policy starting in 1999, and with more than two decades successful collaboration as a member of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, focussing on cross-regional cooperation, people-to-people contacts, and joint-projects in the field of environment, including addressing nuclear-waste in the Russian Arctic.

The EU's current Arctic policy dates from 2016, with its Joint Communication on 'An integrated European Union policy for the Arctic'.² This policy states from the outset that 'a safe, stable, sustainable and prosperous Arctic is important not just for the region itself, but for the European Union and for the world. The EU has a strategic interest in playing a key role in the Arctic region'. EU's Arctic Policy is a comprehensive policy, although it has also its limits.

1 EU'S ARCTIC POLICY HAS THREE PILLARS

1.1 FIRST PILLAR: TO COUNTERACT CLIMATE CHANGE AND SAFEGUARD THE ARCTIC ENVIRONMENT

Major transformations of the Arctic are taking place now: the Arctic is heating up twice as fast as the rest of the world, with new records being noticed daily. Researchers just found out that permafrost, which is soil frozen for ages in the Arctic, is thawing seventy years earlier than predicted. The Arctic fragile environment is heavily affected by pollution, stemming from other parts of the world. The Arctic Ocean has the highest concentration of micro-plastics among the world's oceans. Because the Arctic is warming up, the Arctic itself becomes a contributor to global warming.

¹ EU Global Strategy June 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/eu-global-strategy_en.

² European Commission, *An Integrated European Union Policy for the Arctic*, JOIN (2016) 21 final (Brussels, 27 Apr. 2016), http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/arctic_region/docs/160427_joint-communication-an-integrated-european-union-policy-for-the-arctic_en.pdf.

The Arctic is part of the EU's wider efforts to combat climate change, is part of EU's commitment to implement the Paris Agreement and other multilateral environmental agreements. The EU encourages the full respect of the United Nations Convention of Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which includes the obligation to preserve the marine environment. Ample EU legislation, such as to reduce air pollutants including black carbon, and its strategy combatting plastic pollution, are part of EU's engagement to protect the Arctic environment.

Science, research and innovation are fundamental to our response to better understanding the changing Arctic. The EU is a major investor in Arctic research under its Horizon2020 program. The EU actively promotes and facilitates international scientific cooperation, through supporting transnational access to Arctic research infrastructure and open-data resources. The EU contributes to climate-change observation, to Arctic shipping safety and monitoring environmental performance via EU's Space Programs. Well-known are Copernicus, Europe's eyes on Earth, and Galileo, EU's Global Satellite Navigation System. They provide precious Earth observations data and services with direct benefit for researchers and end-users in the Arctic.

The EU is very proud having co-organized together with Germany and Finland, the Second Arctic Science Ministerial in Berlin (October 2018), a clear example of science in action, of close interaction between politics, science and the people living in the Arctic, contributing with their traditional knowledge. Indeed, the Arctic poses challenges, which only the scientific community can navigate. Science enables knowledge-based policy decision, and this is why research plays such an important role in policy-making in the Arctic.

1.2 SECOND PILLAR: PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AND AROUND THE REGION

The EU has a strategic interest that economic activities in the Arctic are taking place in a sustainable way. Halting economic development in the Arctic is not a realistic option. But key is that it is done in a sustainable, a responsible and environmentally sound manner. Essential is to find the right balance between safeguarding the Arctic's fragile environment, the need to protect, and allowing smart economic development and growth, with due account to local and indigenous peoples' rights.

The EU contributes to enhancing the economic, social and environmental resilience of societies in the Arctic. EU's cohesion policy supports investments as well as capacity building in the European Arctic, with emphasis on research and innovation, competitiveness of small and medium enterprises and supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy. With its research programs, the EU stimulates the deployment of innovative technologies in the Arctic for cleaner energy, cold-climate

technologies and more sustainable tourism. An important aspect of sustainability is promoting more connectivity within and outside the Arctic. This will be a continued focus of EU's Arctic policy also in future, as Arctic stakeholders want the EU to do more in promoting in particular digital connectivity.

1.3 THIRD PILLAR: ENHANCE INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION ON ARCTIC ISSUES

The challenges affecting the Arctic, and the solutions required to address them, require a joined-up response at regional and international level. Wider geopolitical dynamics may add further complexity.

The EU has a strong interest in the Arctic remaining a zone of constructive international cooperation, where complex issues are addressed through negotiated solution, through cooperation and not confrontation.

Therefore, the EU is actively engaged on matters of direct relevance to the Arctic at international level via the UN and its specialized Agencies, such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the International Maritime Organization. The EU also actively participates in the Arctic Council, the primary, but not exclusive forum for international cooperation in the region, by – for example, contributing to the work of relevant working groups, task forces and expert groups.

The EU is actively engaging with all Arctic stakeholders: with Arctic States, which have the primary responsibility for tackling issues within their territories. Equally important is to engage with non-Arctic partners that take an increasing interest in the Arctic. This is needed to ensure a maximum of cooperation to address global challenges such as climate change, and to ensure the respect for international law. Arctic cooperation should be inclusive. Therefore, we firmly believe that Arctic cooperation should not only be preserved, but also be expanded, including with 'new' actors, who are increasingly engaged on the Arctic, also because it is our common responsibility to preserve it. Last but not least, the EU actively engages with Arctic indigenous peoples and local communities to ensure that their voice is heard and rights are respected.

We are very pleased that Finland as EU's Council Presidency (July–December 2019) – inspired by their successful Arctic Council Chairmanship (2017–2019), assumes a leading role in strengthening the EU's Arctic policy.

Looking ahead, there are certainly new developments, not least because the Arctic is changing dramatically, which will have to be taken into account when reflecting on EU's future Arctic policy. However, it is my conviction that the three pillars of EU's current Arctic policy will remain as solid, relevant and necessary as ever. We will continue to actively engage with the people of the Arctic – next major encounter is the EU Arctic Forum in Umeå/Sweden (3 October 2019). But adjustments might be

needed, particular to address the major geo-economic and geo-political consequences of the warming up of the Arctic.

The main geo-economic implications of the changing Arctic are well-known: easier access to the region's rich natural resources, especially energy and minerals; the opening up of 'new' shipping routes along the Northeast and Northwest passages for business, trade and tourism; and more possibilities to step up connectivity. These new opportunities are attracting increased interest globally. These developments also have the potential to affect energy markets, trade and shipping globally.

The step from geo-economics to geo-politics is small. The Arctic is being described as 'one of the most secure regions in the world'. The Arctic is indeed an example of constructive cooperation. Yet, increased economic activity in the region, and linked to it the possibility of increased competition, disputes and even conflicts in Europe's Far North, cannot be ruled out. The biggest threat to security, is possibly the spill-over of conflicts from outside into the Arctic.

Recent developments confirm that geo-politics impact also on the Arctic. The Arctic is not immune to such developments. And, as said by a Finnish politician, you cannot put a 'do not disturb' message upon the Arctic. Peace and security in the Arctic cannot be taken for granted, and needs constant hard work, close cooperation and enhanced dialogue, in order to preserve it.

This is why, to my mind, any future EU Arctic Policy will have to address the geo-economic developments in the Arctic, ensuring consistency of its Arctic policy with other EU policies. It will also need to address geo-political dynamics. The Arctic will certainly have an increasingly important role in EU's foreign and security policy. The EU should systematically address the Arctic when interacting with relevant third parties. As expressed by the EU High Representative Mrs Mogherini, 'the Arctic is also crucial in terms of regional and global security and is a strategic component of our foreign policy'. This will only be reinforced in future, being faced with an increasingly complex and unpredictable global environment.

In brief, the Arctic is much more than 'polar bears on melting ice'. The Arctic is local and global. It plays an essential role in addressing global challenges such as climate change. A safe, stable, secure, sustainable and prosperous Arctic is important, not just for the region and its people, but also for the European Union and for the world. And that is why the European Union cares, why it has an Arctic policy, why it is strongly engaged, and why the EU is a key and reliable partner in and for the Arctic.