

The EU's Arctic Policy: Between Vision and Reality

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Executive Summary

- > The EU's Arctic policy statements have so far been primarily aggregations of existing actions, wrapped in high-level rhetoric.
- > EU policy-makers have not yet developed a convincing Arctic narrative to broadly engage the European public in Arctic matters.
- > Although no dramatic changes took place in the Arctic in the last years, security questions and high politics have become more visible.
- > The current main themes of the EU's Arctic policy – climate, sustainable development and international cooperation – should be kept. Climate change should not be the only pillar of the EU's Arctic engagement. Policymakers need to propose concrete future-oriented actions for issues such as marine litter. At the same time, the EU should not openly raise security questions.
- > To operationalize its policies, the EU should reconsider the current institutional set-up of its Arctic policy, including ways to involve the European Parliament and making internal long-term coordination more effective.

The European Political Strategy Centre – the European Commission's in-house think tank – has recently produced a foresight analysis, proposing the renewal of the European Union (EU)'s Arctic policy (EPSC 2019). One of its key recommendations is to prepare a new Joint Communication on Arctic matters. This policy brief adds to the ongoing discussion by considering whether such a document is needed at this time and how it could differ from previous EU Arctic statements. First, we present a brief history of the EU's Arctic endeavour and consider new developments – including geopolitical changes – in the region since the latest EU-Arctic policy statement adopted in 2016. We then reflect on possible ideas for a future policy statement (a new Joint Communication), and conclude by assessing policy options and their respective limitations.

Ever since 2007-2008, the EU's main institutions have developed a dedicated set of Arctic-related documents, defined positions and expressed the EU's very own 'Arcticness' (Raspotnik 2018). By 2019, ten Arctic policy documents have been produced: three (Joint) Communications by the Commission (and the High Representative – HR); three related Conclusions by the Council; and four Resolutions by the European Parliament (EP). Essentially, these documents identify the EU as part of and linked to the Arctic, affecting and affected by the Arctic. The latest rendition of the Commission and HR, issued in 2016, was structured around three broad themes:

- Climate change and safeguarding the environment;
- Sustainable development in the (European) Arctic;
- International cooperation on Arctic issues.

Visible from these three priority areas, the EU's Arctic policy covers a vast spectrum of domains – of both internal and external nature. This ranges from the EU's climate change mitigation actions to protecting the regional environment, from sustainably exploiting the region's resources to fostering economic growth in the European Arctic, and from participating in international Arctic cooperation to the engagement with the Arctic's Indigenous Peoples. Accordingly, the Arctic policy umbrella attracts a broad range of different stakeholders and opinions on the region's future.

Although EU officials have aimed to integrate these various policy fields into one overarching approach, the results have largely remained a mere aggregation of keywords. The various policy statements are mostly focused on identifying existing EU Arctic-relevant actions, while simultaneously formulating overarching abstract objectives (Kobza 2015; Stępień et al. 2016). The result has been high-level rhetoric, which is in stark contrast to the limited and rather superficial interests in Arctic matters across Europe, and especially within the EU.

Another implication of the broad yet marginal character of the EU's Arctic policy continues to be the difficulty in clearly stating the EU's northern ambitions and further developing a convincing EU-Arctic narrative. Considering the current status of regional development and the EU-Arctic nexus, one needs to ask if any 'Arctic narrative' currently exists that is legitimate, but also compelling and engaging (Stępień & Raspotnik 2015).

The Arctic setting: all quiet on the northern front?

When pondering whether the EU should re-visit its policy towards the Arctic, we first need to reflect if anything has changed in the region since the EU's last policy document issued in 2016.

For Fridtjof Nansen, the famous Norwegian explorer, “the history of Arctic discovery shows how the development of the human race has always been borne along by great illusions” (Nansen 1911). Analysing Arctic developments, one is constantly confronted with widespread illusions about the region's present and its immediate future.

“There is an ongoing difficulty to develop a convincing EU-Arctic narrative.”

When an average European thinks about the Arctic, climate change and its implications are likely to be among the key notions. Therefore, one might think that ‘climate change’ and the EU's self-proclaimed leadership in climate change mitigation could constitute a convincing narrative that attracts broader European attention. This should be especially the case in the current political context: after a decade of being outperformed by economic, financial and migration-related crises, climate change appears to gradually return to the focus of public attention. In the Arctic, global warming occurs two times faster than on average globally, making the region climate change's ‘canary in a coal mine’. However, the root causes of this transformation – greenhouse gas emissions – originate from outside the region. Thus, little mitigation can specifically be achieved via a distinct Arctic policy that aims to ‘mitigate climate change’. At the same time, some Arctic stakeholders including regional authorities, business representatives and even some indigenous politicians are concerned that economic development in the region may be unjustly hindered – as compared to other regions – due to the symbolism of the Arctic in global climate debates. Thus, if ‘climate change’ cannot be the sole axis of the EU's Arctic discourse, one may wonder which other options for building a convincing narrative exist. Would addressing other, more indirect implications of global warming – economic opportunities, resources and security questions – be more appealing?

Starting from 2006-2007, many analysts have argued that the Arctic would become the world's next energy frontier as well as the new ‘Mediterranean/Suez’ connecting Europe and Asia – a transformation driven by the accelerated melting of the Arctic Ocean sea ice, coupled with globalization and optimistic estimates of the region's hydrocarbon potential. With the Arctic coastal states – Canada, Denmark (via Greenland), Norway, Russia and the United States – placing the Arctic on their domestic and foreign policy agenda, also non-Arctic states and

entities, such as the EU, China, Japan and Korea, discovered their ‘Arcticness’. The world's next geopolitical conflict over territories, resources and influence was assumed to be around the corner (Raspotnik 2018).

In contrast to climate change impacts on the environment and Arctic livelihoods, the predicted economic boom and Arctic conflict have not materialized so far. However, that does not mean that economic development, strategic interests and high politics are absent from the Arctic region. In fact, the Arctic landscape is changing.

While it is unlikely that major transpolar shipping lanes and massive offshore oil exploitation emerge in the region in the near term, gradual economic developments and sea-borne exports of Arctic resources are on the rise, primarily within and from the Russian Arctic (Stępień et al. 2016). Furthermore, the international community was recently reminded of the existence of Arctic high politics by the confrontational tone of US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, who expressed concerns regarding Chinese regional activities and Russia's encroachments over the freedom of navigation along the Northern Sea Route (NSR). The Trump administration's disruptive politics have indeed reached the Arctic.

Despite justified criticism about the aggressive tone and the speech's inappropriate timing – right before the Arctic Council's Ministerial Meeting in Rovaniemi (Finland) in May 2019 – the concerns expressed by Pompeo are not completely far-fetched. Russia is the key Arctic state and the EU's most important neighbour. There is clear willingness to selectively engage with Russia in the Arctic. However, the country's gradual military build-up in the region and new rules for foreign vessels traversing the NSR are sources of anxiety also in EUrope. Similarly, there is a degree of suspicion regarding increasing Chinese activities in the Arctic, which include shipping, research and resource cooperation with Russia. Although many stakeholders see Chinese financing as beneficial for the capital-poor region, others are concerned about the potential influence gained via such investments. And yet, apart from taking part in Russian oil and gas developments, Chinese presence in the Arctic still remains relatively modest.

Furthermore, the Rovaniemi Ministerial Meeting added a new source of disquiet about the region's future. The Arctic Council is one of the key pillars of a peaceful and cooperative Arctic. For over a decade, this forum for Arctic cooperation has been pervaded by climate work. However, at present, the Trump administration is against even uttering climate change language, which led – for the first time – to the failure in adopting a ministerial declaration in Rovaniemi. This might well be a sign that Arctic politics are facing some sort of a tipping point.

These challenges, among many others, are also highlighted by the EPSC (2019). The Strategic Note “Walking on Thin Ice: A Balanced Arctic Strategy for the EU” builds on the notion of a

global power shift in international politics and economics, notably with the rise of China. This global transformation is also manifest in the Arctic, resulting in increased strategic importance of the region. With the region expected to become a(n even) hot(ter) topic in the coming decades, it is suggested that the EU should develop its own strategy for the future of the Arctic. Inferring from the EU's Arctic past, one may wonder what such a 'strategy' could look like. Does naming an accumulation of policies a 'strategy' effectively make a difference? Or would such a re-branding remain the continuation of a well-known Arctic catchphrase-collecting story?

Moving forward: options and non-options

A new document: need and purpose

Considering the lessons from the 2016 Joint Communication, a new policy statement is likely to remain broad and – as indicated above – built around three familiar themes: climate change, sustainable development and international cooperation. Hence, 'nothing new on the northern front'. And yet, there are good reasons for drafting a new document. *First*, the process of putting together an EU Arctic policy statement is an important and rare moment for internal reflection that brings together different European actors around Arctic topics. *Second*, a new document, notwithstanding its content, would communicate the EU's continued Arctic commitment towards regional partners and stakeholders, as well as the EU's own public. *Third*, there is a number of emerging issues that should be considered in an updated document, such as bioprospecting, marine litter or more controversial questions related to hard security. *Fourth*, the adoption of a new document would allow for reconsidering whether the existing Arctic policy coordination set-up – with Arctic work currently being led by the Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE) and the European External Action Service (EEAS) – is still the most appropriate one in light of new Arctic challenges and the broad scope of the EU's Arctic policy. Below, we discuss these issues in greater depth.

New topics, new focus?

With the EU's Arctic policy already including a broad spectrum of issues, we recommend that policy-makers agree on a short list of concrete future-oriented new actions and initiatives, rather than expand the well-known Arctic shopping list. Climate change, sustainable development and international cooperation appropriately constitute the current set of themes. References to regional climate change impacts should be used more courageously to enhance the EU's overall climate action. However, the EU should avoid suggesting that human activities in the region need to be limited merely because of the Arctic being a 'symbol of global heating'. Supporting sustainable development, especially in the European Arctic, requires concrete new actions, not just naming available sources of funding. A short list of tangible actions could include emerging issues like

the problem of marine litter and microplastics pollution, the opportunities and risks related to bioprospecting, challenges pertaining to Arctic youth, or broader questions of digitalization and urbanization processes in peripheral regions. The problematic issue to debate rather concerns international cooperation, and whether – or how – to deal with Arctic high politics and related security questions.

Keeping quiet again on hard security?

It is certainly beneficial for EU policy-makers to be aware of geopolitical and economic developments in the Arctic (Keil & Raspotnik 2014). Especially Chinese investments, joint projects between China and Russia and Russian attempts to increase control over navigation in its exclusive economic zone are sources of anxiety in Europe. However, it remains questionable whether the expression of such concerns should be part of an updated EU Arctic policy document. There are limited benefits of outlining these issues openly, risking that such statements may artificially fuel conflict narratives and discourage the EU's Arctic partners.

**“Expressing security concerns
may fan the flames.”**

Instead of such open statements, the EU could attempt to establish bilateral dialogues with China and Russia under a specific 'Arctic umbrella'. Interest on the Russian side may be limited, but the EU should at least express its openness to selectively engage with Russia in the Arctic and propose a related roadmap with relatively uncontroversial topics to discuss, including environmental cooperation or cross-border business linkages. A separate EU-Arctic dialogue with China may raise concerns among Arctic actors. Hence, any closer cooperation and future engagement between the EU and China in the Arctic should be transparent and focused on areas where both actors can be of benefit for the region, such as research, logistics or climate change mitigation. With regard to Arctic cooperation troubles, the EU is unlikely to have leverage when it comes to shielding collaboration from US climate change denialism. The only options are to maintain involvement in the activities of the Arctic Council at the working level and use other platforms to facilitate climate change assessment activities that cannot be carried out under the Arctic Council umbrella in the current political climate.

A different institutional set-up?

The recent EP elections hold a certain disruptive potential for the EU's political system, with the new EP bound to be younger and greener. This might elicit new Arctic interest among MEPs. Similarly to the EPSC (2019), we therefore propose a stronger role for the EP in shaping Arctic policy.

Generally, a strengthened role for the EP is certainly appropriate in light of enhancing the legitimacy of EU Arctic policy. However, ideas about what the Arctic is are so broad within the EP that, at least so far, the four EP Resolutions (2008, 2011, 2014 and 2017) were merely compilations of thematically very diverse paragraphs. At the moment, it is difficult to imagine of how the Commission could find guidance in such Resolutions.

Thus, we recommend the Commission and the EP to find informal ways of working *together* on developing *one* short list of concrete future-oriented actions and initiatives. In this vein, a true inter-service and -institutional group, involving a triangle of the Commission, EEAS and EP, could be envisaged. When it comes to the Commission's own set-up, DG MARE currently shares coordination responsibilities with the EEAS, an arrangement based on the Integrated Maritime Policy origins of the EU's Arctic endeavour back in 2006/2007. However, at present among the key elements of the EU's Arctic policy are regional development in the European Arctic and the financing of innovation and research funding. Despite all of these sectors holding some maritime component, one should honestly scrutinise the 'Arctic leadership' by DG MARE before drafting a new document. Might a different DG be better suited to lead the Arctic debate within the Commission?

Currently, the EU's Arctic policy is a cross-sectoral one and any coordinator needs to deal with issues outside of their policy comfort zone. The fact that DG MARE has been associated with Arctic issues for over a decade has an intrinsic value. However, a high turnover of officials responsible for the Arctic within DG MARE has hampered institutional memory and led to the perception of policy transience among Arctic stakeholders. It would be beneficial to allow a small team to work on Arctic issues over longer terms, thereby acquiring good understanding of the related work by their colleagues from DG CLIMA (for Climate Action), DG MOVE (for Mobility and Transport), DG REGIO (for Regional and Urban Policy), etc.

Yet, whatever the institutional set-up, EU policy-makers engaged in Arctic affairs should make greater efforts to ensure that specific Arctic concerns are included in concrete sectoral decision-making, funding distribution via interregional and cross-border programmes and investment financing, or regulatory impact assessments when the Commission produces new policy and legislative proposals that may be Arctic-relevant. That seems to already work well with regard to the Arctic's place in the EU's research policy. Yet, this is particularly important in areas where EU legislation can affect the EU's environmental footprint in the Arctic, as is the case of its clean air policy, which may limit the amount of black carbon reaching northern latitudes from Europe.

A process as important as the outcome

Formulating a relatively coherent policy towards a large transnational region is a difficult task, perhaps even a mission impossible. On the one hand, there are multiple disconnected

policies, initiatives and actions, as well as various stakeholders who have little in common apart from being placed under a regional umbrella. This is not only an Arctic problem, as for instance the EU's macro-regional and sea basin strategies share similar characteristics. On the other hand, the region and thus its policy occupies a relatively marginal place in the EU's policy system, attracting limited genuine (i.e. non-superficial) attention. Defining a clear, convincing narrative while at the same time maintaining a balance between different interests and expectations is a formidable challenge. However, this brief shows that a key value of the EU's Arctic policy is the Union's chance to regularly reflect on its 'Arcticness', engage with regional and Arctic-relevant stakeholders, and rethink its influence and presence. The *process* of finding a convincing narrative is perhaps as important as the appropriate phrasing of policy statements. What the EU needs is to boost the ongoing Arctic policy-making process, which can be achieved by 1) creating more continuity and institutional memory due to a long-term involvement of policy officials, 2) further enhancing inter-service communication, 3) better involving regional stakeholders, and 4) trying to propose a set of tangible actions related to areas such as specific changes in intraregional funding distribution or even concrete project proposals, means for enhancing EU Arctic research funding, and specific new financing options for European Arctic projects. An ongoing reassessment is crucial in times of Arctic change, with the region's geopolitical scene becoming populated by new actors and regional cooperation being threatened by climate change denialism. An Arctic-minded EU will not solve all of the regional issues on its own, but it can certainly support activities and initiatives that could carry Arctic cooperation through difficult times, such as Arctic climate change projects, continued generous funding for Arctic research, or the fostering of bilateral relations with key Arctic actors.

A visionary Arctic policy for the 21st century?

From an EU perspective, the Arctic could be much more than what it currently is, namely a marginal policy area wrapped up in high-level rhetoric. One might contemplate if the Arctic can eventually be a laboratory for a stronger, more coherent, truly supranational EU foreign policy. Could the EU's Arctic policy be one that looks not only five years ahead, but 20, 30 or even 50? One that puts the future of the Arctic in the context of broader global developments beyond the 'simple' melting of the region's (sea) ice and 'old-school', geopolitical security concerns, addressing issues such as global developments tackling the nexus of climate change, migration and demographic changes, or the future of food production and artificial intelligence? While necessary to pose, these are not questions to be answered here. Maybe instead of only retroactively addressing the challenges arising from Arctic change, the region and its peripheral status could provide ample food for thought about our future in times of lacking global visions.

Further Reading

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