

The Great Illusion Revisited: The Future of the European Union's Arctic Engagement

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Keen observers of Arctic news headlines must have recently been amazed by the European Union edging again towards the Arctic stage. Despite our world being stymied by a sub-microscopic infectious agent, headlines on the future of the EU's Arctic policy become more frequent—albeit starting from a rather low level of frequency. This brief takes advantage of an emerging EU-Arctic momentum and the future of the EU's Arctic engagement by re-considering the EU's Arctic status quo, the geopolitical realities of a new Arctic policy and the distinct role of the European Parliament in this policy-making process.

Connoisseurs of the EU's past Arctic endeavours are well aware of the region's marginal importance in day-to-day EU-ropcean political life. Although a dedicated set of Arctic-related documents has been developed by the EU's main institutions since 2007-2008, the region has not yet gained a [prominent place](#) in the hallways of Brussels. But the Union's geographic and strategic blind spot is in a state of flux, literally due to global climate change but also figuratively due to increased global awareness. As once [famously put](#) by former Norwegian foreign minister Jonas Gahr Støre: "Geography is changing – even though we cannot change geography."

However, change is not only inherent in any system. It is also in the eye of the beholder, not only with regard to what is changing but also in how one distinguishes between minor change from fundamental change, trends from transformations, and perceived change from real change. This holds particularly true for the Arctic region and the European Union's perception. A key value of the EU's Arctic policy and its several updates is the Union's chance to regularly reflect on its Arctic commitment, engage with regional and Arctic-relevant stakeholders, and re-think its influence, presence and interests. First signals towards another recalibration of the EU's Arctic policy are currently set. A new Special Envoy for Arctic matters has started his work in April this year; a [public consultation](#) on *the way forward for the European Union's Arctic policy* has been launched by the Commission and the EEAS in July; a [study](#) assessing the EU's regional ecological and economic impact is conducted and also the EP has recently released an [analysis](#) on *a balanced Arctic policy for the EU*. Most importantly, almost a year ago, the Council invited the Commission and the High Representative to update the EU's Arctic policy in light of (perceived) shifts in Arctic geopolitics and economics. We should also not forget that Ursula van der Leyen initially branded her

Commission to be a *geopolitical* one, which might suggest mobilising the EU's [soft power instruments for harder power projection](#) on a changing world stage.

An update is the act of making something more suitable for use by adding new information or changing its design. Yet, what does that mean for the future of the EU's Arctic policy? In answering this question, three aspects should be highlighted. First, a lack of internal attractiveness and external recognition continues to impede the EU's Arctic engagement. Second, providing new information needs to reflect the changing geopolitical realities of and in the Arctic, perceived or real. Third, the European Parliament can give directions to a new Arctic policy document with a geopolitical touch.

The Brand Image Problem of the EU's Arctic Engagement

The EU is an Arctic actor. Its Arctic policy documents have convincingly demonstrated the EU's very own *Arcticness* – from the Union's geographical and functional Arctic presence to a monetarized (= funding for regional development and research) and ecological (= EU-rope's Arctic footprint) presence, to highlight a few. There is currently also good awareness of Arctic realities and sensitivities among the handful of EU officials who are directly involved in Arctic affairs. Moreover, and probably most importantly, the EU has followed its own Arctic instructions by making strong commitments in areas that are essential to the EU's Arctic policy. The European Green Deal might cross one's mind first. However, also the EU's budget has seen specific items aimed for the development of Northern regions, and Horizon Europe, the EU's next funding programme for research and innovation (2021-2027) is shaped to comprehensively cover Arctic (research) needs. Ever since the last policy document on the Arctic from 2016, the EU has continuously re-confirmed itself as an Arctic actor, making space now for a new policy statement in 2021.

And yet, the EU's Arctic engagement has a serious brand image problem, both internally and externally. Internally, the Arctic and everything involved remains a marginal topic, despite the broad array of decision-making powers and autonomy the EU holds in Arctic matters. Although the EU has in fact greatly contributed to production (via research funding) and aggregation (via various assessments, reports and [coordination](#)) of knowledge about the region, this information is not necessarily absorbed by all relevant policymakers and does not facilitate any kind of broader attention in Brussels. Externally, a lack of regional recognition still undermines the EU's Arctic appearance. This might be inherent in the EU's multi-level institutional set-up and the related complexity in the interplay between the supranational and the intergovernmental level. The special nature of the EU as a political animal *sui generis* and the complicated division of competences between the EU and its Member States are not only difficult to grasp publicly but are also challenging to integrate into – for example – the Arctic Council's *modus operandi*.

On top of that, [actorhood requires conditions](#) that are favourable for the attainment of a goal – an opportunity, the necessity to act or even a certain attractiveness that goes beyond simple recognition. Apparently, it is difficult for the EU to convince both a broader EU-ropean and Arctic audience on why and how enhanced involvement in Arctic affairs is required, and what role the EU could play for the future of the region.

Which Arctic are we talking about?

In a [similar brief](#) from September 2019, Adam Stępień and I argued that ‘an update of the EU’s Arctic policy has to be based on realistic foresights and the acknowledgement of the actual role of the EU in the region and its capability to make a difference.’ Here, I want to provide some food for reflection on the EU’s Arctic capabilities considering recent developments.

A recurring topic of the EU’s Arctic policy, and analyses thereof, concerns the geographical reach of such policy. Should it predominantly focus on the European Arctic, cover the entire circumpolar North, or be a mixture of both? Inevitably, arguments can be found for all three perspectives. Given the complexity of the Arctic one wonders though if a single Arctic policy is simply too small for an area of 14,5 million km². In the end, the EU holds its strongest presence in and is [most closely connected](#) to the European Arctic. In many ways, the European Arctic is the most significant region in the Arctic. Its eastern part – the Barents region – covers northern Norway, the two Member States Sweden and Finland, as well as north-west Russia, inhabits about 5,5 million people and holds solid economic prospects concerning the exploitation of resources (oil, gas, mining, forestry, etc.), maritime transportation and tourism. As home to the Northern Dimension and the Barents Cooperation it also has a long, and rather successful, history of cooperation efforts and policies with Russia. The European Arctic’s western part comprises Norway, the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland and is often illustrated as EU-rope’s gate to the Arctic Ocean, with rich (and sustainable) fish stocks, and a high potential in the aquaculture and mining industry.

So far so good, however, a truly geopolitical European Union might consider the entire Arctic as a region to advance and meet its global strategic objectives, from ensuring the security of its citizens and territory, to targeting governmental, economic, societal and climate/energy fragility and to supporting cooperative regional orders based on international law. Or in the words of the [2016 Global Strategy](#):

(...) 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 & rescue, as well as concrete cooperation with Arctic states, institutions, indigenous peoples and local communities.

One can assume that an updated EU Arctic policy will remind an international audience of the Union’s Arctic objectives and competences, and will be [built around](#) the three familiar themes of climate change, sustainable development and international cooperation. Thus, a mixture of covering challenges in both the European and broader Arctic region – a sustainable and [low-tension Arctic as the Union’s key priority](#). The public consultation process as well as the new footprint assessment will further provide updated, and maybe also new information on the EU’s comprehensive engagement in and with the region. So, what is new on the EU’s northern front?

A Changing European Union in a Changing Arctic

The Arctic has changed since the EU’s last policy document was issued in 2016, and frankly, so has the European Union. The Arctic remains ground zero of climate change and fairy tales about an Arctic economic boom resurface every few months. Arctic cooperation is still considered a

successful, international example of cooperation efforts between stakeholders that all share the basic interests to preserve and protect the Arctic environment and to promote sustainable regional development. Arctic security challenges tackle questions of climate change and environmental protection and are not primarily discussed in terms of overlapping territorial claims and spheres of influence. And yet, Arctic high politics exists and the region is increasingly becoming [a focal point of great power competition](#), or at least the perception thereof. This does not concern rivalries *over* the Arctic region itself but increased global geopolitical tensions between the US and China, Russia and the 'West', all with specific Arctic references. Most [prominently expressed](#) by US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, and his concerns regarding Chinese regional activities and Russia's encroachments over the freedom of navigation along the Northern Sea Route. Moreover, we also observe an increasing military rearmament, large-scale military exercises by both Russia and NATO, and incidents of GPS jamming in Northern Norway or hacked e-mails of Members of the Norwegian Parliament. The world is about to get less multilateral and more multipolar, and the Arctic is in the thick of it.

The last five years have also brought substantial change to the European Union. Brexit might be the most tangible one, with yet to be defined implications for the EU's Arctic presence. But the EU has also felt the need to gradually [adapt its posture](#) on the increasingly conflicted world stage, be it because of emerging great power rivalry, a changing transatlantic relationship, a more assertive China or its continuous clashes with Russia. EU Member States become more sceptical about China's global intentions, [leading to a new convergence](#) of EU-rope's assessment of the challenges China poses to the Union. In a post-Crimea world, EU-Russia relations have shifted from [fostering interdependence to managing vulnerabilities](#). The Ukraine crisis has affected [the EU's understanding of its role in international relations](#) with diplomats in Brussels and EU-ropean capitals having started to embrace the idea that the EU must have a more strategic and geopolitical approach in its foreign policy. Ursula van der Leyen spoke of a geopolitical Commission and French President Emanuel Macron [argued](#) for a more decisive European Union with geopolitical awareness.

Geopolitics is nothing new to the European Union. Over the last years, the EU has steadily developed a [tacit geopolitical discourse](#), exhibiting international ambitions alongside its own conceptualization of world order, core values, rule of law and good governance. From civilian to [regulatory](#) or market power – the labels of such *geopoliticised* European Union are plentiful. As such, also the Global Strategy changed the EU's own perception to that of a [power broker](#), keen on defending its own interest, insisting on principled pragmatism in foreign policy and strengthening third countries' resilience. Thus, van der Leyen's geopolitical Commission did not come as a surprise, despite critics rightly pointing to internal weaknesses and lacking competences that continuously affect the international effectiveness or enforcement of truly EU-ropean actions in case of crises; Libya, Ukraine, Belarus or Nagorno-Karabakh to just name a few.

In an Arctic context, considerations on matters of (soft) security have a long history for the EU. Both the establishment of the Barents Euro Arctic Council back in 1993 and the introduction of the Northern Dimension were aimed to foster the relations with Russia in order to mutually tackle a broad range of security challenges in the European Arctic. Yet, over the last few years hard security issues have only been mentioned in a [general, implicit way](#): the strengthening of low-level regional and multilateral cooperation, the allegiance to international legal order and the vision of a

cooperative Arctic that is not affected by any spill-over effects. The Global Strategy took the same line, highlighting the Arctic as one potential venue of selectively engaging with Russia. Yet, the European Union [is increasingly aware](#) of the Arctic's changing geo-political dynamics and the need to address those in light of regional and global security considerations. Also, both [Germany's updated Arctic policy](#) (August 2019) and [France's Defence Policy for the Arctic](#) (October 2019) specifically respond to the changing security aspects of the Arctic.

Given the notion of a geo-strategically changing Arctic coupled with great-power politics, one wonders about the European Union's related reaction in its next policy update. And what could the European Parliament's specific role be in this respect? An institution that has often been bolder (or more naïve) in its Arctic statements as compared to its institutional counterparts. Could the EP be of help to mobilise the EU's existing soft power instruments to further promote Arctic stability?

What role for the European Parliament?

Generally speaking, the [EP's Arctic voices](#) tend to yield more controversies and are less coherent than policy statements issued by the Commission/EEAS and the Council. Especially in the early years of the EU's Arctic policy process, considerations from the European Parliament and those of its Members have often raised eyebrows among Arctic stakeholders – be it the push for the infamous seal ban or discussions on an Arctic Treaty and moratoria on hydrocarbon exploitation. Yet, the EP has often pushed the EU's Arctic policy to move forward and for example continuously called to develop a comprehensive Arctic 'strategy'.

Raising its Arctic voice is of key importance to the EP. On an individual level, the Arctic and related matters of combatting climate change or environmental and animal protection, is a relatively low-hanging fruit for some MEPs to gain votes within their electorate. Moreover, as knowledge on Arctic matters is rather limited, those MEPs are easily to be considered opinion makers, offering an often-unique chance to influence and define policy. On a broader level, the declaratory and political nature of EP resolutions allows for its representatives to take more ambitious, outspoken and at times controversial or confrontational stances, as compared to other EU institutions. Thus, the continuous engagement with Arctic issues is not only important for the European Parliament and some of its MEPs to continuously re-define its regional voice, it is also essential to acknowledge the Union's normative and decisional supranationalism. This relates in particular to the Arctic, as its policy touches many aspects of both internal and external relevance/competence for the EU.

Accordingly, one wonders if the EP could not sow the seeds for a more ambitious geopolitical European Union, using the Arctic as case study and test ground to frame an EU-uropean narrative fit for tomorrow's power politics? This would start with specific discussions on [Chinese localisation tactics in Greenland](#) to the EP asking the Commission/EEAS for a comprehensive security analysis of the Arctic and ends with a future- and goal-oriented, honest assessment of what the EU can and wants to achieve in the circumpolar North. There are good reasons for the rather timid coverage of the security angle in the last policy statements. Yet, a policy that aims to fully integrate all Arctic concerns should explicitly recognise the *strategic* importance of the Arctic, examine the new geopolitical realities and present clear and ambitious EU-uropean goals – despite this might giving rise to negative responses from Arctic states.

As such, the EU could also convincingly tackle matters of key importance, such as an Arctic-based selective engagement with Russia. Could the European Arctic be an area where the EU could seek talks with Russia based on its [continuing northern cross-border bond](#) and a [potential willingness](#) on the part of Russia? The peripheral Arctic might be the venue where the EU and Russia find common ground again, not only improving their relationship but also promoting Arctic stability. Using the Arctic as arena for renewed relations, or at least talks thereof, might have positive spill-over effects on other areas of dispute. As such, the Conference of Arctic Parliamentarians and the active engagement of the European Parliament might offer an opportunity to promote and actively engage in related, behind-the-door-talks? Given the current world situation and the EU's Arctic history, this might be naïve, but a policy that [separates regional from systemic components](#), sustainable development and environmental protection from questions of hard security, offers the opportunity to delineate clear and ambitious goals for the EU's Arctic involvement. The European Parliament could complement the other institutions to adapt a more strategic mind-set and breaking down policy silos, starting with the Arctic region.

Arctic Geopolitics the EU-ropean Way

If the European Union aims to become a truly *geopolitical* Union it needs to learn the [language of power](#) by translating its economic and soft power into strategic leverage. In an Arctic context this means, among others, a concrete understanding of the security concerns (some) Member States have, the definition of strategic goals and an assessment on how the Union's economic and soft power could address and tackle future security challenges. A security analysis of the Arctic might also reveal the potential for the EU to be at the forefront of developing new regional means of 'geopolitical cooperation'. This could provide impetus to properly manage the growing global interest in Arctic matters and counteract emerging global geopolitical competition that also affects the Arctic. Over the last ten years, we have seen a European Union that has fulfilled its Arctic commitments, from funding research to fostering ocean governance, from supporting sustainable development to promoting international cooperation. A European Union that seems to be satisfied with its Arctic status quo. However, if change is indeed inherent in any system, we might also see a European Union that aims to leave its Arctic comfort zone based on a geopolitical strategy the EU-ropean way – if Arctic states like it or not.

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