

## EU Commission unveils first ever official Arctic policy

Written by Martin Banks on 28 April 2016 in News  
News

The EU's newly-unveiled Arctic policy says that Brussels regards Russia as an important ally in the Arctic.



The Commission makes this clear in its proposal for an Arctic strategy, published on Wednesday.

The EU's first ever official Arctic policy is designed to guide the bloc's actions for the coming years.

It states that "the challenges affecting the Arctic, and the solutions required to address them, require a joined-up response at regional and international level."

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The policy, outlined by the Commission and EU foreign affairs chief Federica Mogherini, says the EU "should cooperate with all Arctic partners, including Canada, Russia and the United States with a view to identifying further areas for cooperation."

The stated willingness to work with Moscow comes despite the tense relationship between the EU and Russia. This has resulted in EU sanctions against Russia over its role in the Ukraine conflict.

Reacting to the new policy, ECR MEP and Chair of Parliament's SINNEA (Switzerland, Norway and the EU-Iceland and EEA JPCs) delegation, Jørn Dohrmann, points out that Russia's military activity is not mentioned or accounted for in the proposal.

He says: "The EU and Russia have had previous cooperation on the Arctic - yet it is extremely remarkable that the proposal does not take any note of Russia's extensive military activity in the Arctic, which has increased significantly in recent years."

The Danish member said, "The relationship between the EU and Russia, when it comes to the Arctic, is mutual. Russia has great interests in gas and oil, but this also creates the need for cooperation on research, rescue operations at sea, and on environmental issues".

He adds, "Conversely, the EU's ambition for more engagement in the Arctic forces it to keep on good terms with Russia. This is particularly the case in order to become a full observer in the Arctic Council, where Russia is a member with veto power, but also in general because the Arctic is one of the last remaining international fora where dialogue between the EU and Russia is still open."

The strategy says the EU should engage with the region on three priority areas: climate change and safeguarding the Arctic environment; promoting sustainable development in the region and supporting international cooperation on Arctic issues.

It says member states should consider establishing a working party on Arctic matters and Parliament might consider establishing a delegation on Arctic matters and northern cooperation.

The communication, which comes eight years after the last informal one, sets out a "more coherent framework" for the EU's Arctic engagement.

It aims to channel European resources in order to contribute to creating jobs and growth while safeguarding the Arctic's natural environment.

The policy, a joint initiative by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission, also seeks to give a strong signal that the EU is committed to the Arctic and remains engaged and ready to take its responsibilities to the region seriously.

It says, "A safe, stable, sustainable and prosperous Arctic is important not just for the region itself, but for the EU and for the world. The EU has a strategic interest in playing a key role in the Arctic region.

"EU engagement is important. Building on previous initiatives this communication sets out the case for an EU policy that focuses on advancing international cooperation in responding to the impacts of climate change on the Arctic's fragile environment, and on promoting and contributing to sustainable development."

On the environment, it says, "In recent years, the Arctic's role in climate change has become much more prominent. The Arctic is warming at almost twice the global average rate. Whereas in the past attention focused almost solely on the effects of climate change in the Arctic, more recently there has been growing awareness that feedback loops are turning the Arctic into a contributor to climate change. Understanding these dynamics, and helping to develop specific strategies to mitigate and adapt to climate change in the Arctic, will form part of the EU's wider efforts to combat climate change."

It goes on, "Given the important role of Arctic as a regulator for the climate of the planet and acting as a sink for long-range pollution, the EU has a duty to protect the Arctic environment and strengthen ecosystem resilience. The EU should also promote sustainable development in the Arctic."

In recent years, the communication says the Arctic has acquired a higher profile in international relations due to its increasing environmental, social, economic and strategic importance and the EU should contribute to enhance the safety of navigation in the region.

"The EU will continue to engage with Arctic indigenous peoples and local communities to ensure that their views and rights are respected. The EU should support the deployment of innovative technologies in the Arctic and should be committed to working closely with member states on oil and gas activities to promote the adoption of the highest standards of major accident prevention and environmental control."

It says that Arctic inhabitants increasingly suffer from high levels of pollutants and heavy metals that end up in the Arctic's food web, adding, "The EU should continue to support work at international level to prohibit or phase out the use of persistent organic pollutants in the environment between now and 2020."

In recent years, several member states have also issued Arctic policy documents, with an Italian strategy being the latest one.

The Italian policy states, "The government will keep on supporting the national research centres currently engaged in the Arctic and will promote a growing awareness of Arctic-related themes by civil society."

Separately, in a letter to Miguel Arias Cañete, European Commissioner for climate action and energy, three Norwegian government ministers have asked for a "clear message from the Commission that natural gas remains important for the EU's energy mix."

The letter states, "Norway is a large supplier of oil and gas to the EU and the development of the Energy Union is therefore of great interest and relevance to us. By replacing more carbon intensive coal, gas can deliver emission reductions quickly. Natural gas can also provide necessary flexibility in a power system where intermittent renewable energy sources increase their role."

Renewed commitment to the Arctic, say the Norwegians, would be a welcome signal for Norwegian investment in exploiting the untapped gas resources in the Barents Sea.

"A considerable share of our untapped gas resources is located in the Barents Sea. Additional gas export capacity from the Barents Sea will be decided during the next decade."

## **About the author**

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