

EU Arctic strategy: What exactly is in it?

Written by Jørn Dohrmann on 9 May 2016 in Opinion
Opinion

The EU Arctic policy makes for interesting reading, but perhaps what is most interesting is what has been left out, says Jørn Dohrmann.



The European Commission has, at last, published its first ever policy paper on the future of EU involvement in the Arctic.

As Chair of Parliament's SINEEA delegation, which deals with Arctic issues, this is something I have been looking forward to with great anticipation. The Arctic is a political playing field that, in years to come, will only grow in importance; not simply for the EU and the Arctic states but also for the majority of the dominant figures in international politics.

The US currently chairs the Arctic Council and as such obviously holds an interest in the harsh and inaccessible area, not least because of Russia's own ambitions regarding the region. The same goes for other Arctic nations such as Scandinavia and Canada, but also China, which has expressed great interest in investing in the extraction of mineral resources in Greenland. Other Asian economic powers are also showing interest in the region.

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The EU has finally determined that geopolitical developments call for some sort of European strategy for the Arctic. The policy paper highlights three main features on which the future of EU policy will rest: climate change and environment, sustainable development and international cooperation.

The paper's content certainly makes for interesting reading, but I believe that what has been left out is equally important. When I was asked to write this article, I decided to outline three key points that are either missing or barely feature in the new strategy.

One thing that some will likely find remarkable is the fact that Russia is only briefly mentioned. This may seem odd, given that the Kremlin has been heavily re-arming its Arctic regions, with billions of euros being invested in military equipment and bases.

Some of the more pessimistic pundits and scholars think that Russia's mobilisation should be considered aggressive action. Therefore, they may wonder why this has not been mentioned in the paper.

However, an important interpretation that can be extracted from this is that Russia has deliberately not been mentioned as an opponent, but rather as a political partner in an Arctic context.

Russian activity in the Arctic is closely tied with its desire to intensify the production of oil and gas in the area. Such investments are not only expensive, but also technically challenging.

The Russians will need the EU and the remaining Arctic nations for cooperation on scientific research, search and rescue missions and other daunting tasks. The Commission knows this. There is no need to spark diplomatic tensions in one of the few diplomatic fora where Russian talks are still healthy.

The policy paper also says the EU should support the Arctic's local and indigenous populations. The question of how to do this is another issue. Communication is tricky in many Arctic regions, where internet hotspots and connection are either poor, expensive or both.

Helping develop telecoms in the Arctic could potentially substantiate the framed ambition of helping out locals. For example, in terms of public health, the harsh Arctic environment and long distances make it hard for many inhabitants to efficiently seek out medical attention and advice. Better access to communications would make it easier for locals to seek medical attention online.

Increased vessel activity will only continue to grow in Arctic waters. Therefore, access to quick and modern communication options will be crucial. Access to a stable internet connection will be especially important if the Commission wants to intensify its scientific research in the Arctic.

This is why it is surprising, even disappointing, that no such considerations have been brought up by the relevant DGs.

The paper carefully sums up the different economic and political frameworks under which the EU can work together with its partners. Yet no Arctic nations are being given any special attention.

Other than climate change, concrete challenges such as socioeconomic problems or Russian military activity have elegantly been left out of the text. All together this signals - to me at least - that the EU is eager to pursue its status as a fully-fledged observer in the Arctic Council.

Taking sides and touching concrete issues that are delicate to individual members of the Council, will not ease this process, due to the veto right of each member. The EU has already experienced diplomatic difficulties in its Arctic relations in the past with Canada, over a seal skin ban.

The Commission wants to play an active role in the Arctic in the years to come. For this, it must make sure every Arctic player is happy - even Russia.

About the author

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