

## EU Arctic policy requires a soft, objective approach

Written by Jørn Dohrmann on 9 July 2018 in Opinion  
Opinion

The key word when developing the EU Arctic policy must be 'neutrality', argues Jørn Dohrmann.



Jørn Dohrmann | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

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As the world's superpowers turn their attention to the Arctic, the EU has begun to mobilise politically in this increasingly important region. As a geopolitical arena, the Arctic is both complex and unique.

It is the only part of the world that touches three continents - Canada, the US, Russia, Norway, Iceland and EU member states Finland, Denmark and Sweden are all Arctic nations with political ambitions for the area.

With ice retreating as a result of global warming, new sea routes are now forming, as well as opportunities to explore fields of energy such as oil and natural gas. With these new doors of economic opportunity opening, other political heavyweights such as China and Japan, are looking to

make their mark on the region.

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The Arctic is a melting pot of power brokering. It is becoming harder to identify where countries' sympathies lie and it therefore seemed natural for the EU to move towards shaping a policy for the Arctic.

Following calls from the last Parliament, the Commission finally presented its communication on an Arctic policy in the spring of 2016. It is divided into a number of policy fields, including foreign affairs.

One element that really stood out was the approach of taking a neutral stance. At the time, the EU was in the midst of a crisis with Russia as a result of the annexation of the Crimea peninsula in Ukraine.

Because of the political situation back then, and Moscow's military expansion in its Arctic regions, one might think the Commission would deem it imperative to highlight a potential Russian military threat in the Arctic. However, wisely, it did not, because while there will always be a risk of military confrontation in the Arctic, the probability of such an event is not likely.

The area's geographical composition makes it difficult for any political actor to go it alone. The need for multilateral cooperation on environmental preservation, R&D efforts and search and rescue missions outweighs whatever gains anyone might find in military actions.

The Parliament's initiative report, which followed the Commission's communication, delivered the same approach. I am happy with that. I believe neutrality is the key word for the EU in the Arctic. If the EU wants to have a say in the Arctic domain, it must be careful not to try and claim ownership over the region.

This was almost the case when Parliament's draft report condemned Arctic oil exploration. In principal, I do not necessarily support new oil excavations in the Arctic, but the EU needs to understand that meddling in sovereign decisions taken by national states in no way benefits an overall EU strategy.

History has shown this consistently. When the EU introduced its sealskin ban, Canada blocked the decision to grant the European Union observer status in the Arctic Council. Canada has since removed its veto, now Russia is blocking the decision.

The EU needs to take a soft, objective approach. It should seek to deliver political support to Arctic states on preservation and development, not by forcing its way to the table but through offering its expertise in research, science and regional development. This way, the EU can become a trusted confidante for the Arctic nations.

## About the author

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