

## A holistic EU Arctic strategy

Written by Jari Vilén on 9 July 2019 in Opinion  
Opinion

The impact of global warming is shaping the geopolitical future of the Arctic; the EU must be fully involved, writes Jari Vilén



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This year marks 20 years of EU engagement with the Arctic region.

The EU's latest Arctic Joint Communication, published in 2016, strikes a delicate balance between the EU's three priorities in dealing with the Arctic: responding to climate change and safeguarding the environment; promoting sustainable development in and around the region as well as international cooperation.

In addition, "research, science and innovation [...] will play a key role across all three priority areas".

Yet in recent years, the Arctic region has become one of the most significant geopolitical and geo-economic areas in the world due to accelerating climate change.

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With Arctic sea ice melting at an unprecedented rate, the region is becoming a source of acute global concern.

In parallel, melting sea ice makes the Arctic's vast natural, mineral and hydrocarbon resources increasingly accessible.

This opens possibilities for a logistical hub of global significance to develop in and around the central Arctic Ocean.

These developments have prompted increasing interest from a growing number of countries, notably Russia, China and the United States.

The current US administration holds peculiar views on climate change and views China's ambitions in the Arctic with suspicion.

The US objectives in the region are security and stability, safeguarding US national security interests and international cooperation.

Meanwhile, Russia's strategy in the Arctic appears to be multifaceted, comprising elements of geopolitical competition as well as international cooperation.

Moscow views the Russian Arctic as key to its future economic growth; it contains abundant mineral and hydrocarbon resources, and the Northern Sea Route (NSR) linking Europe to Asia is a potential source of national and regional development.

Russia sees the NSR as internal waters subject to its jurisdiction. Therefore, it is erecting a panoply of regulatory and administrative barriers to foreign navigation along the route.

It is also rapidly upgrading logistical infrastructure in the region and rebuilding its nuclear-powered icebreaker fleet.

Lastly, the Kremlin has engaged in a large-scale military build-up in the region designed to guard the NSR and its resources, creating concern among its neighbours.

“With Arctic sea ice melting at an unprecedented rate, the region is becoming a source of acute global concern”

For any potential gains to materialise in the Russian Arctic however, Moscow needs the region to remain a stable, secure and investment-friendly area.

In addition, foreign technologies and capital are necessary to access and extract its Arctic resources.

Moreover, it is in Russia's own interests to uphold existing international law, which protects Moscow's claims to the hydrocarbons located in Russian waters; it is therefore committed to keeping the Arctic a region of peaceful cooperation.

Russia and China cooperate in the Arctic, notably in the fields of transport, research, energy, tourism and environmental protection, but their respective interests are not fully aligned.

A self-styled "near-Arctic state" with the ambition of becoming a "Polar power", China considers that "the Arctic is a global issue that cannot be left to Arctic states alone" and seeks international cooperation in the region for mutually beneficial outcomes.

It has therefore successfully sought observer status at the Arctic Council, the region's main platform for multilateral cooperation and coordination.

China also recognises international law. Yet unlike Moscow, it expects freedom of navigation to apply along the NSR.

Indeed, the NSR is, in Chinese strategic thinking, the "Polar Silk Road" of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and is therefore of strategic importance.

Thus, Chinese investors have expressed interest in participating in several infrastructure projects, including in EU Member States. Beijing also recognises the need to give priority to environmental protection.

"Now more than ever, EU and global action is needed to keep the Arctic cool – both figuratively and literally"

Accordingly, non-binding guidelines for a "green Belt and Road", published in 2017, state the aims of preserving the health of oceans, maritime ecosystems and biodiversity and strengthening international cooperation on climate issues.

The Arctic's increasing profile in international politics means it must also have greater importance among the EU's future policy priorities.

The delicate balance between environmental protection and sustainable development must be preserved. At the same time, the EU must increase its international role in the region.

It should develop a multifaceted Arctic strategy covering all relevant policy areas, and systematically take account of the Arctic when engaging stakeholders – states, nonstate actors and local communities– and in relevant international negotiations.

The EU should therefore continue its selective engagement with Russia in areas of common interest – notably peace and security, environmental protection (particularly black carbon emissions), research, management of shared fish stocks, transport, search and rescue as well as nuclear safety.

The EU should also open a dialogue with China to address common interests such as peaceful cooperation, climate change and connectivity.

The EU should seek engage with the US on the Arctic but must not shy away from climate change or other difficult issues.

The Arctic has become a focus of climate change and of international politics. Now more than ever, EU and global action is needed to keep the Arctic cool – both figuratively and literally.

### **About the author**

Jari Vilén is European Commission ambassador and senior adviser for arctic policy

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