

## A new Arctic strategy for the EU: maritime security and geopolitical signalling

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# SWP Comment

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## A New Arctic Strategy for the EU

Maritime Security and Geopolitical Signalling

*Michael Paul*

The European Union is an Arctic actor with a long record of engagement. Climate change and safeguarding the Arctic, sustainable development and international cooperation are the priority areas guiding its Arctic policy and its numerous projects in the region. Although the Union lacks formal observer status in the Arctic Council, member states Finland, Sweden and the Kingdom of Denmark are members of the body, along with Iceland and Norway, which are members of the European Economic Area and participate in the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation.

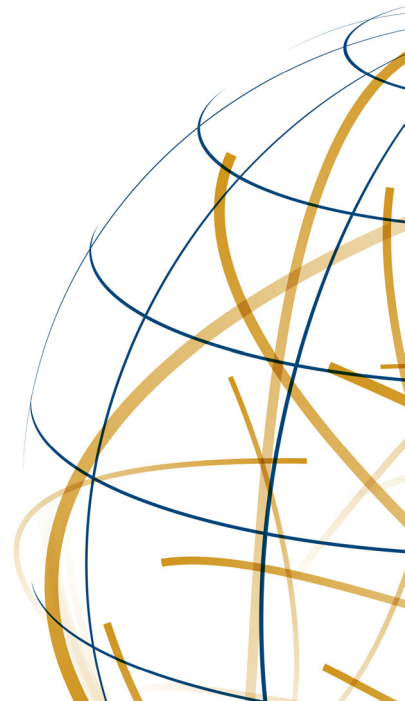
Whereas the environmental and sustainability elements spelled out in the Commission's communication of 2016 remain highly relevant, the region's growing geopolitical significance makes the lack of a security policy component an increasingly pressing concern. This should therefore be addressed in the EU's new Arctic policy, which is currently being finalised after the public consultation ended in November 2020. Maritime security offers a tested and appropriate field for expanding EU engagement.

The dramatic impacts of climate change create huge challenges across the Arctic, which states seek to address in their respective Arctic strategies. As the Commission communication of April 2016 notes, it is "more important than ever to ensure that the Arctic remains a zone of peace, prosperity and constructive international cooperation". The document does not, however, say how this is to be achieved in practice.

Over the past three years numerous states – and in one case multiple ministries and several branches of the armed forces – have published new Arctic strategy documents. In 2019 France, the

United States (Navy, Coast Guard and Pentagon), Germany and Canada issued new or updated strategies. The US Air Force, Russia, Sweden, Norway and Poland followed suit in 2020. In January 2021 the US Navy and US Marine Corps published a joint strategy document, closely followed by another from the US Department of Homeland Security. India has placed a draft Arctic Strategy on the internet for discussion; Denmark, Finland and Switzerland are expected to follow in the course of 2021. The European Commission plans to publish its own new Arctic Policy in the autumn.

The number of new strategy papers is striking enough in itself. Those published



to date also embody a significant shift in content, with all except India's placing greater emphasis on security risks or mentioning the topic for the first time. One reason for this is Russian military activities, which may be understandable from the Kremlin's perspective but have unsettled other Arctic states and created a security dilemma. The extent to which the Sino-Russian cooperation will also develop a military aspect in the Arctic is another uncertainty. When Russia assumes the chair of the Arctic Council at the May 2021 ministerial meeting in Reykjavik it will also have to address the resulting conflict potential.

## Arctic Security Policy Challenges

All the Arctic states want the circumpolar region to be a space of peace, stability, cooperation and low tension. The risk of escalating conflict remains small but does exist. Many of Russia's military activities and ambitious arms projects can be attributed to its self-understanding as a great power, its safeguarding of economic interests and its desire to be treated as an equal by the United States and its NATO allies. The Arctic and the North Atlantic area are an important part of Moscow's overall strategy and the Kremlin is not unaware of the growing conflict potential.

Aggressive rhetoric and activities notwithstanding, Russia's strategic objectives in the region are fundamentally defensive and stem from a persistent sense of vulnerability. But Moscow has neglected to foster understanding for its Arctic policy through transparency and confidence-building. Instead it is perceived as an aggressive military power riding roughshod over the security interests of other countries. Its Arctic neighbours respond by expanding their military capacities and preparing for potential conflict. In that respect the situation has changed fundamentally over the past decade: the Arctic has lost its exceptional character as a zone of peace and cooperation.

Ten years ago, Sweden's strategy for the Arctic still rested on an assessment that the "current security policy challenges in the Arctic" were "not of a military nature". "In bilateral and multilateral contexts", it concluded, "an approach based on a broad concept of security" should be emphasised and "the use of civil instruments is preferable to military means". Alongside the necessity for peace and security, the new strategy paper of November 2020 underlines the "new military dynamic in the Arctic region". Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines of August 2019 dedicate an entire chapter to the security dimension and call for "more intensive involvement in the security policy implications of the Arctic on the part of the EU and NATO". French Defence Minister Florence Parly noted in 2019 that heightened competition between states in the region was a major new challenge that could one day lead to confrontation. In her foreword to the French strategy document Parly quotes Michel Rocard, former French prime minister and French Ambassador for International Negotiations on Arctic and Antarctic: "It's a second Middle East!" These statements underline the extent to which geopolitical change and insecurity characterise the current situation.

The EU's new Arctic Strategy will therefore need to address security. For Brussels this means a balancing act between Arctic and non-Arctic states, EU and NATO states, geopolitics and geoeconomics, high expectations and inadequate capabilities. The upshot is a multitude of conflicting goals.

## The EU's Place in the Arctic

At the beginning of the five-year cycle, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen pledged to lead a "geopolitical Commission". "Europe must learn the language of power", she declared in a keynote speech on 8 November 2019 in Berlin. That also meant "building our own muscles [in areas] where we've long been relying on others – for example in security policies." But Brussels is in no position (nor is it willing) to

balance a weakening America, an ambitious China and an aggressive Russia. That would overstretch the Union and require more — especially military — power resources than is currently politically realistic or realisable. As Michael Mann, the EU's Arctic envoy since April 2020, put it: "We are not hard security providers, and we don't have anything approaching a European army, so, for us, the idea of security includes things like health issues, environmental issues and search-and-rescue."

In light of the geopolitical shifts, no new Arctic Strategy can afford to ignore the security challenges and the necessary conclusions — as the Swedish case demonstrates. So what contribution can the EU make, assuming it wishes to stay the multilateral course of cooperation without ignoring the risks?

Maritime security is a field where the EU's recognised abilities match a well-known need in the region. The measures laid out in the European Union Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS) serve capacity-building and resilience against external interference, and contribute to enhancing maritime, aviation and satellite awareness. Here the Arctic suffers significant deficits, while the EU has a wealth of practical experience to contribute: The growth in Arctic shipping is associated with risks that need to be addressed, from marine invasive species as an environmental problem to the prospect of foreign fishing fleets presenting challenges for the coast guard. As already laid out in the EU's strategy of 2016, maritime security needs to be improved.

For example better maritime domain awareness (as a decisive component of EUMSS) is needed to secure shipping routes. Currently communication coverage is patchy or entirely absent, making it difficult or impossible to deploy and coordinate search and rescue (SAR) teams when ships and their crews are in distress. Any vessel in trouble in the Arctic is in acute danger. As navigation increases the annual figure for incidents in the Arctic has increased from 28 (2007) to 71 (2017), mostly attributable to *mechanical failure*. The dearth of SAR per-

sonnel and resources means that managing risk is the best that can be done.

Maritime security demands a combination of soft and hard security resources. The EU member states already possess these in the Arctic — from shared norms to the means for satellite surveillance, coastal protection and naval operations. Here, however, the old problem of EU-NATO relations pops up: the potential for cooperation on maritime security is only sketchily defined, still less agreed and coordinated. One positive exception is the Baltic Maritime Component Command in Rostock, which will serve both NATO and the EU (though primarily the former), focussing on operations in the Baltic and NATO's northern flank.

## A Viable Strategy towards Russia

If the new EU Arctic Strategy is to give realistic guidance for the future it must address Russia both as a problem and a challenge (with and without China). European and Russian interests coincide in certain policy areas — even if prioritisations may diverge and the situation over eastern Ukraine and Crimea will dictate caution over any — even selective — engagement. But using the Arctic as an arena for renewing relations, might have positive spill-over effects on other areas of dispute. Russia will be interested in projects and scientific exchange as long as they are politically unproblematic (like Arctic scientific research and environmental projects). Its own agenda, however, foregrounds national security. When Russia assumes the chair of Arctic Council in May 2021, energy and military security will therefore be its priorities, while climate change matters tend to be secondary. But Russia is naturally also interested in enhancing SAR capabilities in the circumpolar Arctic and open to cross-border cooperation on environmental issues.

The European Union's broad spectrum of regional competencies, expert knowledge and existing initiatives can serve as a framework for putative joint projects. Its broader

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decisions and activities also directly impact the region's economic development. The EU is not least an important market for the Arctic energy and fisheries sectors.

Concretely, maritime security and safety offers a tried and tested field for cooperation, with projects like ARCSAR (Arctic and North Atlantic Security and Emergency Preparedness Network) supplying suitable examples. New projects could tackle Arctic infrastructure expansion. Given the grave infrastructure deficits, EU support would benefit international shipping, and European climate and environmental standards could be useful for both sustainable development and safeguarding the environment. A viable strategy will need to take this into account not only for regions adjoining the Russian Arctic and relations with Russia, but also for Greenland, whose Project Independence could give rise to new maritime vulnerabilities in terms of securing shipping routes and associated infrastructure.

Russia, for its part, will have to work during its upcoming Arctic Council chairmanship to reduce the growing conflict potential noted in its own Arctic Strategy. Continuing collaboration in the Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) and enhancing regional security dialogue are also in the interest of the new U.S. administration. An expert dialogue on Arctic military security could be initiated as a substitute for the Chiefs of Defence meetings that were suspended in 2014 – or as prelude to reactivating them. That could involve taking up the Recommendations of the NATO-Russia expert dialogue before potentially moving on to agree military rules of conduct for the Arctic, which could also include maritime security measures (like an Arctic Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea framework).

Then Finnish Prime Minister Antti Rinne said in October 2019 that “there should be more EU in the Arctic and more Arctic in the EU”, as the EU had a lot to offer the region. Brussels can contribute to maritime security and should also pursue an Arctic-

specific connectivity policy (digitalisation, navigation, logistics, transport). But the EU will not become an Arctic security actor in the foreseeable future, because it lacks the required military capabilities. In that light, the new EU-Arctic Strategy should include more maritime security and the European Global Strategy more Arctic – signalling a concrete expansion of its geopolitical scope.

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