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EU sets new course for the Arctic

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The European Union's strengthened engagement in the Arctic, presented on 13 October, marks two new directions in the Union's diplomatic positioning: a strategic and security turn, and the absolute priority given to the fight against climate change.

From the European Union's awakening to the Arctic issue in October 2008, with the resolution on the European Parliament's "[Arctic Governance](#)", to the Commission and High Representative's Communication on "[a stronger engagement by the Union for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous region](#)," presented on 13 October, there has been a long journey marked by the quest for a legitimate diplomatic position with the "[Arctic 8](#)", i.e. the eight Member States of the Arctic Council.

In successive resolutions, communications and conclusions[1] on the Arctic, the European Union has tried its hand at a variety of themes drawn from the Arctic Council's credo, steadily consolidating its case for the Union's legitimacy in Arctic affairs, even going so far as to delete from the website of the European External Action Service (EEAS) any reference to the European Parliament's 2008 resolution on 'Arctic governance', which irritated the Arctic coastal states[2] at the time because of its call for the opening of negotiations on an "[international treaty on the protection of the arctic environment](#)".

The European Union has spared no effort to win the favour of the Arctic 8 and to say the least, its efforts have not been rewarded. It has been begging the Arctic Council for an [observer](#) status for twenty-one years, while six Member States such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Italy have obtained it; this is a status that was refused first by Canada

because of European regulations on seal products and then by Russia because of European sanctions linked to the illegal annexation of Crimea and the deliberate destabilisation of Ukraine. And then there has been the age-old "*elephant in the room*" argument, which reflects the embarrassment of an 8-member Council of States regarding the idea of welcoming a 27-member supranational organisation into its midst. Since 2013, after thirteen years of not being granted an "*ad hoc observer*" status, the Union has enjoyed the special status of "*permanent guest*", which means that it can follow the Council's work, like the permanent "observers[3]" - but this is simply confirmation of humiliating discriminatory diplomatic treatment. This situation is especially surprising since three of the Arctic 8 are members of the European Union[4] and two are associate States[5] ; and all the more inappropriate given that, elsewhere in regional and multilateral fora dealing with Arctic issues, the Union enjoys membership status[6].

Although [the Union's intervention on 20 May last](#) at the 12th ministerial meeting of the Arctic Council in Reykjavik was a landmark event, facilitation by Iceland, which held the presidency until then, should be recognised rather than it being breakthrough in terms of settling the question of the EU's status as an observer. Diplomacy sometimes uses anti-phrasing, and beyond the polite words of the Joint Diplomatic Service's conclusion at this ministerial meeting - "*We wish the Russian chairmanship well and look forward to continuing our fruitful cooperation with the Council in the coming years*" - the new Russian chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2021-2023) means, at the very least, a freeze on the EU's bid for an observer status, if not more discriminatory treatment for the next two years. This is a useful base to decipher the EU's diplomatic positioning in its updated Arctic policy.

[1] Resolutions: [a sustainable European policy in the High North](#); the EU strategy for the Arctic; an integrated EU policy for the Arctic; security challenges : Communications : "The European Union and the Arctic"; «Developing a European Policy towards the Arctic Region: "An integrated policy for the Arctic".

Council conclusions of 8 December 2009, 12 May 2014, 20 June 2016, 21 November 2019 and 9 December 2019.

[2] USA, Canada, Denmark, Norway and Russia

[3] Since the ministerial meet of the Arctic Council in 2013, the status of "ad hoc observer" was abolished and the status of "permanent observer" became that of "observer" attributed to 13 States, 12 intergovernmental or interparliamentary organisations and 12 NGOs.

[4] Denmark, Finland and Sweden.

[5] Norway and Iceland.

[6] Euro-Arctic Council of the Barents Sea; Commission for the Management of Fisheries in the North-East Atlantic; Commission for Fisheries in the North-West Atlantic; Ministerial Conference on Arctic Science; EU Northern Dimension; etc.

Another interesting contextual element relates to the *modus operandi* followed by the EU to consolidate its policy in the Arctic. The [European Commission and the EEAS](#) chose to use a public consultation on the theme: "What do you expect from the European Union on the Arctic?" This consultation, launched on 20 July 2020, aimed to gather information on the strengths and weaknesses of the Union's policy in the face of the new challenges and opportunities in the Arctic region "with a view to a possible update of the approach in this area. The opinions we shall gather on a large scale through this consultation will allow us to prepare a solid strategy for the region", explained the Commissioner for the Environment, Oceans and Fisheries, Virginijus Sinkevičius.

At a time when civil society, and especially young people (Generation Climate, Youth4Climate, etc.), has taken up the climate challenge with fervour, it is easy to imagine the passionate opinions that could be gathered during this consultation, as this is a region of the planet that almost everyone has identified as a sentinel area for climate change. The European Union did not wait for this consultation to make the fight against climate change a priority of its Arctic policy, since it was already part of the 2016 integrated Arctic policy as one of its three priorities, along with sustainable development and international cooperation. However, with the new communication, it is important to consider the level of prioritisation given to the climate issue in relation to other Arctic priorities, as the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, warned that : updating the Arctic Policy will be part of the European [Green Deal](#). The EU's roadmap for reaching the target of ending net greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

It is in this double perspective of a laborious quest for a legitimate diplomatic positioning of the European Union in Arctic affairs, and of an alignment of its Arctic policy with the new climate legislation, that the strengthened engagement of the European Union on the Arctic should be addressed.

How does the Communication of 13 October 2021 mark a change in the EU's positioning in relation to

the 2016 Integrated Arctic Policy? The EU's stronger engagement regarding the Arctic is innovative, firstly through a number of concrete measures, in particular the creation of a European Commission office in Greenland[7] to "raise the profile of Arctic issues in the EU's external relations" and financial support for the green transition to benefit people[8] in the Arctic. To a large extent, the 2021 communication re-enacts the Arctic Council's repertoire of stereotypes (sustainable development, environmental protection, international cooperation, partnership with indigenous peoples, etc.). Two guidelines give this updated policy a bold and unprecedented positioning.

The first concerns the issue of fossil fuels in the boreal zone, which a report by the US Geological Survey, published in 2008, estimated to represent 13% of the world's undiscovered oil reserves and 29% of the world's undiscovered gas reserves. The European Union has never committed itself to condemning Arctic fossil fuels before. The European Union is now committed to "exerting pressure" (...) and, "building on the partial moratoria on hydrocarbon exploration in the Arctic[9], to ensure that oil, coal and gas remain underground, including in Arctic regions".

From the 2016 Communication to the 2021 Communication, the focus has shifted from promoting sustainable development in and around the Arctic, in line with the Arctic Council's credo, to urging an indefinite freeze on fossil fuel exploitation in the Arctic regions, the reception of which by the Arctic coal and hydrocarbon mining states is easy to imagine. The argument follows: "The European Union is a world leader in the fight against the climate crisis and biodiversity loss and is ready to assume its global responsibility through its new climate legislation in the run-up to the UN Climate Change Conference (COP). The legislative proposals in the Green Pact for Europe are at the heart of the EU's commitment to the Arctic".

Presenting the new communication, the Commissioner for the Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Virginijus Sinkevičius, explained that the European Union was determined to make the Arctic region a "sustainable and prosperous area, linking the Union's

[7] Greenland, an autonomous community of Denmark left the EEC in 1985. It is associated to the EU as a overseas country and territory. (OCT).

[8] Footnote of the [Ottawa Declaration](#): "The use of the term 'populations' should not be interpreted as having implications with regard to the rights attached to that term in international law".

[9] In parts of the USA, Canada and Greenland

commitment to the Arctic closely to our climate policy, the European Green Deal and its blue economy." Rather than consolidating or updating the EU's (regional) policy in the Arctic, which is part of the process of finding a legitimate diplomatic position that began in 2008, the new communication marks a shift, a new direction, which can be understood to be the alignment of Arctic policy with the new climate legislation.

To measure the audacity of a position like this, it is enough to recall that during COP21, the Arctic was presented as a sentinel region for climate change but was not concerned by the negotiations on an international treaty on climate change because it is not a greenhouse gas emitting area. The question remained: how to reconcile the challenge of reducing global greenhouse gas emissions with the development of new energy provinces in the Arctic regions? The European Union will answer this question in 2021, based on the International Energy Agency's report entitled "[Zero net emissions target for 2050](#)", published on 18 May: "*we no longer need new oil and gas fields as part of the trajectory towards net zero emissions*". The EU's strengthened Arctic policy is thus marked by a "*climate U-turn*^[10]" and a paradigm shift which gives absolute priority to the fight against climate change, to the detriment of other priorities, including sustainable development in and around the Arctic. The European Union knows that it will raise eyebrows, but it appeals to the higher reason: the coming decade is "*the decade when everything will be decided in the fight against the climate crisis and biodiversity loss*".

A second orientation gives the European Union's strengthened engagement in the Arctic a new positioning: the emphasis on a strategic dimension of the North Circumpolar Region. "*The Arctic region is of major strategic importance for the European Union*", announces the European Commission's press release, which takes up the first lines of the 2021 communication, an entire section of which is devoted to "*peaceful cooperation in the new geopolitical context*". In recent years, there has been a "*sharp increase in the number of countries with an interest in the Arctic regions*", which could ultimately contribute to the area being turned into "*a theatre of geopolitical competition*".

At the same time, "*military activities have increased significantly in many areas of the Arctic*", in particular, with "*the strengthening of military capabilities in the Russian Arctic*", which seems to "*reflect both strategic positioning on the world stage and domestic priorities*".

The United States, Norway, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Canada and Iceland are monitoring this situation closely, as is the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), "*so as to be able to respond to the increased assertiveness of the Russian presence in Arctic waters and airspace*". Finally, the Communication states that this new geopolitical context is also marked by China's growing interest in areas such as "*critical infrastructure ownership, submarine cable construction, global shipping, cyberspace and disinformation*". The 2016 EU Integrated Arctic Policy does not include any reference to a strategic dimension of the Arctic, let alone an open stigmatisation of Russia's military activities in the Arctic or China's strategic positioning along the Polar Silk Road. The choice has been made here to point bluntly, and without euphemism, to a geostrategic context that involves the security of European citizens. This approach contrasts sharply with the spirit in which multilateral diplomacy on the Arctic was developed at the end of the Cold War. Cooperation between the eight countries of the Arctic zone originated in the 1980s from the resolve to ward off the strategic past of the high latitudes of the Northern Hemisphere. The initiative came from the last president of the Soviet Union, Michael Gorbachev, who, in his speech in Murmansk on 1 October 1987, called for the creation of a regional cooperation body that would make the Arctic a demilitarised and nuclear-free zone of peace: "*Let the North of the globe, the Arctic, become a zone of peace; let the North Pole be a pole of peace!*"

Indeed, when it was established in 1996, the Arctic Council included in its [statutes](#) that the Council would not deal with "*matters relating to military security in the Arctic*" and, in the decades that followed, [each of the Council's meetings](#) has invariably been punctuated by the leitmotif of "*the Arctic as a pole of peace, stability and fruitful cooperation*". The European Union follows this line, and each of its communications includes a

[10] Even a "climate change U-turn".

couplet on *"the importance of maintaining the Arctic region as a secure, stable, sustainable and prosperous region"*, to quote the first sentence of the EU's 2016 integrated policy for the Arctic.

This strategic and security shift in European positioning in Arctic affairs is linked to the European Parliament's report on ["The Arctic: outlook, problems and security issues"](#) adopted on 7 October 2021, ahead of the finalisation of the Joint Communication of 13 October 2021. The report expresses serious concerns about the Russian military build-up in the Arctic, which is considered unjustified as it goes far beyond legitimate defensive objectives. MEPs are also extremely concerned about China's large-scale projects in the Arctic. *"Our perception of the Arctic needs to change urgently as the increasingly tense international situation forces us to rethink our policy"*, explained Anna Fotyga, [rapporteur and author of the report](#); *"The Union's new Arctic strategy must take into account the new realities regarding security in the region, growing geopolitical tensions and new actors such as China (...) Moscow is looking at the Arctic in the long term and is trying to impose a series of legal, economic and military facts. In this way, Russia is creating global tensions in a region that we want to preserve as an area of peaceful and fruitful cooperation."*

This analysis directly echoes NATO's outlook, which shows a renewed interest in the North Circumpolar Region. At the 2015 annual session, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg told the members of the Parliamentary Assembly: *"The North is of importance to all NATO countries, it is our common northern flank (...) We have to understand that Russia's posture is changing in this area"*.

By choosing to add a strategic priority to the European Union's Arctic policy, namely the development of a *"strategic perspective on emerging security challenges"*, even though the drafting authors were careful to present it as a *"priority 3 bis"*, so as to keep the structure of the 2016 integrated Arctic policy unchanged, the issue of international cooperation in the Arctic has changed shape and no longer covers the same alliances or the same political balances.

As long as the high latitudes of the northern hemisphere were considered a zone of low tension, to coin a phrase of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs^[11], international cooperation was mainly conducted in multilateral and regional diplomatic cooperation fora dealing with Arctic issues, first and foremost the Arctic Council, the intergovernmental forum of reference on Arctic issues.

As soon as the strategic dimension in the boreal zone became prevalent, to the point of threatening the security of European citizens in the region, international cooperation took on a security dimension and involved the NATO political and military alliance. This strategic dimension is contributing to the reshaping, and even a weakening, of the balance between Member States and Observer States in the Arctic Council. Of the Arctic 8, five are NATO members (Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and the United States) and two (Finland and Sweden) are partners benefiting from the 'new opportunities' programme, with Russia inheriting the figure of the *"Ennemi commun fédérateur"* (federating common enemy). The division between member and observer states in the Arctic Council has to reckon with the NATO format, where decisions are taken by consensus of the 30 member countries. This does not mean that the prerogatives of the Arctic countries (minus Russia) have been erased and, in the absence of a consensus among the Allies on the role that NATO should play in the Arctic, it is important to remember that NATO's role in the Arctic is not just a matter for the Allies, the [doctrine](#) that currently prevails is that *"NATO's Arctic countries take the lead, or even act alone, when NATO activities are conducted in this region"*.

With this new deal, the European Union, of which twenty-two states are members of NATO, incidentally, gains considerable weight and political legitimacy, which contrasts with its non-status in the Arctic Council. Beyond its participation in the Arctic Council, which it intends to continue and even strengthen, the European Union has announced that it will engage in enhanced cooperation with the United States, Canada, Norway and Iceland, as well as with NATO, to develop a strategic outlook on emerging security challenges in

[11] [High North Low Tension](#)

the Arctic region. The EU's new Arctic policy does not sacrifice much in the way of propriety or decorum with regard to the Arctic Council and, in so doing, breaks with the process of seeking a legitimate diplomatic position with the Arctic 8 that began in 2008. As mentioned in a press release by the European Commission: "*The EU's engagement in the Arctic is not [no longer][12] a question of convenience, but a necessity[13]*".

Finally, beyond the question of the European Union's position, which was the focus of this development, the

question is raised as to the extent to which international cooperation on security in the boreal zone will enable balance to be maintained within the Arctic Council.

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*[12] Author's note
[13] Questions and answers
on the EU's Arctic Strategy,
European Commission, 13
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