



Recently, the Arctic Ocean has been melting to such an extent that we could be forgiven for thinking that the "battle for the Arctic" has begun, writes Patrick Hebrard. There are those who hope that, as the ice melts, they will have access to new trade routes, fishing areas, sources of hydrocarbons and minerals buried at the bottom of the sea. Others are concerned about the effects of thoughtless exploitation on the environment and indigenous peoples. Still others fear potential conflicts in the region.

Behind the veil of sustained political rhetoric, national posturing and media hype about unresolved territorial claims, vast hydrocarbon resources and the disappearance of the polar bear, there lies a complex web of controversial scientific debate fuelled by inadequate information and unreliable predictions. A constantly changing situation of this type is obviously a source of opportunism and faulty judgement. The most likely scenario, however, is that of a natural or human disaster on a scale that no single country could hope to contain, a disaster that would require coordinated action, including military support.

The notion of a "rush to the Arctic" is somewhat of an exaggeration. Efforts to confirm the presence of estimated reserves and the possibility of exploiting these are bound to be severely hampered by the costs of the technologies required to operate in an environment which, climate change notwithstanding, remains both challenging and dangerous, and will place fragile ecosystems at major risk. Most of the national strategies proposed for the Arctic make no provision for the funding needed for their implementation, with the result that the targets announced are unlikely to be achieved in the near future. The "rush", if it happens, will definitely be more modest than predicted.

The extent and speed of the physical changes occurring will need capacities well in excess of those that a single country can provide and require a collective response to achieve the necessary knowledge, structures and resources to enable progressive and responsible adjustment to these developments. This involves putting more effort into scientific research and

exchanges, improving hydrography, navigational aids, the quality of weather forecasts and support for indigenous peoples.

The EU as a protagonist in the Arctic

Under these conditions, what could be the European Union's role?

The EU is not an Arctic State, nor even an observer in the Arctic Council. Indirectly, it does, however, have a stake in the Arctic through its Member States:

- Denmark, as an Arctic coastal state via Greenland;
 - Sweden and Finland, on account of their Arctic territory and indigenous peoples;
 - Member States such as France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom, which are permanent observers in the Arctic Council and who can boast acknowledged and respected scientific research programmes;
 - Norway and Iceland are also part of the European Economic Area
- and the European Commission is a permanent member of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Council of the Baltic Sea States.

Moreover, the EU already exerts a measure of influence over the Arctic protagonists through its efforts on the environmental front. Scientific exploration offers diplomatic leverage for promoting international cooperation and is a key factor in making appropriate assessments of the Arctic. More generally, EU legislation, which has been accepted by all Member States, forms an accepted benchmark for the members of all Arctic forums.

Taken as a whole, there is a nucleus of common interests that Member States could use as a springboard for action under the solidarity clause and for showing their support for the EU's Arctic States. Strengthening the EU's action capabilities in the Arctic would therefore be a vital factor in boosting its relevance in the region, particularly via the solidarity clause and other appropriate articles of the Treaty on the European Union.

The EU continues to build on these common historical, cultural, scientific and economic factors through increased investment in science and research

- at government, agency, institution and private sector level to create a shared knowledge base; and underpin common and consistent risk management, sustainable development and environmental protection. The European Polar Board, part of the European Science Foundation, is responsible for improving the coordination of scientific activities in relation to polar climate and planetary observation, biological resources and dialogue with indigenous peoples. Each

year the EU invests 20 million euros in research projects under the 7th Framework Programme;

- through investments in sustainable development in the North, with the emphasis on maritime transport and safety. The EU is renowned for its experience in shipbuilding, hydrography, navigation satellites, communications, Search and Rescue and port infrastructure;
- by promoting civil/military and public/private involvement in research and operations management, including joint exercises designed to improve skills and foster mutual trust among players;
- by supporting the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and the Arctic Council in developing governance, standards and, where applicable, regulations;
- through active partnership with other intergovernmental organisations;
- by using the EU's satellite capacities to reinforce security in navigation, communications, surveillance and follow-up action.

The EU has also become a major stakeholder in the Arctic by furthering regular exchanges with indigenous communities and providing major funding through various initiatives. Over the 2007-2013 period, its aid amounted to 1.14 billion euros (1.98 billion euros if combined with the funds supplied by individual Member States).

In October 2008, the European Parliament published a resolution on Arctic governance in which it expressed its concerns regarding "the race for the Arctic's natural resources, which could threaten EU security and overall international stability."

In 2012, the European Commission and the European External Action Service addressed a joint report to Parliament underlining their ongoing concern about climate change and its impact on the Arctic, but also sketching out the requisite overall approach:

- Financial assistance for research and innovation in the Arctic as a part of the Horizon 2020 programme to the tune of 80 billion euros (cf. IP/11/1475);
- Contributing to Search and Rescue in the Arctic by launching the next generation of exploration satellites
- Stepping up the fight against climate change
- Using EU funding possibilities to encourage sustainable development in the Arctic to the benefit of the local and indigenous communities;
- Promoting and developing environmentally-friendly technologies which could be used by the mining industry in the Arctic;
- Enhancing two-way exchanges on Arctic issues with Canada, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation and the United States, including by making a further application for permanent observer status in the Arctic Council, past applications having so far been unsuccessful.
- Further developing dialogue with representatives of Indigenous Peoples' Organisations on EU policies and programmes

- Integrated EU policy for the Arctic

Further to these two documents, the European Commission published "An integrated EU policy for the Arctic" on 27 April 2016. This sets out a general strategy revolving around three priority forms of EU action in the Arctic:

- Protecting the Arctic and fighting global warming
- Promoting sustainable economic and social development in the region
- Supporting international cooperation on Arctic issues.

For the 2014-2020 period, Arctic research funding will be maintained at 200 million euros, with emphasis on an integrated system for observing the impact of changes in the Arctic on the climate in the Northern hemisphere. This will go hand-in-hand with support for the EU-PolarNet initiative, the brainchild of 22 European research institutes, and the European space programmes by providing scientists with access to the infrastructure and operational services of the Copernicus programme.

The EU will encourage the creation of protected marine areas in support of biodiversity and will work with its partners to set high standards for preventing major accidents in the oil and gas sectors. To this end, it will also support the research and application of innovative technologies through the InnoFin programme. The Galileo system will provide coverage of the Arctic region and contribute reliable navigational data. The European Union supports the establishment of the Polar Code agreed by the IMO, which came into effect on 1 January 2017.

The most productive way for the EU to pursue its goals consists of fostering international and multidisciplinary exchanges in order to better understand the risks, promote cooperation and prevent conflicts in the interests of all stakeholders. Active negotiations of this sort will be based on the United Nation Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and will take place through participation in the Arctic Council Working Groups, where it is hoped that permanent observer status will soon be obtained⁴ and by supporting regional cooperation. The EU continues to discuss with the indigenous populations and to assist them via several of its programmes⁵. It is pursuing its cooperation with Greenland through financial support on the educational front⁶. Where maritime activities are concerned, the objectives sought via the Integrated Maritime

Policy (IMP) are fully applicable to the Arctic and the EU supports the Declaration on Arctic Fisheries with regard to the need to gather greater knowledge on Arctic Ocean ecosystems before opening this region up to commercial fishing.

Conclusion

The Arctic is the latest theatre of geopolitical rivalry. It is an essentially maritime area with many potential points of diplomatic and economic friction, even though none seem likely to culminate in interstate dispute. But there are other threats to the security of maritime activities, which need to be defused as a matter of urgency, given the complications intrinsic to the Arctic. In view of the multidimensional scale and nature of these challenges, the only effective response has to be collective and international, with the EU being well placed to play a leading role.

The Arctic could be a catalyst for cooperation and for development of an overall approach, and the EU could exert a positive effect by contributing to capability reinforcement. Observation and scientific research still represent the main priority thrusts. Scientific diplomacy has a vital role to play, as does establishing an international legislative framework to cater to the specific issues facing the region. The challenge will be that of finding the right balance between waiting too long to develop the necessary capabilities and investing too soon before a proper scientific basis has been solidly established.

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