



Almost daily there are reports of the impact of climate change on Arctic sea ice, and thus the geostrategic implications of greater freedom of navigation. In a very real sense the region has become the new frontier for global competition.

As a geopolitical power, the EU has strategic and day-to-day interests, both in the European Arctic and the broader Arctic regionâ€¦. The EUâ€™s full engagement in Arctic matters is a geopolitical necessity â€“ EU Joint Declaration on the Arctic (13th October 2021)

The European Union is renowned for grand statements which take an age to come to pass, and are often disappointing. Its latest policy pronouncements in October (see Data Source 1 at the footnote for source) â€“ supporting a Resolution by the European Parliament in September (Data Source 2) - on the Arctic â€“ are mainly vague, wide ranging and worthy.

But they also offer an opportunity which, if the EU deploys mechanisms already in its armoury, allow it to take significant actions which will establish it as a geopolitical actor; which will support Member States, their interests, and associated territories in the Arctic region; and which will help fulfil the commitments it is making therein to international safety, stability and sustainability.

To assist in effective, efficient and rapid implementation of necessary measures to achieve policy objectives set out in the Declaration, existing institutions and powers can be utilised, which will also have the benefit of strengthening those institutions and the European Union.

Central to this is the European Border and Coastguard Agency (Frontex " Data Source 3) which should be tasked with practical projects to bring the EU's updated Arctic policies about in the shortest possible time, under its existing status, using its own and Member States' personnel and equipments. This could require faster recruitment within existing targets, and the purchase or leasing of necessary communitaire assets such as search and rescue helicopters; maritime patrol aircraft; long range communications and ice capable coastguard cutters.

Political actions required include obtaining membership of the Arctic Coastguards Forum, the credibility of which these proposals justify; reaching basing/support agreements with Arctic countries; and overflight arrangements.

Declaration and Resolution commitments to which Frontex is the answer

Search and rescue : *(The EU should) promote and exchange best practices in terms of SAR and contribute to the interoperability of SAR units through joint exercises; recommends that Member States consider creating new Permanent Structured Cooperation projects, for example concentrated on SAR or environmental response, which aim to enhance common security and defence policy capabilities in the Arctic (The Resolution)*

Appropriate equipments and basing would enable the EU to provide search and rescue for the increasingly utilised Northern Sea Route in the Arctic Ocean, as well as North Atlantic Ocean and Baltic Sea.

Locations and directly interested parties : *....intensifying regional cooperation and monitoring and anticipating emerging security challenges (The Declaration);*

Iceland, Ireland and Norway participate in Frontex Management Board. There is a Frontex Liaison Office in Stockholm. The Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) - Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden- is intended to strengthen the participants' national defence, explore common synergies and facilitate efficient common solutions.

Environmental damage : *the monitoring of ice evolution and the sustainable management of marine resources, the detection of pollution, emergency warning systems, the identification and tracking of maritime movements, and search and rescue services; supports continuous investment in the development of these capabilities and advises that they be applied in the*

Arctic in cooperation with and under the leadership of the Arctic states that are members of the EU and/or NATO (The Resolution)

Equipment : Helicopters and drones (search and rescue; airborne reconnaissance and environmental surveillance: there is already significant cross-border cooperation on search and rescue operations; *encourages the EU to enhance its contributions to emergency prevention, preparedness and disaster response within the Arctic Council, the Arctic Coast Guard Forum and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (The Resolution)*

Equipment : Coastguard cutters and ice capability: *(The European Parliament) considers that the EU should promote the construction and deployment of more icebreakers and ice-strengthened ships under an EU flag* “ 7 October 2021 *(The Resolution)*

Funding *(European Parliament) calls on the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) to improve inter-service cooperation and coherence between different programmes and investments in the Arctic and urges them to allocate adequate resources to reflect the ambition of the EU's Arctic policy (The Resolution)*

But what is Frontex?

The European Border and Coast Guard standing corps (Frontex) is the EU's first uniformed service. Fabrice Leggeri (of Italy) is its Executive Director, and its HQ is in Warsaw, Poland. The standing corps officers currently perform basic border management functions, such as border checks and patrols, identity and document checks, registration of migrants, countering cross-border crime.

The standing corps is composed of Frontex and EU Member States' officers, who support national authorities facing challenges at their external border.

Heavy equipment such as planes and remotely piloted aircraft for air surveillance is leased by the agency to support EU Member States in border control.

Frontex border guards work under the command of national authorities of the country they are deployed in. They can work at the borders of EU Member States, but also in non-EU countries that signed a Status Agreement with the European Commission, such as Albania, Montenegro or Serbia.

They currently support operations in Italy, Greece, Spain, the Western Balkans, Lithuania and Latvia, but they are also present at border crossing points and airports.

There is a network of Frontex Liaison Officers based in EU countries (including for Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, based in Stockholm)

Frontex also has experts deployed to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations, acting with a liaison function. Since summer 2017, a Frontex expert has been supporting the EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya (EUBAM) on the ground. Frontex has exchanged experts acting as liaison officers with EU NAVFOR MED'S Op Sophia and the NATO Operation in the Aegean Sea.

Frontex capabilities demonstrated

Over the last few years, Frontex has stepped up its collaborations with EU Member States, its rate of expansion and its ambitions, and demonstrated that it has the capabilities necessary to discharge a High North mandate if it is handed to it by the EU.

Innovation : Late in 2020 it launched an aerial surveillance pilot project after tests carried out in Greece in cooperation with the Hellenic Coast Guard proved that aerostats can be successfully used to support EU Member States in maritime border surveillance for law enforcement purposes.

The aim of the pilot is to assess the capacity and cost efficiency of aerostat platforms for maritime surveillance, as well as to modify and optimise the equipment used based on the lessons learnt from last year's tests. The activity will also help define optimal platform dimensions, payload and capacities for maritime surveillance.

Recruitment and training : Soon thereafter 168 new recruits began their six-month training programme in Bari, Italy. 260 recruits completed their online training and underwent in-person training at two centres in Poland. 3 August 2021. Later in the year 86 Frontex officers from 16 European countries who trained in Spain, graduated from their basic border and coast guard training. Recruitment advertising started for more people to start their one-year training in January. The agency plans to recruit about 200 basic-level and around 100 intermediate-level officers by 2022 towards a target for the year of 500.

Information : Early last year Frontex started supporting EUNAVFOR MED'S Operation IRINI, implementing the United Nation Security Council Resolutions on the arms embargo on Libya with information gathered as part of the agency's risk analysis activities, such as tracking vessels of interests on the high seas, as well as data from its aerial surveillance in the Central Mediterranean. An EUNAVFOR MED expert based at the Warsaw headquarters of Frontex supported information exchange and cooperation in search and rescue operations. Operation IRINI is tasked with the implementation of the United Nation Security Council Resolutions on the arms embargo on Libya through the use of aerial, satellite and maritime assets, building on Op Sophia collaboration combating people smuggling and trafficking and helping the mission build a comprehensive picture of cross-border criminal activities in the Central Mediterranean.

Operations at sea : In March, as part of the operation 30 Days at Sea, which was globally coordinated by Interpol aimed at detecting environmental crime, Frontex planes and vessels monitored nearly 1 000 vessels. The operation's tactical phase included the detection of 1,600 marine pollution offences, often triggering fines and follow-up investigations around the globe. Thousands of suspects, companies and criminal networks engaged in maritime pollution have been detected and investigated in a global INTERPOL-led operation.

Co-operation : The European Commission has adopted a 'Practical Handbook' on European cooperation on coast guard functions developed by Frontex and other EU agencies, a guide to facilitate the cooperation of EU civilian and military authorities in their work related to increasing safety and security at sea.

Thoughts on some practical issues

â€¢ Basing

There are a number of possibilities for co-locating Frontex SAR operations alongside

MS/associate bases and activities – For example :

1. The political parties in Denmark agreed in February 2021 on a major programme of investment also involving the Faroe Islands and Greenland : Danish Defence will be strengthened to support civil society with search and rescue operations, emergency operations, environmental surveillance, fisheries control, climate monitoring and research etc
There is a US/NATO airbase at Thule in Greenland at 76° 31' 52" N 68° 42' 11" W
Tasks assigned to the Joint Arctic Command Denmark, headquartered in the capital Nuuk, include sovereignty enforcement, monitoring sea waters and search and rescue operations.

2. The Icelandic Coastguard operates the Keflavik air base at 63° 59' 06" N 22° 36' 20" W Iceland has no conventional armed forces

3. Finland has the northernmost airport in the European Union at Ivalo 68° 36' 39" N 027° 24' 50" E Its Border Guard has search and rescue duties, both maritime and inland, and operates SAR helicopters.

– Air assets

Frontex/EU owned (communitaire) air assets will be required. EU companies manufacture SAR helicopters and Maritime Reconnaissance Aircraft (MRA).

The European Air Transport Command, located at Eindhoven Airbase in the Netherlands, which has operational control of 75% of the aerial refuelling capabilities and military transport fleets in the EU – as well as some training – is an alternative mechanism. The European Defence Agency provides a procurement route and further development could take place under the auspices of PESCO.À,À

– Operations and overflight

Access to the Northern Sea Route for SAR and MRA from Finland would require overflight arrangements with Norway. One way of facilitating with might be the Under the NORDEFECO Memorandum of Understanding, third party collaboration is possible. Section 7 states that

"Nordic Defence Cooperation activities or projects with others than the Participants to this MoU will be based upon a pragmatic approach, as a result of a defined need assessment. The Participants to a specific activity or project will jointly formulate the provisions under which such cooperation may be performed."

â€¢ Specialist recruitment

As illustrated, Frontex has a recruitment function. Currently there are surplus commercial pilots (including ones trained during Covid), and offshore helicopter pilots may not have the same future as the EU struggles to meet climate change obligations. ("Wet leases" with commercial companies may also be a short term option) Retraining could be necessary, and in the longer term Frontex could train its own, or task the EATC on its behalf.

â€¢ Arctic Coastguards

Securing membership of the Arctic Coastguards Forum is, it is suggested, a primary political objective, but based on capabilities in service rather than aspiration. So while no immediate action may be necessary or even possible, it has to be a strategic goal. In the meantime, close collaboration/liaison with EU nations which are members of the Forum will be essential.

In conclusion

This paper is far from definitive, but shows that early action is feasible, and would powerfully underline the EU's willingness to take practical steps in support of the policies that its Parliament and the Commission support. As has recently been put succinctly :

The citizens of Europe are tired of the strategic babble of their leadersâ€™. They should stop

talking and start acting – Europe’s strategic autonomy : That obscure object of desire –
Frederic Mauro IRIS October 2021

The EU Arctic Strategy presents the first and fastest such opportunity

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DATA SOURCES

1. The Declaration https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2_en_act_part1_v7.pdf
2. The Resolution https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0413_EN.html
3. Frontex website <https://frontex.europa.eu/>