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## The Arctic Elephant

Why Europe must address the geopolitics of the high north

This policy brief argues that there is an urgent need for the EU and European countries to upgrade the Arctic diplomatic dialogue to address security and geopolitical concerns. Out of fear that power rivalry may come to hinder climate change cooperation, European countries seem to be blind to the fact that geostrategic interests have already eclipsed other concerns in the region. The time has come for the EU and its close ally Norway to step up and address the elephant in the Arctic: geopolitics. This needs to be taken on board in the revised EU strategy for the Arctic, which should call for an Arctic council on security and geopolitics. If the new European Commission truly wants to be a geopolitical one, the Arctic is one of the chessboards that can no longer be treated primarily as an area for scientific cooperation on climate change.

### The Arctic arena: torn between conflict and cooperation

For decades, the Arctic was a hotbed of Cold War tension, as US and Russian nuclear missiles stood ready to fly across the North Pole, and the Arctic ice offered hiding places for nuclear submarines. Since the end of the Cold War, the Arctic has vanished from European geostrategy. Instead, it has become a prime example of how states as different as Denmark and China can work together on sustainable development and scientific exploration.

Current strategic narratives of the EU and various north-western European countries on the Arctic are all about climate change mitigation, scientific cooperation and environmental protection, while making little mention of security issues or geopolitical

strife. The European Union Arctic Policy clearly reflects that, by stating:

*this Joint Communication sets out the case for an EU policy that focuses on advancing international cooperation in responding to the impacts of climate change on the Arctic's fragile environment, and on promoting and contributing to sustainable development, particularly in the European part of the Arctic.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> *International Cooperation on Arctic Matters*, European External Action Service, 2017, [https://eeas.europa.eu/arctic-policy/eu-arctic-policy/20954/international-cooperation-arctic-matters\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/arctic-policy/eu-arctic-policy/20954/international-cooperation-arctic-matters_en) (accessed October 2019).

While European Arctic powers try to keep the Arctic de-politicised, the US, China and Russia know no such scruples, with far-reaching polar strategies that recognise the different logics of the geopolitics of the Arctic. It's high time European countries did the same.

The last meeting of the Arctic Council in Rovaniemi on 7 May 2019 proved that geopolitical and security concerns are already dominating Arctic politics.<sup>2</sup> In this policy brief we discuss how US, Chinese and Russian interests in the Arctic add up to the sobering fact that geopolitical rivalry, geo-economic competition and the prospect of military conflict are already part of the equation in Arctic diplomacy – and that Europe is faced with a tough choice: address the geopolitics of the high north or lose any chance of shaping it. We end with some specific recommendations for the European External Action Service and foreign and defence ministries of EU member states to do what's necessary: address the elephant in the Arctic.

## The two taboos of Arctic diplomacy: climate and security

Eight states have territories within the Arctic circle. In 1867 the USA bought the wild lands of Alaska, creating borders on one side with the northernmost parts of Canada and on the other to a vast piece of Russia that stretches from Provideniya to Murmansk. In between Canada and Russia lies the 'European' Arctic, including: the largest Arctic island, Greenland, a territory of Denmark but with a large degree of self-rule; the most sparsely populated European country, Iceland; the archipelago of Svalbard, coined Spitsbergen by Willem Barentz, a Dutch Arctic explorer who lived in the 17th century; and finally,

the northernmost tips of the Norwegian, Finnish and Swedish mainland.<sup>3</sup>

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) divides up the Arctic sea, prescribing, among other things, that 'every State has the right to establish the breadth of its territorial sea up to a limit not exceeding 12 nautical miles'. Moreover, States may establish exclusive economic zones up to 200 nautical miles beyond its territories, in which they have sovereign rights for economic exploration and exploitation.<sup>4</sup> This has not stopped Arctic states – those within and outside of the NATO family – quarrelling over who owns what. The USA, which has not ratified UNCLOS, and Canada disagree over ownership of the Beaufort Sea, which is thought to hide considerable hydrocarbon treasure.<sup>5</sup> Denmark has claimed territory around Lomonosov Ridge including the North Pole, which overlaps with claims made by Russia and Canada. In 2007 Russian explorers planted the country's flag on the seabed of the North Pole.<sup>6</sup>

A special UNCLOS Commission has been set up to assess the legal claims on the limits of the so-called continental shelves, something allegedly related to the Lomonosov Ridge, which could be described as a small mountain on the bottom of the sea stretching from Russia to the border between Greenland and Canada. Since the matter is legally and geographically very complicated,

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2 'In the Arctic, rising temperatures are producing hotter heads', Planetary Security Initiative, The Hague, 2019, <https://www.planetarysecurityinitiative.org/news/arctic-rising-temperatures-are-producing-hotter-heads> (accessed 2019).

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3 *Arctic map*, National Snow & Ice Data Center, n.d., [https://nsidc.org/sites/nsidc.org/files/images//arctic\\_map.gif](https://nsidc.org/sites/nsidc.org/files/images//arctic_map.gif) (accessed October 2019).

4 *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, UN, 10 December 1982, Article 57 (hereinafter 'UNCLOS').

5 'Rush for Arctic's resources provokes territorial tussles', *The Guardian*, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/06/arctic-resources-territorial-dispute> (accessed October 2019).

6 *Thaw in accord: As Arctic ice melts, territorial disputes are hotting up, too*, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/geopolitical-consequences-of-melting-arctic-ice-russia-canada-us-northern-sea-route-shipping-natural-a8229306.html> (accessed October 2019).

a verdict is not expected for about a decade. It will then be the question whether the states concerned will accept the verdict and if the US will do the same, as it is not a member of UNCLOS.

The territorial Arctic States are most prominently organised in the Arctic Council, set up by virtue of the Ottawa Declaration of 1996<sup>7</sup> to:

*Provide a means for promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, with the involvement of the Arctic indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues, in particular the issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic.*

The Ottawa Declaration further narrows down its broadly defined scope – i.e., ‘common Arctic issues’ – with an ominous footnote:

*The Arctic Council should not deal with matters related to military security.*

As such, the Arctic Council embodies the two taboos upon which Arctic diplomacy is founded: the first, that the gravity of climate change as a threat to the Arctic must not be denied (even though the US is not in agreement on that); and second, that geopolitics must never dominate Arctic relations again (even though great powers clearly focus on this aspect already). It shows that the Arctic Council is a product of two historic events: first, the end of the Cold War; and second, the growing awareness of climate change hitting the region hard. Both events have contributed to a narrative of ‘cooperation’ becoming dominant over narratives of ‘competition’ or ‘conflict’, delegitimising any mention of that pink,

prancing elephant in the Arctic, which says that geopolitical rivalry is here to stay and may overtake environmental concerns.

Among EU Member states, the German Arctic Policy ‘advocates more intensive involvement in the security policy implications of the Arctic on the part of the EU and NATO’,<sup>8</sup> without specifying what that means. The French National Roadmap for the Arctic acknowledges that ‘France’s main interests in the Arctic primarily concern its economy, security and the environment, rather than military and defence issues.’<sup>9</sup> Neither the Finnish Arctic Strategy<sup>10</sup> nor the Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy<sup>11</sup> point to the security dimension of Arctic politics. Norway acknowledges Russian militarisation of the Arctic.<sup>12</sup> The Swedish strategy says the country ‘will work to ensure that the Arctic remains a region

7 Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council: Joint Communiqué of the Governments of the Arctic Countries on the Establishment of the Arctic Council, Arctic Council, Ottawa, 19 September 1996.

8 Germany’s Arctic Policy Guidelines: Assuming Responsibility, Creating Trust, Shaping the Future, Federal Foreign Office, 2019, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2240002/eb0b681be9415118ca87bc8e215c0cf4/190821-arktisleitlinien-download-data.pdf> (accessed November 2019).

9 The Great Challenge of the Arctic: National Roadmap for the Arctic, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et du Développement International, 2016, [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/frna\\_-\\_eng\\_-\\_interne\\_-\\_prepa\\_-\\_17-06-pm-bd-pdf\\_cle02695b.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/frna_-_eng_-_interne_-_prepa_-_17-06-pm-bd-pdf_cle02695b.pdf) (accessed November 2019).

10 Finland is an active and responsible partner, Prime Minister’s Office Finland (VNK), Helsinki, n.d., <https://vnk.fi/en/arctic-issues/finlands-arctic-policy> (accessed October 2019).

11 Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy, Prime Minister’s Office Finland (VNK), Helsinki, September 2016, <https://vnk.fi/documents/10616/1986338/VNKJ092016+en.pdf/b33c3703-29f4-4cce-a910-b05e32b676b9/VNKJ092016+en.pdf?version=1.0> (accessed October 2019).

12 Norway’s Arctic Strategy: Between geopolitics and social development, Norwegian Ministries: Strategy, 2017, <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/fad46f0404e14b2a9b551ca7359c1000/arctic-strategy.pdf> (accessed October 2019).

where security policy tensions are low<sup>13</sup>  
The Danish Arctic Strategy<sup>14</sup> concludes that:

*The premise of this strategy stems internationally from the Arctic Council Declarations and the Ilulissat Declaration of 2008,<sup>15</sup> in which the coastal states of the Arctic Ocean committed themselves politically to giving negotiation and cooperation pride of place in handling disputes, challenges and opportunities in the Arctic, and thus hopefully once and for all dispelling the myth of a race to the North Pole.*

In contrast, the US, Russia and China seem to think that the race for geostrategic influence in the Arctic is on.

Outside the Arctic Council, the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) is a forum to discuss security cooperation. This is a semi-annual gathering usually attended by 12 nations focused on improving communications and maritime domain awareness in the Arctic Circle. The 12 nations include: Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. This means China and the EU are not included, which makes it difficult to consider it as the prime venue to discuss geopolitics; and Russia has not been invited since 2014. Other more informal fora, such as the UK-initiated Northern Group could be possible venues, but none of these bodies are as exclusive as the Arctic Council.

## Calling out the elephant: the return of geopolitics to the Arctic

On 6 May 2019, the United States set off a bombshell regarding its approach to the Arctic. In Rovaniemi, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said:

*The world has long felt magnetic pull towards the Arctic, but never more so than today. ... the region has become an arena for power and for competition. And the eight Arctic states must adapt to this new future.<sup>16</sup>*

Pompeo's statement made the day before the official start of the Arctic Council meetings was followed by negotiations in which the US pushed to water down language on climate change to the point that for the first time since the Arctic Council was set up in 1996, the Arctic States were unable to sign a joint statement on the issue it was founded to tackle.<sup>17</sup> Pompeo thus broke both Arctic taboos: he hailed climate change as an economic opportunity rather than a threat and called the Arctic an arena for power and competition rather than science and cooperation.

Now, if the Arctic Council's most powerful member in terms of military might does that, it is worth looking at the reasons why. There are two: the economic gains to be had from melting polar ice on the one hand and growing geopolitical and military rivalry with Russia and China on the other.

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13 *Sweden's strategy for the Arctic region*, Government Offices of Sweden, 2011, <https://www.government.se/49b746/contentassets/85de9103bbbe4373b55eddd7f71608da/swedens-strategy-for-the-arctic-region> (accessed October 2019).

14 *Denmark, Greenland and the Faroe Islands adopt new strategy for the Arctic*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, Copenhagen, 2015, <http://um.dk/en/news/newsdisplaypage/?newsid=f721f2cb-aff1-4cf7-a3e7-14fda508690a> (accessed October 2019).

15 *2008 Ilulissat Declaration*, adopted 28 May 2008 in Ilulissat, Greenland.

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16 *Looking North: Sharpening America's Arctic Focus*, Pompeo, R Michael (speech), Rovaniemi, 6 May 2019, <https://www.state.gov/looking-north-sharpening-americas-arctic-focus/> (accessed 2019).

17 *US climate objections sink Arctic Council accord in Finland*, BBC, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48185793> (accessed October 2019).

## Oil, gas and sea lanes

Hidden under the melting ice of the Arctic lie not only an expected 30% of the world's undiscovered gas and 13% of the world's undiscovered oil,<sup>18</sup> climate change is also beginning to expose two sea lanes that may be of great importance to the world economy. Both offer a shorter route to China from the US east coast and Europe.

The first is the Northwest Passage. Climate change is quickly opening up the Passage that is still covered in ice for most of the year.<sup>19</sup> Canada's International Trade Minister Jim Carr has gone on record as saying that the Passage will be free from ice all year round within a generation.<sup>20</sup> Canada claims the Passage as its own, insisting that other countries ask its permission before they ship through it, while US and European countries argue it is part of international waters.<sup>21</sup>

The second is the Northern Sea Route, which is of particular economic importance to Russia. In 2007, when Russia planted its flag on the North Pole, it showcased not only, as the Canadian foreign minister said, a 15th

century colonial attitude,<sup>22</sup> it actually put symbolic claim to Russia's economic future. The Russian Arctic already accounts for about 20% of its GDP – even though only 1.6% of its people live there – and nearly a quarter of Russian export revenues. It produces nearly all of Russia's gas and two-thirds of its oil. Most of Russian rare earth metals are mined in the Arctic, and almost all of its diamonds and platinum. Russia stands to gain from the development of the Northern Sea Route, which, like the Northwest Passage, has the potential to turn into one of the main shipping lanes of the global economy.<sup>23</sup>

That the inevitable opening up of these two passages will be of great economic importance to European markets is evident not only from the fact that European powers have been trying to find a way through the high north since Willem Barentsz was stranded at Novaya Zemlya in the 16th century; the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis published a study in 2015 predicting

*a remarkable shift of bilateral trade flows between Asia and Europe, diversion of trade within Europe, heavy shipping traffic in the Arctic, and a substantial drop in traffic through Suez.*<sup>24</sup>

Most notably, the Port of Rotterdam has hailed it as an opportunity, saying that 'its trade volumes with countries in Northeast Asia are expected to increase significantly

18 Gautier, L Donald, et al. 2009. 'Assessment of undiscovered oil and gas in the Arctic', *Science*, 1175-1179, <https://pubs.er.usgs.gov/publication/70035000> (accessed October 2019).

19 'NASA scientists estimate that on average the Arctic loses nearly 21,000 square miles of ice each year, and the experts who prepared the 2014 National Climate Assessment predict the Arctic Ocean will be ice free in summer before 2050.' 'A thawing Arctic is heating up a new Cold War', *National Geographic*, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/2019/08/how-climate-change-is-setting-the-stage-for-the-new-arctic-cold-war-feature/> (accessed October 2019).

20 *A Conversation With Justin Trudeau, Chrystia Freeland, and Jim Carr*, Council on Foreign Relations, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-justin-trudeau-chrystia-freeland-and-jim-carr> (accessed October 2019).

21 'Who owns the Northwest Passage?', *The Economist*, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2019/05/22/who-owns-the-northwest-passage> (accessed October 2019).

22 'Russia plants flag on North Pole seabed', *The Guardian*, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/aug/02/russia.arctic> (accessed October 2019).

23 'Is Russia going hard or soft in the Arctic?', *The Wilson Quarterly*, 2017, <https://www.wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/into-the-arctic/is-russia-going-hard-or-soft-in-the-arctic/> (accessed October 2019).

24 Bekkers et al., 2015. Discussion Paper: 'Melting ice caps and the economic impact of opening the northern sea route', CPB Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, <https://www.cpb.nl/sites/default/files/publicaties/download/cpb-discussion-paper-307-melting-ice-caps-and-economic-impact-opening-northern-sea-route.pdf> (accessed October 2019).



and it could possibly serve as a hub for new, global value chains'.<sup>25</sup> The voyage through the Northern Sea Route cuts off about two-thirds of travel time between north-western Europe and China compared to the Suez route – and is pirate-free.

## Russia

Russia, too, has bet on winning the Arctic race – and is willing to leverage its geopolitical weight to succeed.

In 2013, a Chinese COSCO ship named the MV Yong Sheng arrived in Rotterdam after a 33-day journey starting from the port of Dalian,<sup>26</sup> cutting travel time by more than ten days compared to the Suez route.<sup>27</sup> China has sent about a dozen ships since, as has the Danish shipping company Maersk. This may not sound like much, but to Russia it means that in the mid to long term, it may be able to refuel its struggling economy – crumbling under the pressure of low oil prices and Western sanctions – by tapping into the Arctic sea lanes now mostly covered in ice.

In 2018, more than 18 million tons of goods were transported on the sea route, an increase of almost 70% from 2017. In May 2019 President Putin decreed that was a matter of top national priority for shipping on the Northern Sea Route to reach 80 million tons by 2024.<sup>28</sup> As Putin put it:

*This is a realistic, well-calculated and concrete task ... We need to make the Northern Sea Route safe and commercially feasible.*<sup>29</sup>

Up until now it could not be said to be commercially feasible: 2018 saw 26 transit voyages between Europe and Asia,<sup>30</sup> compared to more than 18,000 going through Suez.<sup>31</sup>

This has also led to increasing militarisation of the Russian Arctic. As the US Arctic Strategy summarises:

*Russia has gradually strengthened its presence by creating new Arctic units, refurbishing old airfields and infrastructure in the Arctic, and establishing new military bases along its Arctic coastline. There is also a concerted effort to establish a network of air defense and coastal missile systems, early warning radars, rescue centers, and a variety of sensors.*

Russia is betting on winning the scramble for the Arctic's resources and territory, investing billions in its Arctic strategy.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, in recent years, a third player has claimed a place at the table: China.

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25 Pole route offers advantages for Rotterdam, Port of Rotterdam, 2015, <https://www.portofrotterdam.com/en/news-and-press-releases/pole-route-offers-advantages-for-rotterdam> (accessed October 2019).

26 Port of Rotterdam sees arrival of first commercial ship via Northern Sea Route, gCaptain, 2013, <https://gcaptain.com/port-of-rotterdam-sees-arrival-of-first-ship-via-northern-sea-route/> (accessed October 2019).

27 Dalian-Rotterdam sea route, Sea Routes interactive map, n.d., <https://www.searoutes.com/routing/4294967667/4294967340?suez=true> (accessed October 2019).

28 'We Want to Change the Course of History,' Northern Sea Route Operator Says, The Barents Observer/The Moscow Times, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/07/11/we-want-to-change-the-course-of-history-northern-sea-route-operator-says-a66366> (accessed October 2019).

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29 'Polar powers: Russia's bid for supremacy in the Arctic Ocean', *Financial Times*, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/2fa82760-5c4a-11e9-939a-341f5ada9d40> (accessed October 2019).

30 'Russia's Northern Sea Route sees record cargo volume in 2018', *Arctic Today*, 2019, <https://www.arctictoday.com/russias-northern-sea-route-sees-record-cargo-volume-in-2018/> (accessed November 2019).

31 *Suez Canal Traffic Statistics: Annual report 2018*, Suez Canal Authority Information Center, 2018, <https://www.suezcanal.gov.eg/English/Downloads/DownloadsDocLibrary/Navigation%20Reports/Annual%20Reports%E2%80%8B%E2%80%8B%E2%80%8B/2018.pdf> (accessed November 2019).

32 Report to Congress: Department of Defense Arctic Strategy, DoD doc., <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jun/06/2002141657/-1/-1/1/2019-DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY.PDF> (accessed October 2019).

## China

In 2010, the state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation – the fourth biggest company in the world – signed a deal with Sovcomflot – the Russian state-owned shipping company specialised in oil and gas transport – to work together in developing the Northern Sea Route. Forty-six percent of China's GDP is dependent on shipping, and with its appetite for hydrocarbons growing it clearly is a most interested party to the promise that the Arctic's sea lanes and its resources hold.<sup>33</sup>

In 2013, China signed a free trade deal with Iceland.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, China is investing significantly in mining and infrastructure in Greenland.<sup>35</sup> A major reason for that is that China is an important producer of rare earth metals but is also expected to run out of its own supply in about 20 years.

China's involvement in the Arctic reaches further than the mere economic. As the US Arctic strategy<sup>36</sup> states, although China's military presence in the area is limited, it is nevertheless seen by its American rivals as challenging.

In 2014, after it had been an observer at the Arctic Council for only one year, President Xi spoke of China's ambition to become a 'polar

great power'.<sup>37</sup> It has an impressive research station on Svalbard, is the biggest foreign shareholder in Russia's natural gas projects in the Arctic, and just last year published its own Arctic strategy, which made the rather audacious claim that China is a 'Near-Arctic State', and called for the launch of a 'Polar Silk Road'. The strategy also stated that:

*A champion for the development of a community with a shared future for mankind, China is an active participant, builder and contributor in Arctic affairs who has spared no efforts to contribute its wisdom to the development of the Arctic region. ... China's capital, technology, market, knowledge and experience is expected to play a major role in expanding the network of shipping routes in the Arctic and facilitating the economic and social progress of the coastal States along the routes.*<sup>38</sup>

International sanctions seemed to have tied together Russia's and China's fates. The 2014 sanctions imposed on Russia have pushed it closer to China.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, on 25 September 2019 COSCO was blacklisted, leading to worries that this could have a serious negative effect on Russian Arctic liquified natural gas exports.<sup>40</sup>

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33 Blunden, 2012. 'Geopolitics and the Northern Sea Route', *International Affairs*, 88(1), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41428544.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ab24320bc7e638f78c14ed84838dca981> (accessed October 2019).

34 'Iceland and China Enter a Free Trade Agreement', *The New York Times*, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/16/business/global/16iht-iceland16.html> (accessed October 2019).

35 'The (Many) Roles of Greenland in China's Developing Arctic Policy', *The Diplomat*, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/the-many-roles-of-greenland-in-chinas-developing-arctic-policy/> (accessed October 2019).

36 Report to Congress: Department of Defense Arctic Strategy, DoD doc., <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jun/06/2002141657/-1/-1/1/2019-DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY.PDF> (accessed October 2019).

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37 Brady, A-M, 2019. *China as a Polar Great Power*, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

38 China's Arctic Policy, 2018. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2018/01/26/content\\_281476026660336.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm) (accessed October 2019).

39 *Russia signs deals with China to help weather sanctions*, Reuters, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-china-banks/russia-signs-deals-with-china-to-help-weather-sanctions-idUSKCN0120WG20141013> (accessed November 2019).

40 'U.S. sanctions against Chinese shipper reverberate on Russian Arctic coast', *The Barents Observer*, 2019 <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/industry-and-energy/2019/10/us-sanctions-against-chinese-shipper-reverberate-russian-arctic-coast> (accessed November 2019).

In short, a third great power has claimed its chair at the geopolitical table of the Arctic: China. Even more important to the US perhaps, is the fact that China and Russia are working closely together.

The big question is: how will Europe relate to the geopolitical dimension of Arctic politics?

### Address the elephant: geopolitics is here to stay

Mike Pompeo's surprising statement at the 2019 Arctic Council Summit will prove to be more than a symptom of the brazen style of diplomacy the Trump administration is known for. Pompeo called the elephant in the Arctic by its name and had good reason to do so.

Due to structural historic, geographic and economic factors, the Arctic always has been, currently is and will be in decades to come an arena for geopolitical rivalry. That rivalry will intensify as a consequence of, rather than be mollified by, climate change, and might well lead to actual security competition. Competition may dwarf cooperation and perhaps even lead to outright military conflict.

Pompeo further concluded that:

*This is America's moment to stand up as an Arctic nation and for the Arctic's future. [...], the Arctic is at the forefront of opportunity and abundance.*<sup>41</sup>

European countries may acknowledge they live in the same world as Mike Pompeo without accepting his strategic conclusion. The desire of European countries for the Arctic to be a pristine area of preserved nature where peace prevails is understandable, but rising US, Chinese and Russian economic and military stakes cannot be matched by sending more climate scientists or talking only about black carbon. Instead, European countries should task diplomats and military

strategists with considering which Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs) would help to reduce tensions. Perhaps the Scandinavian countries are already quietly doing this, but the EU's overall weight has not yet been put behind it. The only way to shape these debates, to lower security tensions, and to let cooperation have a chance, rather than let competition lead to conflict, is to be at the table.

That, however, is not as easy as it sounds. At which table can geopolitics be discussed? The Arctic is in dire need of a place to discuss geopolitical and security issues. The current diplomatic architecture fails to provide such a platform.

### Europe

In 1993 Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the European Commission came together to set up the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, which meets at foreign ministry level every two years to discuss cooperation in the fields of transport, culture and youth issues, among others. In 1999 the EU took the initiative to set up the Northern Dimension platform together with Russia, Norway and Iceland, as a policy framework to promote dialogue on a number of issues, none of which touch on security or geopolitics. Although the EU enjoys a strong voice in each of these two platforms for conversation, neither seems to be a fitting platform to discuss geopolitical issues in any meaningful way. The Foreign Affairs Council addresses Arctic issues only on a general level in its Working Party on Eastern Europe and Central Asia – where it is hardly a top priority. Fisheries is another policy area through which the EU discusses the Arctic, but its raw materials strategy only refers to the Arctic in relation to deep sea mining, and its connectivity strategy on Europe and Asia fails to even mention the new sea route.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.state.gov/looking-north-sharpening-americas-arctic-focus/>

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council – The raw materials initiative: meeting our critical needs for growth and jobs in Europe, SEC(2008) 2741, [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint\\_communication\\_-\\_connecting\\_europe\\_and\\_asia\\_-\\_building\\_blocks\\_for\\_an\\_eu\\_strategy\\_2018-09-19.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_communication_-_connecting_europe_and_asia_-_building_blocks_for_an_eu_strategy_2018-09-19.pdf)



## NATO

NATO has yet to define an Arctic strategy; although it should be noted that the UNCLOS Article 5 guarantee stretches to the Arctic (Alaska, Canada, Greenland and Norway). Although NATO would be a crucial platform to coordinate security cooperation regarding the Arctic between various European countries, too strong a push for a NATO policy on the Arctic would do anything but lower tensions in relations with Russia, would certainly make it less likely for China to engage in the debate, and has very little chance of success during the current US government.

Although European defence ministries meet on an informal level to periodically discuss security-related issues of the Arctic, this has not yet resulted in the adoption of new Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs), although the increase in number of exercises in the region, such as the NATO Cold Response and Trident Juncture, could be considered as such.

## The Arctic Council

Recently, there has been some debate on redesigning the Arctic Council coming forward from the US, even arguing for setting up an Arctic security and cooperation organisation:<sup>43</sup>

*Under this new “Arctic OSCE-like” structure, there will be three baskets covering three major issues – an “economic dimension”, a “human dimension” and a “security dimension”.*

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43 Conley A. and Melino. 2016. ‘An Arctic Redesign: Recommendation to Rejuvenate the Arctic Council’, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/160302\\_Conley\\_ArcticRedesign\\_Web.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/160302_Conley_ArcticRedesign_Web.pdf) (accessed October 2019). Report to Congress: Department of Defense Arctic Strategy, DoD doc., <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jun/06/2002141657/-1/-1/1/2019-DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY.PDF> (accessed October 2019). *Walking on Thin Ice: A Balanced Arctic Strategy for the EU*, European Political Strategy Centre, 2019, [https://ec.europa.eu/epsc/publications/strategic-notes/walking-thin-ice-balanced-arctic-strategy-eu\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/epsc/publications/strategic-notes/walking-thin-ice-balanced-arctic-strategy-eu_en) (accessed October 2019).

For this to work, however, the founding creed of the Arctic Council ought to be changed; it would need to be able to discuss matters of military security.

Since the imposition in 2014 of sanctions against Russia, the Arctic Council is one of the few platforms in which Western countries and Russia work together constructively, mostly in the fields of environmental protection, scientific research and coast guard cooperation. The Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) is another.

The Netherlands is one of four original Arctic Council Observers; the EU has not yet been granted the same status, although it is present at the meetings. China has observer status, as do India, Korea, Singapore and Japan.

## Five ways to address the elephant in the Arctic

All in all, there is no obvious answer to the conundrum of the Arctic elephant. We must address it to shape the debate, but there is no easy way of doing so. The architecture of Arctic diplomacy is specifically designed not to discuss security, yet the current geopolitical situation makes it urgent to do so.

In order to address the Arctic elephant and, through dialogue, channel growing geopolitical tensions, the following could be done:





- EU Member states should reinvigorate dialogue on a national level between business, diplomacy, defence and science to get an integral view on long-term strategic interests in the Arctic, including science, climate, economic interests (notably with regard to raw materials, the new sea lanes and access to fish stocks), security and geopolitics.
- NATO should formulate its own Arctic strategy, reflecting upon how and to what extent it could contribute to managing security tensions in the Arctic, with special reference to Sino-Russian cooperation.

- The new EU strategy on the Arctic should put security and geopolitical concerns front and centre; if the new European Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen truly wants to become geopolitical, this is not a region that can be ignored.
- The EU Council should set up a Working Party on Arctic Affairs, focusing on coordinating diplomacy and security policies between national Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs. Such a working party could consider what Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs) might help to act as a deterrent without adding to security tensions. It could also discuss how the EU would respond to a verdict of the UNCLOS Commission on the limits of the Continental shelf.
- EU Member states should call for an Arctic security and cooperation organisation to include China, Russia, India, Japan and the USA. Possibly this could be an upgraded version of the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) with the inclusion of China and the EU.

### About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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