The End of an Exceptional History: Re-Thinking the EU-Russia Arctic Relationship

https://www.e-ir.info/2022/03/23/the-end-of-an-exceptional-history-re-thinking-the-eu-russia-arctic-relationship/

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Thursday, 24 February 2022 was a turning point in European history. Russia's attack on Ukraine is not only a terrible, singular, event – it will also tempt fate on the future of Europe's security. The related and fast evolving strategic environment of the Arctic region – a landscape (for the sake of accuracy, predominantly seascape) where governance structures and international cooperation have already been under threat – will not be immune to the outcome of the ongoing tussle over Ukraine. Today, the Arctic is often – falsely – viewed as a coherent region in security terms; namely, that increased ice melt, the 'opening up' of the region, regional cooperation efforts or even the unique, global alignment of many regional interests are the main drivers of security dynamics in the North. And yet, the security trajectory of the Arctic is not only driven by regional relations and events happening in the Arctic but primarily affected by the strategic interactions between the world's superpowers elsewhere.

The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea brought external conflict dynamics to the Arctic, with both direct and indirect effects on Arctic cooperation – from affecting existing practices of security cooperation to economic cooperation in the Russian Arctic through the policy of sanctions. Despite this, Russian-Western cooperation in the Arctic remained rather insulated from developments elsewhere, as for example seen when agreeing on an international agreement to prevent unregulated High Seas fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean. This, however, is not carved in stone. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has already negatively affected Arctic cooperation after the A7 – Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the United States – paused their participation in meetings of the Arctic Council, currently chaired by Russia. With the European Union and its Member States preparing for a historical turning point in their relationships with Russia, time has come to finally also think strategically about how to deal with Russia in the Arctic. The European Union does not only need to talk about Arctic security more generally, it essentially needs to take into account and deal with the Nordic countries security concerns regarding Russia more specifically. Eventually, the European Union needs to become a veritable security provider in and for the Arctic region.

The Geopolitical Awakening of the European Union?

As noted by Francis Fukuyama, 'major crises have major consequences, usually unforeseen'. For the European Union, Russia's war against Ukraine might herald the start of a historical turning point. The return of hard power considerations at the Union's borders have not only crashed the common belief that (economic) interdependence necessarily pacifies the EU's relations with Russia. It also puts an end to a generation-long moral conviction and political opinion that the fate of European nations (and the European Union as a consequence thereof) will be determined by economic liberalism, interdependence and integration. And, while the civil wars in former Yugoslavia were probably the exception to that rule, generations of Europeans are now waking up, realizing that the promise and narrative of Kant's *Perpetual Peace* was nothing more than *A Philosophical Sketch*.

If we are already living in post-Pax Americana, we are also living in the post-End of History and an emerging new international order, determined by the future relationship between the United States and China, and an apparently unpredictable Russia. The return of geopolitics to Europe will inevitably force the European Union to become a veritable geopolitical actor, led by a true geopolitical Commission. Such transformation will demand leaders and

researchers alike to think pluralistically on how to create a grand strategy for the European Union – a strategy that will allow Europeans to interpret the world better while also being a tool to transform it.

For the European Union this does not only mean to increasingly throw its economic and regulatory weight behind its global actions, currently subsumed under the search for 'open strategic autonomy'. It might also force us to re-think power, territory and narrative the European way. As argued by Luuk van Middelaar, 'any serious geopolitical player displays a will to act, shows an awareness of space, and tells a narrative which links the past, present, and future of a given community.' One attempt to at least tackle the concept of power is the just approved Strategic Compass; an effort of the Union 1) to act rapidly and robust, 2) to enhance its ability to anticipate threat and guarantee access to strategic domains, 3) to invest more in technologies and 4) to strengthen its cooperation with partners.

One of the key problems for a supranational entity such as the EU to remedy all the ills confronting its own security and defence (policy), are the various threat perceptions of its Member States (and citizens), particularly towards the Russian Federation. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has already prompted a significance rewrite of the document, but did it also take into account one of those geographical spaces that are in urgent need for a more comprehensive geostrategic discussion in Europe, the Arctic region?

The Need for a Coherent EU Security Role in the North

Over the past decade, the Arctic region has barely figured in any discussions concerning a strategic outlook. On the one hand – and for good reasons and the lack of an official 'competence' – the European Union itself has rather timidly covered Arctic security matters in its regional policy documents and only discussed security in a general, implicit way. This includes the strengthening of low-level regional and multilateral cooperation, the allegiance to an international legal order and the vision of a cooperative Arctic that is not affected by any spill-over effects. The Global Strategy took the same line, highlighting the Arctic as one potential venue of selectively engaging with Russia. The peaceful and stable Arctic of the 21st century might have provided too few incentives (or security problems related to Russia) to include the region in thorough analyses of matters of security and defence.

The Union's latest update to its Arctic policy – the 2021 Joint Communication – already took into account the Arctic's changing geopolitical dynamics and the need to address them in light of shifting regional and global security considerations. Generally said, any role for the EU in the Arctic is based on its geography (and the Union's very division of labour): the presence of EU Member States Denmark, Finland and Sweden and EU-rope's links to Iceland and Norway through the European Economic Area agreement. Yet, this link has never been utilised in terms of setting out a clear geopolitical Arctic strategy for the Union based on the security concerns of these countries. Thus, the EU has become irrelevant for one of the things that matters the most for the Nordic countries: how to manage their security relations with Russia.

The Russian military threat and related security concerns over the borders and in the North Atlantic and Baltic Sea have preoccupied the Nordic countries for over a decade. So far, the Nordic countries have also been reluctant in promoting a stronger security role for the EU in the north. With the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, this reluctance might shift as the Nordic countries (and the European Union as a consequence thereof) must not only deal with increasing militarization driven by Russia, but also a growing Chinese interest in the region, and the related US great power competition that follows.

The 'High North' – a term often used by Norway to describe its immediate Arctic areas adjacent to Russia including a massive maritime domain that stretches from the European mainland to the North Pole – is vulnerable to strategic Russian military projections. Russia's Northern Fleet is located only 100 kilometres from the Norwegian border town of Kirkenes – one of Russia's four fleets housing its strategic submarines and ballistic missiles. It is no coincidence that Russia was conducting a military exercise in the Barents Sea while it was stepping up military activity on the border with Ukraine just before the invasion on 24 February. The message signalled was clear: Russia has the capacities and willingness to defend itself *vis-à-vis* the United States and NATO in the Arctic.

In isolation, a low level of tension in the Arctic is still in Russia's interest. Increased military exercise activity and the

building up of forces in the same area, on the other hand, do not contribute to this. The more tense the situation between NATO and Russia becomes, the more this tension will also spread to the northern areas of Europe – where it has already become increasingly hard for the Nordic states to fulfil Russia's criteria for 'good neighbourly relations' in the realm of security policy.

Still, we must discount the idea of an Arctic 'new cold war' – the region is too vast and varied for such descriptions to be valid. However, the European Arctic is increasingly important as one of four theatres where Europe meets Russia (the others being the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and obviously the Ukraine/Belarus region). If the EU is going to become *the* geopolitically relevant security actor in Europe that it must in order to remain relevant for its Member States (and citizens) and ensure peace in Europe, attention to the military security concerns in the Arctic is crucial. It is not sufficient to lean on NATO's capacities and deterrence capabilities; even though not yet supported by some Member States, the EU must have its own military and security clout. This does not discount close integration with NATO, especially if Finland and Sweden eventually decide to join the military alliance. In this way, the Arctic is no different than the other theatres mentioned: it is an arena where the EU needs to act, secure, invest and partner – to quote the Strategic Compass again.

The Arctic's Strategic Future – with or without the European Union?

The idea that the Arctic is an exceptional part of the world, sheltered from great power competition, was dead already in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and supported the conflict in Donbass. The Trump Administration's decision to drag the Arctic into a rivalry with China further contributed to this. The invasion of Ukraine eventually solidifies what has, in fact, been the case all along: given Russia's dominant position in the Arctic, any security trajectory in that region is dependent on Russia's actions vis-à-vis the other Arctic countries and the West/NATO writ large.

That does not, however, discount the value of regional cooperative forums such as the Arctic Council or the various Barents mechanisms that promote dialogue on a sub-national level or aim – in the case of the Arctic Council – to produce knowledge and recommendations for how to deal with issues of common concern in the north, barring security and military issues. As such, these rather technical areas of cooperation could be a fruitful space for restarting cooperation with Russia once the current level of tensions, in whatever scenario, subsides.

Still, security and foreign relations with Russia will likely not return to pre-2022 levels, and especially not 2014-levels, until Putin is no longer ruling Russia. That also goes for the Arctic, and the European Union's relationship with Russia in the north. Ever since its first Communication in 2008, the EU has been tiptoeing, almost neglecting, Russia in its Arctic policy. This has been referred to as the 'Arctic Exception' in EU-Russia relations. If the Union's full engagement in Arctic matters is a geopolitical necessity – as emphasized in the 2021 Joint Communication – it might now be the time to think strategically about the Union's future relationship with Russia in the Arctic. As such, the EU needs to radically change its regional attitude towards Russia, be it with regard to energy dependence and the substantial amount of imported natural gas stemming from the Russian Arctic, or the recognition that Russia in the Arctic is a security threat for the European Union. Based on this, the EU needs to find a way to properly address Arctic securitisation, and Russian realpolitik.

Unfortunately, but as somewhat expected, the just approved Strategic Compass pays only little (and rather superficial) attention to the Arctic, particularly if compared to other, even more distant, parts of the world. As such, the region has been furnished with all the relevant security issues – from climate change (global warming, environmental degradation and natural disasters) to geopolitical rivalries and commercial interests – and also put in a maritime security context. However, the Arctic was not an essential part of the Strategic Compass' 2020 Threat Analysis – an effort to build a common strategic culture that contributes to the credibility of the EU as a strategic actor. It is rather that the main challenges the Compass highlights – Russian aggression and systemic rivalry with China – also materialize in the Arctic. As such, it is not coincidental that both Norway as 'our most closely associated partner' and Canada with a 'long standing cooperation in security and defence' are specifically highlighted as bilateral partners. Much of what makes the Arctic particularly relevant for the EU foreign and security policy is mentioned across the Compass. Still, even after the apparent Russian-inspired rewrite of the document, one need to ask if the Arctic itself is nothing more than an abstract, hard to materialise geographical space for EU policymakers

and Arctic security a similar vague theoretical concept?

A specific Arctic security threat analysis might provide for a necessary overview of how the Union's 27 Member States perceive regional security *vis-à-vis* Russia in the North. Moreover, such analysis might put Arctic security on some Member States' tables for the first time. If the EU really aims to become a geopolitical power in its own right, it also needs to better understand the security challenges of the circumpolar North. It needs to assess how EU leaders really feel about selectively engaging with Putin's Russia in the Arctic. As the EU is currently adapting its policy toolkit under the heading of 'open strategic autonomy' the Union might be able to influence Arctic security constellations or utilize the region for its own security via and in terms of its economic power.

Russia's war against Ukraine also makes for a regional case for the EU to further strengthen its economic interlinkages with nations and regions in the North Atlantic – from Norway and the Faroe Islands, to Iceland and Greenland, and even the United States and Canada. Immediate security issues where the EU can play a role are for example (critical) mineral imports or the use of the Union's satellite systems. As such, the Arctic might make for another example of the EU shifting from a technocratic regulator into a geopolitical actor willing to actively utilize its economic interdependencies, counter its strategic dependencies – as analysed in the context of the Industrial Strategy update – or defending its Member States against coercions by third parties.

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