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Rethinking Arctic governance

A case for the EU's revised Arctic Policy

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Key findings

- **The EU is revising its 2021 Arctic policy as it has to adapt its role and priorities in the region to a new political context**. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, circumpolar cooperation has been reduced to a minimum. The Arctic Council, once the region's most important intergovernmental forum, is increasingly unable to act, leaving a governance vacuum to be filled.
- **As the Arctic becomes central to intensifying global geostrategic competition, it faces security risks that place particular strain on Arctic communities and governance systems.** The EU must clearly articulate its geostrategic ambitions aligned with its core goals of peace, environmental protection and sustainable development. By broadening the security perspective, which currently dominates political discourse, and emphasizing the human dimension, the EU could strengthen its legitimacy as a partner for cooperation.
- **For a 'strong EU in the Arctic', close partnerships with the Nordic countries and Canada are essential**. The EU's credibility as a partner will depend on alignment of priorities and the EU's output legitimacy, namely whether or not its actions are perceived in the region as producing results. In order to do that, the EU needs to strengthen its soft power profile in the region, which will require high quality engagement with Arctic stakeholders at both state and community levels, building on its efforts to strengthen resilience and connect Arctic societies.

Introduction

We are witnessing 'geopolitical shocks' that are 'seismic' in scope and will result in permanent change. These are the words that the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, used in her special address at the 2026 World Economic Forum.[1] This 'changing geopolitical and geoeconomic context'[2] is also prompting the EU to revise its 2021 Arctic Policy.

The Arctic regions are facing heightened security threats – ranging from the Trump administration of the United States having sought to annex Greenland to hybrid threats, such as cyber-based hacking of authorities, espionage and the sabotage of infrastructure.[3]

At the same time, diminishing attention is being paid to the causes and impacts of climate change, which also constitutes a threat to the Arctic, where the effects of climate change are progressing most rapidly. **The central question is how, and to what extent, this evolving context will reshape the EU's priorities and partnerships in the Arctic – if in the future the EU is to be a relevant actor in the region**.

1 Von der Leyen, Ursula (2026), Special Address by President von der Leyen at the World Economic Forum: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_26_150

2 European External Action Service (2026), The EU in the Arctic: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-arctic_en

3 Hoogensen Gjørv, Gunhild (2024), Security and geopolitics in the Arctic: The increase of hybrid threat activities in the Norwegian High North, Hybrid CoE Working Paper 30: https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/20240327-Hybrid-CoE-Working-Paper-30-Security-and-geopolitics-in-the-Arctic-WEB-corr.pdf

If the current context is seized as an opportunity to build 'a new, independent Europe', as Ursula von der Leyen suggested, the EU will need to dismiss old and establish new policy priorities and partnerships. In the Arctic, the EU must decide not only which partners to engage with and in which policy areas, but also which values should serve as preconditions for cooperation, such as the respect of human rights. This raises the question of whether these values can be upheld consistently by the EU, or whether mineral extraction in pursuit of the green transition, contested Arctic territorial use and reliance on US military capabilities generate double standards that undermine the EU's legitimacy as an Arctic partner.

This policy brief analyses how the EU may strengthen its role and advance its legitimacy in the Arctic when redesigning its priorities and partnerships, and how, in the process, it may contribute to the redesigning of established institutions and policies to fill the vacuum left by the Arctic Council. We will first provide a brief overview of the tensions inherent in different types of cooperation approaches, the role that the EU wishes to play in the Arctic and external expectations that concern the EU's priorities in the Arctic.

Second, we discuss how these tensions affect the EU's legitimacy as a cooperation partner and assess factors that strengthen and weaken the EU's perception as an actor that needs to engage in the Arctic to avoid being excluded from policy negotiations of great relevance for the EU's short-term, mid-term and long-term priorities. Third, we conclude with how EU ambitions have changed and how it can strengthen its legitimacy as a cooperation partner by emphasizing the human dimension of security in the Arctic.

Cooperation with whom?

At the regional level, the Arctic Council has long been the primary forum for Arctic cooperation. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, however, all Arctic states have suspended cooperation with Russia, the largest Arctic state, which has had the effect that the Arctic Council, the Arctic's main intergovernmental forum, has also limited its operations to a minimum. Indigenous peoples' voices, in their status as Permanent Participants, have been weakened as a result of the reduced activity in the Arctic Council. Circumpolar cooperation has been further undermined by US president Donald Trump's stated ambitions to annex Canada and acquire Greenland, as well as his rollback of environmental protection and sustainable development policies – longstanding pillars of Arctic cooperation that have also been emphasized by the EU.

Together, these developments have deepened divisions between the United States, Canada and the Nordic countries. As a consequence, Arctic cooperation is increasingly conducted through what Steinveg describes as 'conferencing'[4], with international forums serving as key arenas where policymakers and stakeholders come together to build informal relationships and shape political agendas beyond formal governmental hierarchies. **For the EU, this means that it needs to engage more in a network approach and to adapt its cooperation approach with the Arctic states that it has maintained under the auspices of the Arctic Council up to now**. While the Arctic Council is characterized by a circumpolar structure in which Arctic states have had the primary say and responsibilities, the new network approach requires the EU to decide with whom the EU wants to align on what issue areas, in what settings and why – thereby also considering to what extent values that serve as preconditions for cooperation are shared and respected.

Thus, with pan-Arctic cooperation increasingly fragmented, the EU must also define the scale at which it intends to prioritize its engagement in the region. Three Arctic states – Denmark, Finland and Sweden – are EU members, while Norway and Iceland belong to the European Economic Area, making the European Arctic and these national partners a natural focal point for EU cooperation. At the same time, in areas such as science, technology and transatlantic security, Canada remains a key partner through frameworks like Horizon Europe – through which the EU is the 'world's largest funder of Arctic research'[5] – and the EU-Canada Security and Defence Partnership.

Beyond conventional military risks, hybrid threat activities designed to 'increase doubt and mistrust' have intensified and are already shaping 'geopolitical dynamics in the European Arctic'.[6] The related security risks place particular strain on Arctic communities and governance systems, who increasingly experience cyber-attacks on authorities and sabotage of critical infrastructure, such as undersea cables. As a result, security concerns have come to the forefront, accompanied by a growing need to reinforce trust in democratic institutions to counter the destabilisation of societies.

4 Steinveg, Beate (2023), Arctic Governance Through Conferencing, Actors, Agendas and Arenas, Frontiers in International Relations, Springer Cham: https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-23332-6

5 Bergmann, Max/ Svendsen, Otto/ Raspotnik, Andreas/ Habeck, Robert/ Buchanan, Elizabeth/Gricius, Gabriella (2026), Northern Connections: The European Arctic by 2035: https://www.csis.org/analysis/northern-connections-european-arctic-2035

6 Lackenbauer, P. Whitney/Hoogensen Gjørv, Gunhild (2024), Suggested Readings: Hybrid Threats in the Arctic: https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/24mar-Hybrid-Threats-NAADSNrdglist-PWL-GHG.pdf

These security challenges demand the strengthening of societies, for example, through increased engagement with sub-national EU initiatives such as the Arctic Urban-Regional Cooperation (AURC) Programme, which supports exchanges among Arctic towns and cities, and the Youth Together for Arctic Futures project, which seeks to empower Arctic youth and foster connections with their European peers. These efforts aim to build societal connections, enable collaborative approaches to shaping the Arctic's future and exemplify the EU's value-driven soft power.

Bridging soft power and geopolitics

With geopolitics playing a major role in shaping visions of the Arctic's future, the revised EU Arctic Policy must clearly articulate its geostrategic ambitions in line with its core commitments to peace, environmental protection and sustainable development. To strengthen its soft power profile in the region and ensure credibility as a cooperation partner that is located mostly 'outside' the Arctic, the EU should place particular emphasis on what is feasible and accepted EU policy in an Arctic landscape that is only partly EU territory, marked by explicit great power interests, and with more than 40 per cent under Russian jurisdiction.

For the EU to be a legitimate partner, its results must be credible, which means that governance needs to be perceived as effectively solving societal problems and 'generating benefits for the people'.[7] As an 'outside' cooperation partner, the EU's priorities thus need to align with those of its Arctic partners. **If the EU seeks to play a constructive role in the region, it should build on its efforts to strengthen and connect societies**. In doing so, it should also critically address and balance internal tensions within its policy priorities, on the one hand, and prevent conflicting norms from undermining its output legitimacy, on the other.

With regard to the former, although current political discourse is dominated by a security perspective that prioritizes the military dimension, the EU should seize the opportunity to foreground human and ecological aspects of security – an understanding that is also shared by the Nordic countries. Thereby, the EU can promote, also internally, a broader understanding of security – one that moves beyond a traditional state-centric focus and instead recognizes it as a multifaceted concept, with interconnected dimensions that can drive either conflict or stability.

By building on its established emphasis on societies and environmental protection, the EU would strengthen its legitimacy as a partner for cooperation. At the same time, the EU, in pursuing its geopolitical interests, must render visible the linkages between Member State societies and Arctic communities to justify and better define its ambitions, and to avoid the perception of engaging in the Arctic for opportunistic reasons.

The EU must acknowledge that, as the world's fourth-largest emitter of greenhouse gases, the energy use and consumption patterns of its Member States significantly affect environmental change in the Arctic, as well as related environmental, economic and socio-political transformations that are planetary in scope. It should also be transparent about its interest in Arctic rare earths and minerals, which are essential both for advancing its green transition and for reducing energy dependencies, particularly on Russia.

The EU must respect and emphasize the territorial rights of Arctic inhabitants by recognizing the distinct rights of Indigenous peoples, while avoiding further polarisation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and communities by placing people from the Arctic in separate categories and prioritizing them differently. Finally, and perhaps most crucially for maintaining legitimacy as a credible partner, developments such as the US ambition to purchase Greenland underscore the need for the EU to take clear positions and to insist on respect for international law – even among its long-standing allies – in order to avoid perceptions of double standards.

With like-mindedness being increasingly the main token in Arctic cooperation, the EU should use its soft power and continue to support and invest in dialogue formats across governance levels, to connect and balance perspectives, and to build up trust and strengthen Arctic governance systems at the regional and sub-national levels. It is clear that the circumpolar governance approach needs to be redesigned.

The EU could support this process by developing innovative procedures when pursuing a network approach that builds on shared values, dialogue arenas at different scales, and co-creative and holistic policymaking processes involving the communities of the Arctic.

7 Dellmuth, Lisa M./Tallberg, Jonas (2015), The social legitimacy of international organisations: Interest representation, institutional performance, and confidence extrapolation in the United Nations. Review of International Studies, 41(3), 451–475, 455.

Way forward: recasting ambitions

The current 'governance vacuum' in the region constitutes a security concern in its own right, but also an opportunity for the EU to deepen its role in the Arctic. Strengthening political cooperation structures would require the EU to prioritize the maintenance of peace as a core commitment, while advancing Arctic cooperation in partnership with trusted actors that share this objective.

Revising its approach to cooperation structures will, however, involve a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, the EU must continue to engage with established channels and institutions that are increasingly constrained in their effectiveness, such as the Arctic Council working groups. On the other hand, it needs to expand its engagement in emerging networks and invest in areas that are both critical for the Arctic and aligned with the EU's comparative advantages – namely, where it holds legitimacy (e.g. through regulating market access) and political credibility (e.g. as a proponent of a rules-based international order), and where existing institutions such as the Arctic Council have a limited mandate.

This is particularly relevant for the EU's framework for scientific cooperation as a strategic domain. While the Horizon framework provides substantial access to funding, it remains largely driven by natural science perspectives on the Arctic, leaving limited room for research on the socio-political dynamics that underpin 'Arctic change'. Although the EU has increasingly emphasized the inclusion of Indigenous rights through co-creative research approaches, broader pan-Arctic societal questions still lack adequate frameworks for public and democratic deliberation. This is especially evident in relation to contested issues such as land use, mining and infrastructure, where polarisation is growing and structured dialogue is urgently needed.

Addressing these gaps would help identify critical knowledge needs, strengthen the role of universities as regional development actors in the Arctic and foster more meaningful engagement with local communities. In this context, the Horizon programme could serve as a catalyst for more innovative cooperation formats – not by bypassing established institutions, but by complementing and revitalizing them through bottom-up, co-creative approaches.

Such efforts could promote more horizontal, cross-border collaboration and facilitate dialogue among state and non-state actors, whose limited interaction risks deepening conflict. A concrete step in this direction would be to reform the EU Arctic Forum and Indigenous Peoples Dialogue by establishing regular, structured dialogue formats – such as monthly exchanges – rather than relying primarily on annual conferences that tend to reproduce one-way communication. Crucially, the outcomes of these processes should be systematically integrated into existing democratic and institutional frameworks.

With regard to other strategic areas – environmental protection and sustainable development – the EU should place greater emphasis on leveraging its soft power by establishing and upholding high environmental standards for market access, particularly in light of the Arctic's fragile ecosystems, that concern, for example, sea-borne tourism. To complement the precautionary principle, the EU should introduce due diligence procedures that more clearly assign responsibility and require more comprehensive assessments, as exemplified in the Madrid Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty. Such mechanisms would necessitate innovative and deliberative approaches to linking multilevel governance across local, regional, national and international actors, while fostering a stronger sense of solidarity oriented toward the common good.

The EU should not deprioritize the climate crisis, which remains the most acute security threat to both the Arctic and the planet. Addressing this challenge requires sustained political commitment, despite geopolitical pressures. In its Arctic security discourse, the EU should become more innovative in articulating a broad notion of security. The EU should consolidate its identity as a soft power actor in the Arctic by eschewing the exacerbation of security tensions and by revitalizing cooperative norms through the reinforcement and adaptation of governance structures, building on efforts to connect and support Arctic societies.

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