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The scramble for the Arctic

With climate change, geopolitical interests now compete in the Arctic for raw materials, trade routes and military bases

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Greenland will remain Greenland and not become the 51st state of the US. Donald Trump's diplomatically clumsy and unsuccessful expression of interest in buying Greenland made the world sit up and take notice of the way that the Arctic has taken on crucial importance for geopolitics and climate policy.

The current US President has indirectly recognised that these two focal points inevitably impact each other. Nevertheless, as the most prominent denier of global climate change, he made no reference to the catastrophic effects of climate change on the Arctic and the geopolitical shift resulting from it.

The facts are dramatic and severe, as we saw in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's special report on the oceans and the cryosphere published in September 2019. Climate change is particularly noticeable in the Arctic as temperatures have doubled compared to the global average.

The report states that according to current projections, the Greenlandic and Arctic ice sheets will continue to lose mass at an accelerating rate throughout the 21st century and beyond. As a consequence, sea levels throughout the world will continue to rise and extreme weather situations increase. The temperature rise in the Arctic region will also result in permafrost areas thawing faster increasing the release of harmful greenhouse gas emissions such as carbon dioxide and, in particular, the even more dangerous methane.

The new interests in the Arctic

When discussing the Arctic, it's necessary to take the scientific concept of

'tipping elements' into account. For many years, the assumption of linear, gradual changes in the environment went unchallenged. However, it's now clear that melting processes are self-stimulating and will cause discontinuous, irreversible and extreme events for global warming, which in turn will accelerate itself.

On top of that, the melting of ice and snow will make hitherto frozen areas accessible and create new land masses: a wide variety of mineral resources are thought to exist there and many parties are already keen on gaining access to them.

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Apart from catastrophic climate damage, the melting of the ice at sea is likely to result in new shipping routes. For example, within 20 years the Northeast and Northwest Passages are expected to be ice-free in the summer months. As a result, new maritime law and land allocation issues must be decided and sealed bilaterally and internationally between the neighbouring countries. It's important that international legal frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) be extended to the Arctic, and this includes the safeguarding of applicable shipping and transit rights.

The route between Europe and Asia will become 40 per cent shorter, resulting in additional economic and political interests on the part of not only the countries neighbouring the Arctic directly, but other European nations and China as well. The changes in the Arctic are at the same time creating new territories, already raising issues regarding sovereignty and thus military and security. Consequently, for several years now the Munich Security Conference has been addressing the situation in that region.

Multilateral cooperation in the Arctic

In 2018, in response to the finding that Arctic temperatures were rising twice as fast as elsewhere, European foreign policy started with a first European Council decision and an initiative proposal by the European Parliament on the subject of climate diplomacy. The current EU Council Presidency of Finland is in the process of demanding maximum climate protection and the promotion of sustainable Arctic development, which is to be more strongly embedded in an active European internal and external Arctic policy.

Existing foreign policy committees such as the Arctic Council, and the good cooperation between the Arctic countries in climate and environmental protection, have their roots in previous arrangements that date back to the Cold War. The existing institutions should by all means be maintained and strengthened.

The Arctic Council comprises a large group of neighbouring countries – Canada, the US, Russia, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Iceland and Sweden – and therefore continues to be an example of multilateralism that is functioning well. Because of China's intense interest in expanding its Silk Road to the Arctic region – it is already participating in infrastructure projects in the Arctic – China legitimately has observer status and should be closely involved in decision-making processes.

It's both right and essential that European Arctic policy involve local and indigenous Arctic communities in all discussions. Climate change and the resulting developments are already threatening some of these communities and their existential and cultural foundations. With that in mind, it's only logical that international Arctic policy should be based on the 17 goals of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with a particular focus on local people whilst their region undergoes development and change. The right to freedom, health and self-determination for the indigenous people in the Arctic must be respected.

Germany's Arctic foreign policy

Even under the current German federal government, the Arctic is rightly seen as a region of rapid change, whose geo-ecological, geopolitical and geo-economic importance for the international community is growing steadily because of global warming and the melting of ice at an accelerating rate.

For this reason, Germany published its own foreign policy Arctic guidelines in August 2019, whereby it has committed to taking more responsibility and a sustainable approach to the Arctic region. This fits in well with Germany's current foreign policy strategy and its non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council since January 2019. In his opening speech, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas explicitly referred to the Arctic when presenting the topic of climate diplomacy.

As important as it is to adapt to the potential geopolitical changes in the Arctic, our main focus

It remains to be seen whether the German government's desirable goal of preventing any militarisation of the Arctic can be implemented or whether it's already too late. However, there's certainly an urgent need for further discussion

should be on climate protection in the region.

on this matter.

The German government also demands the introduction of a legally binding regulation for the exploration and extraction of mineral resources, which would meet the highest environmental standards and contain best-practice principles for environmental damage and liability. Hopefully, during its EU Council Presidency in the second half of 2020, the issues of climate diplomacy and especially the Arctic will be high on the EU's foreign policy agenda – despite the likelihood of other conflicts and crises in the world.

As important as it is to adapt to the potential geopolitical changes in the Arctic, our main focus should be on climate protection in the region. In particular, more prompt and decisive collective action must be taken in order to reduce the soot particles that are already being produced by increased shipping traffic, raw material extraction and forest fires, and which are accelerating snowmelt. Many of the correlations that affect climate change, in the Arctic and therefore around the world, are still unknown.

It's therefore imperative that international scientific cooperation, as an important cornerstone of international climate diplomacy, be protected politically and not restricted by any new territorial claims. Regardless of this, the complexity and importance of the Arctic issue shows that, in addition to the EU member states' diplomatic services, the presently established European External Action Service must ultimately be provided with a powerful work unit on the subject of climate diplomacy. This demand by the European Parliament, which was set out in its first climate diplomacy report in 2018, must now be implemented by the new European Commission, which intends to make Europe the leading continent in terms of climate protection.



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