

The EU and the Arctic: Which Way Forward?

Adele Airoidi

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1. Stock-taking four years after

The long-awaited joint communication by the Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy “*Developing a European Union Policy towards the Arctic Region: Progress since 2008 and next steps*”¹ was issued in July 2012, four years after the groundbreaking Commission communication on the EU and the Arctic region.²

The 2008 communication was a difficult effort to identify the EU’s potential role in the Arctic, building on a checkered variety of policies and actions. The declared aim was “*to lead to a structured and coordinated approach to Arctic matters, as the first layer of an Arctic policy*” for the EU, thus “*opening new cooperation perspectives with the Arctic states, helping all of us to increase stability and to establish the right balance between the priority goal of preserving the Arctic environment and the need for sustainable use of resources.*” That aim has yet to be achieved, as the language of 2012 reveals: “*Taking a comprehensive approach to Arctic issues, this new Joint Communication underlines the **need for a coherent, targeted EU approach** towards the Arctic, building on the EU’s strengths, promoting responsible development while engaging more extensively in dialogue and cooperation with all Arctic stakeholders.*”

In its second part, the joint communication responds more specifically to the 2009 Council invitation to present a progress report, and summarizes the EU Arctic-related activities since 2008,³ structured around the three policy objectives indicated then by the Commission and approved in 2009 by the Council:

- “*Protecting and preserving the Arctic in unison with its population.*”
- *Promoting sustainable use of resources.*
- *Contributing to enhanced Arctic multilateral governance*” re-baptized “*International cooperation.*”

The information given is extensive, albeit in some cases overly self-congratulatory. A distinct example is the description of EU policies on climate change, qualified as capable of having “*a major impact in reducing Arctic pollution impacts from climate change.*” While this formulation is rather opaque, what is clear is that neither the EU performance nor EU international action in reducing greenhouse gas emissions are presently particularly brilliant, and even less are they capable of making a major difference for the Arctic. The communication furthermore fails to mention that climate change is not a priority issue, to say the least, for important circumpolar states such as Canada, Russia, or, until concrete proof of a change of attitude, the US, and that any EU-sponsored ambitious climate policy would have little chance of support.

¹ http://eeas.europa.eu/arctic_region/docs/join_2012_19.pdf

² http://eeas.europa.eu/arctic_region/docs/com_08_763_en.pdf

³ Set out in further detail in two accompanying staff working documents (*Inventory of activities in the framework of developing an EU Arctic policy* and *Space and the Arctic*). Cf. http://eeas.europa.eu/arctic_region/index_en.htm for relevant links.

An evaluation of the Arctic-relevant achievements in the EU since 2008 shows one clear new positive element. That is that EU awareness of Arctic-relevant issues and EU participation in Arctic international work has stepped up considerably. Otherwise, the communication simply confirms the general trends already evident in 2008, that the EU is strong in Arctic research and is a significant provider of funds to northern (although not necessarily Arctic) regions and their populations via different programs and partnerships. Some sections of the progress report (such as those on hydrocarbons and raw-material extraction or on indigenous peoples) are richer in general developments than in specific EU-relevant results, an indirect indication that no great progress has been made. The relatively new entry, the “space” document, is, by contrast, refreshingly clear and honest, admitting in the conclusions that “*certain objectives can probably be met with existing or planned programmes*” and “*a certain number of gaps have been identified.*”

2. The proposed way forward

Instead of indicating policy objectives, the communication sets out a way forward to develop an EU policy towards the Arctic, summarized in three catchwords: **knowledge, responsibility** and **engagement**. These are worthy concepts, but they are neither particularly enlightening nor original. Yet they should, and hopefully do, form the basis for the EU approach to any policy.

Unfortunately, these concepts do not translate into a clearer vision than in the 2008 communication, nor in a better developed and defined program.

The most noteworthy new element is probably a detectable shift from the priorities proposed by the Commission in 2008 and confirmed by the Council in 2009.⁴ The 2012 communication, echoing the mixed message emerging from the 2011 Parliament resolution on a sustainable EU policy for the High North,⁵ replaces the clear primacy given to environment preservation, defined as the “*priority goal*” in the 2008 communication, by a much more nuanced position: “... ***the particular emphasis on the protection of the Arctic environment remains the cornerstone of the EU’s policy towards the Arctic. However, given the evident speed of change in the Arctic, the time is now ripe to refine the EU’s policy stance towards the region, take a broader approach, and link it with the Europe 2020 Agenda for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth while continuing to support every effort to ensure the effective stewardship of the fragile Arctic environment.***” This convoluted wording indicates an uneasy awareness that a broader approach to growth, however smart, sustainable and inclusive, may not be easily compatible with the effective stewardship of the Arctic environment.

As regards future action, the communication proposes a set of not easily identifiable “*building blocks*”, which, at closer analysis, appear to be in great part a continuation or intensification of what is already being done, at EU, bilateral or multilateral level, and do not address fundamental shortcomings of the present approach.

⁴ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/111814.pdf

⁵ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2011-0024+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

3. An alternative way forward

It is possible to imagine an alternative way forward that would address those shortcomings. Indulging in the catchword fashion, it could be summarized by three inter-linked concepts, to be translated into general and punctual action.

First, **commitment**. The EU needs to decide in a clear-headed way where its interests in the Arctic lie by priority, how important they are, and to what extent it is ready to allocate human and financial resources to Arctic issues. All EU institutions should be involved in this exercise, without waiting too long, as the situation is in rapid evolution in all sectors. It is welcome news that the Council is preparing conclusions on the joint communication, but they need to go beyond a generic endorsement of the communication, and to be concrete, comprehensive and organic.

This would contribute to achieving the second – sorely needed – aim: **coherence**. Coherence would imply not only commissioning and proudly vaunting multi-million research projects on Arctic topics, but also feeding the results into the EU process, systematically examining and appraising the options identified by research as a guide for action.⁶ At an operational level, coherence would imply the creation of a unified or very well-coordinated EU structure dealing with Arctic-relevant issues, with a designated hierarchy able to give directions, to follow work and to act as a reliable contact point from the outside.⁷ Presently, incredibly, it is not even possible to find information on Arctic-relevant activities by the different EU Commission services in a single website.⁸

Commitment and coherence would lead to improved **credibility**. The EU still needs to establish itself as a credible partner, both for Arctic states and for Arctic inhabitants. It is striking that, with the single exception of Finland, no Arctic strategy of Arctic Council states, including EU member states or prospective members, gives much attention to the EU as an Arctic partner. The first step, once again, would be for the EU to clarify, first of all to itself and then to the others, which role it is willing and ready to play in the Arctic—and then, to take concrete steps to implement its declared intentions. There is also a clear need to restore credibility vis-a-vis indigenous peoples. The unfortunate ban on seal-product imports remains a powerfully negatively charged event that still embitters relations with Arctic peoples. There is no easy solution, but credibility could be improved by openly admitting that on issues of animal welfare, including to some extent whaling, different visions exist that cannot be reconciled.

⁶ As an example, the Arctic footprint project (<http://www.endseurope.com/docs/101119a.pdf>) rightly praised in the communication, includes interesting policy options addressing the correction or improvement of the EU impact on the Arctic, which would have deserved much more attention.

⁷ An Arctic inter-service ensures presently a measure of coordination, on an ad-hoc basis

⁸ DG MARE and the EEAS continue to have two different Arctic -dedicated websites, mainly containing the same items. Neither however systematically reports on Arctic-relevant action by other DGs, such as ENV, RTD, MOVE or ENTR.

4. A way beyond

A fourth quality, of a different order, is conspicuously absent from the communication: **courage**.

The EU has been accused in the past of behaving on Arctic issues like a bull in a china shop. In the 2012 communication, it tiptoes on eggshells, trying to convince the Arctic community at large that its intentions are wholly honorable, that it only wants to be helpful, and that it deserves to be one of *them*, and particularly to be admitted as permanent observer to the Arctic Council.

This aspiration is given disproportionate prominence, both in the communication and in public statements by High Representative Ashton. One wonders whether the issue is really so important, particularly as the role of observers, as it is now, is a very minor one. If the thinking behind this position is that admission would imply a duty of coordination of EU member states' positions on Arctic issues, it is quite clear that precisely this aspect would be likely to create tensions with non-EU, and possibly even EU, Arctic Council members and observers, as well as with the organizations of indigenous peoples' permanent participants. On the other hand, unlike applicant observers such as China, Japan, and South Korea, the EU has already close links with many Arctic Council states, and is already to some extent an insider able to exert a measure of influence and able to offer valuable contributions.

Therefore, the EU cannot and should not be conditioned in its attitude by the uncertain perspective of its admission to the Arctic Council. The EU can and should legitimately, by virtue of its activities, its competences in policy sectors relevant for the Arctic, and its economic and political weight, take a firm stance on the main emerging Arctic issues.

For a start, the EU should reaffirm loud and clear that it stands by the policy objective identified in the 2008 communication "*Contributing to enhanced Arctic multilateral governance*", re-baptized "*International cooperation*" in 2012 in an Orwellian excess of caution. Whether or not the "g-word" is used, enhanced **governance** is clearly needed in the Arctic, and should be one of the essential aims of international cooperation where the EU is entitled to participate.

This does not necessarily imply that the EU should push for controversial ideas such as an international agreement for the integral protection of the Arctic Ocean beyond the exclusive economic zones, however attractive this idea is. It would rather mean vigorous EU support to arrive at the best possible constellation of sectorial agreements, which may well be the most likely future Arctic governance system.

There are fields in which the EU could already effectively exert an influential role. Climate change, as already noted, is, at present, unfortunately not one of them. The EU could rather throw its weight as a major **consumer** of Arctic resources to influence the way in which they are or would be exploited.

It could take an open and firm stance in favor of a general moratorium on the *expansion* of commercial fishing in the Arctic Ocean, until an international agreement determining the sustainable harvest limits on the basis of sound research is concluded—as advocated by over 2000 scientists. The Council in 2009 had expressed itself in favor of a temporary ban, but the communication is less clear and determined on this point.⁹

And even if it means defying angry reactions by some Arctic States to perceived outside interference with their sovereign rights, and risking accusations of the mortal sin of Greenpeace-ism, the EU could insist that new offshore drilling in the Arctic be postponed until shared international standards—for which “*the need is unquestioned*,” according to the US National Commission on the Gulf oil-disaster report—have been developed and agreed upon, in line with the Commission’s own proposal on the safety of offshore oil and gas prospecting, exploration and production activities.

Both of these causes are certainly worthy and can be defended with very good and reasonable arguments. Of course, the EU should be ready to initiate and pursue intensive co-operation, both bilateral and multilateral, in research and standard-setting on the above issues, including actively seeking dialogue with non-Arctic partners that share an interest in Arctic issues, an element missing in the communication.¹⁰

Initiatives in the above fields have the potential to give rise to a much needed wave of support in the European and international public, including, in many cases, Arctic indigenous peoples, for issues far worthier than banning trade in sealskins. This would also allow, in particular, the European Parliament—were it to decide on a bold position—to regain its somewhat tarnished reputation of defender of the Arctic.

Excessive political realism and excessive deference, which, it has been noted, have characterized in later times the EU attitude, need to give way to vision and creativity. The Nobel Prize for peace needs to be justified by ongoing EU action, not only by past ones.

⁹ Compare point 10 of the Council conclusions “*The Council ... underlines that harvesting of Arctic marine living resources should be managed on the basis of scientific advice as part of an ecosystem perspective. It stresses the need to promote a precautionary approach to new fishing activity in Arctic high seas... expresses its readiness to consider a proposal to put in place a regulatory framework for the part of the seas not yet covered by an international conservation system... Until such a framework is in place, the Council favours a temporary ban on new fisheries in those waters*” with the softer, “appeasing” language of the first bullet point page 10 of the communication: “... *The EU is keen to ensure good cooperation with Arctic states in the sustainable management of marine biological resources. The EU supports the exploitation of Arctic fisheries resources at sustainable levels based on sound scientific advice, while respecting the rights of local coastal communities. In doing so, the EU continues to advocate a precautionary approach whereby, prior to the exploitation of any new fishing opportunities, a regulatory framework for the conservation and management of fish stocks should be established for those parts of the Arctic high seas not yet covered by an international conservation and management system.*”

¹⁰ A reference to an exchange of views on Arctic matters is included in the joint press communiqué from the 15th EU-China summit of September 2012.