Conference on Climate Change and the Arctic. Security Implications.

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Key-note speech by Marie-Anne Coninsx: "The Impact of climate Change on Arctic Security"

The Arctic, which is gaining international interest and strategic importance, is currently undergoing the direct impact of two global crises: climate change and Russia's war against Ukraine. Both are having - directly or indirectly - security implications for the Arctic.

The Arctic and Climate Change

I will only briefly speak about climate change, as it will be extensively addressed by Professor Massonnet. Hence, I would like mainly to highlight those aspects of climate change and the Arctic, that impact security, hereby using a large definition of the notion of security.

The Arctic region is warming up dramatically. It is warming up four times faster than the rest of the world. This is causing dramatic consequences, in the first place locally, for the environment, the eco-systems, and especially for the people living in the Arctic. Some examples:

- In impacts on food-security: Wildlife and the Indigenous people of the Arctic, all rely on sea-ice. When the ice disappears, the food chain is broken or is disappearing. It affects badly the livelihood of the people.

- It causes the collapse of the basic infrastructure in the Arctic, which is built upon permafrost that is melting. More than 25% of the Arctic sits on permafrost; two-thirds of the Russian Arctic sits on permafrost. And permafrost is melting, with as consequence that infrastructure - build upon it - is collapsing. This includes economic infrastructure, such as pipelines in Alaska - thus a problem of economic security, or collapsing military infrastructure and logistics, a major problem that is specifically mentioned in the US Defence Arctic Strategy of 2019.

But the warming up of the Arctic has also major implications globally. It accelerates global warming; we are getting warmer because the Arctic is heating up. It causes extreme weather events in North America, Europe and Asia, such as increased heatwaves, huge wildfires, and major floods. And the melting of land-ice, such as the glaciers in Greenland, causes the rise of sea-levels globally. All these is having a major impact on people, including on human security, causing people to migrate or to be relocated.

The geo-economic implications of the warming up of the Arctic.

In general. the warming up of the Arctic presents new economic opportunities. Indeed, the Arctic is very rich in natural resources. These are becoming more accessible when the ice is melting. This means, more, better, and easier access to the energy and minerals in the Arctic.

The warming up of the Arctic, also opens up also "new" sea routes, especially the Northern Sea Route (NSR), offering the potential of shorter, faster sea-routs, linking Europe with Asia. When speaking about new shipping opportunities, this means impacting upon international trade and global shipping.

In other words, the warming up of the Arctic offers new opportunities regarding drilling, mining, fishing and shipping. All these sectors have geo-economic importance, and are hence increasing the worldwide interest in the Arctic.

While the opening up of the Arctic, due to climate change, offers new opportunities to the region, increased economic activity will increase the risk of possible escalations, such as for example, disputes regarding commercial fishing or mining. There will be also an increased a risk of accidents and environmental disasters, such as search and rescue operations, or oil-spills, which are very challenging to handle in a difficult Arctic environment.

Also here, there is a link with security. The more the ice is melting, the more and easier is the access to Russian territory. This was one of the reasons for Russia, to increase its military presence along the Northern Sea Route (NSR), though having often also dual-use purposes, notably as a support to the strong economic development of the NSR.

An important, geo-economic sector in the Arctic, is the energy sector.

The energy sector in the Arctic is highly affected by climate change, but also by geopolitical turbulences. Before the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the EU was highly dependent on Russian gas, more than 40% of its imports stemming from the Russian Arctic. Putin was, still is, using the energy sector as an instrument of war, by cutting gas-deliveries to Europe. The EU reacted immediately, in reducing its dependency of fossil fuels coming mainly from the Russian Arctic, by its programme *"RePowerEU",* contributing to increase its energy security.

Increase of energy security, is - besides ending dependency from Russia and increasing the diversification of the energy-imports -, also relying on more renewable energy. Also here, the Arctic plays a major role. Indeed, beyond the region´s vast fossil-fuel reserves, the Arctic has an even greater abundance of renewable energy potential. With a growing number of companies based in the Arctic, working on clean energy solution, the region is transforming into a technological innovation hub.

There are however some specific challenges when addressing renewable energy in the Arctic, such as lacking the necessary energy infrastructure, but also the issue of the rights of indigenous peoples. Indeed, there is a growing resistance to some larger renewable energy projects among indigenous communities, e.g., against major wind-parks in northern Norway.

Another important geo-economic sector, is the sector of critical minerals.

The President of the European Commission, *Ursula von der Leyen*, summarised very well the importance of critical minerals (January 2023*): "The economies of the future will no longer rely on oil and coal, but on lithium for batteries, on silicon metals for ships, and on rare earth permanent magnets for electric vehicles and wind turbines. And it is sure, the green and digital transition will massively increase our need for critical minerals."*

Many of the critical minerals and key raw materials, needed for the green transition, exist in the Arctic. In January 2023, a Swedish mining company (LKAB) announced that they had discovered in the high north of Sweden the largest known deposit of rare earth elements in Europe. This is a raw material that is critical for the transition to new, green technologies, but is currently not being mined in Europe.

Also here, there is a link with security, or rather with the issue of strategic autonomy. Indeed, the EU is currently highly dependent on the import of critical minerals from one-single country, such as China with its authoritarian regime that is capable of cutting exports in case of e.g. a trade dispute. Hence, the Arctic - where critical natural resources are becoming more accessible due to climate change, offers a unique opportunity to increase EU´s strategic autonomy.

A major challenge however is ensuring sustainable development in the Arctic. Actually, any economic activity in the Arctic, raises the question of sustainability. The reason is simple. Working in an extremely fragile environment, can damage that environment, with all its consequences. Hence, while economic development in the Arctic, including extraction of resources, is needed, it has to be done in a sustainable way[1].

I will not say more about it, as Ms Alexandra Middleton will provide you with more extensive reflections on the topic.

The Arctic and Security:

When speaking about security in the Arctic, it usually covers a very broad definition going from soft security - such as energy security, food security, human security -, to military or hard security.

Soft security.

An important example of soft security, related to the Arctic, is maritime security.[2] For obvious reasons, the Arctic being mainly an ocean, maritime security plays a key role in the context of the Arctic, which is particularly challenging in the High North.

The EU updated its EU Maritime Security Strategy in March 2023. Maritime security is vital to the EU and to its Member States. EU´s economy depends greatly on safe and secure oceans[3]. An update was necessary, mainly to protect better against new security threats. Examples of new security threats are, the attack on the North Stream 2 pipeline in 2022, or the attack in 2021 on fibre optic cables, connecting Svalbard to mainland Norway. These are a strong reminder of the vulnerability of critical undersea infrastructure.

The new EU Maritime Security Strategy addresses the threat linked to climate change. For example, it wants to increase the knowledge of the effects of climate change on maritime security.

The Action Plan of the EU Maritime Security Strategy explicitly foresees actions related to the Arctic, such as observation of the new Arctic sea-routes, including making use of EU satellites systems such as Copernicus.

Defence and (hard) security.

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[1] Sustainability is possible, by for example, using the latest innovation technologies and the use of renewable energy, which should help to mitigate and minimise environmental impacts. There are ample examples of sustainable development in the European Arctic.

[2] Maritime security is a broad term, that means protecting the maritime environment against threats, which endanger the freedom of navigation, the security of maritime routes and global economic development.

[3] Over 80% of global trade is via sea-routes. About 2/3 of the world's oil and gas is either extracted at sea all transported by sea. Up to 99% of global data flows all transmitted through undersea cables.

The case of Russia:

The Russian Arctic is of key economic and strategic security interest for Russia. This is not new. What is new however is Russia´s increased military focus on the Arctic.

To put it simple: Russia has the largest Arctic coastline. As polar sea-ice melts, its Arctic coastline becomes more accessible. This exposes Russia to new risks. And these new risks, have put the defence of this region, at the forefront of Russian´s Arctic strategy. As some experts put it: the Arctic is seen by Russia as its "front door".

Russia´s increased military focus on the Arctic, is also a reflection of Putin´s overall strategic plans and ambitions, especially as reflected in Russia´s new Maritime Doctrine adopted on 31 July 2022, against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine.

The doctrine states that the Arctic is now Russia´s first regional priority. The Arctic is conceived as an area of strategic confrontation. The new doctrine reflects Putin´s beliefs that maritime capacity is key to Russia remaining a great power. The doctrine explains that the Arctic has turned into a region of global military and economic competition. Major goals of the doctrine are: sustaining Russia´s leading role in the Arctic, and the "wide exploitation" of its mineral reserves.

The military security environment in the Arctic especially changed in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea. Indeed, from 2014 onwards, Russia developed major military capabilities across its Arctic territory, that could threaten Arctic states. Russia built new military bases along its northern and western borders, intended (among others) to defence its strategic nuclear forces. Russian submarine activity in the North Atlantic, also reached Cold War level.

The security environment in the Arctic has certainly become more tense following Russia´s invasion of Ukraine. Immediately after Russia´s invasion of Ukraine, Nordic politicians[4] stated that "the global geostrategic situation had affected the region" and that "the Arctic has resumed its military strategic importance".

Military experts also estimate that the Russian naval and military buildup inside its Arctic, especially the nuclear forces on the Kola Peninsula, have an effect or potential effect, far beyond the polar circle. The Russian military might not be in good shape, but Russia´s military capabilities in its Arctic are impressive, as demonstrated by Russia´s Northern Fleet that includes sub-marines with nuclear warheads. Also, the north-western Russian Arctic is critical to its nuclear deterrence strategy vis-à-vis NATO.

And what about NATO?

When Russia invaded Crimea in 2014, the West reacted strong in words, but weak in facts[5]. NATO was at the time very reluctant to deal with its northern flank. The Arctic was not on its radar.

Until the "wake-up call" when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. This had as direct consequence, that NATO, but also the EU, could no longer ignore security on their Northern frontiers.

[4] Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde at a conference of the Atlantic Council Northern Office on "Cooperation in the Arctic: Ways forward in a Changed Security Environment" , 28 April 2022, Stockholm, Sweden.

[5] Some "restrictive measures" were taken, but for the rest, cooperation with Russia even increased in some areas, and certainly European dependency of Russian energy resources (gas) increased.

In other words, the Russian aggression in Ukraine, together with Russia´s increased military focus on the Arctic, prompted NATO countries to look north.

It is generally felt that the Russian war in Ukraine, has pushed Sweden and Finland towards NATO, with the potential to reshape the Alliance´s northernmost border. But, some say, that this also has the potential to increase security tensions with Russia in the Arctic. Important to note is that, when Finland and Sweden will join NATO, 7 out of the 8 Arctic States, will be Member of NATO.

Thus, the Alliance´s territory is about to expend further north. As said by some experts: "by looking at NATO´s geography, it is clear that NATO has to play a role in the Arctic" [6]

To counter the Russian military expansion, NATO has increased its military presence in the Arctic, by engaging in maritime security operations and exercises in the Barents Sea. Very recently (27 May to 2 June 2023), Finland (since becoming the 31st member of the Western alliance in April 2023) hosted its first joint NATO exercise, in the Arctic.

Thus, importantly, Russian aggression in Ukraine, has strengthened the European east-flank of NATO. There is clearly an increased military presence of allied forces, in for example the Baltic States. And these days, the major NATO air defence exercises are taking place in Germany, called "Air Defender 2023".

NATO and Climate Change.

The link between climate change and security, has got higher on the agenda of NATO.

At the NATO Summit in Madrid, June 2022, it was decided to create new NATO Climate Change and Security Centre of Excellence, expected to open in Montreal (Canada) in the fall of 2023. The aim of the centre is to understand the nature of the climate threat, how climate change might impact the strategic environment, in which need to operates.

A final word about the US and the Arctic.

To be noted that, already before the Russian invasion in Ukraine, especially the US Defence sector had an increased focus towards the Arctic. Different departments were (and still are) active on the file, especially the Department of Defence with its Arctic Strategy of 2019[7]. In January 2021, there was the US Army Arctic Strategy, with its title: "Regaining dominance in the Arctic"[8]. Since October 2022, the US has a new US National Strategy for the Arctic Region whereby security has become top priority, though it sharpens also its focus on climate change.

We clearly see an increased US willingness to engage in security issues in the Arctic, more concretely by increased US participation in NATO exercises in the high north, and in engaging its US Fleet in Arctic waters.

In brief, the Arctic is likely to become more important to operational defence and security policy thinking in Nordic countries, in Arctic States and more generally across NATO members. It is likely also to figure higher on the European security agenda.

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[6] Paul, Michael, and Goran Swistek, 2022. "Russia in the Arctic". Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

[7] Objective of its Arctic strategy is an "Arctic that is a secure and stable region in which US national interests are safeguarded"

[8] The aim is to improve Arctic capability and skills to operate in the Arctic environment, to increase the army's capability to operate in extreme cold weather

Conclusions.

There is no doubt that the Arctic region has gained in strategic importance.

The further opening of the Arctic, caused by climate change, raises the potential for defence and security concerns. However, the biggest threat to security of the region, might be the deterioration of the global security environment.

But, let us be optimistic, what we really strive for, is a safe, secure, stable, sustainable, peaceful and prosperous Arctic.

For all these reasons, the Egmont Institute - backed by a resolution of the Belgian Parliament, is supporting the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in drafting the first Belgian Arctic Strategy.

No doubt, that today´s deliberations will feed into this process.

Last but not least, I would like to wish the participants of the Belgian Defence College, a great study trip to the US and Canada. All the very best!

Thank you!