



The future of the Arctic region: what is at stake for Belgium?

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The Arctic region is undergoing dramatic changes with multiple implications for the region and well-beyond, with profound geo-economic and geopolitical consequences.

These major developments and especially the gravity of climate change in the Arctic, have triggered growing attention world-wide and has generated several Arctic, and increasingly non-Arctic States, to formulate strategies or policies towards the Arctic. As such, the European Union – some of the territory of which is part of the Arctic – recently updated its Arctic Policy, as illustrated by the EU Communication on “A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic” presented jointly by the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (October 2021). In the aftermath of this publication, the Egmont Institute organized a conference on this theme¹, with discussions that highlighted the Belgian perspective.

The fact that Belgium is affected by developments in the Arctic is clear. Indeed, the increasing warming-up of the Arctic impacts the whole of Europe, including all EU Member States. Local challenges of the Arctic have become global. Classic security threats (interstate) today go together with non-traditional and more structural security challenges, of which climate change is the most acute. The Arctic region is a perfect illustration of this. On the one hand, the region is characterized by increased geopolitical rivalry (including territorial claims), which are linked to the economic interests of the Arctic and non-Arctic states. On the other hand, the consequences of climate change in the High North are especially pressing: the sea-ice and permafrost are melting and are affecting dramatically the Arctic’s maritime and coastal environment. In addition, the warming of the Arctic brings both risks - such as causing extreme weather patterns in and outside the region (example: the forest fires that have ravaged Siberia in recent Summers) and opportunities for economic development. Among these are the opening of shorter shipping channels between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and particularly, easier access to huge reserves of natural resources in the Arctic, including the exploration of critical raw minerals. However, new economic

opportunities in the Arctic raise serious concerns regarding sustainability, given the extreme vulnerability of the Arctic environment.

THE NECESSITY FOR BELGIUM TO ENGAGE ON THE ARCTIC

The European Union, as a geopolitical power - together with its Member States, have strategic and day-to-day interests both in the European Arctic and the broader Arctic region. Being a major economic player, the EU together with its Member States, share the responsibility for global sustainable development, including in the Arctic regions, and for the livelihood of its inhabitants.

There are ample reasons for the EU to engage in the Arctic, which are highlighted in its updated strategy, such as the need for more strategic autonomy and resilience in geopolitical and economic terms, addressing climate change and its impact, protection of the Arctic environment, managing energy transition and energy security, ensuring sustainable development and circular economy, and, last but not least, taking care of the human dimension by prioritizing the people living in the Arctic.

However, in parallel to the implementation of this updated and comprehensive EU approach and in complementing it, individual Member States with special stakes in the region, and Belgium is one of them, have a strong interest in developing their own additional national policies on the Arctic, in order to fine-tune and adapt its policy to its own needs and specific interests.

Indeed, the warming up of the Arctic, might particularly affect Belgium. As an example, the land-ice loss in the Arctic (the melting of the icecap in Greenland) is a major contributor to global sea-level rise and hence is a serious threat to the Belgian coast. Already now, the Belgian tax authorities are taking the expected rise in sea-level due to climate change into account in their rulings regarding real estate developments on the coast.

Moreover, Belgian strategic economic interests, related to energy security, green energy transition and import of critical minerals, might be affected by developments in the High North. Importantly, for a coastal, port- and flag state, with great maritime assets and a small territory like Belgium, it is necessary to go sea- and ocean bound, to the North Sea and further North, also towards the Arctic. Here lies the key for economic development of the coming decades. Belgium can certainly contribute - with its own industrial and economic activities in the High North, to sustainable development in the region. Finally, Belgium already has interests, responsibilities, and tools, including as a member of the EU, NATO, and other international organizations.

Pushing for a stronger Belgian support of the EU's Arctic role in the Arctic – within the limits of its competences – would reinforce Belgium's engagement in the region. Supporting EU policies - including ambitious climate goals such as the Green Deal and the promotion of sustainable economic development – that directly contribute to addressing major challenges that the Arctic is facing, can only reinforce Belgian interest and engagement in the Arctic region.

THE GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA

Taking the fight against climate change as a starting point, it is immediately clear how the policy-response almost automatically acquires geopolitical connotations. After all, the European goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2050 presupposes the systematic phasing out of fossil fuels - the most important export product of the Russian Federation. In other words, the European Green Deal not only means that European energy dependence on Russia must change, but also that it is a new foreign policy tool for the EU, with profound geopolitical consequences. The development of the Russia's long northern coastline is central to Russia's

ambitious economic aspirations. However, the geopolitical rivalry that Russia sees today in its relationship with the Western world – as opposed to a more pragmatic, transactional relationship with China – has to do much more with establishing itself as a super-power in the Arctic and beyond, and less with European energy policy. Overall, better understanding the European relationship with Russia is therefore critical. The common aim of Arctic and non-Arctic states to maintain the Arctic as an area of peaceful and constructive cooperation, is an important confidence building measure in the overall tense geopolitical environment. The EU's support to regional cooperation in the European Arctic, is well recognized in this respect.

The Arctic region is vital for the economic and military survival of the Russian Federation. About 20% of Russia's GDP is produced in the region, and the Kola Peninsula is the beating heart of Russia's nuclear umbrella. The melting of the polar ice has gradually made Russia a maritime superpower. In this context, Russia's increasingly assertive position - with the planting of the Russian flag on the seafloor beneath the North Pole in 2007 as a symbolic opening gesture is not surprising.

As described in a recent study by an Egmont working group², relations between Russia and our country are characterized by a paradox. As a founding member of the EU and NATO, Belgium is fully involved in multilateral decision-making regarding Russia. On the bilateral level, however, we maintain a more pragmatic position, according to which the 1993 Belgian-Russian Treaty of Understanding and Cooperation remains in force, bilateral trade flows have largely recovered (as important for the diamond sector in our country, for example) and strategic investments continue (as showcased by the LNG terminal infrastructure in Zeebrugge).

TOWARDS A BELGIAN ARCTIC POLICY

To put in place a Belgian Arctic Policy, and regarding Belgian interests and responsibilities in the short, medium, and long term, there is a need for identification of our key interests and responsibilities, but also a need to raise awareness. It is necessary to identify national, regional, international tools and to adopt a comprehensive approach for supporting and defending those interests and assuming those responsibilities.

While the broad and diverse participation in the Egmont Seminar confirmed that there exists a great number of Belgian stakeholders – policy makers, scientists, businesses, NGOs – very much interested in the Arctic, a more common awareness and sense of purpose is needed. With no common strategic direction, Belgium will miss out on synergies and activities that could be mutually supportive, and we will fail in launching a real Belgian engagement in the Arctic.

The tabling of Belgium's own Arctic Policy would clearly express the country's engagement on the Arctic, under the umbrella and in support of EU's Arctic Policy. This is to be recommended provided its Arctic Policy is specific, represents an added value, finds its own “niche” in the multitude of Arctic Policies, and demonstrates the strengths of Belgium in what it can bring to the file.

Below are listed some key areas that should be covered in a possible Belgian Arctic Policy:

1. Scientific Polar research and Innovation

Belgium already has an international solid reputation in polar research – mostly related to Antarctica, but also has specific Belgian expertise regarding the Arctic. Its Arctic Policy could support and encourage scientific research and innovation, including by Belgian scientific institutions (BELSPO and research by several Belgian universities) and the private sector. The launch in 2022 of the new Belgian marine research vessel *Belgica II*, is an important addition to

the toolbox, including for cooperation with international partners.

2. Specific Belgian economic/investments interests, contributing to sustainable economic development in the Arctic Region

The geo-economic impact of the warming-up of the Arctic (such as easier access to the rich natural resources and “new” shipping routes in the High North) present new opportunities for Belgian economic stakeholders and investors. Specific sectors of interest such as shipping, ports, energy (LNG imports to Europe via the port of Zeebrugge), renewable energy, dredging and engineering, mineral extraction (including deep sea mining), the fishing sector and others, must be defined. Belgium has a clear interest in being part of the economic development of the Arctic; doing it in a sustainable way is key. Belgium has recognized international expertise in sustainable maritime management, including in the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and other relevant international bodies.

3. The Human dimension

Any respectful Arctic policy should also address and respect the interests of the people living in the Arctic – their rights and cultural heritage, promoting diversity, mobility, cultural exchanges, and particularly special actions in favour of indigenous people and the youth (e.g., by promoting exchange programs with Belgian universities and mobility of students.).

4. A contribution to constructive and productive relationship with all Arctic States, and hence to a balanced geopolitical environment.

Belgium would have an interest to address Arctic matters in its relations with Arctic States - including to build upon an already constructive cooperation on the Arctic with Russia. Our country has some important assets, such as our companies’ expertise in engineering, the significant research potential as well as our nuanced diplomatic positioning. In addition, Belgium should intensify relations with other

important Arctic countries such as Canada, where there exist already substantial Belgian investments (e.g., diamonds extraction in the Canadian Arctic) and with close Allies such as Norway, especially regarding security issues. In its relations with major non-Arctic States, which are very active on the Arctic file such as China, it would be recommended to maintain common support for the European policy towards China, which is principled, practical, and pragmatic, staying true to its interests and values.

Stronger engagement of Belgium in the Arctic can also be showcased by taking an active stand in different multilateral fora whose activities and policies equally are beneficial for the Arctic. For example, this could include the support of the moratorium in using heavy fuel for Arctic shipping within the International Maritime Organization (IMO) or the protection of the rights of Indigenous Peoples within the UN framework. Regarding security and defence, Belgium can play a role within the NATO framework by means of a proportionate contribution to the alliance’s deterrence posture and accompanying reassurance measures.

Finally, a status as an observer in the Arctic Council would be testimony of the growing engagement of Belgium in the Region. Belgium’s application for such a status needs to be considered in a very prudent way, as the shaping of a Belgian Arctic Policy and the Belgian engagement in the region evolves and is recognized. Indeed, obtaining observer status in the Arctic Council, should not be an aim in itself, but rather a means to leverage Belgium’s strengths. This will require significant preparatory work.

HOW TO SHAPE A BELGIAN ARCTIC POLICY?

Today, there is no constant Belgian governing body taking the initiative of pulling the Arctic file on the Belgian agenda. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has the vocation and tools to facilitate this process of awareness raising, coordination and policy streamlining, and could take this role of initiator, on the condition that the importance of the Arctic

agenda is recognized and that the basic and necessary tools and resources are put in place to assume this responsibility. Such a coordinating role will also be instrumental to ensure consistency and coherence of Belgian Foreign policy objectives regarding the Arctic, with other key policies such as climate, energy, maritime, shipping, and other policies.

Coordination will be key, as what is needed is a “whole of government” approach, encompassing all relevant levels of Government. The Ministry’s existing coordinating tools could support its role towards the other Belgian stakeholders. For instance, under the “Comprehensive Approach” Framework, a specific Task Force could be created, and other tools, including political-military, relations with the EU and multilateral cooperation could play an important role as well. The Egmont Institute and the Group of Belgian Friends of the Arctic which emerged after the workshop on the Arctic, also have the vocation of becoming a key supportive and mobilizing force, acting as convening, awareness raising and policy feeding vehicles among Belgian stakeholders and for outreach to international partners. The recent parliamentary debate and Chamber Resolution - calling for a Belgian Arctic Policy and adopted by a broad parliamentary majority³, reinforces the momentum in this respect.

CONCLUSION

Belgium already has a polar tradition – mainly through its history of remarkable Belgian presence and renowned polar research in Antarctica.

Given recent developments and major implications of the dramatic changes in the Arctic for the outside world, including for this country, Belgium needs to raise awareness on the importance of the Arctic and of the need to address the challenges the region is facing, for the benefit of the region and its inhabitants, but also for the global community.

Belgium’s engagement on the file, is highly recommended. Indeed, Belgium’s specific interests in addressing the impact of climate change (due to

the warming up of the Arctic), in harnessing the potential economic benefits in the High North while contributing to sustainable development of the region, and in contributing to security and constructive cooperation in the Arctic, justify the formulation of an own Belgian Arctic Policy.

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Endnotes

¹ Egmont Seminar on 29 October 2021, “The Future of the Arctic Region: What is at stake for Belgium?”² See also deteriorating situation in the country: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/10/1103932>

² Mattelaer, A., Vansina, L. (2020) “Dealing with Russia: Towards a coherent Belgian policy”, *Egmont Paper*, Egmont Institute (available at: <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2020/12/EP109.-final.pdf?type=pdf>).

³ Federal Parliament of Belgium. Chamber of Representatives (2021) « Résolution visant l’élaboration d’une stratégie belge pour la région arctique attentive à la crise climatique et aux défis en matière de sécurité dans cette région », *Chamber of Representatives* (available at: <https://www.dekamer.be/doc/flwb/pdf/55/2027/55k2027007.pdf>).



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