

The Arctic: opportunities, concerns and security challenges

2020/2112(INI) - 07/10/2021 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 506 votes to 36, with 140 abstentions, a resolution on the Arctic: opportunities, concerns and security challenges.

International cooperation

Parliament recalled that the Arctic is of strategic and political importance to the EU. It underlined the EU's commitment to being a responsible actor, seeking the long-term sustainable and peaceful development of the region by fully cooperating with international partners. It is crucial that all stakeholders, including the EU and its Member States, act to maintain peaceful and intense international and regional cooperation, scientific research, prosperity and low tensions in the Arctic, as well as to respond to the very alarming effects and consequences of climate change in the region.

The EU should contribute to strengthened multilateral governance in the Arctic, promote sustainable use of resources and protect and preserve the Arctic, together with its people. The EU's Arctic policy should include new actors such as China and consider the security dimension.

While recognising the sovereign status of the Arctic states and their sovereign rights under international law, the resolution stressed that the EU's capacity to provide solutions to potential security challenges should be fully exploited and that global, regional and local fora are needed for dialogue on the security needs of the region.

Climate change

Concerned by the IPCC's findings that global warming has led to widespread shrinking of the cryosphere in recent decades, with a mass loss of ice caps and glaciers, Members urged the EU to take a leading role in work to build an ambitious climate action plan for the Arctic. EU policies should ensure that the interests of the people of the Arctic region, including indigenous peoples, in protecting and developing the region.

Sustainable development and exploitation of strategic resources

The resolution emphasised the sustainable and scientific exploitation of energy resources in the Arctic and stressed the need for a strengthened policy on domestically produced renewable energy and energy efficiency that will significantly reduce the EU's dependence on external sources and thus improve its security position.

In view of the environmental risk posed by the exploitation of oil and gas in the Arctic, Parliament called for strict requirements to be introduced for the exploration and exploitation of new hydrocarbon reserves in the region. It expressed concern about attempts, notably by Russia and private companies in other countries, to pursue large-scale development projects without assessing their environmental impact.

Funding

Noting that the EU has been a major financial contributor to Arctic research through programmes such as Horizon 2020, Parliament stressed the need to increase EU funding for Arctic research and development. It also called for an ambitious investment plan for the Arctic.

Indigenous people

The circumpolar Arctic is home to over four million people, including over 40 different indigenous peoples and local communities and half a million EU citizens. The EU only recognised indigenous people, the Sami people, live in the Arctic regions of Finland and Sweden, as well as Norway and Russia. Recognising that the effects of melting ice and milder temperatures are displacing indigenous populations and thereby threatening the indigenous way of life, the resolution stressed that the EU should pursue policies that ensure that measures to address environmental concerns take into account the interests of the inhabitants of the Arctic region, including its indigenous peoples, in protecting and developing the region. There is a need to ensure the preservation of indigenous peoples' cultures, traditions and languages by establishing capacity building programmes to increase awareness about the diversity, history and the rights of indigenous peoples.

Russia and China

Parliament expressed its regret at the Russian Government's efforts to subordinate civil society, which is having a very negative impact on indigenous peoples by limiting the autonomy of their representations and partnerships in international forums, blocking access to external funds. It is also concerned about the progressive Russian military build-up in the Arctic, which it considers to be unjustified as it significantly exceeds legitimate defensive purposes.

Parliament considered that the inclusion of the Arctic by China in its economic development programmes, with the aspiration of integrating the Arctic's Northern Sea Route into its Belt and Road Initiative (as a Polar Silk Road), needs to be closely observed by the EU. It also expressed concern over China's investment attempts in the seaports along the Northern Sea Route and its attempts to obtain mining rights. The Arctic is also expected to play a central role in the European raw materials alliance, boosting European production of key minerals and reducing dependence on China for rare earth metals.

More EU in the Arctic, more Arctic in the EU

Parliament considered that the EU, as a global player, should engage in active political dialogue, react to the growing strategic importance of the Arctic and continue to play its role as an accepted and credible actor in the region. The resolution noted that the best reply to growing Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic is greater coordination at EU level. Moreover, the Commission is called on to set up a working group covering all issues related to Northern Europe and the Arctic. The Arctic should also be given a more prominent place in Parliament, including through the creation of a specific interparliamentary delegation.

