

Disagreements over animal rights issues have prevented the EU from gaining full observer status at the Arctic Council

blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/01/20/disagreements-over-animal-rights-issues-have-so-far-prevented-the-eu-from-gaining-full-observer-status-at-the-arctic-council/

20/01/2014

Although analyses of the EU's external relations have typically focused on regions to the east or south of the continent, the EU has also developed a growing interest in the Arctic. [Clive Archer](#) provides an overview of the EU's involvement in the Arctic, including the recent failure of the EU to gain full observer status at the Arctic Council in 2013. He notes that while a strong case had been made for the EU's inclusion, the application was undermined by opposition from the European Parliament to seal-skin imports, which provoked disagreement with permanent members such as Canada.



At their meeting in Kiruna, Northern Sweden, in May 2013, the ministerial meeting of the [Arctic Council](#) accepted the applications by China, India, Italy, Singapore, the Republic of Korea and Japan to become Observer States to the Arctic Council, but that of the European Union was put on hold. In the diplomatic language of the eight ministers from Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States, this application was received 'affirmatively' but a final decision was deferred 'until the Council ministers are agreed by consensus'. So the answer to the EU was 'not yet', though it could sit in meetings, effectively as an observer, in the meantime. How did this impasse arise and why has the EU wanted to be an observer in the Arctic Council?

The Arctic Council: post-Cold War co-operation

The Arctic region was strictly divided politically during the Cold War, with NATO and Soviet forces facing each other over the North Pole and an array of surveillance and intelligence stations scattered among the snowy wastes. The thaw started with a speech in Murmansk by President Gorbachev of the Soviet Union in October 1987 that offered co-operation in the Arctic to Western states. While the West rejected the military side of the Murmansk speech, progress was made in the area of scientific and environmental co-operation that built on the experience of polar scientists working together over the decades, though with little formal institutional east-west co-operation.

Eventually, the eight states that have land within the Arctic Circle (in Iceland's case a small island) set up the [Arctic Council](#) in 1996 to oversee the various functional committees that had already been established. While the new Council could not cover security matters, it could deal with broad sustainable development, scientific and environmental co-operation, and it included six indigenous peoples' organisations as Permanent Representatives, such as the Sami Council. It allowed observer status to international organisations such as the UN Environment Program and non-governmental organisations like the International Arctic Science Committee. Also, non-Arctic countries that had interests and activities in the Arctic and accepted and supported the Council's objectives were allowed [State Observer status](#). The UK, France and Germany signed up from the beginning.

The European Union: the long march north from Brussels

To start with, the EU had little interest in the Arctic. Greenland, part of the kingdom of Denmark, had greatly reduced the land-size of the then European Community by leaving it in 1985, and Sweden and Finland – two Arctic states – only joined in 1995. Norway and Iceland, two other Nordic Arctic states, stayed outside the EU, but were both closely linked to the single market through the European Economic Area.

The Nordic EU members, especially Finland, pressed for a 'Northern Dimension' for the EU to which an 'Arctic Window' was attached. However, in 2007 the Commission's Integrated Maritime Strategy mentioned the Arctic

Ocean in the context of global warming, and the following year the joint High Representative and Commission paper on [Climate Change and International Security](#) suggested the adoption of an Arctic EU policy. In October 2008 the European Parliament debated the Arctic and suggested that an international treaty, similar to that for the Antarctic, should be agreed for the Arctic. The subsequent Commission Communication on Arctic issues rejected this notion, but did adopt proposals for the protection and preservation of the region in unison with its population, promoting sustainable use of resources, and contributing to the enhanced governance of the Arctic. To that end, the Commission wished to apply for permanent observer status in the Arctic Council.

The Council, in its 2009 [Conclusions](#), accepted the Commission's gradualist approach and dismissed the idea of yet another international organisation. It wanted member states' interests and rights in the Arctic accepted and pressed for observer status of the Arctic Council, an idea that the Canadians kicked into the snow. The European Commission and High Representative's communication of 2012 on developing an EU policy toward the Arctic noted in particular the effects of global warming on the Arctic, the opening of new transport lanes, the exploitation of minerals and natural resources, and the use of international institutions to manage the region. It put its foot in the door by mentioning the EU's fight against global warming, the EU's status as a major destination for Arctic resources, and the implications its policies have for Arctic states. Extensive EU and member state Arctic research was mentioned, including a budget of €1 million to research the strategic assessment of Arctic development.

All this made a strong case for EU observer status of the Arctic Council. However, what one part of the Union might carefully put together, another can undo. Sure enough, the European Parliament's pressure for a continued EU ban on seal-skin imports riled exporters in Canada, and the European Court of Justice rejected a Canadian Inuit attempt to lift the ban, upsetting Arctic indigenous peoples' groups. Russia has not been keen on the EU having observer status, but has allowed Canada to lead the opposition. The Canadians are unlikely to give way unless there is movement by the EU on its seal-skin ban, while the animal rights groups within the EU will resist its weakening. In the end, the EU may have to be content with being an *ad hoc* observer, but without the status of the new observers such as China.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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Boundary of the Arctic, Credit: University of Texas

