Sustainable EU policy for the High North

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Michael Gahler (EPP, DE) on a sustainable EU policy for the High North, in response to the Commission Communication on the EU and the Arctic Region.

It stresses the need for a united, coordinated EU policy on the Arctic region, in which both the EU's priorities and the potential challenges and a strategy are clearly defined. Members recall that three EU Member States – Denmark, Finland and Sweden – are Arctic States. Whilst acknowledging that the EU has no Arctic Ocean coastline so far, they reaffirm the legitimate interest of the EU and other third countries as stakeholders by virtue of their rights and obligations under international law, the EU's commitment to environmental, climate and other policies and its funding, research activities and economic interests, including shipping and exploitation of natural resources. The EU has large Arctic land areas in Finland and Sweden that are inhabited by the only indigenous population group in Europe, the Sami. A future accession of Iceland to the EU would transform the Union into an Arctic coastal entity. Iceland's candidate status underlines the need for a coordinated Arctic policy at EU level and represents a strategic opportunity for the EU to assume a more active role and contribute to multilateral governance in the Arctic region. The committee adds that the growing interest in the Arctic region of other non-Arctic actors such as China, illustrated by China's commissioning of a first icebreaker, their allocation of funding to polar research and not least the applications by South Korea, China, Italy, the EU, Japan and Singapore for status as permanent observers at the AC, indicates a different geopolitical appreciation of the Arctic on a larger scale.

Permanent inter-service structure and Arctic Unit: the committee requests that the Commission develop the existing Inter-Service Group into a permanent inter-service structure to ensure a coherent, coordinated and integrated policy approach across key policy areas relevant to the Arctic, such as the environment, energy, transport and fisheries. It recommends assigning the co-lead of this structure to the EEAS and DG MARE, the latter acting as a cross-sectoral coordinator within the Commission. It further recommends creating an Arctic unit in the European External Action Service (EEAS). Members call on the Commission, in negotiating bilateral agreements, to take account of the fact that the sensitive Arctic ecosystem must be protected, the interests of the Arctic population, including its indigenous population groups, must be safeguarded and the natural resources of the Arctic must be used sustainably. The Commission must be guided by these principles in relation to all activities.

EU Arctic Information Centre: the report calls on the Commission to report on the establishment of EU activities in the Arctic such as a circumpolar joint multilateral research funding programme providing for less bureaucratic cooperation and joint projects of the research community. The Commission is asked to explore as a key priority the establishment of an EU Arctic Information Centre as a joint, networked undertaking, taking into account suitable proposals. Such a centre needs to be capable both of organising permanent EU outreach to the major actors relevant to the Arctic and of channelling Arctic information and services towards the EU's Institutions and stakeholders.

Research: Members underline the fact that the EU and its Member States are main contributors to Arctic-relevant research, regional cooperation and the development of technology relevant to the region and beyond. They ask the Commission to examine the possibilities of developing circumpolar co-funding and co-programming initiatives to enable more effective cooperation between experts from the countries involved. The EU should promote cooperation activities with the USA, Canada, Norway, Iceland, Greenland and Russia in the field of multidisciplinary Arctic research, thereby establishing coordinated funding mechanisms.

Environment and natural resources: the committee stresses 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. Policies must respect the interest in sustainable management and use of the land-based and marine, non-renewable and renewable natural resources of the Arctic region, which in turn provide important resources for Europe and are a major source of income to the inhabitants of the region.

Members note that it is estimated that about a fifth of the world's undiscovered hydrocarbon resources are located in the Arctic region, although more extensive research is needed to establish more accurately how much gas and oil there is in the region and how economically viable it would be to exploit these reserves. They call on the States in the region to resolve any conflicts over access to natural resources in the Arctic in the way of constructive dialogue, possibly within the AC, which constitutes a good forum for such discussion. The report underlines the role of the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) in finding solutions for conflicts between Arctic States over delimitation of their exclusive economic zones.

Governance: Members are of the opinion that a strengthened Arctic Council should play a leading role in cooperation on the Arctic. They would therefore welcome politically and administratively improved capacities of the AC, e.g. the permanent secretariat currently under discussion, more equal sharing of costs, more frequent ministerial meetings and an Annual Arctic Summit on the Highest Level. The committee confirms its support for permanent observer status for the EU in the AC. It regards the Northern Dimension as a focal point for regional cooperation in Northern Europe, stressing the need for close alignment between the Northern Dimension policy and the EU's evolving Arctic policy. Lastly, Members regard the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) as an important hub for cooperation between Denmark, Finland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the European Commission.

Indigenous people: Members note the special position and recognise the rights of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic and call for greater involvement of indigenous people in policy-making. They call for all governments in the Arctic region, especially that of Russia, to adopt and endorse the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted by the General Assembly on 13 September 2007.

New world transport routes: lastly, the report underlines the major importance of the safety and security of new world trade routes through the sea in the Arctic, in particular for the EU and its Member States' economies, these countries controlling 40% of world commercial shipping. It calls on the States in the region to ensure that any current transport routes – and those that may emerge in the future – are open to international shipping and to refrain from introducing any unilateral arbitrary burdens, be they financial or administrative, that could hinder shipping in the Arctic, other than internationally agreed measures aimed at increasing security or protection of the environment.