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<b>ΠΕΡΙΦΕΡΕΙΑ</b> <b>REGIONAL</b> <b>INTEGRATION</b> politics economics governance			
INTRODUCTION ΕΙΣΑΓΩΓΗ	The Editor of the special issue Addressing Climate Change in Turbulent Times <b>Emmanuela Doussis</b>		
POLICY BRIEF ΚΕΙΜΕΝΟ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣ	<b>Constantinos Cartalis</b> Towards climate neutrality in the European Union		
RESEARCH ARTICLES ΕΡΕΥΝΗΤΙΚΑ ΑΡΘΡΑ	<b>Andreas A. Papandreou</b> Climate economics: central themes and evolving debates <b>Marie-Claire Cordonnier Segger &amp; Markus Gehring</b> Climate Justice through International Court and Tribunals: Advisory Opinions in the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) <b>Emmanuela Doussis</b> The bumpy road to climate neutrality and just transition and the case of Greece <b>George Dikaïos</b> Policy change, port governance and climate policy in the European Union <b>Othon Kaminiaris</b> Taking stock of the Greek climate change adaptation processes: compliance with and efficiency of the institutional and legal framework <b>Nikos Mantzaris</b> Conflicting policies threatening the sustainability of Greece's electricity model: short history and lessons learnt		
POLICY PAPER ΚΕΙΜΕΝΟ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣ	<b>Alexandros Sarris</b> The European Union's Engagement in the Arctic through its Environmental Policy in an era of unprecedented tensions		
BOOK REVIEW ΒΙΒΛΙΟΚΡΙΤΙΚΗ	EU Climate Diplomacy towards the IMO and ICAO <b>(Marianna Terezaki)</b> Επισημονική επιθεώρηση για την περιφερειακή ολοκλήρωση-πολιτική, οικονομία & διακυβέρνηση		

## The European Union's Engagement in the Arctic through its Environmental Policy in an era of unprecedented tensions

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## The European Union's Engagement in the Arctic through its Environmental Policy in an era of unprecedented tensions

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### Abstract

In the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, the use of the Arctic seems to be associated with not only peaceful uses since it was always an era of tensions and conflicts among the superpowers. The EU seems to be willing to get more actively involved in the region through its environmental policy even though European Arctic States have their own individual interests and policies at the Arctic Ocean. European Union seems to be willing to discuss on the basis of the effective government of the region regarding the management of living and nonliving national resources and the navigation challenges arising from the melting of the ice in order to contribute to the establishment of the peaceful use of the Arctic Ocean.

**Keywords:** Arctic, European Union, Climate Change, Governance

## Η εμπλοκή της ΕΕ στην Αρκτική μέσα από την περιβαλλοντική της πολιτική σε μια εποχή πρωτοφανών εντάσεων

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### Περίληψη

Στον απόηχο του πολέμου στην Ουκρανία, η χρήση της Αρκτικής φαίνεται να συνδέεται όχι μόνο με ειρηνικές χρήσεις, καθώς αποτελούσε πάντα μια περιοχή εντάσεων και συγκρούσεων μεταξύ των υπερδυνάμεων. Η ΕΕ φαίνεται να είναι πρόθυμη να εμπλακεί πιο ενεργά στην περιοχή μέσω της περιβαλλοντικής της πολιτικής, παρόλο που τα ευρωπαϊκά κράτη της Αρκτικής έχουν τα δικά τους ατομικά συμφέροντα και πολιτικές στον Αρκτικό Ωκεανό. Η ΕΕ φαίνεται να είναι πρόθυμη να συζητήσει στη βάση της αποτελεσματικής διακυβέρνησης της περιοχής σχετικά με τη διαχείριση των ζώντων και μη ζώντων εθνικών πόρων και τις προκλήσεις ναυσιπλοΐας που προκύπτουν από το λιώσιμο των πάγων, προκειμένου να συμβάλει στην εμπέδωση της ειρηνικής χρήσης του Αρκτικού Ωκεανού.

**Λέξεις κλειδιά:** Αρκτική, Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση, κλιματική αλλαγή, διακυβέρνηση

## 1. Introduction

The Arctic region has increasingly emerged as a center of geopolitical interest and strategic maneuvering, particularly for the European Union (EU). The EU's involvement in the Arctic is driven by a combination of pragmatic economic considerations and a commitment to addressing urgent environmental issues. This dual approach was articulated in the European Commission's Arctic policy, released in 2021, titled "A Stronger EU Engagement for a Peaceful, Sustainable and Prosperous Arctic" (EUAP) (European Commission, 2021). The document emphasizes the EU's ambition to strengthen its presence and influence in the Arctic while highlighting the importance of collaboration, sustainability, and the immediate need to combat climate change.

As the Arctic's natural resources continue to attract global attention, their political and economic significance is expected to increase in the coming years. Given the EU's substantial market power and leadership role in climate policy, its aim to enhance its presence in the region is not unexpected. The EUAP portrays the Arctic as a zone for peaceful collaboration, stressing the urgent need to mitigate climate change impacts and promote sustainable development for the benefit of local communities.

The geopolitical landscape has shifted dramatically, particularly in light of escalating military tensions in Europe following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This situation has compelled the EU to reassess its role in fostering European and international security. The 2022 Strategic Compass reflects the EU's commitment to becoming "a more capable security provider for its citizens and a stronger global partner for international peace and security" (European Council, 2022). This article explores the rising tensions in the Arctic and the EU's interests, examining the role that the EU hopes to play through its environmental policy.

## 2. The Rise of Tension: The EU's Interest in the Arctic

Global interest in the Arctic intensified dramatically in 2007 when Russia famously planted a flag on the North Pole, signaling its intent to claim sovereignty over the resources beneath the ice (Bennett, 2019). This act raised significant legal and geopolitical questions, particularly concerning the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). According to UNCLOS, coastal states have exclusive rights to exploit natural resources within 200 nautical miles of their baseline, while the North Pole itself falls within the global maritime commons, accessible to all nations (United Nations, 1982).

Securing maritime routes is of paramount importance, especially considering that approximately 80% of global trade occurs via the sea. In 2019, about 15% of vessels navigating Arctic waters were registered under flags of EU member states, underscoring the EU's vested interest in maintaining secure ocean routes for economic stability (European Commission, 2021). In response to evolving se-

curity threats, the EU's new Maritime Security Strategy emphasizes the necessity of securing Arctic sea routes by 2025 through enhanced satellite observation capabilities (European Commission, 2020).

The Arctic comprises eight states: the United States, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway, Canada, Iceland, and Russia. Although the EU does not border the Arctic Ocean, it has maintained a keen interest in the region, particularly following the accession of Finland and Sweden in 1995. Through its relationships with Iceland and Norway—part of the European Economic Area (EEA)—the EU benefits from an open market policy with specific Arctic regions. Since 2007, the EU's interest in Arctic issues—including climate, environmental, and social concerns—has expanded, culminating in its bid for observer status in the Arctic Council, a request that remains unfulfilled (Arctic Council, 2021).

Historically, the narrative surrounding EU-Russia cooperation in the Arctic was one of “exceptionalism.” Despite ongoing political tensions, Russia remained a key energy supplier to the EU until early 2022, with many hydrocarbons sourced from its Arctic territories (Moe, 2022). The EU had viewed Russia's untapped energy resources as crucial to its future energy security, a relationship it sought to maintain in accordance with its 2016 Arctic strategy. However, the onset of the Ukraine war dramatically shifted this dynamic, leading to extensive economic sanctions imposed by the EU on Russian exports (European Commission, 2022).

The Northern Sea Route, anticipated to serve as a significant trade shortcut between Asia, Europe, and North America, underscores the EU's economic interests in the Arctic. Climate change is expected to open new Arctic routes, and the EU aims to manage these developments responsibly in collaboration with Arctic states under UNCLOS.

The EUAP of 2021 outlines various challenges influencing its Arctic stance, including geographic proximity, increasing militarization, territorial disputes, and competition for resources. These factors, alongside global environmental threats posed by climate change, form the basis for the EU's argument advocating for greater involvement in Arctic affairs. Consequently, the European Arctic emerges as a critical case study for understanding the complexities of European and international security and foreign policy.

### 3. The EU as an Emerging Geopolitical Power

Under the leadership of Ursula von der Leyen, who became president of the European Commission in 2019, the EU has embraced the notion of a “geopolitical Commission.” This framework differentiates between “low politics,” which pertains to economic, social, and environmental issues, and “high politics,” encompassing national and international security matters (Von der Leyen, 2019). The latter remains under the jurisdiction of individual member states, underscoring the sensitivity of foreign policy, which is closely tied to national sovereignty. Most EU member states are also NATO members, to whom they delegate their military capabilities.

In this context, initiatives such as the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity and the European Peace Facility signify the EU's efforts toward enhancing its security and defense posture. The EU is striving to develop its military capabilities, reducing reliance on NATO for security matters, thereby characterizing von der Leyen's Commission as a 'geopolitical Commission' (European Commission, 2020).

The latest EU Arctic Policy contrasts sharply with its 2016 predecessor, which primarily focused on raising awareness of environmental degradation in the Arctic and the EU's climate initiatives. The new EUAP adopts a more geopolitical lens, with politicians from Sweden and Finland advocating for increased EU engagement in the Arctic. Former Finnish Prime Minister Antti Rinne has emphasized the necessity of a robust EU presence in the region (Rinne, 2021).

The EU envisions the Arctic as a "safe, stable, sustainable, peaceful, and prosperous" area, articulating its future aspirations. When the EUAP was released in 2021, the geopolitical threat posed by Russia was less pronounced than it is today. Consequently, the policy frames the EU's Arctic engagement within the broader context of the European Green Deal. The EUAP sets forth plans for reforming internal policies to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, emphasizing the cessation of fossil fuel extraction while promoting sustainable energy production in the Arctic (European Commission, 2021).

However, the ongoing energy crisis, largely driven by deteriorating relations with Russia, raises questions about the feasibility of these plans. The core premise of the EUAP revolves not around traditional military security but rather the environmental security threats posed by climate change. These elements are interconnected; rising Arctic temperatures increase access to new resources and transportation routes, transforming the region into a "theater of local and geopolitical competition" that could undermine EU interests. The EU's approach aligns with comprehensive security theory, emphasizing the interplay of various security dimensions, with environmental security positioned as the most urgent concern, followed by economic, military, societal, and political security (Bailes et al., 2022). While the EU has vested interests in the Arctic, it also views its role as a geopolitical power as essential for ensuring global environmental security.

#### **4. Changing Geopolitical Context and EU-Russia Arctic Relations**

The Arctic's geopolitical landscape is shifting from a paradigm of 'exceptionalism' to one characterized by competition among major powers, including Russia, the United States, the EU, and China. This transformation has roots in ongoing crises in Europe since 2007, continuously reshaping the EU-Russia trade relationship (Götz & Storch, 2022).

The illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia marked a pivotal moment, significantly impacting the dynamics of cooperation. The EU's reliance on Russian en-

## 5.2. International Treaties and Agreements

The EU actively engages in international climate agreements, reinforcing its commitment to combat climate change. The Paris Agreement, with its aim to limit global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius, serves as a critical framework for the EU's climate initiatives (UNFCCC, 2015). The EU has established legally binding targets to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, signaling its dedication to sustainable practices and climate resilience.

The EU's advocacy for international cooperation in the Arctic is evident in its support for various treaties and agreements, including the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (UN CBD) (United Nations, 1992). By emphasizing the need to conserve Arctic ecosystems and address threats such as overfishing and habitat destruction, the EU seeks to promote sustainable development and protect biodiversity in the region.

## 5.3. Promoting Research and Innovation

Scientific research and innovation are crucial components of the EU's Arctic strategy. Collaborative research initiatives aim to enhance understanding of climate change impacts and develop adaptive strategies for vulnerable communities. Programs like Horizon Europe support research projects focusing on sustainable Arctic development, climate resilience, and the integration of Indigenous knowledge (European Commission, 2021).

By fostering collaboration among academic institutions, governments, and Indigenous communities, the EU seeks to create a comprehensive understanding of the interconnected challenges facing the Arctic. This approach aligns with the EUAP's emphasis on participatory governance, recognizing the importance of diverse perspectives in shaping effective climate policies.

## 5.4. Building Partnerships with Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous peoples are key stakeholders in Arctic governance and climate adaptation strategies. The EU acknowledges the importance of engaging Indigenous communities in decision-making processes, recognizing their traditional knowledge as invaluable in addressing climate change. Collaborative initiatives aim to empower Indigenous voices and promote their participation in governance structures.

By incorporating Indigenous perspectives into climate policies, the EU enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of its initiatives. This collaborative approach fosters mutual respect and understanding, contributing to more sustainable outcomes for Arctic communities. The EU's commitment to recognizing the rights and contributions of Indigenous peoples is integral to its climate diplomacy.

## **6. Implications of the EU Green Deal for the Arctic**

### **6.1. Economic Transition to Sustainability**

The Green Deal advocates for a transition to a sustainable economy, which has direct implications for the Arctic. The EU aims to promote green technologies and practices that can create jobs while safeguarding the environment. This includes supporting renewable energy projects in the Arctic, reducing reliance on fossil fuels, and enhancing energy efficiency (European Commission, 2020).

### **6.2. Enhanced Resilience of Arctic Communities**

The EU's commitment to climate adaptation within the Green Deal has significant implications for Arctic communities, particularly Indigenous populations. By prioritizing local engagement and knowledge, the EU can enhance the resilience of these communities against climate impacts, ensuring their voices are heard in decision-making processes (European Commission, 2021). This participatory approach aligns with the EU's goal of promoting social equity and inclusivity.

### **6.3. Strengthened Regulatory Frameworks**

The Green Deal reinforces the need for robust regulatory frameworks that govern environmental protection in the Arctic. This includes stricter regulations on pollution, resource extraction, and habitat conservation. By promoting high environmental standards, the EU can help prevent ecological degradation in the Arctic and ensure sustainable development practices are followed (European Commission, 2019).

## **7. The Future of the EU in the Arctic**

### **7.1. Balancing Economic Interests and Environmental Sustainability**

As the EU navigates its engagement in the Arctic, balancing economic interests with environmental sustainability remains a critical challenge. The prospect of accessing valuable resources and trade routes must be tempered by a commitment to responsible stewardship of the Arctic ecosystem. The EU must leverage its market power to advocate for sustainable practices and engage in responsible resource management.

The transition to renewable energy sources presents both challenges and opportunities for the EU in the Arctic. As the region faces pressure from resource extraction and climate change, the EU's approach to economic development should prioritize sustainability and resilience.

### **7.2. Strengthening Multilateral Cooperation**

The EU's approach to Arctic governance should prioritize multilateral cooperation, engaging with Arctic states, Indigenous communities, and international organizations. Strengthening partnerships will enhance the effectiveness of climate initi-



atives and foster dialogue on pressing geopolitical issues. By promoting collaborative governance, the EU can contribute to a more stable and sustainable Arctic.

The EU's role as a facilitator of dialogue among Arctic stakeholders is crucial in addressing complex issues such as resource management, climate change adaptation, and Indigenous rights. Collaborative initiatives that involve various actors can lead to more effective solutions and foster a sense of shared responsibility.

### **7.3. Enhancing Security and Resilience**

In light of rising geopolitical tensions, the EU must enhance its security posture in the Arctic while remaining committed to environmental security. This entails investing in research and technology to address security challenges and develop resilient strategies for responding to climate change impacts. The EU's Maritime Security Strategy must be adapted to address the unique dynamics of the Arctic, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding shipping routes and ensuring safe navigation.

Enhancing resilience in the face of climate change requires a multi-faceted approach, including investing in infrastructure, fostering community engagement, and promoting sustainable practices. The EU can play a pivotal role in facilitating these efforts through targeted funding and support.

### **7.4. Advocating for Inclusive Governance**

The EU should continue to advocate for inclusive governance structures that prioritize the voices of Indigenous peoples and local communities. Ensuring their participation in decision-making processes will enhance the legitimacy of Arctic policies and foster greater public support for sustainability initiatives.

Inclusive governance not only strengthens democracy but also leads to more effective policy outcomes. By actively engaging with diverse stakeholders, the EU can foster a sense of ownership and shared responsibility for the future of the Arctic.

### **7.5. Preparing for Future Challenges**

The Arctic is poised to face numerous challenges in the coming decades, including increased shipping traffic, resource extraction, and the impacts of climate change. The EU must remain proactive in addressing these challenges, adapting its strategies to reflect evolving geopolitical dynamics and environmental realities. By fostering resilience and promoting sustainable development, the EU can contribute to a more secure and prosperous Arctic.

Preparing for future challenges involves a commitment to long-term planning and adaptive management. The EU's ability to respond effectively to emerging threats will depend on its capacity to anticipate change and foster collaboration among Arctic stakeholders.



## 8. Conclusion

The evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Arctic necessitate a re-evaluation of the EU's role in the region. With climate change accelerating and new economic opportunities emerging, the EU's engagement in the Arctic must prioritize environmental security while addressing the realities of geopolitical competition. The EUAP provides a comprehensive framework for navigating these complexities, advocating for sustainable development, effective governance, and cooperation among Arctic stakeholders.

This article illustrates how the ideas of policy coherence and integration can help assess responses to the cross-border effects of climate change, a relatively underexplored area. Using the example of EU Arctic policy, we demonstrated that evaluating cross-border policy coherence can uncover both synergies and conflicts between climate adaptation efforts and other policy goals. This understanding can inform the development of more effective strategies to prevent, mitigate, or capitalize on the cross-border impacts of climate change. Our findings from the EU-Arctic case emphasized several key considerations for evaluating policy coherence and integration:

Addressing the coherence of policies related to cross-border climate change adaptation is complex, involving various actors across different jurisdictions and multiple policy areas (e.g., environment, trade, security, tourism, agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and cultural heritage) (Biesbroek & Candel, 2020; Biesbroek, 2021). The Arctic example showcased this complexity, revealing conflicts between pursuing new economic opportunities and protecting vulnerable ecosystems and communities.

A thorough analysis of coherence must consider the different mandates of involved actors, which can lead to overlaps or gaps in policy responses. Our case highlighted the distinct interests of Arctic indigenous communities and Arctic states, as well as the limited influence that indigenous communities and the Arctic Council have as policy stakeholders. Interviews indicated that indigenous representatives feel their concerns are often overlooked in policy-making. Evaluations of policy coherence should account for power imbalances that may lead to inconsistencies or conflicts in policy (Harrinkari et al., 2016; Kröger & Raitio, 2017).

While policies may seem coherent at the objective level, implementation can reveal conflicts, as illustrated in our case. Issues such as prioritizing certain policy objectives (like trade over adaptation), the ability of various actors to influence implementation, and unexpected outcomes during the policy process can all contribute to this. Additionally, the push for coherence can lead actors to present their objectives as more aligned than they truly are.

These insights highlight the necessity for detailed evaluations of cross-border policy coherence, requiring comprehensive information about policy processes, implementation, and outcomes. For example, our case emphasized the impor-

tance of understanding the rights and conditions affecting indigenous groups as they navigate natural resource exploitation across borders, especially as they adapt their traditional livelihoods to climate change (Maggia, 2024).

Evaluations are merely the starting point for enhancing cross-border policy coherence. Prior research has pointed out the difficulties in achieving coherence across administrative domains (Carbone, 2008; Furness & Gänzle, 2017). The cross-border context intensifies these challenges, as responses to impacts require input from actors operating in diverse political and jurisdictional environments. Our example identified several specific challenges: (1) Seeking consensus within the complex governance of the Arctic may hinder integration and coherence, as the demands of various actors often conflict. (2) Cross-border climate change responses can negatively affect sub-national actors, such as indigenous communities, even if the overall impact is positive. (3) Adaptation policies may overlook coherence issues by failing to consider the opportunities for resource exploitation that climate change presents. Furthermore, geopolitical events, such as the Russian attack on Ukraine, can drastically alter the frameworks of policy integration and coherence, necessitating a dynamic understanding of these concepts (Biesbroek & Candel, 2020; Biesbroek, 2021).

We recommend that policymakers integrate climate adaptation objectives into other policy domains that inherently address cross-border issues, including foreign affairs, security, trade, and finance. The EU, facing many cross-border climate impacts, should proactively expand its adaptation policies to include these dimensions. A crucial first step is to establish formal objectives and measures that enhance coherence across various policy areas. Achieving coherence between climate policies and other domains, and among different regions interconnected through global trade and relations, should be a primary objective for entities like DG Trade, DG Clima, and EEAS within the EU. This goal should extend to policy instruments, including adjustments in trade agreements and collaborations with regions most affected by climate change (Benzie et al., 2019; Lung et al., 2017).

The cross-border context underscores the link between policy integration and coherence. Incorporating climate adaptation objectives into areas like trade, finance, and security can be a fruitful approach to tackling cross-border climate impacts. While policy integration lays the groundwork for addressing these impacts, it must be accompanied by active efforts to involve a broader range of actors to foster comprehensive policy coherence at horizontal, vertical, and cross-border levels.

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