

All Eyes on the Arctic

Climate change, economic opportunities and geopolitics make European and German attention to the High North a political necessity

BY MICHAEL MANN

As recently as a decade ago, the Arctic was of little interest to people south of the Arctic Circle. This has changed rapidly. Today, the European Union – together with the United States, Canada, Norway and Iceland – recognizes that a safe, sustainable, peaceful and prosperous Arctic is important not just for the region itself but also for the entire world. The reason for the increased attention is that the Arctic is becoming a new stage for some of the most defining issues of our time: climate change, the urgent need for inclusive and sustainable development, and geopolitics.

Climate change is the biggest threat the Arctic is facing, even if it is not the result of Arctic activities but originates from carbon dioxide emissions around the globe. It is happening more than twice as fast there as in other parts of the world. Before long, coastal stretches will become ice-free during summers, and later on during winters too. Melting ice and thawing permafrost are releasing large amounts of methane, further accelerating global warming, which in turn interferes with global weather systems.

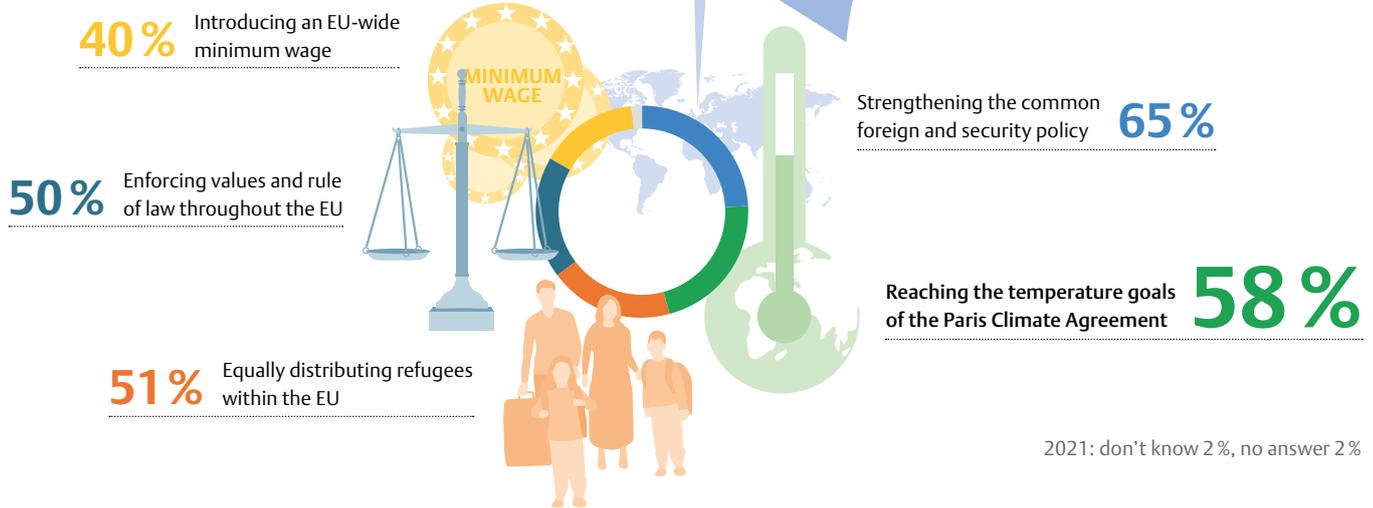
Besides the security threats caused by climate change, receding ice also creates economic opportunities, opening up shipping routes and easing access to oil, gas and minerals. Some of these minerals will play a crucial role in driving the

world's growing demand for technological products, not least those needed for the transition to a carbon-neutral economy. This is of high relevance for the success of the European Green Deal, which depends for its success on just such a technological transition. It also explains why the Arctic is getting more 'crowded', with a growing number of countries like China and Russia extending their engagement there. What happens in the Arctic directly affects European states, including Germany, which is not only an observer to the Arctic Council but also led the recent MOSAiC project, a scientific expedition that explored the Arctic climate system. The EU's Arctic policy is therefore not a matter of convenience but a political necessity.

The Arctic directly affects Europe

To tackle these challenges and opportunities, the EU is already taking several measures: through its updated Arctic policy, it combines climate and environmental goals with sustainable economic opportunities so that the region can showcase future-compatible job creation and sustainable approaches to connectivity, tourism, fisheries and innovation. The EU Satellite Centre offers secured geospatial analysis and thereby helps the EU to monitor the climate-related security situation in the Arctic region, while a large chunk of the €200

Which of the following goals should Germany's next chancellor particularly promote within the EU?



million spent by the EU on Arctic research between 2014 and 2020 focused on the broader effects of climate change.

There are three reasons why the EU should and will remain engaged in the Arctic, and why Germany's next government also needs to pay attention to the region.

First, the EU is the world's leading proponent of multilateralism, taking the lead in international negotiations – including on climate change – that will be crucial for the future of the Arctic. The eight Arctic states – Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Russia and the United States – have the primary responsibility for what happens on their sovereign territory. Yet, many issues affecting the Arctic, such as climate change or biodiversity loss, can only be addressed through regional or multilateral fora. One example is the need for regional or circumpolar cooperation to mitigate the risks of dangerous nuclear waste. Other examples, such as sustainable harvesting of fish stocks or energy and sustainable heating, show that we are more effective working together.

Second, the EU is part of the Arctic – physically with three member states having Arctic territory and as a lawmaker in the European Arctic. It is active in several regional bodies, including the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Northern Dimension, where it works with

Russia, Norway and Iceland, in particular on environmental clean-ups. The Arctic is proof that it is still possible to ensure international cooperation on existential issues like climate change.

Cooperation on existential issues is possible

Third, the EU is a major consumer of Arctic resources, which are essential for German industries as well, and is a trailblazer in efforts to slow climate change and biodiversity loss. The EU's strategic autonomy in minerals – important for the green transition, space services and future technologies – could be bolstered through sustainable extraction in some parts of the Arctic. The level of interest from European companies to invest in this sector will be key in the years ahead.

The EU is determined to scale up and modernize its engagement to face the serious, even existential, challenges in the Arctic, accelerated by climate change. Germany's next government will have a vital role to play in continuing to support the EU's Arctic policies, building on the success of MOSAiC and helping to raise the profile of Arctic issues in its international diplomatic relations. ✖

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