



Northern Research Forum

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The strategic implications of Iceland’s EU membership on the New Arctic Agenda

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Iceland’s geopolitical position in the High North

It has been said that Iceland’s position is ambivalent due to being situated geographically between North America and Europe. Indeed, the country was between the two fronts, and in middle of the naval -fighting of the 2nd WW and the maritime strategies of the Cold War.

On one hand, Iceland is a small island nation with a special and excellent geographical and geopolitical location in North Atlantic. It is one of the Nordic countries with strong European heritage, although, it was isolated / been left alone for centuries, a clear American influence (e.g. the US air and radar base at Keflavik until 2006, and certain national peculiarities, such as a strong feel of independence and an active civil society like for example, the high and successful activity in autumn 2008 and winter 2009 due to the financial crisis.

On the other, Iceland played a big and strategic role in the development of UNCLOS in the 1970s and 1980s (see also the Cod War between Iceland and Britain), and a special role for nuclear safety in Northern seas in the 1980s/1990s due to nuclear submarine accidents and wastes. Here the main issue was fish and fisheries, but behind was a combination of the utilization of resources and environmental security, which indicates a preference of comprehensive security.

Recently Iceland has (re)defined its geopolitical position toward the High North, and according to the Report on Sustainable Development in the Arctic by the Icelandic Ministry of Foreign Affairs Iceland is the only country located entirely with the Arctic region, and its prosperity relies heavily on sustainable utilization of the regions’ nature resources. This is no surprise, since Iceland, particularly President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, has several years ago defined that for a small nation located in the North it is simply wise and smart to be active in fields which are natural, i.e. northern issues.

Furthermore, the country has been very active in, and is one of the leading countries of, the current international, and mostly multilateral, northern cooperation. Examples of this include among others: the first meeting of Parliamentarians of the Arctic took place in Reykjavik; the offices of CAFF and PAME (of the Arctic Council) are located in Iceland; the Northern Research Forum (NRF) (an Icelandic initiative) was started in 2000, and the NRF secretariat is located in Akureyri; Iceland’s chairmanship of the Arctic Council in 2003-2004 was successful e.g. the launch of ACIA and

AHDR reports; an emphasis of Marine Transportation in the North through new trans-arctic global sea routes (Report by Icelandic MFA in 2005); International School of Renewable Energy Sciences and International Polar Law M.A. program started in 2008; and University of Akureyri as well the Town of Akureyri have hosted several international conferences and meetings of northern issues.

All in all, this policy has much been the mainstream of Icelandic foreign policy in last years, and seemingly successful for Iceland. Further, it seems to be so that it will continue as the Report on Sustainable Development in the Arctic by the Icelandic Ministry of Foreign Affairs (September 2009) indicates. Among the highlights of the report are 1) international cooperation with emphasis on multi-laterality; 2) security through international cooperation, particularly environmental security; 3) the environment and resources emphasising both sustainable development and Iceland's interests, particularly those of Iceland's fishing industry; 4) transportation meaning new shipping routes; 5) people and cultures with unique cultural heritages; and 6) international cooperation on research and monitoring.

Strategic implications of Iceland's EU membership on the new Arctic agenda

The term of "New Arctic agenda" indicates first, that something new and important is going on there, in the circumpolar North; and second, that the Arctic states as well as the European Union, partly NATO, and some major powers outside the region (such as Britain and France in Europe, and China, Japan and South Korea in Asia) either have stated / approved, or are in a process to do so, their new arctic agendas / plans / strategies / policies, such as the above-mentioned Report by the Icelandic MFA.

This kind of draft policy is the EU Commission's Communication "The European Union and the Arctic Region (November 2008). Its main policy objectives, such as the environment and climate change, indigenous peoples and local population, research and monitoring, sustainable use of resources, transport, and multilateral governance, are much the same as the highlights of the Icelandic Report. There are however, differences, such as that the EU Communication emphasises the importance of climate change, unlike the Icelandic Report that of both transportation and (environmental) security. Further, if the Icelandic Report on Sustainable Development emphasizes the points of view of Iceland (and its interests) and the region, then the EU Communication can be interpreted to mean a way to come to utilize natural resources of the North as well as to control the northern social and political space.

Followed from this the Union, both the Commission and most of the member-states, would like to be present in the region, and also to see Iceland becoming a new member-state. Thus, from the point of view of the EU this would be important, since then the EU would not only have one (Nordic) democracy more, but an access into northern seas, and almost the Arctic Ocean, when Greenland would not join in the near future. Furthermore, this would mean that four Arctic states (from the eight of the AC) would also be EU member-states, which might make the EU's position within the Arctic Council stronger, although it is good to remember that five of the Arctic states are Nordic countries. Finally, this would hopefully mean more legitimacy in northern / arctic cooperation, which the Union does not have now much due to disagreement on seal hunting and whaling with Greenland and Iceland, and being a loud advocate against global warming, when Greenland, the majority of Inuit Circumpolar Council as well as Iceland also recognize positive impacts.

Unlike, from the point of view of the Arctic region and northern cooperation Iceland's possible EU membership would not mean so big thing, since Iceland is already entirely involved in and

integrated in the current northern cooperation and its institutions. Furthermore, behind the “New Arctic agenda” there is a multi-functional geopolitical, geo-economic and environmental change, which means that there are so many different dynamics and several actors with their interests, and here an EU membership does not mean so much.

More important and a bigger change would be if Iceland’s membership would mean that Norway will also join, or even Greenland will join, in the near future. And Iceland’s EU membership would most probably be taken as a positive or interesting thing within the Nordic Region by making the Nordic club within the EU stronger, and it may also accelerate same kind of process in Norway. And if Norway will join, then the EU will become a real and powerful actor within the Arctic Region, and also the Arctic Ocean, even so that there will be three to four big actors.

Finally, what about Iceland, the Government and the Parliament, and the majority of Icelanders? How do they take and interpret the EU now, in the referendum (after two years or so), and after being several years under the burden of IMF?

Reflecting on some possible reasons, which Alyson Bailes mentioned, why Iceland would join: First, Iceland’s security-political and military-political situation is different and more complicated after the US troops left Keflavik. However, Iceland is a NATO country and has bilateral military agreements with Denmark and Norway, and has recently, but also earlier, emphasized environmental security. Second, the current financial crisis which hit Iceland in early autumn of 2008 has had a huge impact. But here a membership might be something what is “too little, too late”, and in any case the long-term costs and benefits -calculation on fisheries is a big issue for Iceland.

Third, when thinking international cooperation, the EU would certainly give an chance for a bigger stage for many activities, particularly if the EU will launch its Arctic strategy. On the other hand, Iceland is already active and influential northern country in international relations, in NATO, EEA, EFTA, AC and BEAC, and Nordic cooperation, even Baltic Sea cooperation. And, furthermore, Iceland has its own international cooperative region, West-Norden together with Greenland, Faroes and Norway, and they all are outsiders!