

EU/Arctic

EU discusses Arctic but hesitates on position to adopt

By Anne Eckstein | Friday 01 February 2013

What strategy should the Union develop on the Arctic? The member states' foreign ministers, meeting in Brussels on 31 January, exchanged views on this subject but did not give an answer to the question.

To launch the debate, Maritime Affairs Commissioner Maria Damanaki and Catherine Ashton presented the joint communication adopted by the European Commission and the high representative for foreign affairs, on 12 June 2012, proposing a "strategy for the Arctic" ⁽¹⁾.

This document points out that, in 2008, the European Commission requested permanent observer status for the EU in the Arctic Council (whose members are Canada, Denmark including Greenland, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States). Meanwhile, new criteria for the admission of observers were adopted in May 2011.

This status "would allow the European Union to gain detailed understanding of the concerns of Arctic partners, which will be important when developing its own internal policies," reads the communication.

The EU Council is expected to reiterate its determination to become a member of the Arctic Council but is hesitant over what political approach to adopt given the opposition of Canada and Russia. The Arctic Council requires unanimity for this question. Sweden, Denmark and Finland pointed out that due to the Union's position on seals and the similar approach requested by NGOs and the European Parliament on polar bears, the EU is perceived in the Arctic as "hostile" to indigenous peoples.

⁽¹⁾ *'Developing a European Union policy towards the Arctic region: Progress since 2008 and next steps', JOIN(2012)19*