

**Agora Briefing :**  
*The Big Chill - our  
relationship with the  
Arctic in the face of  
climate change*

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## Executive summary

Our closest polar neighbour has more of an impact on us than we realise. In the aftermath of a harsh end of Winter in Britain because of Arctic winds, it is time to have a look at our relationship with the North.

For many years the Arctic has merely existed unchecked in the North, a looming and unnoticed region that largely does not get registered by the mind on a weekly basis. Yet this is foolish, as we have more stake in the Arctic than we believe, and more now than ever before.

This policy brief attempts to initiate a discussion on how we can re-evaluate our relationship with the great white North. By examining some of the most important legacies and perspectives of the Arctic in history, as well as the current state the Arctic is in as we witness the Climate Change crisis worsening, we might seek to reconsider how we approach the region in future years and how our actions may impact our future livelihoods.

## Introduction

The ‘Beast from the East’ shook London at the end of February and beginning of March last year. The media revelled in this sudden shift, detailing how transport has shut down, people cannot get to work, and the struggle for first responders to reach people injured by the anomaly. All over Britain, the forces of climate change were being felt.

However, the ‘Beast from the East’ was a misnomer. It was more a ‘Beast from the North’, and not really a force from our Russian neighbours. Regardless of its name, however, it was a phenomenal storm, hitting almost every single corner of Europe with the worst snowstorms in decades.

Yet it is still important to understand the origins of this freak weather phenomena, this south-heading storm which derived from the northernmost geographical point, the Arctic circle. Meteorologists refer to the event as a ‘wavy polar vortex’ – where the normal wind dynamic that occurs from west-to-east around the Arctic circle is forced down to certain longitudes. This is induced by an increase in temperatures in the region that displaces the air pressure, causing the normal wind cycle to act more erratically<sup>1</sup>.

The rise in temperature in the Arctic has been expected, given the average rise in temperatures increasing steadily for decades. In fact, Arctic temperatures have reached a higher point than predicted, with studies in 2007 indicating that Arctic temperatures were prematurely meeting the estimated mean which was not expected until 2052. The rise in temperatures is undisputed evidence of the effects of climate change, with greater temperatures melting the ice caps, which in turn absorbs more radiation and worsens the condition even further. The Arctic is an incredibly volatile region, with the decline in the Arctic’s reflective capacity feeding into the melting of the ice with the higher radiation trapped in our oceans.

This is precisely why the ‘Beast’ is important, as it has caused us to re-recognise the looming presence that is the Arctic. Britain, with snowfall reaching record amounts, needs to re-evaluate its role in the region both historically and contemporarily. This will be the focus of this policy paper; looking at Britain’s role in the Arctic and where this should lead in order to try to reduce and mitigate the effects of climate change, should we face another ‘Beast’ in the coming years.

## Analysis

The history of the Arctic is a vast one which needs to be investigated in further detail in order to look at how the Arctic has been shaped into how we envision it today. The following section will expand on the two principal divisions of the Arctic's human history: The Colonial Era, and from the 1950s to the Present-day.

## History and perspectives

The Arctic today has largely been shaped by the pioneering actions driven by the European expansion that featured very prominently in the last millennium.

Early European interaction and colonisation of the Arctic begins as far back as the end of the 10th century with the settling of Greenland (today a part of the Kingdom of Denmark) by one of the most famous Vikings, Erik Thorvaldsson – commonly known as Erik the Red. Though not the original discoverer of Greenland, Erik the Red was the first person to successfully found a colony on Greenland made up of Icelandic Vikings from his homeland.

Fast forward to the 16th Century, the Dutch explorer, Willem Barents, sails the Arctic Circle in an attempt to uncover the Northeast Passage, rumoured to be somewhere north of Siberia. Although ultimately unsuccessful, Barents had a lasting impact on Arctic exploration as one of the first explorers to bring claims of land and resources from the Arctic Circle. Though the northeast passage was first successfully sailed by Baron Nordenskiöld in the 19th Century, the Barents Sea is named after Willem Barents.

Shortly after this, plans were made to find the parallel Northwest Passage. Several ventures ultimately ended in failure, with some of the most notable resulting in mutinies and captains never being heard from again. In the early 20th Century, famed explorer Roald Amundsen finally managed to navigate the passage. However, for many years the route remained largely unnavigable due to harsh Arctic winters blocking the route. The two passages were thought to be of prime advantage, offering shorter routes for traders and explorers to new markets and lands, and this still is the case today for contemporary shipping routes.

In the 18th Century, the most north-western tip of the North American continent was settled by Russia, to become Russian America. Largely a fur-trading contract, with no complete settlements being established, Russian America did not last long. After the loss in the Crimean War, the territory was sold to America after

the turn of the century to become Alaska, as it is known today. As such, America officially now owned territory in the Arctic Circle.

The remainder of Arctic exploration largely consists of competing ventures and theories around the North Pole and the Arctic's circumnavigation. What arose from the Era of Exploration was most importantly, different levels of awareness and perceptions of the Arctic. To understand what is meant by this, we must firstly become accustomed with the spectrum of how the Arctic is perceived by the various explorers and admirers.

At one end of the spectrum are the realists who hold that the Arctic could be a source of future development or military advantage, such as Vilhjalmur Stefansson and Robert Peary. This category often held disdain for the romantic and literary misappropriation of the Arctic that other explorers wrote about. They also, however, disagreed with the perception that the region did not have the potential for development and strived to expand the understanding that the future of human development lay in the North. Stefansson believed that we needed to discard the beautification of the Arctic and instead focus on looking at its untapped potential for the future development of humankind. Robert Peary believed that the North Pole could be of a massive strategic advantage to the US and offered it to President Taft via telegram at the time, who strangely declined<sup>3</sup>.

At the other end of the spectrum are the romantics, consisting of explorers such as Fridtjof Nansen and Roald Amundsen. Their perceptions were unique in that they blended the romanticism of the vast, white wilderness and the modern, economic potential in the future. Many of Nansen's records describe the Arctic as being a region dominated by the harsh benevolent beauty of nature. Even infamous author, Jules Verne, adapted perceptions into stories that chronicled the exotic tragedy that was the Arctic<sup>4</sup>.

Today the Arctic is the centre of a very 'cold' geopolitical stand-off between several stakeholders. With soft and flexible legislation in place over the Arctic region, territory and resources are still being disputed by all 5 littoral players: Denmark, Russia, Norway, Canada, and the United States. Each stakeholder has a field of tension between them, and everyone is attempting to stake their claim, with Russia provoking further debate with their stunt of planting a Russian flag on the seafloor at the North Pole<sup>5</sup>. It would not be a hazardous guess that those watching the Arctic are waiting for the opportunity to exploit this untapped region following the further loss of its ice sheet, which we are currently facing.

Though this is of course a rudimentary and simplified summary of Arctic history, it is impossible to miss the key transitions from the era of exploration and trade, to the geopolitical deadlock.

## The melting Arctic

In 2015, the world seemingly came together to finally consolidate thoughts and actions on one of the most pressing issues of our time: Climate Change. After lengthy debates and discussions between some of the world's foremost diplomats, academics, thinkers and, strangely, industries, the Paris Agreement was finally signed by all member states of the UN except two, who later became signatories soon afterwards. The agreement called upon every country and their governments to pledge efforts and initiatives in order to “[Hold] the increase in the global average temperature well below the 2 °C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels, recognizing that this would significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change;”<sup>6</sup>. This was seen by many as being a supposed glimmer of hope in the face of ongoing climate tragedy.

2 years on, the Arctic reaches one of its lowest summer minimums on record once again<sup>7</sup>. The Greenland Ice Sheet appears to be stabilising if not continuing on its trend of gradual depletion year on year<sup>8</sup>. Of course, expecting a concrete and significant change in 2 years is far too optimistic and naïve, yet the reality of the speed at which the Arctic is melting should serve as a wake-up call to the fact that the world needs to implement stronger measures sooner rather than later.

The Arctic is of the utmost importance for not just monitoring the rate of the impacts of climate change, but also what role it plays in managing our global climate system. There is a lot of phenomena proven to be facilitated by the Arctic, from large albedo feedbacks by the natural reflective surface of the ice sheet to other circulatory trends both in the atmosphere and in the oceans<sup>9</sup>. As such, not only should further efforts be dedicated to the monitoring and research of the region, but wider participation in the protection of the Arctic too.

Currently there is very little governance in the Arctic circle in disputed and ‘unclaimed’ territories. The stakeholders in the Arctic, as well as the soft and unconcise law that currently is in place in the Arctic, serves as a catalyst for this due to the fact that there are several disputed territories and claims of land and the sea floor<sup>10</sup>. This is the vacuum that needs to be filled in order to ensure the survival of the Arctic and assist us in remaining within the 2 °C threshold set out in the Paris Agreement.

## Recommendations

Where does the UK stand on this? Despite not being one of the conventional 'Arctic states', the United Kingdom has a large stake in the region, which must be recognised wider.

With Scotland and the outer isles being the northernmost part of Britain, the UK is actually just a short nautical distance south of the Arctic circle and, as such, feels much of the impact of changes in the Arctic, as witness by the polar vortex phenomenon experienced this year. There is potential that further depletion of the Arctic could have profound effects on the UK's economy, climate, etc., thus making the UK one of the non-Arctic states that would feel the first impacts of worsening conditions.

Additionally, the UK has been one of the longest-serving of 13 observers on the Arctic Council. The Arctic Council is an intergovernmental forum that seeks to discuss, promote, and foster cooperation on common Arctic issues – namely those of matters of sustainability and the environment<sup>11</sup>. Whilst the role is purely that of an observer, the UK should contribute to a shift in how the Arctic Council advocates the protection and wider cooperation of the Arctic. Currently, priorities lay in scientific research and commercial enterprises, with the current UK policy advocating “sound science with full regard to the environment” and “the highest environmental and drilling standards in the Arctic”<sup>12</sup>, which must change in the future as the Arctic continues to change.

The commercial enterprise aspect seems to dominate however, given the British Government's occasional advocacy of natural gas and oil drilling in the Arctic. Though the most recent instance for this was several years ago, it may change if ties with the United States are solidified further, as the current administration has put in steps to open up protected reserves in the Arctic for exploration<sup>13</sup>. As the UK is a leader in global research of the polar regions, it should prioritise the research over dedication resource extraction.

Last year the British Government released a White Paper entitled “Beyond the Ice”, earmarking updates on the government's position on the Arctic. Whilst it is promising that the UK government is maintaining its presence in the Arctic region, it is important that they ensure a comprehensive balance of environmental protection and research alongside the evident priority on trade, resources, and defence.

The UK government would find it beneficial to consider the change in trends in the Arctic, their role as a signatory of the Paris Agreement, and how closely we are connected to the Arctic and its various phenomena to perhaps contribute even further to the changing landscape that is the great white North through engagement with further research and policy, a platform in which it is currently one of the world leaders.

## About the author

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## End Notes

- 1 McSweeney, Robert. 2018. Explainer: The polar vortex, climate change and the 'Beast from the East'. 1 March. Available at: <https://www.carbonbrief.org/explainer-polar-vortex-climate-change-and-beast-from-the-east>.
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- 13 BBC. 2017. Trump executive order aims to allow Arctic drilling. 28 April. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-39753223>.