

January 21, 2026

Portugal in the Arctic: Still Waiting for an Action Plan

Céline Rodrigues

PhD Candidate, FCSH-NOVA UNL, Researcher, IPRI-NOVA
NAADSN Research Fellow

Summary

Portugal is a non-Arctic state with no territorial or sovereign claims in the circumpolar Arctic, but it has demonstrated a growing political commitment to Arctic affairs through parliamentary action, science diplomacy, and multilateral engagement. This commitment is articulated in Resolution nº 76/2023 of the Assembly of the Republic, which formally recommends that the Portuguese government develop a national Arctic Action Plan.¹ The resolution reflects increasing awareness that Arctic change has direct implications for global climate systems, North Atlantic maritime security, and the rules-based international order.

Portugal's Arctic engagement is primarily civilian and normative rather than military, emphasizing climate change, ocean governance, scientific research, and multilateral cooperation through the European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and the United Nations (UN). It can be stated that for Canadian defence policymakers, Portugal should be understood as a like-minded NATO ally whose Arctic relevance lies in political alignment, support for Alliance cohesion in the North Atlantic, Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap, and reinforcement of international legal norms, rather than operational presence in the region.

Key Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Priorities

Portugal's Arctic-related defence and security interests are indirect and primarily pursued through NATO and EU frameworks. Resolution nº 76/2023 recognizes the Arctic's growing geopolitical importance due to climate change, renewed great power competition, and heightened strategic attention to the North Atlantic, but it does not envisage a permanent Portuguese military role in the region. Instead, it emphasizes the need for improved situational awareness and policy coherence regarding northern security dynamics.

Portugal has nevertheless demonstrated a meaningful operational contribution to NATO's northern deterrence posture. In 2024, the Portuguese Navy deployed a submarine to NATO's Operation Brilliant Shield in the GIUK gap, marking its most direct military engagement linked to the Arctic-North Atlantic security

nexus. This deployment supports Alliance efforts in anti-submarine warfare, maritime domain awareness, and the protection of transatlantic sea lines of communication.

As a founding NATO member, Portugal supports Alliance deterrence and maritime security across the North Atlantic, and its understanding of Arctic security closely aligns with Canada's emphasis on climate change as a threat multiplier affecting environmental stability, fisheries, and coastal resilience. However, Portugal's defence strategy (Conceito Estratégico de Defesa Nacional, CEDN), under revision since 2022, does not, nor does it seem will, explicitly incorporate the Arctic as a strategic theatre.^{2,3} Integrating Arctic and maritime considerations into the new defence strategy would enhance coherence with NATO and Canadian defence planning and better reflect the evolving security environment.

Bilateral defence cooperation between Canada and Portugal has expanded in recent years, notably through the 2025 General Security of Information Agreement,⁴ which enables classified information sharing and supports intelligence cooperation and defence-industrial collaboration. Additional institutional and industry engagements, alongside the broader EU–Canada Security and Defence Partnership, further strengthen interoperability and cooperation in the North Atlantic context.⁵

Portugal does not articulate positions on Arctic sovereignty disputes, including the Northwest Passage, and remains outside the Arctic Council despite identifying observer status as a long-term objective in the resolution. In that sense, Portugal should be seen as a supportive NATO ally whose Arctic relevance lies in reinforcing Alliance cohesion and transatlantic maritime security.

Context: Literature Review and Expert Commentary

Portugal's Arctic engagement is linked through its maritime identity and ocean-centric strategic culture.⁶ Portugal's historical development as a seafaring nation, from the Age of Discoveries onward, has produced a durable national narrative that links security, prosperity, and international relevance to the ocean. This maritime worldview remains embedded in contemporary Portuguese foreign, defence, and science policy, shaping how the Atlantic nation conceptualizes distant regions such as the Arctic.⁷

Portugal's historical connections to the Arctic are indirect but well established. Portuguese navigators were among the earliest Europeans to explore the North Atlantic, with documented Portuguese voyages to Newfoundland and Labrador waters in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Early Portuguese presence in Atlantic fisheries, particularly the codfish, trade, forged enduring economic and cultural linkages between Portugal and northern waters adjacent to the Arctic.⁸ This legacy continues to inform contemporary political discourse, where the Arctic is often described as part of a shared Atlantic maritime space rather than a remote or isolated region.

In the last couple of years, the role of Portugal (with the participation of the Portuguese Navy) in the circumpolar region and in polar science has been the focus during conferences, namely Arctic Circle Assembly 2024,⁹ and several workshops: Grupo Latino de Ciências Polares (2024),¹⁰ a webinar with the Director of PROPOLAR (2025),¹¹ and the I Latin Polar Science Workshop (2025).^{12 13}

What Does Portugal's Arctic Policy Outline?

Portugal has not produced an Arctic strategy. The Resolution nº 76/2023 adopted by the Assembly of the Republic functions as a political catalyst, formally urging the government to develop a comprehensive National Arctic Action Plan. The resolution reflects a slow and small recognition within Portuguese policymaking that developments in the Arctic have direct implications for global climate systems, ocean governance, and the broader security environment of the North Atlantic. The resolution prioritizes strategic coordination and policy coherence across foreign affairs, scientific research, climate policy, and security planning.

The Resolution nº 76/2023 is a recommendation that the Portuguese government articulate clear national objectives and institutional responsibilities related to Arctic engagement. Meaning that it articulates various critical dimensions such as environment, economy, social and security that would define: a) *Guidelines for the Portuguese flag fleet*; b) *tackling climate change*; c) *environmental protection*; and d) *security in the Circumpolar region*.¹⁴

The resolution also encourages to contribute to the implementation of EU Arctic policy and to apply for accredited Observer status in the Arctic Council. The document pays limited attention to Arctic Indigenous Peoples, however, thus revealing a gap relative to Arctic Council observer criteria.

Recommendations and the explanation of why an Arctic Policy is relevant for Portugal have been published in 2025, but with no reaction thus far.¹⁵

Portugal's potential Arctic contribution lies primarily in ocean science, maritime governance, and multilateral cooperation rather than operational presence. While engagement to date remains largely declaratory,¹⁶ has political momentum increased and is it shifting toward a more coherent Portuguese approach to the Arctic–North Atlantic nexus?

Portugal can be considered as a normative and policy-oriented Arctic actor. Its initial approach reinforces stability, predictability, and cooperation in the Arctic–North Atlantic area, complementing the defence and governance priorities of compatible partners such as Canada, which is complemented by climate awareness, legal norms, and cooperative governance.

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interest

Portugal and Canada share several areas of convergence in Arctic affairs that create meaningful opportunities for policy coordination, defence diplomacy, and institutional cooperation, despite their differing geographic positions and levels of Arctic involvement.

First, both countries demonstrate a strong commitment to multilateralism as the preferred framework for managing Arctic change and strategic competition. Canada and Portugal consistently emphasize the role of international institutions as essential mechanisms for promoting stability, cooperation, and the peaceful resolution of disputes in the Arctic.

Second, climate and environmental security represent a major area of alignment. Portugal's Arctic engagement is largely motivated by concern over climate change and its cascading effects on the North

Atlantic, including altered ocean circulation, fisheries migration, and extreme weather patterns. This perspective aligns closely with Canada's recognition of climate change as a core driver of Arctic security challenges, affecting infrastructure resilience, search and rescue (SAR) requirements, environmental protection, and community safety. In this context, Portugal's participation in Arctic-relevant climate and security forums could be further strengthened through engagement with institutions such as the NATO Climate Change and Security Centre of Excellence (CASCCOE),¹⁷ which would enhance information-sharing and analytical cooperation with Canadian and allied partners.

Third, maritime governance and ocean science offer concrete opportunities for collaboration. Portugal's long-standing expertise in oceanography, marine science, and climate research complements Canada's Arctic and North Atlantic research capabilities. Joint initiatives in climate modelling, ocean monitoring, and sustainable fisheries management would provide mutual benefits while supporting evidence-based policymaking on Arctic and sub-Arctic environmental change. Such cooperation represents a low-risk, high-value avenue for deepening bilateral engagement in areas directly relevant to Arctic security and governance.

Fourth, NATO cohesion constitutes a shared strategic priority. Portugal's consistent political support for NATO's northern focus, combined with its emerging operational contributions in the North Atlantic/GIUK gap,¹⁸ reinforces Alliance unity at a time of heightened strategic competition. For Canada, which places significant emphasis on secure transatlantic sea lines of communication and early warning across Arctic and sub-Arctic approaches, Portugal's alignment with NATO's northern priorities contribute indirectly but meaningfully to Arctic defence and deterrence objectives. This aligns with *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy* released in December 2024.¹⁹ From a Canadian defence perspective, Portugal's value lies in its ability to reinforce Alliance cohesion in the North Atlantic, backing up this basin that links to the Arctic one.

Portugal's interests in the Arctic shall be seen through the lens of enhancing the North Atlantic security, addressing climate change, and fostering scientific diplomacy within the circumpolar region. This involvement is consistent with Portugal's historical identity as a maritime nation and its present aspirations to exert influence via multilateral collaboration, sustainability, and diplomacy grounded in scientific principles.

These shared interests create space for defence diplomacy, science diplomacy and policy coordination, even in the absence of direct Portuguese operational involvement in the Arctic. Canada's membership, since 2021, the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) provides an additional diplomatic framework for collaboration.²⁰ In this context, joining the Atlantic Centre²¹ could be another positive asset for Canada as socio-cultural parallels between Portugal's Atlantic Island communities, particularly the Azores, and Arctic Indigenous communities highlight shared challenges related to isolation, climate vulnerability, and maritime livelihoods. The interest towards blue economy aligns both countries in projects developed through Fórum Oceano.²²

Joint collaboration in scientific research, blue economy, climate monitoring, and maritime governance provides a pathway to strengthen both bilateral ties, cooperation and complementarity at the different levels and within different institutions.

Issues of Divergence, Concern, or Non-Alignment

Portugal has not articulated formal positions on Arctic sovereignty disputes, including the legal status of the Northwest Passage, and continues to situate its primary security interests outside the circumpolar region. Its Arctic engagement remains indirect, largely framed through multilateral institutions and Alliance commitments rather than through national assertions or region-specific defence policies. Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish Portugal's value as a supportive and reliable NATO ally within the broader Arctic–North Atlantic security space, particularly in terms of political alignment and contributions to Alliance cohesion.

Portugal's limited operational engagement in the Arctic constrains its practical contribution to regional defence. The Portuguese Armed Forces lack dedicated Arctic-capable platforms and have minimal participation in Arctic-specific exercises or northern operational environments. As a result, Portugal's direct role in Arctic deterrence, domain awareness, or emergency response remains marginal, with its contributions concentrated instead in the North Atlantic / GIUK Gap, confirmed by NATO's Billiant Shield Mission, Operação Arpão, in 2024.²³

Portugal rarely articulates distinct national positions on contested Arctic legal questions, including the status of Arctic waterways. This cautious posture neither explicitly supports nor opposes Canada's position on the Northwest Passage. This reflects Portugal's diplomatic preference for institutional consensus and legal neutrality over bilateral or issue-specific alignment.

Portugal's focus remains concentrated in the South Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and Lusophone Africa, where it maintains longstanding political, economic, and security commitments. This fact may limit Portugal's capacity and political attention to engage consistently with Arctic-specific issues over the long term.

On one hand, Canada can look at Portugal as a supportive and constructive partner in Arctic affairs. While it is unlikely to play a decisive role in shaping the Arctic security environment, strong commitment to multilateral engagement, support for NATO's northern priorities, and alignment with rules-based governance reinforce Canada's broader defence and diplomatic objectives in the Arctic–North Atlantic domain. On the other hand, joint and bilateral commitments in the different above-mentioned areas can influence Portugal in including the circumpolar area in the defence strategy, elaborate a maritime strategy and develop an Arctic strategy or action plan.²⁴

Endnotes

¹ Assembleia da República. (2023, junho 29). Resolução da Assembleia da República n.º 76/2023, Recomenda ao Governo a elaboração de um Plano de Ação Nacional para o Ártico. Diário da República, 1.ª série, No. 105, 29 de junho de 2023. <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/resolucao-assembleia-republica/76-2023-214955098>

- ² IDN. (2023). Relatório do Conselho de Revisão do Conceito Estratégico de Defesa Nacional. https://www.idn.gov.pt/pt/noticias/Documents/2023/CEDN_teste.pdf
- ³ Presidência do Conselho de Ministros. (2023). Proposta de Resolução nº. 13/xv. <https://www.parlamento.pt/ActividadeParlamentar/Paginas/DetailIniciativa.aspx?BID=172986>
- ⁴ Government of Canada. (2025). Canada and Portugal protect sensitive information and promote economic prosperity with signing of General Security of Information Agreement. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-services-procurement/news/2025/09/canada-and-portugal-protect-sensitive-information-and-promote-economic-prosperity-with-signing-of-general-security-of-information-agreement.html>
- ⁵ EEAS. (2025, June 24). Security and Defence: EU and Canada sign Security and Defence Partnership. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/security-and-defence-eu-and-canada-sign-security-and-defence-partnership_en
- ⁶ Rodrigues, C. (2025). The Importance of the Development of a Regional Strategy for the Arctic, The Case of Portugal. Policy Brief nº2. *United Nations University. Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies*. https://cris.unu.edu/sites/cris.unu.edu/files/UNU-CRIS_Policy-Brief_25.02_Rodrigues.pdf
- ⁷ Rodrigues, C. (2025). Climate Change and Security (Maritime and Human Securities) in the North Atlantic and Arctic Basins in the 21st Century: Scenario Thinking (2023-2035). Portugal in the Arctic. *Maritime Security Centre of Excellence Journal*. *Maritime Security Centre of Excellence Journal*. <https://www.marseccoe.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/20250502-JOURNAL-2024.pdf>
- ⁸ Rodrigues, C. (2024). The connection of Atlantic and Arctic oceans in the 21st century: challenges of maritime and human securities. Portugal in the Arctic. Scenario thinking (2023-2035). *Climate Change and Security Workshop Proceedings*. NATO STO CMRE. <https://www.climatechangesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/CMRE-CP-2024-001.pdf>
- ⁹ 17th-19th October 2024: Arctic Circle Assembly, Session "Building Bridges Between the Arctic and Southern Europe", Reykjavik, Iceland, Speaker, Panel: Moderator: Dwayne Ryan Menezes, Founder & Managing Director, Polar Research and Policy Initiative, UK & Portugal; Speakers: Celine Rodrigues, Researcher & PhD Candidate, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal; Carlos López Ortiz, Deputy Director General for Multilateral Economic Relations and Maritime, Air and Terrestrial Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, Spain; Stefano Nicoletti, Ambassador of Italy to Norway & Iceland; and Mead Treadwell, Former Lt Governor of Alaska, Former Chair, U.S. Arctic Research Commission, Treadwell Development, USA. (https://arctic-circle-www.cdn.prismic.io/arctic-circle-www/ZwjvK4F3NbkBXPfB_2024ArcticCircleAssembly-ComprehensiveProgram.pdf).
- ¹⁰ Grupo Latino de Ciências Polares. (2024). Report, Polar Perspectives. The Arctic in Humanities and Social Sciences in Brazil, Italy and Portugal. *Atlantic Centre, Ministry of Defence*. https://www.defesa.gov.pt/pt/pdefesa/ac/events/Documents/REPORT_WORKSHOP_24_25OCT24_ENG.pdf
- ¹¹ Grupo Latino de Ciências Polares. (2025, julho 3). 3.º Webinar do Grupo Latino de Ciências Polares – Gruppo Latino di Scienze Polari. The Portuguese Polar Program: Advancing Research in Extreme Environments. IPRI-NOVA. <https://ipri.unl.pt/index.php/pt/agenda/5587-3-webinar-do-grupo-latino-de-ciencias-polares-gruppo-latino-di-scienze-polari-2>
- ¹² Tárrega, L.B.A., Rodrigues, C., Barros-Plataiu, A.F. (2025). The I Latin polar workshop: strengthening southern voices in polar research. *Current Developments in Arctic Law*, Vol. 13 (2025). University of Lapland. https://lauda.ulapland.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/66934/Tarraga_Rodrigues_Barros-Plataiu.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

¹³ Rodrigues, C., Belén, A., & Barros-Platiau, A. F. (2025). Lisbon hosts the first Latin polar workshop: southern voices rise in polar research. *The Polar Journal*, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2025.2584942>

¹⁴ Ibid 1.

¹⁵ Ibid 6.

¹⁶ Portuguese Republic. (2026, January 6). Portugal underwrites joint statement on Greenland. <https://www.portugal.gov.pt/en/gc25/communication/news-item?i=portugal-underwrites-joint-statement-on-greenland>

¹⁷ See footnote number 2: Rodrigues, C. (2025). Climate change and human security in the Arctic. *Atlantic Centre, Ministry of Defence*. https://www.defesa.gov.pt/pt/pdefesa/ac/pub/acpubs/Documents/Atlantic-Centre_PB_19.pdf

¹⁸ NATO. (2024, June 25). Portuguese attack submarine completes NATO North Atlantic deployment. <https://mc.nato.int/media-centre/news/2024/portuguese-submarine-Arpao>

¹⁹ Government of Canada. (2024). Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy. <https://www.international.gc.ca/gac-amc/publications/transparency-transparence/arctic-arctique/arctic-policy-politique-arctique.aspx?lang=eng>

²⁰ CPLP. (2025). Secretária Executiva recebeu Embaixadora do Canadá em Portugal. <https://secretariadoexecutivo.cplp.org/informacoes/noticias/noticias-detalhe/?id=23473>

²¹ Ministry of Defence. Atlantic Centre. <https://www.defesa.gov.pt/pt/pdefesa/ac/about>

²² Fórum Oceano. <https://forumoceano.pt/en/about-us>

²³ Ibid 18.

²⁴ Rodrigues, C. (2025). The need for a Maritime Security Strategy for Portugal: North Atlantic and Arctic. *Current Developments in Arctic Law*, Vol. 13 (2025). University of Lapland. https://lauda.ulapland.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/66932/Rodrigues_Celine.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y