

Non-Arctic State Policies and Strategies

Alignments with Canada

Edited by P. Whitney Lackenbauer

Non-Arctic State Policies and Strategies: Alignments with Canada

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Canada is at an inflection point in the Arctic.

For many years, Canada has aimed to manage the Arctic and northern regions cooperatively with other states as a zone of low tension that is free from military competition.

This approach had significant benefits, uniting the Arctic nations to advance cooperation on issues of common interest, such as sustainable development, environmental protection and scientific collaboration, including through the establishment of the Arctic Council in Ottawa in 1996.

However, the guardrails that we have depended on to prevent and resolve conflict have weakened. Russia's illegal war in Ukraine has made cooperation with it on Arctic issues exceedingly difficult for the foreseeable future. Uncertainty and unpredictability are creating economic consequences that Canadians are facing everyday.

Threats to Canada's security are no longer bound by geography; climate change is accelerating rapidly; and non-Arctic states, including China, are also seeking greater influence in the governance of the Arctic. To respond, Canada must be strong in the North American Arctic, and it requires deeper collaboration with its greatest ally, the United States. Canada must also maintain strong ties with its 5 Nordic allies, which are now also all NATO members.

The evolving security and political dynamics in the Arctic have triggered a need for a recalibrated diplomatic approach to advancing Canada's national interests in the region, based on the principles of pragmatic diplomacy.

The Arctic Foreign Policy, a diplomatic strategy, addresses the challenges and opportunities Canada faces today, as well as those it expects to face in the coming decades. It gives Canada the diplomatic tools it needs to continue to assert its sovereignty, advance its national security interests and promote a stable, prosperous and secure Arctic.

Hon. Mélanie Joly, Foreword to *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy* (December 2024)¹



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List of Acronyms

AAC	Arctic Athabaskan Council
AARGM-ER	Advanced Anti-Radiation Guided Missile - Extended Range
AC	Arctic Council
ACAP	Arctic Containments Action Programme
AEPS	Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy
AERC	Arctic Environment Research Centre
ALDFG	Abandoned, Lost, or Otherwise Discarded Fishing Gear
AMAP	Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme
AMBI	Arctic Migratory Birds Initiative
<i>ANPF</i>	<i>Arctic and Northern Policy Framework</i>
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ArCs	Arctic Challenge for Sustainability
ARCSAR	Arctic Security and Emergency Preparedness Network
ARHC	Arctic Regional Hydrographic Commission
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASFF	Arctic Science Funders Forum
ASM	Arctic Science Ministerial Meeting
ASSW	Arctic Science Summit Week
ASW	Anti-Submarine Warship
AWI	Alfred Wagner Institute
<i>AWPPA</i>	<i>Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act</i>
BBN	Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego
BMBF	German Federal Ministry of Education
CAF	Canadian Armed Forces
CAFF	Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna
<i>CAFP</i>	<i>Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy</i>
CAOFA	Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement
CASD	Centre for Higher Defence Studies
CBSS	Council of the Baltic Sea States
CCASCOE	Climate Change and Security Centre of Excellence
CETA	Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement
CHARS	Canadian High Arctic Research Station

CLCS	(United Nations) Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf
CNARC	China-Nordic Arctic Research Centre
CNNRS	Canadian Network of Northern Research Stations
CNR	National Research Council
CNRS	Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique
COSMO-SkyMed	Constellation of Small Satellites for the Mediterranean basin Observation
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
CSA	Scientific Committee for the Arctic
CSIS	Canadian Security Intelligence Service
DETEC	Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications
DND	Department of National Defence
EAER	Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EGIG	Expédition Glaciologique Internationale au Groenland
ENEA	National Agency for New Technologies, Energy and Sustainable Economic Development
EPB	European Polar Board
EPFL	Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne
EPPR	Emergency, Prevention, Preparedness and Response
ETHZ	Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich
EU	European Union
FARO	Forum of Arctic Researchers Operators
FDFA	Federal Department of Foreign Affairs
FDP	Freie Demokratisches Partei
FO	Foreign Office
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
FTA	Free Trade Association
FYP	Five Year Plan
GAC	Global Affairs Canada
GCI	Gwich'in Council International
GC-Net	Greenland Climate Network
GCSP	Geneva Centre for Security Policy
GLAC-ART	Arctic Glacier

GUIK	Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom
HIMARS	High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems
IASC	International Arctic Science Council
IBCS	Integrated Battle Command System
ICC	Inuit Circumpolar Council
ICE Pact	Icebreaker Collaboration Effort
IHO	International Hydrographic Organization
IMO	International Maritime Organization
INGV	National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology
INTERACT	International Network for Terrestrial Research and Monitoring in the Arctic
IPEV	Institute Paul-Émile Victor
ISAR	International Symposium on Arctic Research
ITK	Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami
JAPEX	Japan Petroleum Exploration Company
JFC	Joint Force Command
JOGMEC	Japan Organization for Metals and Energy Security
KAEN	Korean Arctic Experts Network
KANUMAS	Kalaallit Nunaat Marine Science Seismic
KoARC	Korea Arctic Research Consortium
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
MAECI	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
MARCOM	Allied Maritime Command
METI	Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoD	Ministry of Defence
MOF	Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries
MOU	Memoranda of Understanding
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NB8	Nordic Baltic Eight
NCPOR	National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research
NERC	Natural Environment Research Centre
NIPR	National Institute of Polar Research
NORAD	North American Aerospace Defense Command
NORDEFCO	Nordic Defence Cooperation
NSM	Naval Strike Missile
NSR	Northern Sea Route

NWO	Dutch Research Council
NWP	Northwest Passage
OGS	National Institute of Oceanography and Experimental Geophysics
<i>ONSAF</i>	<i>Our North, Strong and Free</i>
OVSQ	Observatoire de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines
PAME	Protection of the Arctic Maritime Environment
PCSP	Polar Continental Shelf Program
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
PNRA	National Antarctic Research Program
POLAR	Polar Knowledge Canada
POLARIN	Polar Research Infrastructure
PRA	Arctic Research Program
PRC	People’s Republic of China
PSR	Polar Silk Road
RIS	Russian Intelligence Service
ROK	Republic of Korea
SAFE	Security Action for Europe
SAON	Sustaining Arctic Observing Network
SAR	Search and Rescue
SCAR	Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SCP	Singapore Cooperation Programme
SCPCHAR	Swiss Committee on Polar and High-Altitude Research
SDWG	Sustainable Development Working Group
SIOS	Svalbard Integrated Arctic Earth Observing System
<i>SSE</i>	<i>Strong, Secure, Engaged</i>
THAAO	Thule High Arctic Atmospheric Observatory
TKMS	ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems
UAV	Uncrewed Aerial Vehicle
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	UN Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNFCCC	UN Framework Convention on Climate Change
US	United States
WCRP	World Climate Research Programme
WSL	Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research

Introduction

P. Whitney Lackenbauer

Global geopolitical drivers, technological advances, and climate change have propelled Arctic security to the forefront of Canadian and international political discussions. According to popular narratives, the melting of Arctic sea ice is opening previously inaccessible areas, offering new opportunities for resource extraction, transpolar shipping routes, and military competition. While the Arctic states continue to assert their sovereignty and control over the region's mineral and energy resources, some non-Arctic state and non-state actors articulate competing narratives about their desired future for the region. Once-prevalent ideas of “Arctic exceptionalism”² – the notion that the Circumpolar North has been, or can be, insulated from global geostrategic pressures – have collapsed in the face of growing great power competition spilling over into regional affairs.

Since February 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has sent shockwaves across the Arctic. While Russia has not signalled any similar aspirations for military conquest in neighbouring Arctic countries, the world has witnessed the spillover of international tensions into circumpolar affairs, and the Kremlin has shattered Russia's credibility as a peaceful, law-abiding actor. Although Canada has often adopted language downplaying immediate conventional military risks to its Arctic, Russian aggression in Europe has prompted changes in assessments about the current and future security threat environment. Furthermore, worries about China's growing intent to “play a larger role in the region” and concomitant security risks factor prominently in recent policy statements.³ While Canada was hesitant about the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members speaking about Arctic security in an Alliance context over a decade ago, this is no longer the case. Instead, it is US President Donald Trump's threats to withdraw his country from NATO that has raised fundamental questions about the future of the alliance and its ability to manage a tumultuous geopolitical climate both in the Arctic and beyond.

Canada's April 2024 defence policy update *Our North, Strong and Free (ONSAF)* placed an unprecedented focus on the Arctic – and particularly on Canada's Arctic. “The most urgent and important task

we face is asserting Canada’s sovereignty in the Arctic and northern regions,” it declared, “where the changing physical and geopolitical landscapes have created new threats and vulnerabilities to Canada and Canadians” – a striking statement that elevated the Arctic to the forefront of national defence priorities. The document highlighted three “powerful, connected trends” that are reshaping global geopolitics: climate change; autocracies and disruptive states (particularly China and Russia) challenging the international order; and new and disruptive technologies that “are rapidly redefining conflict and what it takes to be safe and secure.” *ONSAF* also notes that, “to address new threats through, to and in the Arctic and North, we will prioritize detecting and understanding threats across all military domains, increasing our military’s presence, mobility and responsiveness in the Arctic, and robustly responding to threats when and where they materialize.” By extension, “this will also help address challenges to the safety and security of Indigenous and northern communities.”⁴

Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly, in her foreword to *ONSAF*, noted that “Canada must meet these new and emerging threats with resolve,” insisting that “vigorous assertion of our sovereignty, particularly in the Canadian Arctic, is a fundamental priority.”⁵ As her foreword to *CAFP* later that year reinforced, official narratives had shifted in characterizing the Arctic region not as a natural zone of international cooperation but a site of contestation, uncertainty, and unpredictability. At the same time, Canada champions the human dimension of the Arctic, pursuing economic opportunities that contribute to sustainable development, cooperating on scientific research and climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts, and ensuring that issues important to Northern Indigenous peoples and communities are well represented in international fora.

This volume brings together the perspectives of various Arctic foreign and security policy experts who provide overviews of the strategies and interests of various non-Arctic states. The International chapter to Canada’s 2019 *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (ANPF)* notes that:

While Canada has a long history of bilateral cooperation with Arctic states to address Arctic-related issues, cooperation with non-Arctic states is a new but growing area of cooperation. Thirteen non-Arctic states from Europe and Asia have been admitted as accredited observers to the Arctic Council. Many of these states have developed their

own Arctic policies and strategies and are looking to increase their engagement in the region.⁶

In discerning non-Arctic state actors' alignments and incongruities with Canadian interests, the contributors hope that their work will contribute to the refinement of a policy roadmap for "strong Canadian leadership to respond to the changing reality in the region," rooted in expanded presence and partnerships (both domestic and international).⁷

History

Although Canada is the second largest Arctic state in terms of territory, defining the Arctic has been a longstanding academic pastime in Canada. While co-developing Canada's policy framework in the late 2010s, First Nations in the Yukon as well as First Nations and Métis in the Northwest Territories noted that they felt excluded in the term "Arctic." Inuit also lamented that strategies, policies, programming and investments targeted for the Canadian "North" have been directed towards the three territories and excluded some Inuit. Consequently, Canada's 2019 *ANPF* adopted a loose definition including the three northern territories (the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Yukon) and entirety of Inuit Nunangat (the Inuit homeland in Canada), as well as an unspecific portion of northern Manitoba. Using this definition, the Canadian Arctic covers more than 40% of the country's territory and is home to more than 200,000 inhabitants, more than half of whom are Indigenous People.

A distinctive feature of Canada's Arctic is its high proportion of Indigenous people in the population who have lived in their Arctic homelands "since time immemorial." First Nations, Inuit, and Métis use and occupancy of the lands and waters form a core consideration of what is now widely accepted to constitute Canadian sovereignty. Accordingly, Canada has a recognized legal duty to consult and, where appropriate, accommodate Indigenous groups when their treaty and Indigenous rights could be impacted. Furthermore, their inter-connectedness with the land poses special obligations on the Canadian state to ensure that its practices are representative of Indigenous Peoples' rights, interests, and wishes as recognized in both domestic and international law. The ongoing vitality of Northern Indigenous Peoples makes them an influential force in Canadian domestic politics and in international norm-making in the Arctic more generally.

In 1870, the new Dominion of Canada inherited Rupert's Land, with ambiguous northern limits, from the Hudson's Bay Company, then received whatever rights Great Britain had to the High Arctic in 1880. After settling the Alaska Boundary dispute with the United States in 1903, Canadian officials felt little imperative to dedicate resources to the Arctic apart from funding expeditions to plant flags and assert a nebulous Canadian "sector claim" up to the North Pole, coupled with diplomatic negotiations that confirmed Canadian sovereignty over the islands of Canada's Arctic archipelago.⁸ The Second World War introduced the notion of the region as a military frontier, resurrecting fears about American encroachment on Canadian sovereignty in sparsely-populated areas. Although the Americans withdrew at the end of the war, the Cold War generated another round of military-inspired development beginning in the late 1940s and reignited worries about sovereignty.⁹ In the end, the North American neighbours arrived at Cold War solutions that affirmed Canada's terrestrial sovereignty and facilitate joint defence of North America.¹⁰

Economic development became intertwined with issues of sovereignty, Indigenous rights, and environmentalism in the context of oil and gas exploration. In 1969, American-owned Humble Oil sent an icebreaker, SS *Manhattan*, through the Northwest Passage to determine whether it was a viable commercial shipping route for oil and gas from the Beaufort Sea. The Canadian news media framed this as a challenge to Canada's Arctic sovereignty, prompting the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau to enact a "functional" approach to sovereignty in 1970 that included an *Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act* (AWPPA) enabling Canada to regulate and control future tanker traffic in its Arctic waters.¹¹ To secure international legal validation for this unilateral measure, Canada then championed a specific provision tailored to ice-covered polar regions during subsequent law of the sea negotiations. Although initially opposed, the United States ultimately supported the Canadian-sponsored Article 234 in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).¹²

Domestic drivers dominated the Canadian political agenda for most of the 1970s and early 1980s, but the external dimensions of sovereignty re-emerged with the August 1985 voyage of the US Coast Guard icebreaker *Polar Sea* through the Northwest Passage without seeking official permission from Canada. In response, the Conservative government of Brian Mulroney announced that Canada

was officially drawing baselines around the Arctic Archipelago effective 1 January 1986, thus confirming Canada's sovereignty over its "historic, internal waters."¹³ Canada and the US subsequently negotiated a 1988 Arctic Cooperation Agreement under which, in the interests of safe navigation, the "United States pledges that all navigation by U.S. icebreakers within waters claimed by Canada to be internal will be undertaken with the consent of the Government of Canada." By "agreeing to disagree" on the legal status of the passage, the two countries reached "a pragmatic solution based on our special bilateral relationship, our common interest in cooperating on Arctic matters, and the nature of the area."¹⁴ With this understanding in place and the perceived "crisis" averted, Canadian political attention associated with Arctic sovereignty faded once again.

Within Canada, attention also had shifted to internal dimensions of sovereignty. Thomas Berger's landmark Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry report in the mid-1970s highlighted competing visions of the Canadian Arctic as "frontier" and "homeland," insisting that the latter obligated the Crown to settle Indigenous land claims prior to large-scale development. In response, modern self-determination in the region has evolved over the last 50 years and formalized through land claim and/or self-government agreements signed with the Cree and Inuit of Northern Quebec (James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, 1975), Inuvialuit (1984), Umbrella Final Agreement for Yukon (1990, with eleven of the fourteen Yukon First Nations concluding subsequent agreements), Gwich'in (1992), Inuit of the central and eastern Canadian Arctic (Nunavut Agreement, 1993), Sahtu Dene (1993), Métis (1993), Tlicho (2003), Labrador Inuit (2005), and Nunavik Inuit (2006). Many of these agreements have established innovative forms of co-management by Indigenous Peoples and territorial, provincial and federal governments over land, water and other resources.¹⁵

With the end of the Cold War, the official discourse in Canada on Arctic affairs shifted away from continental security and narrow sovereignty interests to emphasize circumpolar cooperation and broad definitions of security that prioritized human and environmental dimensions. In line with this vision, Canada contributed substantively to building the Circumpolar Arctic governance regime, which it sees as a foundation for a strong, responsible and cooperative rules-based international order in the region.¹⁶ For example, Canada spearheaded efforts to create the Arctic Council, which it considers a leading multilateral forum to

advance its regional interests internationally. Canadian leadership contributed to the 1996 Ottawa Declaration taking the unprecedented step of including Indigenous Peoples' organizations (Permanent Participants) at the Council table. Accordingly, Canada regularly highlights the contributions of Arctic Indigenous peoples to international governance, with Indigenous Peoples in Northern Canada represented at the Arctic Council by the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), the Arctic Athabaskan Council (AAC), and Gwich'in Council International (GCI). Canada was the first chair of the Arctic Council from 1996-1998 and again served in this role from 2013-2015.¹⁷

Framed by principles of Canadian leadership, partnership, and ongoing dialogue with Northerners, *The Northern Dimension of Canada's Foreign Policy* (2000) offered four overarching objectives: to enhance the security and prosperity of Canadians, especially Northerners and Aboriginal peoples; to assert and ensure the preservation of Canada's sovereignty in the North; to establish the Circumpolar region as a vibrant geopolitical entity integrated into a rules-based international system; and to promote the human security of Northerners and the sustainable development of the Arctic.¹⁸

When Conservative Stephen Harper became prime minister in 2006, he shifted the emphasis to sovereignty and security, framing a military-focused "use it or lose it" to Arctic policy. After the Ilulissat Declaration by the Arctic coastal states in May 2008, official Canadian statements began to adopt a more optimistic and less bellicose tone, with *Canada's Northern Strategy: Our North, Our Heritage, Our Future* (2009) articulating a more comprehensive strategy that also emphasized social and economic development, protecting Canada's environmental heritage, and improving and devolving Northern governance. The *Statement on Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy* released in 2010 reiterated the importance of the Arctic in Canada's national identity and Canada's role as an "Arctic power." The overall message mirrored the broader *Northern Strategy*, outlining a vision for the Arctic as "a stable, rules-based region with clearly defined boundaries, dynamic economic growth and trade, vibrant Northern communities, and healthy and productive ecosystems."¹⁹

In September 2019, the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau released the *ANPF* which provides overarching direction about Ottawa's priorities for the Canadian and circumpolar Arctic to 2030.

The overall vision is one of “strong, self-reliant people and communities working together for a vibrant, prosperous and sustainable Arctic and northern region at home and abroad, while expressing Canada's enduring Arctic sovereignty.” Co-developed with territorial and provincial governments, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis People, it includes an international chapter that sets out priority areas for Canada’s international Arctic engagement, including: strengthening the rules-based international order; increasing engagement with Arctic and non-Arctic states; and more clearly defining Canada’s Arctic boundaries.²⁰ This reinforces that there has been more continuity than change in Canada’s approach to the circumpolar world over the last four decades, rooted in a strong belief that the rules-based international order has advanced national and global interests by fostering peace, security, and stability in the Arctic.

As this brief overview indicates, official Canadian statements consistently emphasize that sovereignty, security, and stability are essential to sustain peaceful international relations, protect ecosystems, facilitate sustainable development, and avoid military conflict in the circumpolar world. Our country’s vast Arctic territories and maritime jurisdiction form a core part of Canada’s identity and strategic position in the world, inviting Canadians to promote peaceful governance and stewardship of this strategically vital region in ways that reflect the priorities of Northern Canadians. Canada is a longstanding proponent of bilateral and multilateral cooperation to address complex security dynamics, seeking to uphold the rules-based international order and assert its sovereign rights in adherence with international law.

Arctic Boundaries and Status of Waters

Canada insists that its sovereignty over its Arctic region is long-standing, well-established and based on historic title, and founded in part on the presence of Inuit and First Nations since time immemorial. Furthermore, this sovereignty over Arctic and northern lands and waters is continuously expressed through myriad activities undertaken by the Government of Canada, its partners, and local communities. Nevertheless, sovereignty is a “zombie – the dead issue that refuses to stay dead” – in the Canadian public discourse.²¹ Pessimistic commentators often allude to unclear maritime boundaries and competing legal opinions about the status of Arctic waters as examples of friction points that could lead to inter-state

conflict. These narratives tap into deep-seated Canadian anxieties about borders and sovereignty that extend back to the Alaska boundary dispute, American defence projects in the Northwest during the Second World War, and fears of U.S. Cold War security needs undermining Canadian sovereignty.

Competing interpretations of the international legal status of the Northwest Passage continue to represent the most significant sovereignty dispute in Canada's Arctic. Canada insists that the waters within its Arctic Archipelago constitute historical internal waters over which it enjoys complete sovereignty. This gives Canada the right to control and conceivably forbid the entry of international vessels into these historic waters enclosed by baselines effective 1 January 1986. On the other hand, the United States contends that the Northwest Passage is a strait used for international navigation, a regime in which international shippers have the right to transit these waters without the permission of the coastal state (Part III of UNCLOS).²² Their "agree to disagree" arrangement (explained in the previous section) remains intact, although some commentators worry whether this bilateral approach will be sustainable as international interest grows in Arctic shipping routes.²³

Another bilateral dispute concerns the maritime boundary between Canada and the United States in the Beaufort Sea north of Yukon and Alaska. Canada claims an extension of the land boundary into the sea, while the U.S. bases its claim on an equidistant line drawn from the low-water line of each country's coast. Because the Canadian coastline along the Beaufort stretches in a southeasterly direction, the equidistant line out to 200 nautical miles deviates away from the 141st meridian, creating a 6,250-square-nautical-mile disputed zone. Canada holds the position that an unbroken succession of Canadian governments has treated the 141st meridian as the agreed-upon boundary in the Beaufort based on the 1825 Anglo-Russian Treaty, which states that the border follows the meridian "dans son prolongement jusqu'à la Mer Glaciale" – a phrase that can be interpreted to mean "to the main body of the Arctic Ocean, as distinct from the Beaufort Sea." The United States, however, rejects the notion that the 1825 or 1867 treaties established an ocean boundary in the Beaufort Sea. The dispute has been well-managed since attempts to resolve it failed in 1978, and both countries insist that the dispute will be resolved peacefully, in accordance with international law, when both parties are ready to do so.²⁴

In 2022, Canada reached a landmark agreement with the Kingdom of Denmark and Greenland to create an international boundary on Hans Island (Tartupaluk in Greenlandic) and to complete the process of delimiting the longest continuous maritime boundary in the world. The new land boundary follows a natural ravine that runs the length of the 1.3 km² uninhabited island, in a general direction from north to south, and divides the Island roughly in half. In the Lincoln Sea, the Agreement builds on a 2012 tentative deal and resolves a technical issue that had prevented the final determination of the boundary. The 2022 Agreement also establishes a boundary in an overlapping area of approximately 79,000 km² in the Labrador Sea which, according to Global Affairs Canada, “represents an equitable solution consistent with Article 83 of UNCLOS.”²⁵

UNCLOS sets out a process for its state parties to determine the precise limits of their extended continental shelves (beyond 200 nautical miles). In May 2019, Canada filed a submission to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) to initiate the process to obtain international recognition for the outer limits of Canada’s continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean. In December 2022, Canada submitted an addendum that extended its previous submission to include additional areas of the Lomonosov Ridge that overlap with the shelf claimed by Russia and Kingdom of Denmark. Once the commission reviews the countries’ claims, it will make recommendations that will inform the parties’ bilateral negotiations to resolve overlaps.²⁶

Political, Economic, and Scientific Interests

The Government of Canada seeks an Arctic region characterized by peace, stability, and low tension, where states can exercise their sovereign rights and responsibilities. Accordingly, our country seeks to advance its national and international Arctic interests through circumpolar cooperation with neighbours and ensuring that Northern voices, particularly those of Arctic Indigenous communities, are included in the international conversation. Official statements emphasize that robust rules, norms and institutions guide international affairs in the Arctic, and that an extensive international legal framework applies to the Arctic Ocean, including UNCLOS. Canada strongly supports regional multilateral forums and various United Nations organizations, including the International Maritime Organization (IMO), that make decisions affecting the region, and maintains close bilateral relationships with other Arctic states to

address issues of common interest or sensitivity. Its most important international relationship is with the United States, with bilateral announcements during the Justin Trudeau-Barak Obama period affirming that the neighbours would remain “premier partners” in the Arctic and would play a joint leadership role in regional (particularly North American Arctic) affairs.²⁷

Canada envisages playing a leadership role in Circumpolar Arctic affairs – albeit in what it recognizes as a world of heightened geopolitical competition. Foreign policy language around “pragmatic diplomacy”²⁸ speaks to pursuing interests, while its aspirations around Arctic governance, the rules-based international order, and Indigenous rights speak to values. Canada’s most distinctive feature remains its deliberate intent to include Indigenous rightsholders as full partners, and to ensure that Northern and Indigenous populations, which are disproportionately affected by changes in the Arctic, are the primary beneficiaries of Arctic policies.

The promise to “secure [Canada’s] national interests and ensure stability and prosperity for the Indigenous Peoples who live in the Arctic and the North” is also a longstanding staple of Canada’s domestic and foreign Arctic policies.²⁹ Justin Trudeau’s Liberal Government prioritized reconciliation in its Arctic agenda after taking office in 2015,³⁰ with enhanced financial support for Canadian Indigenous organizations to participate in international Arctic fora and integrate traditional knowledge in research and policy development. To advance these efforts, *Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy* announced that Canada would appoint an Arctic Ambassador, with an office in Canada’s North, who will “work with Arctic allies and domestic partners including Indigenous Peoples and territorial and provincial governments to make linkages between Canada’s domestic and foreign policy agenda, advance Canada’s polar interests in multilateral forums, and raise awareness internationally of Indigenous rights in the Arctic context.”³¹ Virginia Mearns, an Inuit leader based in Iqaluit with a background advancing Inuit self-determination and community well-being, was appointed to this role in 2024.³²

The Canadian Arctic has a mixed economy, comprised of a wage economy and traditional economies of hunting, fishing, and gathering. While proponents of economic development in the Canadian Arctic highlight the tremendous potential for wealth and job creation that will benefit communities and residents through sustainable resource development (including mining and fisheries),

there is no clear consensus on the desirability of extractive industry. While the three northern territories each have a per capita GDP higher than the Canadian national average, many of the high-income mining jobs in the NWT and Nunavut are fly-in, fly-out positions held by Canadians living outside of the region. Conversely, Indigenous-owned businesses have provided resource industries with workers and services for years, and Indigenous peoples are moving into ownership positions in resource development businesses.³³

Traditionally, Canadian mining activity in the Arctic and North has focused on base metal and gemstone extraction, but the global “green energy” transition and security concerns have prompted a recent shift toward critical minerals. Pursuant to *Canada’s Critical Minerals Strategy*, released in 2022,³⁴ Ottawa has deployed massive, targeted financing (including launching a \$2-billion dedicated Critical Minerals Sovereign Fund in November 2025)³⁵ to de-risk extraction in northern environments holding vast reserves of battery-critical materials such as nickel, cobalt, and lithium where enabling infrastructure is lacking. Furthermore, the *Defence Industrial Strategy* released in February 2026 integrates northern mining directly into national security frameworks, recognizing Canada’s capability to produce ten of the twelve minerals designated as defence-critical by NATO, such as gallium, germanium, graphite, and high-grade uranium. The rapid acceleration of extraction will likely involve co-management partnerships with Indigenous rightsholders and require careful navigation of Northern regulatory regimes to avoid deleterious environmental impacts on sensitive ecosystems.

While the Canadian Arctic holds vast reserves of hydrocarbon resources,³⁶ the federal government has imposed an indefinite moratorium on Arctic offshore oil and gas licensing since 2016. This measure, intended to safeguard fragile ecosystems from catastrophic spills, effectively freezes eleven active exploration licences in the Beaufort Sea and bans new commercial drilling.³⁷ The Government of Canada has continuously extended the prohibition through December 2028, in contrast to the US where President Trump revoked, in January 2026, a March 2023 memorandum from the Biden Administration that had barred oil and gas leasing along the Alaskan North Slope. Following Trump’s executive order, the US Department of the Interior initiated a new five-year offshore leasing program to auction oil and gas drilling rights across almost all of Alaska’s coastline, seeking to maximize hydrocarbon production.³⁸ This highlights

divergent North American priorities with respect to energy security and environmental protection, as well as the Canada-US dispute over the maritime boundary in the Beaufort (which also serves as the western boundary of the Inuvialuit Land Claim Agreement). Within Canada, the issue of energy extraction in Inuit Nunangat also has brought environmental protection into friction with economic reconciliation, given that the Government of Canada's moratorium encroaches on Indigenous rights and territorial jurisdiction under devolution agreements.³⁹

Climate change remains a central theme in Canada's policy, characterized as "both the most pressing and the most proximate threat to Canada's security in the Arctic." Official statements regularly point to reductions in sea ice in the Arctic Ocean opening new paths for encroachment on Canadian sovereignty and noting that "competitors are not waiting to take advantage—seeking access, transportation routes, natural resources, critical minerals, and energy sources through more frequent and regular presence and activity." Climate change is already disrupting local human security, increasing the frequency and severity of humanitarian and environmental disasters, heightening demand for search and rescue, and threatening the integrity of legacy infrastructure. NATO's Climate Change and Security Centre of Excellence (CCASCOE), based in Montreal and created "to promote research and knowledge sharing on climate security threats in the Arctic and elsewhere," has opened to articulate clearer, practical pathways forward.⁴⁰

Canada has a long and distinguished history in Arctic scientific research. Today, Canadian science policy with respect to the region couples conventional Western research practices with a strategic pivot toward Indigenous self-determination and the formal integration of Indigenous Knowledge and Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit alongside Western methodologies. The ANPF and Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami's (ITK) *National Inuit Strategy on Research* promote a substantive shift in research priorities from southern-led inquiries to an "in the North, by the North" philosophy that prioritizes community-defined needs.⁴¹ Central to this paradigm is the requirement that all research be co-developed in the spirit of "nothing about us, without us," ensuring that Indigenous rightsholders are equal partners in all stages of knowledge creation, from agenda-setting to data stewardship, and that science directly supports and advances Northerners' cultural, socio-economic, and environmental well-being.⁴²

Scientific research infrastructure in the Canadian Arctic is characterized by a “hub-and-spoke” model designed to overcome extreme geographical and logistical barriers. The centerpiece of this network is the Canadian High Arctic Research Station (CHARS) in Cambridge Bay, operated by the federal agency Polar Knowledge Canada (POLAR), which provides year-round, state-of-the-art laboratory facilities. Supporting this central hub is the Polar Continental Shelf Program (PCSP), which facilitates nearly 100 projects annually by providing critical aviation logistics, communication equipment, and field camps across Canada’s Arctic Archipelago from a hub in Resolute Bay, Nunavut. Furthermore, the Canadian Network of Northern Research Stations (CNNRS) integrates over forty diverse facilities, ranging from university-operated huts to major territorial centres, that facilitate long-term environmental monitoring and ensure that scientific data is collected and shared with Indigenous communities to support both local decision-making and global modeling.⁴³

The Government of Canada considers Arctic science to be a strategic instrument in demonstrating Canadian sovereignty and in its regional and global diplomacy, leveraging technical data to clarify its sovereign rights and to reinforce its standing within the rules-based global order. Canada utilizes advanced geophysical and bathymetric data to substantiate its sovereign claims to the extended continental shelf, providing the empirical evidence required by the CLCS. By mapping the seafloor and crustal structure of the Arctic Ocean, Canada establishes the legal and scientific continuity of its landmass to secure its rights to subsea resources.⁴⁴ Canada continues to see the Arctic Council as “the pre-eminent forum” for facilitating circumpolar scientific exchange, relying on its working groups to produce authoritative, peer-reviewed data that informs robust social and environmental policies.⁴⁵

The Canadian Arctic and North are warming at approximately three times the global average rate, which is reshaping the environmental, social and economic landscapes. Arctic ecosystems are at a disproportionately high risk of experiencing the adverse effects of global warming. Scientific models predict an accelerating loss of seasonal sea ice across Canada’s Arctic, with extensive sea ice-free periods projected by mid-century for the Canadian Arctic and Hudson Bay. Terrestrially, thawing permafrost threatens infrastructure and changes landscapes, changing habitats affect the distribution of species, precipitation has increased significantly, and

more frequent and intense forest fires can threaten entire communities with sudden, catastrophic violence. Climate and environment changes affect Indigenous communities most dramatically: traditional food sources are disappearing; ice conditions are becoming unpredictable and therefore dangerous for travel by hunters using either dogsled or snowmobile; and melting ice and rising sea levels are exposing communities to destructive coastal erosion and damage to infrastructure.⁴⁶

While diminishing ice coverage may increase the feasibility of transiting Canada's Arctic waters at certain times of the year, extremely variable ice conditions continue to make navigation difficult and hazardous. Northern Canadians are particularly concerned about devastating environmental impacts associated with unregulated vessel traffic and accidents. Accordingly, the Government of Canada manages vessel traffic within its internal waters to ensure that navigation is conducted in accordance with the country's rigorous safety and environmental protection standards.⁴⁷

As climate change heightens international commercial interest and activity in the Arctic, Canadians have raised important questions about maritime environmental protection and response, safe regional transportation, and search and rescue. Canada spearheaded efforts to create a mandatory Polar Code (which entered into force on 1 January 2017) through the International Maritime Organization that covers the full range of design, construction, equipment, operational, training, search and rescue, and environmental protection matters relevant to ships operating in polar waters. The country's Arctic Shipping Safety and Pollution Prevention Regulations incorporate the Polar Code, with the addition of specific Canadian modifications designed to provide clarity on discharge requirements for the prevention of pollution by oil, by sewage, and by garbage from vessels, as well as the control of pollution by noxious liquid substances in bulk.⁴⁸

Canada's Arctic Policy

CAFP, released in December 2024, complements the defence policy update *ONSAF* published the previous April. The prioritization of defence strikes a different tone from the aspirations of the March 2016 Obama-Trudeau "U.S.-Canada Joint Statement on Climate, Energy, and Arctic Leadership," which focused on conservation, science-based decision-making, and incorporating traditional knowledge into this process to support strong Arctic communities

built around sustainable economies. These recent policy updates also “supplement” Canada’s *ANFP* “international chapter”⁴⁹ and “safety, security, and defence chapter”⁵⁰ given profound geostrategic changes globally that have spilled over into Arctic affairs. Since that time, climate change, new and disruptive technologies, and major geopolitical changes driven by Russia’s renewed invasion of Ukraine and growing Sino-Russian ties in the Arctic have “rapidly redefining conflict and what it takes to be safe and secure,”⁵¹ spurring renewed thinking in Canada about geopolitics and Arctic security.

Canada’s Arctic foreign policy remains linked to its domestic Arctic and Northern policy,⁵² as outlined in its *ANPF* and Indigenous distinction-based approaches such as Canada’s Inuit Nunangat Policy.⁵³ Canada’s desire for “Arctic state primacy” is a longstanding priority, insisting that the Arctic states are best positioned and equipped to understand the region and its peoples. Reiterating that Canada remains committed to “ensuring that maritime claims are addressed in a manner that is consistent with international law” also gestures to the legality of Canada’s position on the Northwest Passage as historic internal waters as well as its submission to the CLCS in support of its extended continental shelf in the Arctic. Canada envisages national defence as a key part of the country’s “commitment to a safe, secure, and well-defended Arctic and North, and as a continued expression of Canada’s enduring sovereignty over our lands and waters.”⁵⁴

CAFP is built around four main pillars: asserting Canada’s sovereignty; advancing Canada’s interests through pragmatic diplomacy; leadership on Arctic governance and multilateral challenges; and adopting a more inclusive approach to Arctic diplomacy. While these are not new concepts, the latest policy statement asserts that recent emerging threats have “triggered a need for a recalibrated approach to advancing Canada’s national interests in the region.”⁵⁵ This recalibration reflects external drivers as well as enduring Canadian political values rooted in a commitment to democracy, equality, human rights, diversity, the rule of law, and social justice, which are enshrined in foundational documents like the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) and inform both domestic policy and international relations. Canadians deeply value equality and diversity, treating all people with the same respect and dignity regardless of personal characteristics such as race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, or disability. The Canadian political landscape is also marked by a strong commitment to

reconciliation with Inuit, First Nations, and Métis as Indigenous Peoples, rooted in the recognition of rights, self-determination, and a renewed nation-to-nation relationship. All of these values are strongly reflected in Canada's Arctic policy.⁵⁶

Emerging drivers of change both within and beyond the region, however, generate a sense of unprecedented challenge and uncertainty. *ONSAF* placed an unprecedented focus on the Arctic – and particularly on Canada's Arctic sovereignty and security. Minister of National Defence Bill Blair painted an alarming picture of a region that adversaries are openly contesting:

In our North, we need to confront the reality of climate change. Our Arctic is warming at four times the global average, opening the region to the world, which was previously protected by the Polar Ice Cap year-round. By 2050, the Arctic Ocean could become the most efficient shipping route between Europe and East Asia. We are seeing greater Russian activity in our air approaches, and a growing number of Chinese vessels and surveillance platforms are mapping and collecting data about the region. Meanwhile, states are rapidly building up their military capabilities in ways that impact our security in the Arctic—including submarines, long-range aircraft and hypersonic missiles that move faster and are harder to detect. As the Arctic becomes more accessible to foreign actors, we need to ensure our military has the tools to assert our sovereignty and protect Canada's interests.⁵⁷

ONSAF evokes a sense of urgency, suggesting that environmental changes have increased regional accessibility and thus open new threat vectors for competitors to exploit. "Canada must meet these new and emerging threats with resolve," Minister Joly added in her opening message in the defence policy statement. "Vigorous assertion of our sovereignty, particularly in the Canadian Arctic, is a fundamental priority."⁵⁸ While this emphasis on sovereignty may suggest an inward-looking focus, Canada's defence and foreign policy balances domestic and international priorities in articulating approaches to addressing growing Arctic security concerns.

Canadian policy statements also promote a "whole of government"⁵⁹ or "whole of society" approach, acknowledging that addressing the full range of threats in the Arctic requires a broad conceptualization of security for Canada to achieve its national security and public safety objectives. "While operating in Canada's North, we often work in close partnership with other federal,

territorial, and local partners,” Canada’s 2017 defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged (SSE)*, observed. “As such, we will leverage our new capabilities to help build the capacity of whole-of-government partners to help them deliver their mandates in Canada’s North, and support broader Government of Canada priorities in the Arctic region.”⁶⁰ This echoes the messaging from previous DND/CAF Arctic strategic and operational documents, which plan and prepare to support activities such as search and rescue (SAR), major transportation disasters, environmental disasters, pandemics, loss of essential services (i.e., potable water, power, fuel supplies), organized crime, foreign state or non-state actor intelligence gathering activities, and attacks on critical infrastructure, food security and disruptions to local hunting.⁶¹ *CAFP* also specifies that “security in the Arctic includes community security, research security, economic security, security against disinformation and any other form of interference and physical and digital infrastructure security.”⁶² This holistic approach seeks comprehensive security, inclusive of but not limited to national defence.

Defence and Security

“Canada is an Arctic nation, and we are at a critical moment. We live in a tough world, and we need to be tougher in our response,” Minister Joly declared at the launch of *Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy* on 6 December 2024. “I don’t think the Arctic will be the primary theatre of conflict. I see the Arctic as the result of what is happening elsewhere in the world.”⁶³ Melting ice, Russian militarization of its Arctic, and China’s ambitions in the region continue to generate concern about the “spillover” of conflict into the region from elsewhere, the risk of miscalculation or unintended escalation, as well as myriad “below the threshold” or “gray zone” threats to and in the Arctic.⁶⁴ Canada’s commitment to make “generational” investments in the modernization of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) reflect a more dangerous world, with the Arctic increasingly at the epicentre. While *ONSAF* projected military spending to reach 1.76% of GDP by 2029-30, *CAFP* updated this figure to reach NATO’s target of 2% of GDP spending by 2032. This reflected Minister Blair’s announcement at the Washington NATO Summit on 10 July 2024 that the Royal Canadian Navy would purchase of up to twelve conventionally powered, under-ice-capable submarines.⁶⁵ Canada reached 2% GDP spending by March

2026, propelled by the increasingly volatile international security environment.⁶⁶

SSE marked an Arctic pivot in Canadian defence policy. “To succeed in an unpredictable and complex security environment,” it insisted, Canada would “increase [the military’s] presence in the Arctic over the long-term and work cooperatively with Arctic partners.”⁶⁷ The relevance of the region was encapsulated in the statement that “the Arctic region represents an important international crossroads where issues of climate change, international trade, and global security meet.” Rather than promoting a narrative of inherent competition or impending conflict, however, *SSE* pointed out that “Arctic states have long cooperated on economic, environmental, and safety issues, particularly through the Arctic Council, the premier body for cooperation in the region. All Arctic states have an enduring interest in continuing this productive collaboration.”⁶⁸ This last sentence suggested that Russia (described elsewhere in the policy document as a state “willing to test the international security environment” that had reintroduced “a degree of major power competition”) did not inherently threaten Arctic stability given its vested interests in the region. Accordingly, the drivers of Arctic change cited in *SSE* emphasize the rise of security and safety challenges rather than conventional defence threats.⁶⁹

ONSAF elevated “Canada’s sovereignty in the Arctic” to “the most urgent and important task” facing the Canadian Armed Forces. What is the nature of the threats facing Canada that imperil our sovereignty and security in the Arctic? In *ONSAF*, the Government of Canada insists that “Canada’s Northwest Passage and the broader Arctic region are already more accessible, and competitors are not waiting to take advantage—seeking access, transportation routes, natural resources, critical minerals, and energy sources through more frequent and regular presence and activity.” As specific examples, *ONSAF* states that Canada is “seeing more Russian activity in our air approaches, and a growing number of Chinese dual-purpose research vessels and surveillance platforms collecting data about the Canadian North that is, by Chinese law, made available to China’s military.” While the line between military threats and illegal activities that should be countered and prosecuted using law enforcement and diplomatic tools remain opaque, the overall message is one of the need to increase the military’s “presence, reach, mobility and responsiveness across the country, particularly

in our changing Arctic and North,” to “address new threats through, to and in the Arctic and North.”⁷⁰

CAFP confirmed that “while the risk of military attack in the North American Arctic remains low, the region represents a geographic vector for traditional and emerging weapons systems that threaten broader North American and transatlantic security.” In addition to threats listed in *ONSAF*, the foreign policy statement highlights that “adversaries and competitors also employ disinformation and influence campaigns, malicious cyber operations and espionage and foreign interference activities to target Canadians, including northerners.”⁷¹ These statements reveal an appreciation of conventional military threats that would pass through the Arctic as well as “gray zone” or hybrid threats to and in the Arctic that span the defence-security spectrum.⁷²

Canadian strategies frame Russia as the primary kinetic threat *through* the Arctic, observing that “despite battlefield losses in Ukraine, Russia remains highly capable of projecting air, naval and missile forces... through the Arctic to threaten North America.”⁷³ NORAD modernization plans announced since 2022 are designed to detect, deter, and if necessary defeat these threats by enhancing domain awareness and control over the Arctic approaches to the shared North American homeland.

The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) annual report for 2024 affirmed that the Russian Intelligence Services (RIS) and other Russian state actors continue to target Canada, Canadians, and Canadian interests. “These hostile activities include acts of espionage, sabotage, and foreign influence, all of which pose threats to the security and prosperity of Canada,” it discloses. The Arctic is not immune to these foreign interference activities, leading CSIS to take deliberate efforts “to develop and pursue intelligence leads, and engaged with Arctic partners, including Indigenous communities, to counter threats posed by the Russian Federation towards Canada’s Arctic sovereignty.” Briefings to territorial governments and Indigenous local governing bodies in the Canadian Arctic have served to increase awareness and build and maintain resiliency against current and emerging security threats, contributing “to a safer, and more secure and prosperous environment for [Northern] residents and all Canadians.”⁷⁴

Canada also looks to NATO and Europe for enhanced Arctic defence and security cooperation. Pursuant to *CAFP* and the Canada-European Union (EU) Security and Defence Partnership

launched in June 2025, Canada has moved to integrate European states more closely into its Northern security architecture to counter increasing geopolitical competition.⁷⁵ Furthermore, despite Canada's historical reticence about discussing NATO's role in the Arctic, Ottawa now openly promotes the relevance and importance of the Alliance in the region. *CAFP* explicitly connects "Arctic security and continental defence investments made in *Our North, Strong and Free* and NORAD Modernization" with support to "NATO's deterrence and defence agenda by protecting the Alliance's Northern and Western flanks." This "ensures that Canada can engage in the world and deploy from a secure base in support of NATO allies, when needed." After astutely noting that "the defence architecture and threat picture differ across the circumpolar north," the Government of Canada commits to "continue to share information on threats in the Arctic with allies and to support NATO operations and presence in the European High North."⁷⁶

The "guard rails" that prevent conflict are "increasingly under strain" when it comes to the Arctic, Minister Joly proclaimed on 6 December 2024. "The Arctic is no longer a low-tension region."⁷⁷ Furthermore, "threats to Canada's security are no longer bound by geography; change is accelerating rapidly; and non-Arctic states, including China, are also seeking great influence in the governance of the Arctic," the foreign minister asserted in her foreword to the strategy. "To respond, Canada must be strong in the North American Arctic, and it requires deeper collaboration with its greatest ally, the United States. Canada must also maintain strong ties with its 5 Nordic allies, which are now also all NATO members."⁷⁸

Canada's Arctic foreign policy is grounded in the longstanding assumption that "the United States is Canada's closest partner and ally in the Arctic, and this collaboration extends across many shared interests" rooted in "a unique relationship shaped by geography, history, shared values, common interests and strong people-to-people connections."⁷⁹ This continues in deep collaboration on defence and security (including NORAD modernization, with various Arctic components), border management, energy security, and critical minerals. The countries share general similarities in where and how they will secure the North American Arctic, primarily together through the binational NORAD, and both position Russia as the principle geopolitical threat to the North American and European subregions.⁸⁰ Trilateral agreements such as the Icebreaker Collaboration Effort (ICE Pact) intend to strengthen Arctic security by

pooling the marine industrial bases, engineering expertise, and resources of Canada, Finland, and the United States.⁸¹

Since President Donald Trump's re-election to the White House in November 2024, his belligerent rhetoric – and particularly his repeated insistence that Canada join the US as the “51st state” and his repeated threats to acquire Greenland (even refusing to rule out the use of military force to do so) – have disrupted Canada–U.S. Arctic relations by subverting established norms of respect for sovereignty.⁸² Trump's transactional, real-estate-driven approach to geopolitics⁸³ frames northern North America as an unprotected flank that the US must dominate to achieve unilateral national security goals in its competition with Russia and China. By downplaying the bilateral partnership and Canada's contributions to continental defence, Trump's rhetoric has precipitated a sharp rise in Canadian popular concern about the US and a corresponding decline in trust in the US as a reliable ally.⁸⁴ By extension, Trump's aggressive posturing has shifted perceptions of the North American Arctic from a predictable, cooperative, rules-based region into a volatile geopolitical arena where U.S. revisionism may compromise Canada's sovereignty and traditional alliance expectations.

Prime Minister Mark Carney's January 2026 speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos indicated a profound realignment of Canadian foreign policy away from post-Cold War idealism toward “value-based realism” and “variable geometry.” Explicitly rejecting subordination to great power intimidation, he asserted that like-minded middle powers must build strategic autonomy. Accordingly, Canada has strategically pivoted towards Europe, with the Canadian prime minister signing a joint declaration with his five Nordic counterparts to deepen cooperation on Arctic security in March 2026.⁸⁵ As part of his efforts to move Canada from “reliance to resilience,” Carney also announced more than “\$35 billion in federal investments to defend, build, and transform Canada's Northern and Arctic region, and major projects that represent around \$10 billion in investment.” Casting the investments as an example of Canada “taking full responsibility for defending our Arctic sovereignty,” he pledged to “boldly develop the critical minerals, clean energy, and trade corridors” of the region, creating “stronger, more sustainable, more connected communities, greater opportunities, and a lower cost of living” for the 140,000 Northerners and Indigenous Peoples living in Canada's Arctic and North.⁸⁶

Canadian and Non-Arctic State Interests

While Canada's Arctic foreign policy continues to focus primarily on its relations with like-minded Arctic states, its evolving relations with European non-Arctic states seek to deepen strategic partnerships in scientific research, maritime security, and economic resilience. This is institutionalized through Canada's association with Horizon Europe, which facilitates joint polar research, and bilateral agreements such as the 2025-2026 critical minerals partnership with Germany aimed at securing green energy supply chains.⁸⁷ Furthermore, Canada collaborates with these nations as Observers in the Arctic Council and through the G7 (Group of Seven), while upholding the idea of Arctic state primacy: that countries with sovereign territories in the Arctic are best suited to lead in regional governance.

Despite historical frictions between Canada and the EU over the latter's ban on trade in sea mammal products that harmed Arctic Indigenous Peoples, the two parties maintain a robust strategic partnership in the Arctic focused on addressing climate change, promoting sustainable development, and upholding international law, including the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Under the Canada-EU Green Alliance, both parties prioritize environmental stewardship, specifically supporting a moratorium on offshore oil and gas extraction and implementing the 2018 Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean. Furthermore, this cooperation extends to supporting the Arctic Council as the pre-eminent forum for regional governance, with Canada leveraging this engagement to advance scientific, economic, and security interests in the region.⁸⁸

As the chapters in this book demonstrate, Canada also maintains strong bilateral relations with non-Arctic European states that intersect directly with its Arctic foreign and defence policy interests. Canada's priorities for engagement include science, technology and innovation, conservation of fish stocks, environmental protection and climate action, and trade and sustainable economic development.⁸⁹ Although NATO provides a collective defence framework and a unified command structure, Canada also maintains vital bilateral security relationships with the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy to coordinate maritime deterrence, protect critical data networks, and defend the Euro-Atlantic's northern flank against geopolitical threats. As various authors suggest, the alignment in Arctic interests between Canada and the non-Arctic

European Observers to the Arctic Council far outweigh points of divergence, leaving ample opportunity for enhanced cooperation.

Canada's Arctic relations with Asian states are characterized by a cautious balance between fostering scientific and economic collaboration, on the one hand, and mitigating risks to national security and sovereignty on the other. The lion's share of Canadian commentary fixates on China, and particularly perceived threats in the economic and maritime domains.⁹⁰ *CAFP* positions China as a non-Arctic state competitor that "can be expected to use all the tools at its disposal to advance its geopolitical interests, including in the Arctic." The policy raises concern about China's regular deployment of dual-use (having both research and military application) platforms to collect data, as well as malign economic influence.⁹¹ It also leaves space for "pragmatic diplomacy,"⁹² asserting that "Canada will challenge China when it ought to and cooperate when its interests align with China's," including addressing "pressing global issues—such as climate change—that have impacts on the Arctic."⁹³ While these concerns are not new, their direct inclusion in a Canadian Arctic foreign policy statement is.⁹⁴

There is no comparable concern about other Asian partners. In describing the North Pacific as "one of the approaches to the Canadian Arctic," Canada's 2022 *Indo-Pacific Strategy* recognized the need for closer security and defence cooperation in the Arctic, insisting that it "will advance its standing as an Arctic power and uphold our Arctic sovereignty and the rules-based international order in our bilateral and multilateral engagement with Indo-Pacific countries on Arctic and polar affairs."⁹⁵ Canada views Japan and the Republic of Korea as key Indo-Pacific partners for deeper strategic and economic engagement in the Arctic "given the mutual long-standing relationships and shared values of the 3 nations." Both have established Arctic science and technology programs, leading-edge shipbuilding and defence industries, and are aligned with Canada as strong voices advancing rules-based governance. Other shared priorities include maritime security, trade and sustainable economic development, and fisheries.⁹⁶

The contributors to this volume provide expert insight into the Arctic policies and strategies of the thirteen non-Arctic state actors who are accredited Observers to the Arctic Council. The intent is to provide short, accessible overviews that identify alignments with Canadian interests and values, as well as points of potential divergence. This is intended to complement the NATO Strategic

Communications Centre of Excellence report on *Arctic Narratives and Political Values: Arctic States, China, NATO, and the EU*, released in November 2024, which provides a discourse analysis of official external and internal messaging of the eight member states of the Arctic Council, two international organizations, and China from mid-2019 to late 2022.⁹⁷

Notes

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⁵⁵ GAC, *Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy*.

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⁶⁸ DND, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, 50. Most Canadian academic experts seem to have reached a consensus about the prospects of “resource” or “sovereignty wars” emanating from Arctic disputes. Previous proponents of the “sovereignty on thinning ice” school have largely abandoned their earlier arguments that Canadian sovereignty will be a casualty of climate change and foreign challenges. Instead, academic narratives anticipating potential conflict now emphasize how other international events (such as Russian aggression in the Ukraine) could “spill over” into the Arctic or how new non-Arctic state and non-state actors might challenge or undermine Canadian sovereignty and security. See, for example, Franklyn Griffiths, Rob Huebert, and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, *Canada and the Changing Arctic: Sovereignty, Security and Stewardship* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011); and Rob Huebert and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, eds., *Debating Arctic Security: Selected Writings by Rob Huebert and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, 2010-2021* (Peterborough: North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN), 2021), <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/DebatingArcticSecurity-RH-PWL-nov2021.pdf>.

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⁹⁰ On China in the Arctic through a Canadian lens, see P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Adam Lajeunesse, James Manicom, and Frédéric Lasserre, *China’s Arctic Ambitions and What They Mean for Canada* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2018); Standing Senate Committee on National Security, Defence and Veterans Affairs, *Arctic Security Under Threat: Urgent Needs in a Changing Geopolitical and Environmental Landscape*, June 2023, <https://sencanada.ca/content/sen/committee/441/SECD/reports/2023>

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⁹¹ GAC, *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy*.

⁹² Economic Club of Canada, 30 October 2023, <https://economicclub.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Minister-Joly-Takeaways.pdf>. This idea suggests that Canada must “be pragmatic and resist the temptation to divide the world into rigid ideological camps” of “democracies versus autocracies,” thus allowing it to serve as a broker for non-aligned countries. Joly quoted in John Ivison, “Joly's 'pragmatic diplomacy' is just another Liberal foreign policy fantasy,” *National Post*, 31 October 2023, <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/john-ivison-joly-pragmatic-diplomacy-liberal-fantasy>.

⁹³ GAC, *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy*.

⁹⁴ Canadian policy also highlights that Sino-Russian relations in the Arctic appear to be changing, with the Canadian Foreign Minister noting in December 2024 that Russia is “reversing its historic posture by facilitating Chinese access” to the region, and “particularly the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation.” Joint military exercises demonstrated “the continued deepening of Chinese-Russian military cooperation, particularly in the North Pacific approaches to the Arctic.” Message from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, foreword to GAC, *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy*.

⁹⁵ Minister of Foreign Affairs, *Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy* (2022), <https://www.international.gc.ca/transparency-transparence/assets/pdfs/indo-pacific-indo-pacifique/indo-pacific-indo-pacifique-en.pdf>.

⁹⁶ GAC, *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy*.

⁹⁷ Troy Bouffard, P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Elizabeth Buchanan, Adam Lajeunesse, Marc Lanteigne, and Sergey Sukhankin, *Arctic Narratives and Political Values: Arctic States, China, NATO, and the EU* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2024), <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/arctic-narratives-and-political-values-arctic-states-china-nato-and-the-eu/313>. A new STRATCOM COE report applying a similar narrative-focused research framework to these actors through to the end of 2024 is forthcoming later this year.



1

People's Republic of China

Marc Lanteigne

“加强网络、数据、人工智能、生物、生态、核、太空、深海、极地、低空等新兴领域国家安全能力建设 / *Strengthen national security capacity building in emerging fields such as network, data, artificial intelligence, biology, ecology, nuclear, space, deep sea, polar and low-altitude airspace.*”

Proposals of the CPC Central Committee on the
Formulation of the 15th Five-Year Plan
for National Economic and Social
Development, 28 October 2025.¹

The Arctic continues to move towards stronger securitization and militarization due to great power competition and rivalries over potential resources and access. These events are taking place in tandem with the ongoing processes of climate change and reduction of sea ice. Consequently, access points to the region available to non-Arctic states have diminished due to geopolitical forces, while the number of non-Arctic states seeking to engage the region continues to rise.² As well, there have been more overt attempts to propose and develop alternative regimes, reflective of specific great power agendas, to counter those established decades ago to incorporate “whole of Arctic” issues (including the Arctic Council). While Moscow has spearheaded several of these alternative forms of cooperation, they also include initiatives in which China plays a central role, including the now-expanded BRICS+ grouping and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) with its growing membership.³ Canada is now caught in the middle of several of these tempests as it seeks to augment its “middle power diplomacy” in the Arctic in the face of a trinary competition between two Arctic powers,

Russia and the United States, and one with slowly but steadily growing Arctic ambitions, namely the People's Republic of China (PRC).

As the far north emerges as an arena for economic and political rivalries, a host of non-Arctic nations have sought a louder voice in regional affairs. Some have pointed to their long histories of Arctic engagement, via exploration and scientific endeavours, while others cite their current and potential contributions to its development. After Beijing's ambitious push into Arctic affairs more than two decades ago, and its development of scientific, economic and governance pillars in its Arctic policies, the PRC is now attempting to recalibrate its approaches. The reasons include a period of dormancy caused by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic and China's international isolation via its "zero-Covid" / "dynamic zeroing" (*dongtai qingling 动态清零*) policies,⁴ as well as the political fallout from the Russia's accelerated invasion of Ukraine beginning in early 2022 which prompted a scaling back of Sino-Russian political-economic relations.⁵

Even before those events, China had run into opposition from Arctic governments out of concerns that the Xi Jinping government's desire to become a "polar great power" (*jidi qiangguo 极地强国*)⁶ had a strong revisionist and hard power agenda. Canada and Sweden were amongst the governments caught up in Beijing's aggressive 'wolf warrior diplomacy' (*zhanlang waijiao 战狼外交*) policies, which included geo-economic pressures on countries seen as disrespecting the Chinese nation (*ruHua 辱华*).⁷ By 2020, other Arctic state governments, including the Kingdom of Denmark and Norway, also had less enthusiasm for China as an Arctic player, especially given the closer relationship between Beijing and Moscow in recent years and the Chinese government's refusal to support Western-led sanctions on Russia following the latter's attacks on Ukraine. Faced now with a fragmented Arctic being held at risk of becoming even more militarised, the Xi Jinping government is trying to adjust its approach to the region, which reflects the limits of treating the far north as a single political area. China is now seeking more friends and partners in the Western Arctic, while keeping a wary eye on its Russian partner.

History

Chinese officials frequently point out that their country's history in the Arctic can be traced back to its signature on the Spitsbergen (now Svalbard) Treaty in 1925,⁸ which they argue provided the country with Arctic credentials which are distinct, even for a state with no polar geography. However, this point masks that the Republic of China signed the Treaty more than two decades before the People's Republic was founded, and that a long dormant period in China's Arctic policy development followed until the turn of this century. Since the early 2000s, China has opened Arctic research facilities in Svalbard and Iceland, purchased or built icebreaking vessels, and in 2018 published China's first and only White Paper on Arctic policy.⁹ A cornerstone of modern Chinese Arctic policy would be the creation of the northern wing of China's post-2013 Belt and Road Initiative, namely the Polar Silk Road (PSR) (*Bingshang Sichou Zhilu* 冰上丝绸之路), developed in 2017 with initial Russian cooperation, and initially conceived to act as a conduit for Chinese economic interests with as many Arctic actors as possible.¹⁰ At the same time, the Chinese government recognised the Arctic as an emerging maritime corridor that could be used to further simplify trade between Northeast Asia and northern Europe, and eventually also North America, with the region also serving as a source of valuable commodities and energy sources.

China's recent foreign policy, especially in regions like the Arctic which are outside the country's immediate periphery, seeks to enhance the country's legitimacy and status as a global player.¹¹ In keeping with these views, Beijing sought to strengthen its legitimacy in the far north by seeking accreditation as an observer in the Arctic Council, thus building on *ad hoc* observer status that it had held since 2006. China secured that designation in 2013, along with several of its neighbours (India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea). Aligned also with Chinese interests seeking to be viewed in the Arctic as a partner and not a regional gate-crasher, Beijing indicated its openness to joining more issue-specific regional agreements, such as the Polar Code in 2017 and the International Agreement to Prevent Unregulated Fishing in the High Seas of the Central Arctic Ocean Agreement (CAOFA) in 2021.¹² Subsequently, China has formalised its roles in these regimes, with Beijing hopeful that its particular brand of "win-win cooperation" (*shuangying hezuo* 双赢合作) would translate

into tangible Arctic goods in the form of regional status and legitimacy, as well as access and resources.

In recent years, because of a loss of momentum in Chinese polar engagement, the country has adopted a more conservative approach to its Arctic strategies, in recognition of the heightened security situation in the far north. The perceived bifurcation of the region into what Chinese commentators have often referred to the “Russian Arctic” and the “NATO Arctic” was as a result of the regional impact of Moscow’s post-2022 full invasion of Ukraine.¹³ The Chinese government has bemoaned the loss of the previous “post-post-cold war” order in Arctic governance, but rapid power shifts have not dissuaded Beijing from seeking a greater stakeholder role in the far north. Underlying questions include for how long and to what degree China will be dependent on the Russian government for its Arctic access, or whether Beijing will continue to engage other Arctic governments in its pursuit of partnerships, investment, and trade. Especially telling has been the potential for improved Sino-European relations, including in the Nordic countries, because of critically damaged trans-Atlantic relationship under the second Trump administration, with Washington redoubling its determination to seize Greenland over the wishes of the local population and the Danish government. Soured American ties with several key Arctic states, including Canada, beg the question of whether China can or should once again be seen as a comparatively responsible and stable great power in the far north.¹⁴

Political, Economic and Scientific Interests

In the Arctic, Chinese authorities have sought to go “back to basics,” not only in offering the possibility of joint ventures under the aegis of the restarted Polar Silk Road, but also offering opportunities for Arctic governments to engage in joint research project in the name of fostering scientific diplomacy (*kexue waijiao* 科学外交)¹⁵ and addressing mutual regional concerns, including the effects of climate change. Beijing over-optimistically viewed the PSR as a foundation for widespread Chinese investment, resource extraction, and infrastructure development throughout the Arctic, involving all regional governments and economies. Almost a decade since it was first announced, the tangible products of the Polar Silk Road initiative are sparse at best, particularly when one removes Russia as a consideration.¹⁶

In many cases, especially in the North American Arctic, political and security concerns ended planned investment projects there, with one prominent example being the failed bid by a Chinese firm to purchase a gold mine at Hope Bay, Nunavut. The sale, already marred by the post-2018 diplomatic fallout from the Huawei-Meng Wanzhou affair, was blocked by the Canadian government in December 2020 on security grounds.¹⁷ Although Sino-Canadian relations showed signs of improvement in early 2026 with high-level meetings between Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Mark Carney, it remains unclear whether this rapprochement will extend into closer cooperation in the Canadian Arctic.¹⁸ Concurrently, Ottawa has sought to strengthen Canada-Nordic relations in the Arctic in light of concerns about both Sino-Russian activities in the region as well as the United States and its respect of Canadian sovereignty. Canada's 2024 *Arctic Foreign Policy* statement noted growing concerns in the West about China-Russia Arctic cooperation, including challenges to the "rules-based order" in the far north, joint military manoeuvres, and dual use scientific projects.¹⁹

Scientific research remains at the heart of China's Arctic interests in its official policy, especially as Beijing continues to put forward the narrative of itself being a responsible stakeholder in the far north. However, heightened securitisation of the Arctic has meant that Beijing is less restrained about "showing the flag" in the High North and making greater use of influence operations and other means to "tell China's story well" (*jianghao Zhongguo de gushi* 讲好中国的故事) in the region. This includes continuing to portray itself as a positive force for information gathering and shared knowledge in the region.²⁰ How this narrative is playing to the Global South, especially amongst those developing states also seeking access to the Arctic, remains to be seen. This is especially pressing as Russia seeks to develop Arctic cooperation with more "like-minded states," including players such as Brazil, India, the United Arab Emirates, and other members of the now-expanded "BRICS+" group.²¹

Arctic geopolitics and great power strategies have collided over Greenland. Despite ongoing insistence from the United States since late 2024 that Greenland was under imminent security threat from Chinese interests seeking to exploit the island's considerable mineral wealth, the reality is that the four mining projects in Greenland connected to Chinese firms have either been cancelled or delayed.²² As well, frequent mentions in Washington of the threat of "Chinese boats" menacing Greenland as a justification for a threatened US

annexation of the island did not match any coherent facts.²³ China's economic footprint in Greenland is sparse at best, limited to seafood trade and growing tourism numbers,²⁴ with no sign that Beijing intends to challenge Danish sovereignty over Greenland. Nonetheless, the resumption of the American bid to take over the island has fuelled Chinese accusations of American expansionism and militarism in the Arctic.²⁵

The roadblocks that China's Arctic policies have faced, including in the development of the PSR, have prompted closer relations between Beijing and Moscow over their similar views of Western strategies in the region. Both powers have pushed back against what they have viewed as an artificial "rules-based order" in the Arctic which favours Western interests. Looking past rhetoric and high-level diplomacy, however, reveals significant differences in Chinese and Russian views of the desired Arctic order. Russia sees itself as a paramount Arctic state and has been wary of any outside interference in its northern sovereignty, even from friends such as Beijing. At the same time, China is concerned with too much dependence on Russia, a power which may in decline in the wake its war against Ukraine.²⁶ Evidence of Russian guardedness can be found in attempts by Moscow to openly court additional partners in the Arctic, including fellow members of the BRICS+ group and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.²⁷ This prompts questions about whether Russia can and will develop alternative regime configurations in the Arctic that may erode traditional structures including the Arctic Council.

With Moscow seeking to develop a potential alternative network of Arctic partners, Beijing is in the difficult position of trying to avoid giving the impression that it is giving up its "whole-of-Arctic" strategies in favour of overtly leaning to towards Moscow and its networks, while also ensuring that China is not at risk of being excluded from the Arctic as the region falls under a stronger security spotlight. Thus, the need to identify itself as an Arctic player remains of great importance, including attempts to pull the Polar Silk Road initiative out of its recent dormancy. During the autumn of 2025, the Chinese container ship *Istanbul Bridge* (*Yisitanbu'er qiao hao* 伊斯坦布尔桥号) made a successful transit of the Northern Sea Route north of Siberia from Ningbo-Zhoushan to the British port of Felixstowe. This voyage, extensively covered in the Chinese press, was seen as marking the beginning of Beijing's planned "China-Europe Arctic Express" (*Zhong'ou beiji kuaihang* 中欧北极快航) initiative to expand

use of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a secondary cargo route for Chinese maritime trade.²⁸ While this is a small step in a larger process, Beijing has been preparing for more than a decade to make greater use of additional Arctic sea corridors, including the still-emerging Central Arctic Route and the Northwest Passage.²⁹

Arctic Policy

As China's foreign policy matures, and the country settles into global power status, Beijing has become more comfortable with norm-making on the international level, including advocating alternative forms of international governance and regime building. Frequent references to "responsible engagement" (*fuzeren de canyu* 负责任的参与) and the promotion of a "community of a shared future for humanity" (*renlei mingyun gongtongti* 人类命运共同体) illustrate this trajectory.³⁰ These ideas have been transferred to Chinese concepts of Arctic good governance, including ideas reflected in the country's 2018 government White Paper on the Arctic, which stressed that non-Arctic states cannot claim Arctic sovereignty but should nonetheless have equitable access to research and economic opportunities in the region.

Since China's modern Arctic policy began to coalesce at the turn of the century, interest in scientific research has been a cornerstone of regional engagement. More recently, Beijing also has advertised its capabilities in the Arctic via influence operations and strategic messaging, which corresponds with Xi's policy of *jian hao zhongguo de gushi*.³¹ Concurrently, China challenges what it describes as zero-sum and exclusionary diplomacy on the part of the West, a stance that Beijing has developed further as the United States under the second Trump administration adopts a "sphere of influence" approach to the Western Hemisphere which includes Greenland and all of the North American Arctic.

Beijing is concerned that the growing perception of the far north as an arena for contention places Chinese interests in a more precarious position. Despite the conventional wisdom by the "China Threat" school³² that Beijing seeks to expand its power throughout the Arctic, geography remains a considerable limiting factor in China's far northern ambitions, requiring at least a minimal amount of acceptance of Arctic states for access to the region. It also places considerable restrictions on any use of Chinese hard power in the region. Thus, China needs to engage the Arctic by instrumentalizing other types of power, particularly economic and scientific. In contrast

with what it sees as a militarizing West, China perceives itself as a helpful partner engaged in regional policies which benefit all participants.

Along these lines, China has called upon other Arctic actors to abandon a “cold war mentality” (*lengzhan siwei* 冷战思维) of zero-sum thinking and unequivocal alignment with the United States.³³ As China’s relations with Canada begin to thaw after almost a decade of frosty relations, that relationship also may develop via Arctic engagement. Nonetheless, Beijing has not been averse to tying the Arctic to its own strategic interests, wishing to portray China as a regional stakeholder while linking the Arctic to its greater maritime interests, as well as striving to emerge as a “polar great power” by the end of this decade.³⁴ Beijing has also engaged in limited military operations with Russia in parts of the Arctic and sub-Arctic, including in the Baltic region as well as off the Alaskan coast in the Bering Sea. However, these missions have often assumed the form of what strategists traditionally referred to as “swaggering,”³⁵ using military power for posturing as opposed to offensive behaviour. Accordingly, observers must be cautious in assuming that a Sino-Russian Arctic partnership is inevitable, given that there remains several differences in policies between the two powers, including concerns in Moscow about excessive Chinese economic leverage in Russia’s Arctic territory, erratic Chinese responses to Russian initiatives to promote the joint *Power of Siberia 2* natural gas pipeline, and many Chinese firms’ unwillingness to get caught in Western sanctions because of overinvesting in Russia.³⁶

Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Policies

China has designated the Polar Regions, along with outer space and cyberspace, as “strategic new frontiers” (*zhanlue xinjiang yu* 战略新疆域).³⁷ Accordingly, Beijing tries to walk carefully in these emerging areas, positioning itself as a stakeholder given its global power status, along with talking the talk. In the case of the Arctic, this has meant continuing to press the idea of research development, including the launch or procurement of three newer icebreaking vessels (*Jidi*, *Tan Suo San Hao*, and *Zhongshan Daxue Jidi*) to complement the older vessels *Xuelong* and *Xuelong 2*. These vessels have allowed more effective Chinese scientific research at both poles. Moreover, China has deployed a support vessel, *Shen Hai Yi*

Hao, which can carry a submersible to enable additional remote research.³⁸

The United States, under the Joe Biden administration, had moved towards framing the Arctic in military and transactional terms, in addition to a region beset by environmental and developmental challenges, while suppressing the regional threat of climate change.³⁹ The US Department of Defence's *2024 Arctic Strategy* defined China as a "pacing challenge" on the international level and a country more willing to work with Russia in the far north.⁴⁰ The strategy also described China as promoting the idea of the Arctic as a global commons, likely a nod to the controversial 2010 comments made by then-PLA Navy Admiral Yin Zhuo who referred to the central Arctic Ocean as a "commonwealth" (*gongtong caifu* 共同财富) of humanity.⁴¹ These comments, despite their ambiguous nature, were often cited by North American and European China hawks as proof of a revisionist agenda. The 2024 US document also noted the regional risks inherent in China's scientific endeavours in the region, which could have "dual use" implications, as well as the ongoing development of the Polar Silk Road which could adversely effect the economic sovereignty of Arctic states. The US DoD strategy framed all of these policies as leading to an enhanced Chinese presence in the Arctic, to the potential detriment of Arctic state control in and of the region.⁴²

Where the Arctic fits in China's ongoing development strategies remains a persistent question. For example, the Chinese Communist Party began its preparations to unveil its Fifteenth Five Year Plan (FYP) at the Fourth Plenum of the CCP in October 2025, with the specifics formally released in March 2026. As these dates approached, it was expected that there would be an increased push for economic independence, greater industrial capabilities, and a focus on developing emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, quantum computing, robotics, and green tech, as well as greater self-sufficiency in these sectors.⁴³ In comparison with the previous FYP, mention of the Arctic in the fifteenth iteration was more muted,⁴⁴ specifically in the context of the Polar Silk Road. Instead, the Fifteenth FYP gave broader mention of the need to develop China's maritime rights and responsibilities, including the view that 'we must resolutely safeguard our maritime rights, interests, and security and improve our capacity for maritime law enforcement and judicial administration of marine affairs.'⁴⁵

The 2026 FYP was predicted to frame the far north in a similar fashion, especially since now Beijing is more concerned about achieving greater economic policy independence in light of the United States' moves towards greater protectionism and economic isolation of China. Trade conflicts ignited during the first Trump administration prompted Beijing not only to seek new markets but also make use of its distinct economic assets to push back against American economic pressures, especially with the re-election of President Trump in November 2024.⁴⁶ Since 2021, Beijing has also proposed a series of Global Initiatives, including in areas of development and security, further indicating Chinese interests in developing a post-Western international system.⁴⁷ As the Arctic continues to open to economic and strategic activities, what will be Chinese views on governance there, especially with the Arctic Council's future still in question?

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interests

Canada-China relations may have come in from the cold as a result of Canadian attempts to recalibrate economic relations between the two countries. During their January 2026 meetings in Beijing, Prime Minister Carney, President Xi Jinping, and Premier Li Qiang agreed to ease tariffs on Canadian goods while opening the door to Canadian imports of Chinese electric vehicles (despite American objections).⁴⁸ Due to the tariffs which the United States began implementing on Canada in April 2025, Ottawa has sought alternative trade partners including amongst large markets such as China and India. Although the rapprochement between Canada and China has not yet had a significant impact on Canadian Arctic policy, it is likely that Canada will factor into China's renewed efforts to widen its policy scope given shifts in Arctic geopolitics. The strengthened role of the Arctic in NATO's strategies since the full Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, coupled with the admittance of Finland and Sweden as members of the alliance, has upended Beijing's regional-level approach to the Far North, as China can no longer treat the Arctic as a combination of different political orientations (pro-West, Russia, and neutral). Accordingly, Beijing will closely observe tightening trans-Atlantic relations between Canada and the Nordic states.

Beyond state-to-state relations through various formats, including "Track II" fora, China is now better able to better trumpet its commitment to studying the Arctic, while providing a tacit reminder

to the West that, despite China's quieter Arctic policies in the past half-decade, its interests remain and it is poised to re-accelerate its regional pursuits as a "near-Arctic state" (*jin beiji guojia* 近北极国家).⁴⁹ Beijing has made extensive use of both Track II and semi-governmental "Track 1.5" organizations to advance and promote its Arctic policies, with examples of the latter including the Reykjavík-based Arctic Circle Assembly, and the Arctic Frontiers conference in Tromsø. In 2013, the China-Nordic Arctic Research Centre (CNARC) was founded to bring together Chinese and Northern European universities and institutes invested in Arctic research. CNARC has been an important forum for demonstrating China's Arctic research capabilities, and although the group stresses scientific cooperation, keeping politics out of the deliberations had become difficult in recent years, resulting in Sweden and Denmark withdrawing from CNARC conferences and activities in late 2024.⁵⁰ Canada's footprint at CNARC conferences has been light, but the larger question remains about how Track II conferences in general might be used for lower-level forms of information exchanges on areas of Arctic policy of mutual interest, particularly the effects of climate change.

Areas of Divergence or Concern

Beijing has acknowledged that it is unlikely that the Arctic Council can revert to its pre-2022 "business as usual" status, given Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine and Moscow's overt hostility towards the West. In the area of Arctic governance, Beijing is pursuing a hedging strategy towards the Arctic Council, heightening its propensity to Arctic governments through state-to-state processes. This was explicitly framed at the Arctic Circle Assembly in October 2022, when then-Arctic Ambassador of the People's Republic, Gao Feng, caused ripples when he suggested that China would find it difficult to recognise the Arctic Council in its current form without Russia's participation.⁵¹ Current Chinese diplomacy amongst Arctic Council member states is mixed at best, with strained relations amongst some (Sweden, United States), relatively stable (albeit fragile) amongst others (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway), and ongoing questions remain about the depth and width of Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation.⁵² Owing to Prime Minister Carney's recent "recalibration" efforts, Canada's relations with China have moved from poor to stable, but many areas of disagreement remain that may spill over into Arctic affairs. A primary underlying concern is whether Beijing will become less reserved about challenging regional norms

and promoting a stronger security policy in the Arctic as the region becomes more openly contested.

Canadian areas of concern about China's Arctic strategies often focus on alternative narrative-building, in which Chinese officials seek to paint Western actors as militaristic, one-dimensional, and hostile to outside engagement in the Arctic. Canada was the subject of one such example when a Chinese surveillance balloon was tracked over North America in early 2023 before being shot down off the coast of South Carolina. Beijing maintained that it was a civilian meteorological balloon that been cast off course in a case of *force majeure*. Seeking to deflect from US and Canadian accusations that Beijing was practicing illicit "near-space" monitoring, Chinese news services attempted to turn the story around by claiming an overreaction by Ottawa and Washington, while accusing Canada (which had also expressed concerns about Chinese monitoring devices in the Arctic Ocean), of blindly parroting American anti-China rhetoric while supporting a "balloon farce" (*qiqiu naoju* 气球闹剧).⁵³ To oppose what Beijing describes as "zero-sum thinking" in the Arctic favoured by the West / NATO, alongside criticisms of perceived "small circle" (*xiao quanzi* 小圈子) diplomacy which excludes key players (including China) from Arctic conversations, China now frequently uses discourse power to articulate its persona as a "responsible regional power."⁵⁴

It is unlikely that China's Arctic policies, and the Polar Silk Road specifically, will regain its pre-Covid, pre-Ukraine invasion ebullience, owing mainly to the more wary approach of the Arctic states, including Ottawa, to China's Arctic ambitions and presence. China is pursuing a more conservative approach in its far northern strategies, with placing heightened focus on science diplomacy and demonstrations of Chinese capability and reach in the circumpolar Arctic. This does not mean, however, that Beijing is likely to scale back its Arctic engagement, and as Canada seeks to increase its own Arctic security presence, there is the question of to what degree Chinese and Canadian Arctic interests will interact, and potentially collide, on regional affairs.

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⁵⁴ Although not related directly to Canada, another example of Chinese alternative narrative policies in the Arctic is Svalbard, as like Russia, China has begun to question Norwegian interpretations of the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, especially as the Atlantic-Arctic region becomes more contested space, since the islands lie near vital regional transit routes, including the GIUK and Bear Gaps, which act as highways for surface and subsurface traffic in Northern Europe). In 2019, Beijing protested at what it saw as unfair Norwegian restrictions on types of research which could be conducted on the islands, (the protocols set up by the Norwegian Research Council restrict scientific activity in Svalbard to the natural / hard sciences). Tiril Vold Hansen and Arild Moe, “Norway’s Research Policy for Svalbard: Intentions and Perceptions,” *Polar Geography* 47, no.3 (2024): 202-18. Chinese authorities argued that Norway was overstepping in its regulations, and operating counter to the idea of allowing other Treaty signatories input into research protocols on the islands. China has begun to view the Svalbard Treaty as improperly interpreted by Oslo as inflexible “black letter law,” when it should be considered a living document subject to updating, and China is now concerned that its researchers may in the process of being leveraged out of Svalbard, via “lawfare,” by Norway as it seeks to reassert its sovereignty there. Lu Fanghua, “《匹次卑尔根群岛条约》中的平等权利：制度与争议,” [“Equal Rights in the Spitsbergen Treaty: Institutions and Disputes”], *Pacific Journal* 10 (2020): 14-25; Bai Jiayu, “《匹次卑尔根群岛条约》公平制度体系下的适用争论及其应对,” [“The Controversy of Application under the Fair System of the Spitsbergen Treaty and Solutions,”] *Contemporary Law Review* 6 (2021): 144-57; Zhang Jiajia, “大变局下挪威参与北极治理的角色选择研究,” [“Study on Norway’s Role in Arctic Governance,”] *Chinese Journal of Polar Research*, 18 August 2025, DOI: 10.13679/j.jdyj.20250025. This has run counter to the developing Chinese narrative, including as elucidated in the 2018 White Paper, that the Far North should be open to research activities of non-Arctic states, including under the conditions of an “equitable system” in Svalbard, seeking to better understand the region. This stance has also been consistent with China’s narrative of the Arctic as a “community of a shared future for humanity” (人类命运共同体 *renlei mingyun gongtongti*), which has been a cornerstone of Beijing’s polar interests for the past decade. Ding Huang and Zhu Baolin, “基于“命运共同体”理念的北极治理机制创新,” *Exploration and Free Views* 3 (2016): 94-9.



2

France

Nicolas Kempf

"In light of Russia's posture in the High North, China's economic presence there, and the strategic consequences of this rapprochement, we share the need to strengthen our defense posture in the Arctic."

President Emmanuel Macron, January 2026¹

“Only the colonial states can be trusted to protect the great ‘wildernesses,’” Rachael Lorna Johnstone notes with sarcasm.² As a former colonial power, France seems to be struggling to accept its declining influence on the international stage, even though this influence is artificially maintained by certain legal mechanisms that reflect the balance of power in an international society that no longer exists, such as the composition of the United Nations Security Council. France is therefore seeking to maintain and strengthen its influence by investing in various forums to proclaim its experience, its appetite for multilateral cooperation, its status as a global maritime power, and its willingness to engage in certain struggles, particularly against climate change.

It is in this context that France’s desire to become involved in Arctic affairs – or to reinvest in the Arctic, according to the French national narrative – must be understood. Highlighting the polar expertise that it has acquired in the Southern region and unable to claim Arctic state status, France now describes itself as a “polar nation” to bolster the credibility of its claim and puts forward various arguments to anchor the legitimacy of this narrative. Benefiting from observer status within the Arctic Council since 2000, France has stepped up its initiatives towards the Arctic, with the creation of an ambassadorship for polar issues in 2009, the opening of a French consulate in Greenland in 2026, the publication in 2022 and revision in 2025 of a *French Polar Strategy*, and the publication of an *Arctic Defence Strategy* also in 2025. These various policy documents

clearly express France's position, which claims to be realistic, committed to the duty to actively contribute to the stability of the Arctic, and eager to preserve its freedom of action by arguing for a tradition of excellence in polar research that could enable it to respond to the challenges identified as those of the Arctic.

History

Marthe Emmanuel, a French historian and geographer specialising in the polar regions, wrote in 1959 that "France's contribution to knowledge of the polar regions" was "minimal."³ She thus denounced the lack of vision on the part of French sovereigns and ministers, lamenting "a striking contrast with the sacrifices made by the governments of other countries, which very early on had a different sense of grandeur or simply more intuition."⁴ This heroic vision of selfless polar exploration, the main objective of which is the pursuit of knowledge, is common in contemporary discourse, where it is now also accompanied by an environmental halo. This narrative, however, is relatively recent and does not correspond to the previously stated economic ambitions of the powers that led or financed polar expeditions, which are evident in the official mission orders given to these expeditions, and demonstrated by a growing number of authors belonging to critical schools of thought.⁵

France's polar ambitions, which alternatively focused on exploiting resources, territories and trade routes, perfectly fit into this paradigm. In the 16th century, it was the unsuccessful search for a navigable strait symmetrical to the Strait of Magellan that led to the takeover of New France.⁶ In the early 17th century, the French Arctic Company, financed by France, was tasked with finding a passage through the Arctic, this time via the northeast, in order to reach the Indies.⁷ Although this initiative also failed, it nevertheless served French economic interests, whetting the appetite of French whalers who frequented the waters around the Svalbard archipelago assiduously in the following decades.

These same ambitions also led to voyages to the Southern polar regions by Kerguelen and then Dumont d'Urville,⁸ following instructions by the French Minister of the Navy and Colonies to push towards the pole "as far as the polar ice would allow" and to visit various "places of importance," particularly for French whalers.⁹ The overexploitation of seals and whales in the Northern regions, as well as France's defeat by British forces, followed by the cession of the

French North American colony by the 1763 and 1814 Treaties of Paris, explain this shift in French interests from one pole to the other.

At the beginning of the 20th century, French polar interests concentrated on the Antarctic region, with the stated aim of claiming certain territories and exploiting various resources. This is particularly evident in the regulation of mining, hunting and fishing rights in Adélie Land, the Antarctic territory over which France still claims sovereignty. After the failure to recognise unilateral claims in Antarctica and the establishment of a form of condominium through the Antarctic Treaty, these interests were reformulated and the activities of the various members of the Antarctic Club are now expressed in terms of scientific research activities aimed at developing knowledge of the environment and protecting fragile polar ecosystems in the interest of all mankind.¹⁰

It is on the basis of its experience in the Southern Hemisphere and this scientific and environmentalist rhetoric that France now seeks to legitimise its involvement in the Arctic. To this must be added a newly assumed security dimension, which France is seeking to enhance by highlighting its military capabilities, which it claims are synonymous with peace, stability and collective security.¹¹

Political, Economic, and Scientific Interests

Chronologically, scientific research was the first interest to be mobilised in modern French official discourse and remains a widely used argument to justify the legitimacy of France's presence in the Arctic. For instance, the introduction to the 2025 *Arctic Defence Strategy*, signed by the French Minister of the Armed Forces, mentions the pioneering nature of the establishment of a French research base in Svalbard in 1963, and France's "tradition of excellence in polar research, following in the footsteps of iconic figures such as Paul-Émile Victor and Jean-Baptiste Charcot."¹²

Beyond the French national narrative, which openly acknowledges the use of a form of scientific diplomacy to increase the legitimacy of France's presence in the Arctic,¹³ French conducts research in the region, although these activities are less developed than those of the Arctic coastal states. A study tracking the evolution of the number of scientific publications per country focusing on the Arctic, for example, indicated that in 2016 France ranked 11th in this ranking¹⁴ – 9th, according to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs¹⁵ – while a 2023 paper placed France in 12th position.¹⁶ A sectoral study

published in 2019 showed a similar ranking for French research specifically on permafrost.¹⁷

As an Arctic Council Observer, France contributes to the scientific work of the Council's six working groups. Three French universities are part of the UArctic network (Aix-Marseille Université, Université de Bretagne Occidentale, et Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines), while the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), France's leading multidisciplinary public research organization, maintains a network of research dedicated to the Arctic region: the research group Arctique: Enjeux pour l'environnement et les sociétés. Other national and international institutional networks of this type include the Réseau Arctique OVSQ and the Franco-Canadian Takuvik research programme. The French Polar Institute Paul-Émile Victor (IPEV), a group bringing together various French public actors that succeeded French Polar Expeditions, is the main French agency providing resources and expertise for scientific research in the polar regions.

In the Arctic, IPEV collaborates in particular with the German Alfred Wegener Institute in the operation of the *AWIPEV* station located in Ny-Ålesund, in the Svalbard archipelago.¹⁸ A second facility, the *Jean-Corbel* base, located near Ny-Ålesund, completes France's terrestrial scientific facilities in the Arctic.¹⁹ The Fondation Tara Océan, funded by public and private sources, also provides logistical support for French research in the Arctic, with a schooner designed to sail in polar regions since 2004 and a ship designed as a drifting scientific station, the *Tara Polar Station*, since 2025. On the scientific front, the French government has identified ten priority research areas, mainly in the natural sciences, including the study of Arctic atmospheric variability, the study of water and land ice cycles, and the study of changes in marine ecosystems.²⁰

As a self-proclaimed "polar nation," France has various political interests in the Arctic that its official discourse justifies on various grounds, particularly legal ones. For example, France exploits its sovereignty over the islands of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, even though they are located at the mouth of the Gulf of St. Lawrence at a latitude comparable to that of its metropolitan territory. Described as subarctic territories,²¹ and even ambiguously associated with Arctic territories due to their local flora and fauna,²² these territories would place France "much closer to the poles than the traditional representation of remote, even inaccessible regions would

suggest,”²³ and would even place the polar regions “at the borders of overseas France.”²⁴

France’s membership in the European Union (EU) is another legal basis on which the country relies to justify its growing political investment in the Arctic.²⁵ Other international frameworks are also used as legal arguments to justify this involvement, such as the commitment made at the Conference of the Parties (COP) of the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2022 to conserve 30 % of the ocean’s surface by 2030,²⁶ or the obligations undertaken as a member of the Oslo and Paris (OSPAR) Commission on the marine environment.²⁷ Finally, Paris invokes other legal frameworks whose scope covers the Arctic region, such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) or UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), although the implications of these invocations remain vague.²⁸

Highlighting contemporary geopolitical uncertainties and the risks of confrontation that it associates with the Arctic, the French government also emphasises the geopolitical issues at stake in the region in the revised version of its Polar Strategy and now puts forward certain military legal frameworks, such as the North Atlantic Treaty, to justify its growing involvement in the Arctic, notably through French participation in military exercises.²⁹ Finally, France is attempting to bolster the legitimacy of its growing involvement in the Arctic through other activities and political forums, such as the opening of a French consulate in Nuuk, Greenland, in 2026,³⁰ the organisation of various international conferences, notably the One Polar Summit in 2023,³¹ and the diplomatic activities undertaken by the French ambassador for the poles.

France’s economic interests in the Arctic are only partially tangible and simultaneously predominant, given that its scientific and political interests derive largely from them – or, in any case, serve its contemporary or prospective economic interests. Historically, France’s presence in the polar regions focused mainly on polar resources, with fishing, seal hunting, whaling and mining activities serving as the main drivers of French deployment in the poles. France’s sovereignty over the islands of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon and its presence in the Svalbard archipelago are reminders of these economic drivers.

These French interests are now resurfacing, sometimes in hybrid forms, such as activities related to hydrocarbon resources, including investments in joint ventures in the Russian Arctic by the French

company TotalEnergie which are currently suspended. France has not officially commented on the ongoing controversy over the spatial extent of the Spitsbergen Treaty at sea. It seems to share the EU position, which recognizes Norway's right to delineate large maritime areas while affirming that the agreement's principle of equal treatment applies.³²

In its 2022 *Polar Strategy*, France acknowledged the potential of the Arctic's hydrocarbons and minerals but specified that the overwhelming majority of these resources fall under the national jurisdiction of the countries bordering the Arctic Ocean, and that the decision to exploit them was therefore the responsibility of those states. France also stated that, as a "responsible climate actor," it supported the EU's call for the abandonment of extraction of remaining fossil fuel reserves in the Arctic subsoil.³³ Such caution no longer appears in the 2025 revised *Polar Strategy*, which notes "increased competition for control of resources, particularly critical minerals and energy resources" and "strategic competition" between China, the US and Russia, without France taking a clear position.³⁴ The revised strategy also states that all "major Arctic countries are determined to continue exploiting fossil fuel reserves in the region" and acknowledges that the EU's sanctions against Russia are forcing Europe "to diversify its sources of supply."³⁵

Beyond these resources, France has an interest in Arctic fisheries and is a member of various regional fisheries management organizations whose mandate covers Arctic and sub-Arctic waters, either directly or through its status as an EU Member State: this is the case with the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organisation, the North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (as a member of the EU), and the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas.³⁶ Through the EU, France is also indirectly party to the International Agreement for the Prevention of Unregulated Fishing in the High Seas of the Central Arctic Ocean (CAOFA), which, although it does not currently allow fishing activities, should eventually enable such activities to be organised.³⁷

Finally, France also has economic interests in commercial shipping in the Arctic. In a 2016 policy document, the French government noted that the Northeast Passage would reduce the distance between Europe (Rotterdam) and Japan (Yokohama) by 40% compared to the route through the Suez Canal, although it stressed that short- and medium-term navigation conditions would remain challenging and dangerous. These challenges are still mentioned in

the 2022 *Polar Strategy* and in its 2025 revised version, in which France nevertheless considers it likely that polar sea routes will represent “a profitable alternative to traditional routes” by 2040. Although it insists on the need for an “indispensable virtuous approach in terms of preserving the marine and terrestrial environment,” the French government refers to prospects for economic development in the region and considers that “it would be counterproductive to discourage French economic investment in the Arctic.”³⁸

Arctic Policy

France’s Arctic policy is a logical extension of its economic, political and scientific interests. The order in which these interests are prioritized in the numerous policy documents published in recent years varies according to geopolitical tensions and the institution responsible for drafting them. In 2016, for example, France’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development still placed environmental considerations at the top of its priorities for the Arctic,³⁹ while the Ministry of the Armed Forces openly prioritized strategic and security issues in 2025.⁴⁰ At the same time, the pursuit of economic profits is increasingly openly acknowledged, while scientific research and environmental protection at both the regional and global levels – long presented as the justification for these research activities – are now less prominent in French Arctic policy.

Current French policy on the Arctic is mainly outlined in two documents published in 2025: the *Arctic Defence Strategy* published by the Ministry of the Armed Forces, and the 2025 *French Polar Strategy*, published by the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, which is a revision of the *Polar Strategy* originally published in 2022.

The tone used in these two policy documents is similar. The *Defence Strategy* refers to “geopolitical upheavals,” “rivalries between powers,” “potential areas of confrontation” and “polarisation” in the Arctic region, specifically singling out the ambitions of China and Russia.⁴¹ The revised *Polar Strategy* also refers to the “abrupt end of ‘Arctic exceptionalism’” and to a “return of tensions and ‘hybrid’ threats in the Arctic due to Russia’s actions” in the region, which has become “one of the most strategic and volatile global arenas.”⁴² Alongside China and

Russia, which are identified as the main culprits of this “major multi-crisis of cooperation,” the revised *Strategy* now also points to the ambitions of the US.⁴³

The Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs relies primarily on what it describes as a “strategic shift” to justify the rapid revision of France’s *Polar Strategy*, based on the need to “rethink the Arctic region no longer as a preserved area for scientific and climate cooperation, but as a contested strategic space.”⁴⁴ It also cites “increasing climate and environmental challenges” and their impacts,⁴⁵ highlighting in particular the accelerated warming of the polar regions and placing the opening of Arctic sea routes among the climate and environmental challenges.⁴⁶ Aware that scientific research could be the “first victim” of this reconfiguration of the Arctic region, France is now attempting to legitimise its position by highlighting its stabilising capabilities,⁴⁷ through both its military capabilities and its diplomatic efforts.⁴⁸

Towards this end, the French government has restructured its logistics and research institutions, with IPEV now integrated into the French Institute for ocean research and exploitation (*Institut français de recherche pour l’exploitation de la mer – Ifremer*) for logistical aspects, and IPEV’s scientific programme now coordinated by the CNRS.⁴⁹ Since the adoption of its first *Polar Strategy* in 2022, and in accordance with it, a number of achievements have taken place: the budget for French polar operations has been increased, the Tara Polar Station has been built and tested, and the Albedo Foundation for the Cryosphere has been launched, among other things.⁵⁰ The 2025 *Strategy* emphasizes that some projects remain unfinished, such as the creation of an interministerial coordination body for French polar action, or the mission to educate the general public about the poles.⁵¹

After taking stock of the situation and highlighting the proposals in the 2022 *Strategy* that remain unfulfilled, the revised *Polar Strategy* restructures France’s action in the Arctic around three core missions:⁵²

1. Contribute to peace and stability in the polar regions by exerting political influence to preserve the balances that can be preserved;

2. Foster the international community's understanding of the interplay between the cryosphere, oceans, climate and biodiversity in polar regions by establishing French polar science as a centre of scientific excellence with the necessary resources;
3. Preserve the environmental sustainability of the polar regions by capitalising on France's renewed leadership in environmental and climate diplomacy.

This restructuring leads to a new hierarchy of the guiding principles put forward in the 2022 *Strategy*.

France's strategy now consists primarily of relying on a diplomatic pillar based on France's increased participation in various polar bodies, both formal (such as the Arctic Council) and informal (forums such as Arctic Circle, Arctic Frontiers and Arctic Encounter are mentioned), as well as enhanced scientific diplomacy.⁵³

Second, French strategy is based on defence and security. In this regard, the *Polar Strategy* states that "France will seek to contribute actively to regional stability, while preserving its freedom of action, its decision-making capacity and its strategic autonomy."⁵⁴ The improvement of French surveillance and intelligence capabilities is mentioned specifically in this context. The strategy also mentions Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO and France's desire to strengthen cooperation within the Atlantic Alliance through its regular participation in joint exercises in polar conditions.⁵⁵

The 2025 *Strategy* articulates a third pillar around science and research. As such, it states France's desire to maintain scientific excellence by training the next generation of scientists and developing a large-scale research programme based on a "collaborative and interdisciplinary approach that unifies the polar regions to integrate climatic, ecological, political and social dimensions, including stakeholders, particularly local populations, in the development of research."⁵⁶ This pillar also includes a commitment to increase in human, material, financial and institutional resources.

Finally, the revised *Strategy* looks to the economy and innovation. France's aim here is to develop "a sustainable blue economy that respects local balances." The development of this

“sustainable polar economy” is considered “essential for the preservation of these fragile environments and respect for indigenous peoples.” The strategy seems to recognize inevitable changes and adapt to them: the gradual opening of Arctic sea routes “makes the decarbonisation of maritime transport more urgent,” while the development of fishing activities justifies an increased fight against illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. The *Strategy* identifies an opportunity for innovation in polar technologies, including “the establishment of incubators dedicated to polar technology start-ups.”⁵⁷

The final section of the 2025 Strategy reiterates the call to strengthen the coordination of French polar activities already made in the 2022 *Strategy* but not followed up on. Various combinations are proposed, while the central role of the Ambassador for the Poles and the Ocean is reaffirmed.⁵⁸ The publication of a roadmap containing indicators to assess the progress of the *Strategy* (a provisional version of which is appended to the document) is also announced for the first half of 2026.⁵⁹

Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Priorities

The document *France and the New Strategic Challenges in the Arctic*, published in 2019, and the *Arctic Defence Strategy*, published in 2025, provide an overview of France’s current Arctic defence and security interests and priorities. The 2016 *National Roadmap for the Arctic*, the 2022 *Polar Strategy*, and the 2025 revised version also provide insight.

The 2016 *National Roadmap*, which includes a section dedicated to defence and security issues, adopts a reassuring tone. It states that, “at this stage, the main issues for France in the Arctic region are primarily economic, security and environmental in nature, rather than military and defence-related.” The evolution of Russia’s strategic posture is briefly mentioned, but this document’s defence and security recommendations are generally limited to monitoring political and military developments in the Arctic, developing knowledge of the environment, and continuing the activities currently carried out by France, such as supporting French economic interests.⁶⁰

The policy paper *France and the New Strategic Challenges in the Arctic*, published by the French Ministry of the Armed Forces in 2019, logically focuses on security and defence issues, although the link between these issues and research and economic activities in the region is strongly emphasised. The region's international relations are described in more conflictual terms than in previous policy documents,⁶¹ with this document referring to the possibility of the Arctic becoming an "area of confrontation," to Russia's remilitarization, and to China's investments in the region, which are said to be "conducive to a growing assertion of sovereignty from the riparian states."⁶²

In this document, the Ministry of the Armed Forces recalls France's membership of NATO and the EU, highlights its participation in the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, and affirms its desire to deepen its bilateral relations with its regional partners (particularly Canada) in order to protect its national and European interests.⁶³ Various figures are cited, such as the number of military personnel who participated in the TRIDENT JUNCTURE 18 exercise in Norway, the number of French defence attachés present in Arctic states, and the number of countries in the region with which the French authorities are engaged in strategic discussions.⁶⁴ Overall, the Ministry of the Armed Forces emphasizes an increase in activities carried out by the French armed forces in the Arctic.

The 2022 *French Polar Strategy* is broad in scope, and therefore only marginally touches on defence and security issues. Russia is accused of forcing France "to once again consider the Arctic as a potential area of international confrontation," particularly in light of "Moscow's recent security investments on its northern coast." These investments are said to be forcing France to redouble its attention to the Arctic, in accordance with certain principles of international law (UNCLOS and freedom of navigation are highlighted) and France's commitments, which here refer to its membership of NATO and its adherence to the EU's maritime strategy. France presents itself as "a very attentive interlocutor at the regional level," using terms such as "responsibility," "reliability" and "stability."⁶⁵ A post-polar space is imagined, in which the French navy is presented as one of the guarantors of freedom of navigation.⁶⁶

The *Arctic Defence Strategy* is the most comprehensive document published by the French authorities on defence and security issues in the Arctic to date. The tone of this document is relatively alarming, describing the Arctic as the scene of major geopolitical upheavals and renewed rivalry, likely to have “concrete and direct effects on the stability of the Euro-Atlantic area.”⁶⁷ According to the map published in this Strategy, the priority area of interest for France in the Arctic comprises Greenland, Iceland, the Svalbard archipelago, and the north of the European continent, as well as part of Siberia, up to the North Pole, and encompasses all the maritime areas in this zone.⁶⁸

The *Arctic Defence Strategy* is based on three objectives:

1. Actively contribute to regional stability, in conjunction with Allies and partners;
2. Preserve French and European freedom of action, both commercial and military, in the Arctic; and
3. Develop military capabilities adapted to Arctic conditions to “operate and fight towards, in and from the Arctic.”⁶⁹

Various measures should enable France to achieve these objectives. First, the Ministry of the Armed Forces wishes to enhance France’s legitimacy in the Arctic by strengthening French involvement in bodies, organizations, forums, and seminars dealing with the region. The second measure aims to develop overall consistency at the national level and is therefore based on improving interministerial coordination in France and further involving the Ministry of the Armed Forces in this coordination. The third line of effort, “mastering the Arctic theatre and environment,” advocates for in-depth knowledge and practice in the area, intensifying the collection of environmental data and intelligence, and drawing on the experience gained from military operations to optimise French resources. The fourth measure of the *Arctic Defence Strategy* advocates developing bilateral partnerships, after determining the areas of convergence and the “degree of proximity between French priorities and those of regional actors.”

The fifth axis, “NATO as the standard for Arctic interoperability,” is more focused on sharing French Arctic knowledge previously acquired within organizations to which France belongs. NATO is described as the “most relevant vehicle,” and the recent integration of Finland and Sweden into this Alliance is seen as a

way of consolidating interoperability in the Arctic. The implementation of the EU's 2021 *Arctic Strategy*, "aligned with French defence priorities in this area," would also, according to the French Ministry of the Armed Forces, "increase the momentum for interoperability, particularly with regional EU actors that are members of the Arctic Council, as well as with Norway," in order to "strengthen Europeans' own capabilities for action in the Arctic." The sixth pillar of the *Strategy* aims to develop equipment that is compatible or adaptable to French operations in the Arctic and therefore recommends that this ambition be considered "from the design phase of future equipment for the Ministry of the Armed Forces." Finally, the seventh pillar recommends investing in the Arctic space sector and welcomes the ambitions of some of France's partners, which would constitute "real opportunities to complement its capabilities in high latitudes, particularly in terms of maritime surveillance, high-speed telecommunications and the exploitation of low and elliptical orbits."⁷⁰

The 2025 revised *Polar Strategy* incorporates defence and security issues addressed in the *Arctic Defence Strategy*. It does not add anything fundamentally new, except to highlight the growing military alliance between China and Russia in the region.⁷¹ Without directly accusing the US of challenging the Atlantic Alliance, the 2025 *Polar Strategy* also highlights the increased strategic interest of the US in Greenland and states that "the strategic orientations contained in American policy documents, such as 'Project 2025,' confirm this trend towards a unilateral approach to the exploitation of the Arctic, favouring the logic of power at the expense of multilateral frameworks such as the Arctic Council."⁷² The numerous calls for European cooperation, including on defence and security issues, can be interpreted as a certain distancing from the US. In a communication dated March 2026, the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs referred to coordination with Danish and allied forces to support the 2025 bilateral Strategic Partnership Agreement, without mentioning NATO.⁷³

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interests with Canada

The French authorities call for enhanced international, bilateral or multilateral collaboration in recent Arctic-related documents. These potential collaborations concern scientific, economic and security issues. The latest *French Polar Strategy* specifically states that “in the Arctic, France will deepen its relations with Canada, Iceland, Norway, Denmark and Greenland.”⁷⁴ Concurrently, the French authorities have been talking for several years about a shift from cooperation to competition in the Arctic, and claim that the region is currently experiencing a “major multi-crisis of cooperation.”⁷⁵

On the scientific front, the 2016 *Roadmap* recommends developing and strengthening partnerships with scientific organisations in countries bordering the Arctic Ocean.⁷⁶ In its 2022 *Polar Strategy*, France states its intention to establish scientific cooperation agreements and specifies that “Canada, with the icebreaker *Amundsen* and Laval University, and Sweden could be candidates for collaboration,”⁷⁷ assessing the possibility of exchanging services using French resources in the Southern hemisphere. The same document also recommends the development of exchanges “within the framework of the Takuvik International Joint Unit (CNRS-Laval University in Quebec City), the France-Quebec Maritime Institute or the future agreement between the French Oceanographic Fleet and Amundsen Science for researchers’ access to the eponymous Canadian research icebreaker.”⁷⁸ The Tara Polar Station is also mentioned as a vehicle for international scientific cooperation in the Arctic, while France seeks to use Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon to develop international scientific partnerships.⁷⁹

In its 2025 revised *Strategy*, France deplores the decline in scientific cooperation in the Arctic, pointing out that one-third of the Arctic is now inaccessible to Western research, and laments “the United States’ censorship of a large number of climate change research programmes.”⁸⁰ Collaborative projects involving the Takuvik International Joint Unit and the *Tara Polar Station* are highlighted, while the document states that France wishes to “support emerging initiatives and international programmes, in particular by working closely with French-speaking countries.”⁸¹

On the economic front, various policy documents published by France in recent years mention opportunities for economic cooperation and affirm a desire to develop bilateral initiatives with Arctic Council member states, particularly in the areas of sustainable development and green growth.⁸² French companies are active in Canada's Arctic and North in the mining sector (Areva), construction (Bouygues and Colas), and tourism (Ponant).⁸³ The development of a "sustainable polar economy in the Arctic," deemed "essential for the preservation of these fragile environments and respect for indigenous peoples," represents another avenue for collaboration, especially given France's belief that this requires the decarbonization of maritime transport and the fight against IUU fishing.⁸⁴ Nonetheless, international cooperation no longer seems to be a foremost priority for France in the economic sphere, and the 2025 *Strategy's* recommendations on knowledge sharing in polar technologies seem primarily focused on French companies.⁸⁵

French policy documents envisage various forms of collaboration in Arctic defence and security. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, outside the framework of NATO and the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, France should promote "a bilateral approach focused on concrete objectives with countries with proven capabilities in the area." Towards this end, France could "embark officers on board vessels belonging to Arctic coastal states," while the French Navy could also offer embarkation opportunities.⁸⁶ The French Navy also promotes the exchange of oceanographic information with its foreign counterparts, offering information about other regions of the world for Arctic data.

The Ministry of the Armed Forces also wishes to see France expand its bilateral relations with Arctic states. In 2019, it reported on existing collaborations between France and Canada in the areas of defence and security – such as joint military exercises – and proposed to develop them further.⁸⁷ In light of recent geopolitical developments in the Arctic, the revised version of France's *Polar Strategy* recommends strengthening defence partnerships with France's Arctic allies. The document states that "France intends to contribute fully to the security of its allies whose territories are located in the High North, ... particularly in

the areas of maritime surveillance, energy security, space observation and joint training.” It mentions various joint military exercises with a view to “increasing the operational readiness and interoperability of forces, as well as the sharing of intelligence, analysis and feedback on Arctic dynamics.”⁸⁸ France’s *Arctic Defence Strategy* emphasizes two avenues of cooperation, namely the development of bilateral partnerships and the development of interoperability standards through NATO. It highlights joint military exercises and intelligence sharing as the main way to achieve this.⁸⁹

Issues of Divergence or Potential Concern

French Arctic policy does not appear to foreshadow any major disputes for Canada. The priorities identified by France, whether in the areas of defence and security, economics, scientific research or environmental protection, are largely shared by Canada, which is officially identified as a priority partner for collaboration with France.

In terms of security, however, France is adopting a more offensive stance, not hesitating to identify specific adversaries: Russia, China and, somewhat less directly, the US. In this context, French authorities seem to be refocusing on the European Arctic and favouring collaboration with European partners.

Economically, French Arctic policy is in line with the growing strategic competition for resources identified by the French authorities.⁹⁰ Thus, although economic collaboration is envisaged, French policy seems to be mainly focused on supporting French economic activities.

The status of the Northwest Passage could eventually become a source of dispute. The French authorities regularly refer to the defence of international law, in particular freedom of navigation and the right of innocent passage, and affirm their desire to coordinate with their EU partners on this issue. The Northwest Passage does not appear to be a central concern for the French authorities, but it is nevertheless included among the Arctic sea routes, both on published maps and in official French discourse.⁹¹ Canada’s longstanding position is that these are historic internal waters, subject to full Canadian sovereignty, and that there is no international right to transit passage through them.

Finally, Indigenous Peoples do not occupy a central place in French Arctic policy. While they are sometimes mentioned in French policy documents, it is mainly for the purpose of reinforcing the French national narrative defending France's legitimacy in the Arctic, appealing to "an internationally recognised scientific tradition" and certain national heroes.⁹² This contrasts sharply with Canada's strong focus on Indigenous Peoples as rightsholders in their Arctic homeland who are integral to Arctic governance and the co-management of resources.

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²⁰ Ministère des Affaires étrangères, *Le grand défi de l'Arctique*, 21.

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⁸⁴ Ministère de l’Europe, *Équilibrer les extrêmes à l’horizon 2040*, 24 [my translation].

⁸⁵ Ministère de l’Europe, *Équilibrer les extrêmes à l’horizon 2040*, 25.

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3

Germany

Gabriella Gricius

"For what happens in the Arctic concerns us all. It is clear to us that security and stability in the Arctic make themselves felt far beyond the region."

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock
(2024)¹

Germany's engagement in the Arctic has evolved from a market and climate change-based approach to one that is increasingly anchored in security shaped by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and its broader *Zeitenwende* – literally translated as “time turn.” Germany has long been institutionally embedded in Arctic governance bodies such as the Arctic Council, has a polar footprint led by the Alfred Wegener Institute, and invests in ties with Nordic and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners. Thus, Germany has used both scientific and diplomatic routes for legitimizing its Arctic presence. While earlier German Arctic policy prioritized economic opportunity and environmental stewardship, the 2024 Arctic Policy Guidelines clearly put security and stability at the core of its engagement. The Arctic is linked to the North Atlantic and Baltic as part of NATO's broader northern flank with Russia identified as a strategic challenge alongside broader trends of militarization, hybrid threats, and the vulnerability of critical infrastructure. Germany's Arctic strategy is increasingly NATO and European Union (EU) centric, emphasizing multilateralism and the rules-based order. That said, climate change and polar research remain important for Germany's self-understanding as a responsible Arctic stakeholder.

Germany is a strategically valuable partner for Canada in the Arctic. Given its history of polar research and leading role as a European naval and industrial power, there are clear benefits to

engaging more seriously in bilateral and multilateral formats. There are opportunities for engagement in maritime security which are already in operation. However, Germany's strong emphasis on NATO and freedom of navigation may create potential challenges for Canada's approach to its own Arctic and particularly its historic internal waters (often referred to as the Northwest Passage).

History

German interest in the Arctic is long-standing. In the late nineteenth century, geographer August Petermann – a proponent of the flawed hypothesis of an ice-free “Open Polar Sea” and linking polar exploration with imperial desires for maritime prestige – fundraised Captain Carl Koldewey's German North Polar expeditions in 1868 and 1869–1870. Thereafter, Germany pivoted toward international scientific cooperation, playing an active role in the first International Polar Year (1882–1883) with Wilhelm Giese's expedition at Kingua Fjord on Baffin Island and an auxiliary station in Labrador. In the early twentieth century, this scientific effort shifted toward geophysics, with Alfred Wegener's meteorological expeditions to Greenland providing foundational data for his theory of continental drift.² During the Second World War, Germany's Arctic attention focused on the disruption of Allied supply lines to the Soviet Union and “weather war” involving secret meteorological stations across Svalbard, Greenland, and even Labrador to secure meteorological data for forecasting.³ German polar interest resumed in the 1970s, with the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) increasing its research activities in response to the GDR's (East Germany) growing presence in Antarctic and Soviet-led polar research. The 1973 oil crisis also prompted the Federal Republic to look toward the polar regions for potential raw materials, prompting more research in geology and geophysics alongside work in the marine sciences, glaciology, biology, and archaeology.⁴ The FRG's Ministry of Education and Research commissioned the construction of a research icebreaker in 1978, followed two years later by the founding of the Alfred Wegener Institute (AWI) which permanently anchored German Arctic engagement within a structured, state-funded framework of international polar science.⁵

Germany became an Observer to the Arctic Council in 1998, and five years later Germany and France jointly set up the AWIPEV Research Base, led by AWI and the French Polar Institute Paul-Émilie Victor (IPEV) on Svalbard.⁶ Market and economic interest increased

alongside polar science, with a pivot back to climate and environmental change in 2019, and most recently to geopolitical competition.

Germany's first Arctic policy guidelines were released in 2013, clearly articulating its Arctic interests.⁷ Five priority areas were set: 1) seize economic opportunities; 2) set exemplary environmental standards; 3) freedom of navigation; 4) freedom of scientific research; and 5) security and stability. Across the five pages that these priority areas cover, the security and stability section only encompasses one short paragraph, showing the economic opportunities were the primary drivers for this policy.⁸ Moreover, the security paragraph only speaks of potential risks that are tied to economic development and navigability. Accordingly, it is no surprise that the policy guidelines draw a reader's attention to market and economic potential such as shipping and economic extraction as key drivers for heightened German interest alongside the global implications of a warming Arctic. The linkage between a changing Arctic climate and potential downstream impacts on the climate in Northern Europe that "will also directly impact Germany."⁹

The role of climate and environmental change is thus important and legitimizes German interest and involvement in the Arctic, but it is shipping that is particularly important for Germany, as made clear by the full section on freedom of navigation. German interest and engagement are largely framed by the importance of German polar research both through the hosting of Arctic conferences and Arctic expertise through research organizations like AWI, and participation in the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC). The 2013 policy guidelines also were only published by the Freie Demokratisches Partei (FDP), which led the Federal Foreign Office at that time without departmental coordination or cabinet decision.¹⁰

After the 2013 policy was published, AWI established the Arctic Dialogue – an exchange meeting between different German Federal Ministries and agencies to discuss Arctic that takes place twice a year. By 2017, the German Arctic Office was established within AWI in coordination with federal ministries to align the efforts by different ministries and stakeholders in and outside the government.¹¹ This Office has been the cause of confusion as many perceive it to be the official representation of the German government rather than a part of AWI.

In 2019, Germany released its second *Arctic Policy Guidelines*, emphasizing security in a much clearer way as developments in the

Arctic necessitated a change in the German approach.¹² The guidelines highlight climate and environmental protection as the most important elements, followed by that of cooperation and security as well as sustainable development. The priorities of the 2019 policy guidelines are therefore markedly different, promoting a shift to the region because of the centrality of climate change for Germany's foreign policy and secondarily the role of multilateralism as being under strain.¹³ The document foregrounds climate, describing the Arctic as a "kind of early warning system for global warming."¹⁴ This pivot allowed the German guidelines to center their leading role in polar research as part of their contributions to the Arctic, such as the multinational MOSAIC expedition into the Central Arctic Ocean in 2019-20, the largest Arctic expedition in history with half of the funding provided by the German Federal Ministry of Education (BMBF).¹⁵

While acknowledging strain on peaceful norms that had traditionally dominated the Arctic, Germany's 2019 policy guidelines did not mention Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and instead drew attention broadly to diverging interests from key actors.¹⁶ Rather than mentioning geopolitical competition, they vaguely described "overlapping interests, unresolved territorial disputes and potential conflicts over resources in conjunction with varying threat perceptions."¹⁷ Moreover, the guidelines reinforce the importance of maintaining a defensive security stance in the Arctic and to preserve the Arctic as a conflict free zone.

While Germany has now published three Arctic policy guidelines in total (including its most recent 2024 version), the country plays a relatively marginal role in the Arctic. Some scholars point to tension between the stated importance of the Arctic across these documents with the actual low profile of Germany and the lack of prioritization of the Arctic in general within German domestic politics.¹⁸ That marginality aside, German interest in the Arctic belies political, economic and scientific interest that has driven German engagement in the region.

Political, Economic, and Scientific Interests

Germany's interest in the Arctic stretches across environmental, research, economic, and security related interests. From an environmental perspective, climate change in the Arctic has direct impacts on the German population. As stated in the 2024 *Arctic Policy Guidelines*, "atmospheric circulation is already changing, and

thus also weather patterns in Europe and Germany.”¹⁹ This link between changing weather patterns has in past iterations of Germany’s Arctic policy guidelines been linked to sea level rise. The environmental element of Germany’s Arctic interest was initially driven by the initial Merkel term in 2005, where environment and climate elements were key.²⁰ Yet, Germany’s focus on environmental policy and climate change as a central part of its foreign policy is naturally reflected in how it does business in the Arctic. Much of this environmental focus has been supported by the strength of the German polar research community. Not only has polar research been a key element of how Germany has legitimized its Arctic engagement in fora such as the Arctic Council and IASC, but it also reflects the environmental element that is core to German interest.²¹

Germany has highlighted its economic interests in the Arctic more in past policies than in its latest guidelines. Historically, Germany’s Arctic policy has emphasized the Arctic’s resource potential and the role of shipping. This is directly linked to Germany’s interest in freedom of navigation in the Arctic, particularly the Northern Sea Route.²² In 2013, economic interests were particularly strong, as German interest was initially premised on shipping and resource extraction.²³ This has diminished in more recent guidelines, practically vanishing in the 2019 and 2024 iterations.

From a security perspective, Germany sees the Arctic as a region where freedom of navigation is key. This reflects Germany’s economic dependence on maritime trade. Almost half of Germany’s extra-EU imports and exports rely on sea transport.²⁴ Energy security is even more central for Germany. In 2024, imports covered 98% of mineral oil, 95% of gas, and 100% of the hard coal needed to meet Germany’s primary energy demand. The vast majority of this supply came from Norway.²⁵

Beyond maritime trade, Germany sees the Arctic as a theatre for military security through its membership in NATO, the EU, and exercises such as Trident Juncture, the Norwegian-hosted Cold Response, and the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable.²⁶ In its 2019 *Arctic Policy Guidelines*, Germany pushed for a defensive stance in the Arctic and cautioned that an offensive stance could destabilize the region.²⁷ This has shifted to the forefront of Germany Arctic interests since Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine and can be understood in the context of Germany’s broader *Zeitenwende*. Germany no longer sees the Arctic as isolated from geopolitical tension.²⁸ Maintaining security and stability in the Arctic is now the

central objective of the most recent policy.²⁹ This is particularly clear in the 2024 *Arctic Policy Guidelines* that directly mention Russia as a strategic challenge in the Arctic.

Arctic Policy

Germany's 2024 *Arctic Policy Guidelines* reflect key changes in Germany's understanding of the security, particularly present in the sub-heading of the policy: "Germany and the Arctic in the context of the climate crisis and the *Zeitenwende*."³⁰ This emphasis on security is clear as well as in the summary which places "security and stability" at the top of the priority list.

The policy guidelines are divided into four separate chapters, which outline the three priorities of current German Arctic policy and why the Arctic is important to Germany. While past iterations of German Arctic policy have oscillated between economic and environmental justifications for German Arctic engagement, the 2024 policy clearly states that the security environment is now the driving factor for German interest, notably "security and stability in the Arctic are closely tied to the security situation in the North and Baltic Seas, as well as the North Atlantic."³¹ For Germany, maritime security in the Baltic Sea (which makes up its northern maritime operating environment) is inextricably tied to the Arctic. In characterizing the Arctic security environment, the policy describes Russia's militarization of the Arctic and the region's overall geostrategic and geoeconomic significance. The role of climate change in the Arctic and thus for Germany is also noted as a driver of national interest.

The second chapter titled "Safeguarding security and stability in the Arctic" reiterates how Russia's actions in Ukraine prompted a change in German Arctic policy. The overall aim is to "ensure that the region is as free of conflict as possible," while also reacting to security challenges in the Arctic, Baltic, and North Atlantic.³² Other issues include the security of critical infrastructure, increasing accessibility to shipping routes, hybrid threats, Russian militarization in its Arctic, and increasing Chinese presence in the circumpolar region. The chapter then links Germany's Arctic security to that of NATO and the EU, which inherently entails "planning for the defense of Alliance partners, as well as for day-to-day reassurance and as a deterrent vis-à-vis Russia."³³

The third chapter is titled "Defending the rules-based order and strengthening resilience" and outlines the existing multilateral formats that cover the Arctic, including the Arctic Council, the most

recent 2021 EU Arctic policy, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and corresponding environmental agreements,³⁴ the International Maritime Organization (IMO), and the Polar Code. The purpose of listing these tools and formats emphasizes that Germany prioritizes the preservation of the rules-based international order. While recognizing “there can be no business as usual with Russia in the Arctic Council,” Germany’s active engagement in these fora reinforces its commitment to Arctic stability.³⁵

The fourth and final chapter, “Fostering climate action, nature conservation, and environmental protection, as well as sustainable development,” acts as a catch-all for the environmental dimension of Germany’s Arctic policy. It encompasses addressing the climate crisis and protecting the climate – fitting in well with Germany’s and the EU’s overarching focus on climate change as part of its foreign policy – and more localized environmental issues such as black carbon and other environmental pollutants, marine litter and waste, and Indigenous rights. The chapter also includes a sub-section on polar research that outlines the suspension of cooperation with Russia since 2022 and German participation in international Arctic fora. A final sub-section within this chapter emphasizes Germany’s commitment to sustainable development in the Arctic, with particular focus on oil and gas, tourism, fishing, and shipping and the implications for environmental and social conditions for people living in the region.

Many German commentators and responses to this policy were quick to note the drastic shift that brought security and defence to the forefront of Arctic engagement. Yet the policy received relatively low interest from the scientific community and the news media. Experts received the policy positively, seeing continuity in most of Germany’s policies, and particularly in the heavy emphasis that the policy places on the EU and NATO.³⁶ While climate change is relegated to the third chapter, the document puts climate change and national security hand in hand. In short, changes in the Arctic pose both an environmental challenge and direct threat to Germany’s security and resilience.³⁷ Some commentators were quick to point out that the policy was quite vague and is subject to funding reservations.³⁸ Others reacted to the policy guidelines by noting that even though there is a fundamental shift in Berlin’s priorities towards the Arctic, there are no real changes to Germany’s strategic objectives. The responses and reactions are the same as those in Germany’s *National Security Strategy*, which calls for strengthening defence

preparedness, boosting resilience to threats, and diplomatic initiatives. Without specific tools and objectives, critical observers caution, the policy guidelines risk becoming broad statements of fact about the Arctic, instead of a comprehensive, actionable strategy.³⁹

Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Priorities

Germany has significant defence and security interests in the Arctic. It participates regularly in the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, regular sessions of the Nordic Chiefs of Defence, and courses run by the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO).⁴⁰ Its recent interest is primarily driven by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which German Arctic policy frames as creating seismic changes in its operation environment. The Arctic is no longer isolated from the winds of geopolitics, and Russia is understood as a strategic regional challenge. Germany's *2024 Arctic Policy Guidelines* list seven priority steps for security and stability:

- 1) Contribute to security and stability in the Arctic, foster cooperation projects and support the peaceful use of the Arctic on the basis of recognized norms and codes,
- 2) React to the increased security challenges in the Arctic,
- 3) Strengthen the security role of NATO and the EU in the Arctic,
- 4) Expand the mutual exchange of experiences and Bundeswehr exercises together with partners and allies in the region,
- 5) Continue and further expand its defense cooperation and joint procurement initiatives with NATO and the EU partners in the Arctic region,
- 6) Further integrate the Arctic into a system of multilateral cooperation,
- 7) Continue to work resolutely to safeguard the applicable freedom of navigation and transit rights in Arctic waters in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.⁴¹

These priorities can be summarized into three points that stretch across all recommendations: avoiding conflict in the Arctic, better coordinating with and strengthening the role of NATO and the EU, and investing resources to be prepared for Arctic defensive operations. As noted above, there is no specific plan for actually achieving these aims or a budget line to do so.

Germany has taken various actions in the defence sector, with the German Navy of particular importance. In 2025, for example, a German warship visited Greenland for the first time as part of a

broader push to increase its presence in the Arctic.⁴² This also acted as a symbol of solidarity with the Kingdom of Denmark and illustrated that NATO can operate jointly in northern waters.⁴³ Germany and Iceland have also signed a Letter of Intent on defence cooperation including cooperate work on strengthening surveillance and situational awareness in the Arctic and North Atlantic, which allows Germany to use Iceland's port infrastructure, Keflavik, and other logistical support and supply facilities.⁴⁴

Germany has a long history of cooperating with its Nordic allies in exercises such as Norwegian-hosted COLD RESPONSE and ARCTIC DOLPHIN. In 2025, it took part in the Canadian Armed Forces' Exercise NANOOK for the first time, deploying maritime patrol aircraft, submarines, and frigates.⁴⁵ Germany has also sent frigates and supply ships to Norwegian waters to protect critical infrastructure as part of broader NATO deterrence, and has partnered with Norway on new submarines (U212CD) for Arctic operations. The Bundeswehr also has its soldiers train for cold weather environments.⁴⁶ The German Navy also regularly maintains a naval presence in NATO's Standing Maritime Group 1, has a particularly close relationship with Norway in terms of defence and security cooperation, and maintains a strong presence in the Baltic Sea.⁴⁷

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interest with Canada

Germany and Canada's approaches to the Arctic are similar and emphasize many of the same priorities: defence cooperation, polar research, climate change, and supporting a rules-based system and governance in the region.

Germany and Canada have recently formalized their longstanding partnership in the defence sector. In July 2024, a trilateral defence partnership was initiated between Norway, Germany, and Canada focused on maritime security. The following June, Denmark formally joined this partnership. This cooperation is dedicated to enhancing NATO's deterrence, defence coordination, and strengthening supply chains.⁴⁸ Germany is also a member of the Montreal-based NATO Climate Change and Security Centre of Excellence (CCASCOE). Germany and Canada also enjoy close cooperation in defence procurement. In November 2025, the German Navy purchased Canadian CMS 330 combat management systems.⁴⁹ German company TKMS and the Canadian company Marmen signed a Memorandum of Understanding in December 2025, and Germany has officially invited Canada to join in existing German and

Norwegian submarine cooperation.⁵⁰ In August 2025, Germany and Canada announced a new partnership on critical minerals supply chain security and energy security.⁵¹ This is part of a broader trend as Canada seeks to work more closely with the EU and European countries on defence procurement and to develop security relations with its European allies more broadly.⁵²

Given close Norwegian and German defence cooperation, Canada may wish to explore how it could more closely align in a trilateral sense between the two European countries beyond the formal trilateral agreement. Cooperation could also be encouraged through additional opportunities for cold weather training for German troops in the Canadian North in exercises like Operation Nanook or personnel exchanges between Canadian and German troops.

There are also opportunities for Canada to work with Germany on two additional areas of its Arctic interest: climate change and polar research. As noted earlier in this chapter, German polar research is an essential part of how Germany legitimizes its engagement in the Arctic, particularly environmental research. There is space for cooperation between Polar Knowledge Canada and the Alfred Wegener Institute, as well as further institutional cooperation between German and Canadian universities.

Both countries also have a shared understanding of the importance of Arctic governance and a rules-based system in the Arctic at large. Germany's *Arctic Policy Guidelines* highlight this multiple times, most notably in the 2024 iteration. The cooperation between Germany and Canada is thus already in existence in several multilateral forums.

Issues of Divergence or Potential Concern

German Arctic policy does not align with a Canadian perspective in two primary areas. First, Germany sees Arctic security as something that must be dealt with primarily through NATO. Its *2024 Arctic Policy Guidelines* explicitly state that Germany aims to “strengthen the security role of NATO and the EU in the Arctic.”⁵³ Although Canada has indicated its desire to strengthen the Alliance’s northern and western flanks, it has typically preferred to keep NATO at an arm’s length in terms of the North American Arctic, focusing instead on NORAD and Canada’s binational relationship with the United States.

Second, language in Germany’s latest Arctic policy guidelines reference its commitment to “freedom of navigation in Arctic waters”

several times.⁵⁴ These references all mention UNCLOS as being the “universal legal framework for the use and conservation of marine resources, marine environmental protection, and marine scientific research, and also applies to Arctic waters.”⁵⁵ These statements are made in the context of following and promoting the rule of law in the Arctic. There is some risk that this language could also be mobilized in the context of the Northwest Passage (NWP), which could challenge Canada’s longstanding legal position that these are historic internal waters subject to full Canadian sovereignty. As there is no language accompanying any of the German text on customary law or Canada’s specific right to the various waterways typically labelled as the NWP, there may be underlying disagreement on how Germany and Canada interpret the legal status of these waters.

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4

Italy

P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Ph.D.

“Italy has never considered the Arctic to be a remote area of no interest. To the contrary, we have always seen this part of the world for what it effectively is: a strategic region, where the economy, the environment, research, energy, and – today more than ever – security and defence are intertwined.”

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni (2026)¹

Italy’s strategic engagement with the Arctic is rooted in more than a hundred years of polar exploration. Scientific expertise, the main driver of its historical activities in the region, is now complemented by the country’s expanding commercial, energy, and military interests. Italy established the *Dirigibile Italia* research station on Svalbard in 1997 and secured accredited Observer status within the Arctic Council in 2013. Since that time, it has created the Scientific Committee for the Arctic to oversee and evaluate strategic research agendas, while a Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation-facilitated “Arctic Table” serves as a multi-stakeholder platform to synchronize the objectives of government ministries, industrial actors, and specialized agencies. In late 2024, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni’s high-level diplomatic engagements with other European leaders signalled a strategic pivot towards deepening Italy’s regional involvement, increasingly aligning its scientific and broader military and security considerations within the North Atlantic and European defence architectures. Subsequent studies by Italy’s Parliament have sought to conceptualize more nuanced strategies for engaging the region as a non-Arctic state.

Italy’s participation in regional political cooperation “represents a strategic priority” in light of climate change and “the close interaction

amongst the leading international players in the Arctic,” a fact-finding inquiry conducted by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies noted in 2018:²

Given the analysis of China and Russia's attitudes and also in response to the climate of growing global geopolitical tension, the Arctic Council must be strengthened and enhanced to promote a multilateral approach to Arctic issues as much as possible, in balancing the sovereignist impulses of coastal states and the major global players participating in Arctic forums. In the Arctic, in particular, it is necessary to aim for shared management of security.³

For Italy, this also meant increasing its commitment to Arctic research and international scientific cooperation, enhancing “Italian excellence in this sector.”⁴

In January 2026, the Italian government presented its Arctic policy, *Italy and the Arctic: The Values of Cooperation in a Rapidly Changing Region*, marking a decisive move toward geopolitical and economic engagement in the Arctic focused on security, scientific research, and sustainable development. This policy document, which updates Italy's 2015 guidelines to align with current “geopolitical challenges and more conflictual international relations,” underscores the Arctic “as a frontier of Europe that should be safeguarded and as a region essential to the continent's unity,” as well as a critical area for Euro-Atlantic stability. Accordingly, the strategy emphasizes the need for an integrated 360-degree approach that looks beyond previous notions of “Arctic exceptionalism” in favour of a more engaged, expanded, and diversified presence “within the limits and prerogatives of a non-Arctic state.” Italy reiterates its view of science as the bedrock of its regional influence, but moves beyond climate observation to a more integrated national approach that encompasses “broader engagement on geopolitical, geo-economic, and security matters.”⁵ Furthermore, the strategy highlights significant economic opportunities in the region for Italian industries and reinforces the nation's commitment to multilateralism, specifically through its research presence on Svalbard.⁶

History

Italy's early Arctic expeditions bore the hallmarks of the transition from late-nineteenth-century heroic endurance to twentieth-century technological innovation, establishing the nation's place and reputation in polar history.⁷ Italian Navy Lieutenant Eugenio Pietro

Parent participated in Nordenskiöld's fifth polar expedition, contributing to the study of the Svalbard Archipelago.⁸ The 1899–1900 *Stella Polare* expedition, commanded by Luigi Amedeo di Savoia, Duke of the Abruzzi (at that time a lieutenant of the Italian Royal Navy), initially set a prestigious “farthest north” record when his second-in-command, Umberto Cagni, reached 86°34'N on foot.⁹ This maritime success was followed in 1926 by the pioneering aviation feat of the airship *Norge*, designed and piloted by Umberto Nobile, which completed the first verified transpolar flight from Svalbard to Alaska alongside Roald Amundsen.¹⁰ While the subsequent 1928 voyage of the airship *Italia* ended in a catastrophic crash that required the largest international rescue mission of the era, it also marked the first Italian mission with rigorous scientific objectives in physics and oceanography.¹¹ Together, these expeditions – and the Italian Royal Navy's support to hydrographic and rescue activities – laid the foundation for Italy's enduring involvement in the region through the actions of explorers and scientists.¹² For example, anthropologist Silvio Zavatti dedicated himself to studying Inuit, and Guido Monzino reached the North Pole by dog sled in 1971.

Italy, an original signatory of the 1920 *Spitsbergen (Svalbard) Treaty*, has a longstanding research focus on Svalbard. Italy's National Research Council (CNR) has managed the research station *Dirigibile Italia* in Ny-Ålesund since 1997. This multidisciplinary facility supports a permanent research presence focused on “Arctic amplification” and other climate system dynamics, using advanced infrastructure such as the Amundsen-Nobile Climate Change Tower and the Gruvebadet Aerosol Laboratory to monitor atmospheric and glaciological shifts. Other Italian research institutes, including the National Agency for New Technologies, Energy and Sustainable Economic Development (ENEA), the National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology (INGV), and the National Institute of Oceanography and Experimental Geophysics (OGS) have also operated in the region.¹³ Italy's contributions to the archipelago's scientific landscape are reinforced by the Italian Navy's High North campaigns, which through the Hydrographic Institute have completed annual geophysical and oceanographic surveys since 2017 to map the seabed and refine meteorological models.¹⁴ Italian researchers continue to lead high-impact international projects, including the Arctic Glacier (GLAC-ART) arthropod resurvey and the Ice Memory initiative to preserve Svalbard's rapidly melting glacial records –

efforts that Italy highlighted in March 2026 when it hosted the Arctic Circle Rome Forum, reflecting its role as a key scientific partner in the Svalbard Integrated Arctic Earth Observing System (SIOS).¹⁵ Beyond Svalbard, INGV (National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology), ENEA (National Agency for New Technologies, Energy and Sustainable Economic Development), and the University of Rome have carried out extensive scientific activities at the Thule High Arctic Atmospheric Observatory (THAAO) at Pituffik, Greenland, since 1990.¹⁶

Former Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini, who spearheaded Italy's application to the Arctic Council, described the circumpolar forum as a "place of high-level political reflection" in which Italy's presence, even as a Mediterranean nation, was essential.¹⁷ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation oversees the country's participation in Council activities, and established an Arctic Roundtable (Tavolo Artico) as a coordination forum between government ministries, scientific agencies, and private sector partners. This body continues to meet regularly and serves as the primary forum for interaction between Italian public and private actors interested in the Arctic.¹⁸ As an Observer, Italy actively participates in all six of the Council's working groups, as well as some expert groups and task forces. For example, Italian scientists provide critical data on the long-range transport of black carbon and mercury from the Mediterranean to the poles through their contributions to the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP) and its Expert Group on Short Lived Climate Forcers. Additionally, through the Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR) working group, Italy leverages its national expertise in maritime disaster management to collaborate on protocols for oil spill responses in extreme environments. Furthermore, Italian researchers contribute to the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF) working group by sharing longitudinal biodiversity studies that track the migration patterns of marine species affected by warming North Atlantic currents.¹⁹

Political, Economic, and Scientific Interests

In its approach to Arctic issues, Italy follows several basic principles in line with its commitments as an Observer State in the Arctic Council: respect for the sovereignty of Arctic States and the rules of international law applicable to the Arctic (first and foremost the law of the sea); promotion of the protection of local traditions and

cultures and Indigenous Peoples, as well as international, multilateral and bilateral collaboration on Arctic issues; contribution to the economic development of the Arctic, with the involvement of the business community, within the framework of the highest standards of environmental protection and the principles of sustainable development; and protection of the marine environment and safety of navigation.²⁰

In 2014, Italy published its national strategy for the region, *Verso una strategia italiana per l'Artico* (“Towards an Italian Strategy for the Arctic”), which it updated the following year. This document outlined Italy’s objectives and priorities in the region, emphasizing its scientific contributions while summarizing its political, environmental, economic, and societal commitments. The strategy also highlighted the potential for private sector involvement, particularly in industries like energy, space, defence, and shipping, in light of anticipated future opportunities in the region.²¹ Italian experts identified a foundational shift from Italy’s perceived place as a peripheral observer to a proactive actor with scientific, economic, and political interests in the Arctic, while some commentators noted a tension between the goal of European environmental leadership in “greener engagement” and the extraction interests of major Italian energy firms in the region.²²

In 2017, the Italian Parliament’s Foreign Affairs and Community Committee launched a fact-finding inquiry to clarify Italy’s interests and future prospects in the Arctic region. Its proceedings involved hearings with Italian and European Union (EU) institutional representatives, foreign ambassadors, representatives of the scientific community, and business leaders.²³ Its findings reiterated that “Italy’s participation in the dimensions of political cooperation in the Arctic represents a strategic priority in light of the changes taking place in the region, caused by climate change and the close interaction that is recorded in the Arctic between the major international actors.” Furthermore, the committee highlighted that pursuant to Italy’s “commitment to strengthen the resources allocated to research, it seems urgent that our country recognizes the specificity of research in the Arctic by identifying dedicated institutional and financial instruments, necessary to strengthen the channels of international scientific cooperation and enhance Italian excellence in the sector.”²⁴

In the following year’s budget law, the Foreign Affairs Committee promoted the establishment of the Scientific Committee for the

Arctic (CSA) and the establishment of the Arctic Research Program (PRA), with the aim of providing further support to research institutions and defining a coherent framework for a strengthened commitment of the Italian scientific community.²⁵ The decision to initiate a High North oceanographic program, led by Italian Navy Hydrographic Institute (Istituto Idrografico della Marina), to map the sea floor and study the impact of climate change on the Arctic, represented another tangible outcome. “While Italy had previously sailed Arctic waters,” analyst Marco Dordoni noted, “this program marked the first time it did so with a dedicated initiative and specific objectives.”²⁶

Scientific research remains the primary driver of Italy's Arctic engagement, building initially upon the National Antarctic Research Program (PNRA), the *Dirigibile Italia* station on Svalbard, and participation in the THAAO in Greenland. Italian Arctic research is typically conducted through the frameworks of international collaboration and EU programming. The country is represented in the European Polar Board, and its research institutions partnered with and/or contribute to several European research projects, including SOIS and the International Network for Terrestrial Research and Monitoring in the Arctic (INTERACT) infrastructure project.²⁷ Italy is a member of the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) and Associate Member in the ARHC (Arctic Regional Hydrographic Commission), is engaged in the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC), the Arctic Science Ministerial Meeting (ASM), and the Sustaining Arctic Observing Networks (SAON), and sends official delegations to the Arctic Circle Assembly and other events.²⁸ It also contributes to International Maritime Organization IMO efforts to define regulations applicable to ships operating in polar waters (Polar Code). Furthermore, it cooperates bilaterally with several Arctic states (including Canada) on science and technology co-ordination and environmental and socio-economic issues.²⁹

Several Italian companies operate in the Arctic and are involved in the work of the Arctic Roundtable coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), seeking to showcase advanced technology, respect for the environment, and partnerships with local and Indigenous populations. A prime example is Italian multinational oil and gas company Eni S.p.A. which, together with Norway's Equinor, has developed the Goliat field – the world's most northern offshore platform in the Barents Sea. In 2017, the US Government permitted Eni's American subsidiary to begin to

drill wells under the Beaufort Sea north of Alaska, where it applies operating standards and innovative systems to prevent oil spills. Italy's Arctic economic dimension also includes collaboration partnerships related to renewable sources of energy, mining, space, and shipbuilding. In November 2020, Eni partnered with HitecVision to create Vårgrønn, a company engaged in the development, construction, management and financing of renewable energy projects. In the space domain, E-Geos is the exclusive distributor of data from the Italian COSMO-SkyMed (Constellation of Small Satellites for the Mediterranean basin Observation) satellite system in collaboration with several Norwegian companies and the Finnish Meteorological Institute. This initiative uses Italy's proprietary radar satellite constellation to provide high-resolution data for oil spill monitoring, sea ice dynamics, and search and rescue (SAR) operations in remote northern waters.³⁰ Another example is Italian shipbuilding giant Fincantieri, which leverages its specialized subsidiaries, such as Vard Marine, to design and construct advanced, low-environmental-impact polar research vessels and icebreakers for international clients. Given how Vard Marine and the Fincantieri Marine Group in the US have become embedded in transatlantic supply chains such as the Icebreaker Collaboration Effort (ICE) Pact, the Italian parent group has become a critical industrial asset for Arctic security operations (including as designer of record for the Canadian Polar Icebreaker program).³¹

Italy also highlights its contributions to education and training in the field of polar studies. Its latest report to the Arctic Council cites the PhD program in Polar Sciences launched at Ca' Foscari University in 2019 which expanded in 2024 into the National Doctoral Program in Polar Sciences. The Italian Society for International Organization (SIOI), which has been a member of UArctic since 2018, has offered a specialized master's course in "Sustainable Development, Geopolitics of Resources and Arctic Studies," and hosts the annual international symposium "Arctic Connections" in collaboration with Norwegian partners. Furthermore, the Polar Geographical Institute "Silvio Zavatti," established in 1944, manages the Polar Museum in Fermo and publishes the bilingual (English-Italian) magazine *Il Polo* focused on subjects related to Indigenous Peoples and polar research.³²

Arctic Policy

Italy released its new Arctic Policy, subtitled “the values of cooperation in a rapidly changing region,” in January 2026 in response to “new geopolitical challenges and more conflictual international relations in recent years” that have “transform[ed] the Arctic into a place of growing competition.”³³ Drafted over the preceding year, the document highlights the role that Italy has played in the region over the last century and outlines a strategic vision and long-term objectives aimed at strengthening Italy’s Arctic engagement around three main pillars: security, scientific research, and economic development. It seeks to cohere the various components of Italy’s national system into a more effective circumpolar presence that consolidates Italy’s role as a non-Arctic country with legitimate interests in the region.³⁴

Italy’s desired end state is to preserve the Arctic as a stable, peaceful region by preventing military escalation and supporting multilateral mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation. “Italy acknowledges that the Arctic no longer represents exclusively a space for scientific and environmental cooperation, but today constitutes a strategic dimension interconnected with Euro-Atlantic security and global balances,” the policy statement emphasizes. “This calls for a conscious and proportionate approach, consistent with Italy’s role as a non-Arctic state, a reliable NATO ally, member of the European Union and Observer State in the Arctic Council, strongly committed to respecting international law and to the promotion of stability.”³⁵ Accordingly, it seeks to strengthen Euro-Atlantic collective security in line with NATO and EU commitments across various strategic theatres. Unsurprisingly, Italy’s focus is primarily on Europe, where it seeks deeper bilateral relations with the European Arctic countries (Kingdom of Denmark/Faroe Islands/Greenland, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden), while supporting the EU’s growing engagement on Arctic issues.

The second pillar seeks to bolster Italy’s reputation as “an influential and dynamic actor in Arctic scientific research,” with a primary focus on monitoring and addressing the global impacts of Arctic climate change (and particularly on transregional teleconnections that disrupt Italy and the Mediterranean ecosystems). “Italian scientific research in the Arctic aligns with international priorities and actively integrates with institutions from both Arctic and non-Arctic countries operating in the region,” with the policy emphasizing collaboration through the EU, the Arctic Council

and its Working Groups, the ASM, IASC, the European Polar Board (EPB), SAON, and the Arctic Science Funders Forum (ASFF). The strategy also highlights how Italian research can help to reconcile economic development with environmental stewardship, including through efforts to raise awareness “among the public and younger generation,” and that “the full involvement of local and Indigenous communities is paramount, not only as sources of traditional knowledge and environmental stewardship but also as active partners in the co-design and co-production of scientific research.”³⁶

The third pillar on economic development begins by highlighting “the importance of including Indigenous peoples in both regional and international contexts, promoting development that respects this highly fragile environment,”³⁷ but at its core this policy seeks to open new business opportunities for Italian industry. “Overall, the Arctic represents a steadily growing economic opportunity for Italian enterprises, encompassing sectors such as infrastructure development, renewable energy, the defence industry, minerals and rare earths, biotechnology, and the entire blue economy, founded on the principles of circularity and sustainability,” the strategy notes.³⁸ It touts the role of major Italian companies such as Fincantieri (through its subsidiary Vard) for specialized shipbuilding and subsea systems, Eni for energy transition technologies, and Leonardo for satellite monitoring via the COSMO-SkyMed system that contributes to the Arctic Security and Emergency Preparedness Network (ARCSAR) initiative.

Italy Arctic Policy also contains a section dedicated to scientific and public diplomacy, articulating how it can use soft power to project its legitimacy as an influential non-Arctic stakeholder. “A wider understanding of polar challenges, and their global implications for the planet’s future,” it notes, “must no longer be confined to a small circle of experts but should become part of society’s shared awareness.”³⁹ Framing the Arctic as a “crossroads of global challenges that will shape the future of our planet,” Rome promotes its think tank community and universities as conduits to improve popular awareness about the region. As part of Italy’s “more active and diversified role in the Arctic,” these efforts can elevate the profile of the country’s scientific contributions to bolster its diplomatic credibility.⁴⁰

The 2026 policy statement ends with a rationalization of why Italy must take a more active role in regional affairs. “The Arctic, once a distant neighbour for Italy, is now moving closer,” the document

concludes, although it is not referring to continental drift or any geophysical dynamic. Instead, it is the convergence of global drivers in the region that elicit Italy's tightening national interest. "A significant part of Arctic territory lies within Europe, and the continent's integration must also include the strengthening of the North–South axis from the Arctic to the Mediterranean – two regions both deeply affected by climate change," it highlights. "The awareness that developments in the Arctic will directly affect the lives of future generations is no longer a mere projection, but a tangible reality, increasingly visible to all." This is a call to action for Italians to promote international cooperation "through dialogue among States and a strong role for multilateral fora," and to strengthen "the knowledge and analytical capacity needed to manage Arctic transformations effectively."⁴¹

Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Priorities

In October 2025, Italy convened its inaugural National Arctic Conference to deliberate on a unified strategy linking defence, diplomacy, and science with respect to the Arctic and High North. Held at the Center for Higher Defence Studies (CASD) and led by Undersecretary of State for Defense Isabella Rauti, representatives from the armed forces, foreign policy community, scientists, and other researchers discussed the Arctic's transformation into a critical arena for geopolitical rivalry, climate change, and economic expansion. Italian officials highlighted that the Arctic serves as a critical intersection point for both geopolitical security and environmental integrity, affecting international trade corridors, strategic nuclear deterrence, and global climate patterns. To enhance strategic coherence, Minister of University and Research Anna Maria Bernini conceptualized defence, foreign affairs, and research as a "trio representing the future," with Admiral Giuseppe Cavo Dragone stressing interoperability with Nordic partners and collective deterrence through NATO.⁴²

Italian officials view the Arctic as increasingly interconnected with the Mediterranean and the Euro-Atlantic security framework. In a January 2026 interview, Rauti emphasized that "the Arctic is no longer a remote and unreachable 'Far North,'" and "what happens in that region affects economic, energy, and strategic interests that directly concern the Mediterranean and, therefore, Italy. The Arctic and the Mediterranean are now part of the same strategic geography; they are no longer separate spaces, but components of a single

interconnected system whose dynamics are directly reflected in security balances.” She elaborated several specific examples that illustrated how “the entire Arctic region has become central to global balances”:

- The progressive melting of ice is opening new high-latitude maritime routes that complement traditional corridors, reshaping the geography of global trade and directly influencing flows crossing the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal.
- Greater accessibility of Arctic routes opens up new scenarios. In certain seasonal windows, they can reduce Asia–Europe transit times, potentially affecting traffic currently passing through traditional choke points such as the Red Sea/Bab el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal, and, by extension, Mediterranean ports and logistics chains. In this context, the Mediterranean does not lose centrality; rather, it is reinforced as an essential hub connecting emerging Arctic routes, the Suez corridor, and Euro-Asian supply chains.
- Recent crises affecting maritime choke points demonstrate how events occurring far away can generate cascading effects on trade, energy supply, and infrastructure security, highlighting the structural link between the High North and Europe’s southern flank.
- It is within this perspective that issues such as the security of sea lines of communication, access to energy and mineral resources, and the protection of critical infrastructure—including subsea and space assets—must be understood. All these elements directly connect the Arctic to the Mediterranean and to Italy’s strategic space.
- For Italy, a natural bridge between Northern and Southern Europe, Arctic stability is therefore a direct factor of national and Mediterranean security, requiring vision, international cooperation, and an integrated security approach.

She linked these dynamics to intensifying geopolitical competition from Russia and China, insisting that “this context requires a high level of attention from European countries—free from alarmism but equally distant from any underestimation.”⁴³

The mitigation of threats from increased Russian militarization and Chinese “Polar Silk Road” ambitions, while navigating recent diplomatic friction over U.S. interests in Greenland, is central to the 2026 *Italy Arctic Policy*. The country advocates for a coordinated NATO and EU presence in the European Arctic to prevent outside

interference and to safeguard critical maritime trade routes and subsea infrastructure. Internally, it seeks to operationalize these priorities by integrating the Ministry of Defence into the Arctic Scientific Committee and by developing specialized military capabilities for Arctic and sub-Arctic environments, which it lays out in specific sections dedicated to the Italian army, navy, air force, and the space domain.⁴⁴ “As a non-Arctic State,” Italy explains in its Arctic policy, it “does not pursue an autonomous or permanent military presence in the region. Instead, it intends to contribute credibly and responsibly to multilateral deterrence, defence, and crisis prevention initiatives, leveraging its distinctive expertise and an integrated approach encompassing security, scientific research, and advanced technologies.”⁴⁵

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interests with Canada

Canada and Italy are like-minded partners on key global and regional issues and work closely together in a range of multilateral institutions, including the United Nations, the G7, G20 and NATO. Canada’s large Italian-Canadian community maintains deep cultural, social, economic and political linkages that complement those in business, science and technology, and academia.⁴⁶ In recent years, Canada and Italy have adopted new instruments or amended existing instruments to promote enhanced bilateral relations, travel, and business, and in 2024 they signed a Roadmap for Enhanced Cooperation to deepen bilateral ties and advance joint efforts in areas including energy security, climate action, innovation, trade, sustainable development, migration, defence, and youth mobility.⁴⁷ As part of the Roadmap, the two countries launched an Energy Dialogue to advance shared energy and natural resources priorities,⁴⁸ established a Joint Advisory Group on Artificial Intelligence to bolster collaboration in artificial intelligence (AI),⁴⁹ and signed a Joint Statement on Critical Minerals and Critical Raw Materials Cooperation to enhance cooperation on strategic resources.⁵⁰ The latter has a particular Arctic nexus.⁵¹

The countries’ Arctic interests are generally aligned. Italy’s careful articulation of its status as a non-Arctic state does not appear to undermine Canada’s longstanding position about the primacy of the Arctic states, in partnership with Arctic Indigenous Peoples, in regional governance. Both countries support the Arctic Council as the leading regional forum for cooperation facilitating dialogue between the Member States, Permanent Participants, and

Observers, although Italy places more emphasis on the contributions of the latter as an Observer state.⁵² Furthermore, Rome's Arctic policy reinforces that "Italian action is based on full respect for international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and the recognition of the sovereign prerogatives of Arctic States." Given that Italy has made no formal references to the Northwest Passage as an international strait (and only refers to the Northern Sea Route in its 2025 Arctic policy), this sentiment is shared by both countries. So too is Italy's statement that it "considers Arctic security to be an international public good, closely linked to European and global stability."⁵³

There is natural alignment between the two countries on deterrence and collective defence within a NATO context, given their strong defence relationship rooted in common values and strategic interests.⁵⁴ Both highlight the importance of improved pan-domain situational awareness in the Arctic focused on monitoring human activities, environmental conditions, and critical infrastructure, including the protection of subsea and space assets. The space domain is an area of particular convergence, with Italy envisaging emerging space technologies as "a strategic multiplier for Arctic security, resilience, and governance by fostering synergies among Defence, scientific research, and national industry."⁵⁵

Canada shares Italy's commitment to "promoting the growth of expertise, doctrine, and training for operations in Arctic and sub-Arctic contexts, including a dual-use perspective and support for civil authorities."⁵⁶ For example, both countries are partners in the Arctic Security and Emergency Preparedness Network (ARCSAR) project, which brings together search and rescue practitioners, authorities, industry and academia and other organizations in order to bridge gaps and enhance capabilities in the Arctic and North Atlantic region.⁵⁷ Furthermore, there is common interest in securing commercial and scientific activities in the region from malign influence or disruption, as well as enhancing safety for researchers. Italy's policy commits to "ensuring adequate protection for Italian personnel, infrastructure, and missions in the region, in close coordination with host countries and international partners,"⁵⁸ which resonates with Canada's support for scientific collaboration in the Arctic balanced with appropriate oversight, regulatory, safety, and security guardrails to "address potential threats and harms at all levels," including "due diligence to protect Canada's most sensitive research."⁵⁹

Canada and Italy have a strong commercial relationship, including in innovation and technology-based partnerships, underpinned by the Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA).⁶⁰ Global Affairs Canada (GAC) notes that “the two governments have acknowledged the potential to deepen industrial ties in the defence sector, aligning procurement strategies and fostering cross-border collaboration between Canadian and Italian defence industries.”⁶¹ Through bilateral agreements and multilateral frameworks, both countries cooperate on training, industrial and technological collaboration, and operational readiness. This opens opportunities associated with NATO’s heightened interest in the Arctic, including its new “Arctic Sentry” surveillance initiative seeking to provide “NATO planners with full visibility of Allies’ national activities across the region, allowing NATO to consolidate these actions into one coherent, overarching operational approach.”⁶²

There is also alignment on Arctic state sovereignty and territorial integrity. In response to coercive US statements about its intent to acquire Greenland in early 2026, Prime Minister Meloni’s government was one of seven European countries who issued a joint statement reaffirming support for Danish sovereignty while advocating that any increased security measures must occur strictly within a coordinated NATO framework.⁶³ Italy specifically rules out unilateral military interventions, emphasizing instead that both NATO and the EU should prioritize preventing “excessive interference from other actors that could even be hostile” (i.e. countering the assertiveness of non-Arctic actors like Russia and China) in the Arctic.⁶⁴

Issues of Divergence or Concern

There are few obvious points of divergence between Canada and Italy in Arctic affairs. While Canada adopts a more east-west lens that looks first inward (as an Arctic state) and then around the Circumpolar Arctic, Italy’s policy situates the Arctic in a context of promoting stronger “North-South links for the Arctic to the Mediterranean as a means to reinforce continental cohesion.” Furthermore, Italy’s European focus is different from Canada’s predominantly North American. These differences reflect each countries’ respective geopolitical situatedness and should not be read as a source of significant concern. Canada has longstanding interests in the European Arctic and European security, and Italy is committed to “develop stronger Arctic cooperation with the North American Arctic countries (Canada and the United States),

acknowledging the diversity and vast geographical scope of the Arctic region.”⁶⁵ Nevertheless, these perspectives will continue to shape their respective prioritization of attention and resources, including those of NATO.

While Italy signals its strong commitment to Arctic Indigenous Peoples, its list of those Peoples in the preamble to the economic pillar of its 2026 policy does not include First Nations or Métis.⁶⁶ While this may be a minor oversight, it also reminds the Government of Canada about the need to educate its Allies on the diversity of Indigenous Peoples in the Canadian Arctic and North and implications for fulfilling national and collective defence and security responsibilities.

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²⁸ See Arctic Council, "Observer Activity Report - Italian Republic – 2025," 3 November 2025, 6, <https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/b44f17b5-57b2-4321-9026-03c06c358e11/content>. Italy has been participated in the Arctic Circle since 2018, when the MAECI Special Envoy for the Arctic delivered a plenary presentation on the theme "Italy's engagement in the Arctic." An entire Italian panel was dedicated to this topic in 2024. Other keynote speeches on Italy's commitment to the Arctic were conducted by the Special Envoy for the Arctic as part of the 2025 version of the Arctic Circle Forum in New Delhi, Arctic Spirit in Rovaniemi, the EU Arctic Forum in Kittila, and Arctic Encounter in Anchorage. MAECI, "L'Italia e l'Artico." Italy will host the next iteration of the Arctic Circle, titled "Arctic Circle Rome Forum – Polar Dialogue: From Glaciers to Seas," which will be held on 3-4 March 2026 at the CNR headquarters. The event is organized by the Ministry of University and Research (MUR) in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. MAECI, "L'Italia e l'Artico."

²⁹ TAI, "Italy," <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/country-backgrounders/italy/>.

³⁰ Financed jointly by the Italian Space Agency (ASI) and the Italian Ministry of Defence, COSMO-SkyMed is a leading-edge, dual-use (civilian and military) system that represents Italy's largest national investment in an Earth observation space asset. Sodankylä National Satellite Data Centre, "COSMO-SkyMed Tasking," https://nsdc.fmi.fi/services/service_cosmo; Telespazio, "The Third COSMO-SkyMed Second Generation Satellite Successfully Launched," 3 January 2026, <https://www.telespazio.com/en/press-release-detail/-/detail/cosmo-skymed-pr>; Finnish Meteorological Institute, "COSMO-SkyMed satellites provide data for the whole of the Arctic," 12 March 2013, <https://en.ilmatieteenlaitos.fi/press-release/628370>.

³¹ Fincantieri Marine Group LinkedIn page at <https://www.linkedin.com/company/fincantieri-marine-group/posts/?feedView=all>; and Vard Marine, <https://vardmarine.com/gallery/vard-9-206/>.

³² Arctic Council, "Observer Activity Report - Italian Republic – 2025," 3.

³³ MAECI, *Italy Arctic Policy*, 7.

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- ³⁴ Ambasciata d'Italia Ottawa, "The Arctic."
- ³⁵ MAECI, *Italy Arctic Policy*, 23.
- ³⁶ MAECI, *Italy Arctic Policy*, 30.
- ³⁷ MAECI, *Italy Arctic Policy*, 43.
- ³⁸ MAECI, *Italy Arctic Policy*, 46.
- ³⁹ MAECI, *Italy Arctic Policy*, 53.
- ⁴⁰ MAECI, *Italy Arctic Policy*, 47-49.
- ⁴¹ MAECI, *Italy Arctic Policy*, 52.
- ⁴² Riccardo Leoni, "Italy charts Arctic strategy amid rising geopolitical tensions," *Decode 39*, 29 October 2025, <https://decode39.com/12225/italy-charts-arctic-strategy-amid-rising-geopolitical-tensions/>.
- ⁴³ Marco de Roberts, "Why the Arctic matters to Italy's security? Undersecretary Rauti responded," *Decode 39*, 27 January 2026, <https://decode39.com/13244/why-the-arctic-matters-to-italys-security-undersecretary-rauti-responded/>.
- ⁴⁴ MAECI, *Italy Arctic Policy*, 23-29. See also Leoni, "Italy charts Arctic strategy." For an unofficial view on the role of the Italian Navy in the region, see Marco Dordoni, "Italy at the Forefront of Arctic Security: The Role of the Italian Navy," *The Polar Connection*, 23 January 2025, <https://polarconnection.org/italy-navy-arctic/>.
- ⁴⁵ MAECI, *Italy Arctic Policy*, 24.
- ⁴⁶ GAC, "Canada-Italy relations," <https://www.international.gc.ca/country-pays/italy-italie/relations.aspx?lang=eng>.
- ⁴⁷ Prime Minister of Canada, "Italy-Canada Roadmap for Enhanced Cooperation," 15 June 2024, <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/statements/2024/06/15/italy-canada-roadmap-enhanced-cooperation>.
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⁵² MAECI, *Italy Arctic Policy*, 50. The reference to “other Observers” after Permanent Participants in the document may be an oversight missed by the editors, or could indicate a quite downgrading of Indigenous Peoples’ participation as equivalent to Observers.

⁵³ MAECI, *Italy Arctic Policy*, 24.

⁵⁴ In June 2025, Prime Ministers Carney and Meloni committed to enhanced information exchange and collaboration on emerging security challenges within NATO frameworks. GAC, “Canada-Italy Relations.”

⁵⁵ MAECI, *Italy Arctic Policy*, 25.

⁵⁶ MAECI, *Italy Arctic Policy*, 24-25.

⁵⁷ Arctic Security and Emergency Preparedness Network (ARCSAR), <https://arcsar.eu/network-members/>.

⁵⁸ MAECI, *Italy Arctic Policy*, 24-25.

⁵⁹ Global Affairs Canada (GAC), *Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy (2024)*, 20, <https://international.canada.ca/international-canada/assets/pdfs/arctic-arctique/arctic-policy-politique-en.pdf>. See also Office of the Chief Science Advisor, “Summary of the Arctic Research Safety Roundtable,” 20 February 2026, <https://science.gc.ca/site/science/en/office-chief-science-advisor/arctic-science/summary-arctic-research-safety-roundtable>.

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⁶⁴ Giselda Vagnoni and Crispian Balmer, “Meloni does not believe US will make military move on Greenland, urges strong NATO Arctic presence,” *Reuters*, 9 January 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/meloni-rules-out-us-military-move-greenland-urges-strong-nato-arctic-presence-2026-01-09/>.

⁶⁵ MAECI, *Italy Arctic Policy*, 50.

⁶⁶ MAECI, *Italy Arctic Policy*, 42.



5

Japan

Carin Holroyd and Ken Coates

“Japan will always consider the optimal combination of bilateral and multilateral approaches, further promote exchanges of views with Arctic and other relevant countries, maximize the use of international frameworks related to the Arctic, strengthen the dissemination of our country’s perspectives and achievements in observation and research, and enhance our presence.”

Japan’s Fourth Basic Plan on Ocean Policy (2023)¹

Outside the Circumpolar countries themselves, few nations have been paying more attention to the changes occurring in the Arctic than Japan, China, and South Korea. Japan has contributed to a scientific understanding of the region for over seventy years. Along with this scientific commitment is a desire to monitor the impact of climate change on the Arctic, especially the melting of Arctic sea ice and the possibility of an ice-free Arctic and what that could mean for Japan’s climate, new shipping routes and enhanced resource extraction. While there is potential for Canada and Japan to collaborate on numerous Arctic issues in which the two countries are closely aligned, it is not clear that this convergence of interests will translate into impactful Canada-Japan Arctic defence and security cooperation.

It is not surprising, given past engagements and current geopolitical realities, that Japan is far more interested in the Russia North than in the North American North. Japan’s engagement with the Canadian Arctic is both largely symbolic and a matter of courtesy rather than an urgent security need or pressing economic consideration. So far, Japan-Canada collaboration in the Arctic has focussed on the polite exchange of memoranda of understanding (MOUs), replete with earnest commitments to defend the North, to

collaborate, to support research on Arctic ecosystems, and to find commercial opportunities in the Far North. The reality is that Japan has far more pressing concerns than those of the Canadian Arctic and that the prospects for meaningful engagement with Canada in the Arctic pale in comparison to the need for concrete Japanese responses to the pressing issues of the Russian North and the far more intense and complex geopolitics of East Asia.

History

Japan's engagement with the Arctic goes back over a century. The country was one of the original fourteen contracting parties to the 1920 Svalbard (originally Spitsbergen) Treaty, which recognized Norway's sovereignty over Svalbard and the Spitsbergen archipelago. Japan has been actively engaged in polar science for more than sixty years and has had research collaborations with scientists in all of the Arctic countries, including Iceland. Japan's National Institute of Polar Research (NIPR) opened in 1973.

Japan applied for Arctic Council (AC) observer status, joining in 2013 along with South Korea, China, India, Italy and Singapore. Japan's Arctic interest is primarily rooted in a desire to contribute to scientific understanding of the Arctic. Japan's position, as researcher Aki Tonami describes it, is that

scientific research is what it does best as a technologically advanced nation. Japan also believes this is what the AC expects it to do. The natural environment of the Arctic is fragile and requires large-scale, costly research in order to understand the possible repercussions of climate change.²

Along with the desire to use scientific and technological expertise to help the Arctic develop sustainably and peacefully, Japan is also interested in the opening of Arctic passage ways and the implications for shipping, ship and offshore platform construction and port development, along with the potential accessibility of energy and natural resources and concerns about Arctic climate change and its implications.

Political, Economic, and Scientific Interests³

Japanese involvement in Arctic science is of longer standing than countries other than the Circumpolar eight nations. Japan's engagement in polar science began in the 1950s. Japanese physicist Ukichiro Nakaya conducted research on cryospheric science (ice and snow studies) in Greenland, the Canadian Arctic archipelago, the

Arctic Ocean and Alaska.⁴ In 1973, Japan's National Institute of Polar Research (NIPR) opened in Tokyo, replacing the Polar Research Centre, formerly the Polar Department, of the National Science Museum, which had been established in 1962. The NIPR established the Arctic Environment Research Centre (AERC) in 1990. Japan became a non-Arctic member of the newly formed International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) shortly after. IASC initiated Arctic Science Summit Week (ASSW) in 1999, an annual gathering of scientific Arctic research organizations. Toyama was the host in 2015 and Hakodate will host in 2027.⁵

AERC established an observation research centre, initially in conjunction with the Norwegians, in Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard, in 1991. Japan became a member of a 1993-1999 international research program studying the feasibility of the Northern Sea Route, as it is now called, from the Russian Arctic to the Bering Strait. This Norwegian-Japanese-Russian collaboration, called the International Northern Sea Route Program, involved 450 researchers from fourteen countries and resulted in the production of 167 technical reports.⁶ The NIPR managed a major Arctic climate change project from 2011-2016 that included 300 scientists from 35 organizations researching many elements of the Arctic climate system.⁷

Since 2008, NIPR, the Japan Consortium for Environmental Research and other Japanese partners have organized the biennial International Symposium on Arctic Research (ISAR) at which researchers from around the world discuss scientific research on the Arctic. ISAR-8 took place in Tokyo in October 2025.⁸ Japan has also hosted one of the Arctic Circle Forums (a non-profit non-partisan international platform for dialogue on the future of the Arctic). The theme of the Arctic Circle Japan Forum was "Asia in the Future of the Arctic: Science, Geopolitics, Economy, Oceans, Climate Technology." It took place in March 2023 and was organized in cooperation with the Sasakawa Peace Foundation and The Nippon Foundation.⁹ Japan and Iceland co-hosted the 3rd Arctic Science Ministerial in Tokyo (and online) in May 2021 with the theme Knowledge for a Sustainable Arctic. The meeting focused on scientific cooperation to deal with Arctic challenges.¹⁰

In 2015, Japan launched the Arctic Challenge for Sustainability (ArCS) research program. ArCS 1 (2015-2020) focused on promoting international collaborative research by building Japan's Arctic research platforms and disseminating its research through Arctic research organizations and to the general public. ArCS II (2020-2025),

managed collaboratively by NIPR, the Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology and Hokkaido University, promoted advanced research into the environmental changes in the Arctic and meteorological and climate prediction.¹¹ ArCS is now Japan's flagship Arctic research program and operates eleven science research stations. ArCS-III (2025-2029) is "Japan's largest and most comprehensive Arctic research initiative to date" and will contribute significantly to Japanese Arctic research and policy.¹²

Although Japan has three icebreakers, none are active in the Arctic. *Shirase*, a supply vessel for Japanese Antarctic research, is operated by the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force. The Japanese Coast Guard operates *Soya* and *Tesio* as patrol boats in northern Japan. (Japan also has an oceanographic research vessel, *Mirai* (Future), which spends time in the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions.) An Arctic research vessel is now under construction. *Mirai* II, equipped with icebreaking capabilities and research and observational equipment, including weather radar, is slated to start operating in November 2026.¹³ The Japanese government emphasizes its desire to understand the Arctic environment, protect the region, and ensure the peaceful use of the Far North

Japan is keenly interested in climate change in the Arctic, particularly as changes in the Arctic appear to be affecting Japan's weather. East Asia has experienced extreme cold events linked to Arctic warming. Scientists have shown that the warming Arctic is adversely affecting East Asian weather with implications for natural disasters, agricultural production, and even national security.¹⁴

Japanese firms have followed the country's scientists into the region. Greenland Petroleum Exploration Co., Ltd (GreenPeX), in which Japan Petroleum Exploration Company (JAPEx) held a 6.6% share and the Japan Organization for Metals and Energy Security (JOGMEC) held a 59.4% share, was awarded two exploration licenses in partnership with Chevron and Shell, in the northeastern Greenland Sea area in 2013. The Japan National Oil Corporation, the predecessor to JOGMEC, was involved in the KANUMAS (Kalaallit Nunaat Marine Seismic) project, which explored hydrocarbon development in Greenland from 1989-1996. JOGMEC and other companies in the project were granted special opportunities to apply for exploration licenses in 2013 because of their earlier involvement in KANUMAS.¹⁵ Exploration proved to be extremely challenging; many of the companies relinquished their license even before the

Greenlandic government banned all new oil and gas exploration in 2021.

Japanese companies joined an international effort to develop Arctic resources. JOGMEC and Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) partnered with the U.S. Department of Energy, National Energy Technology Laboratory and other American organizations, to test for methane hydrates at Prudhoe Bay on the Alaska North Slope. Tests took place between September 2023 and July 2024. The project was designed to help Japan plan for future commercial production of gas hydrates.¹⁶

Japan's engagement extended to Russian activities. Yamal LNG, a liquefied natural gas plant owned 50.1% by Russia's Novatek, began production in late 2017. While there is no Japanese equity in the project, Japan provided financing, engineering and construction work. Japan took a stake in the subsequent Arctic LNG 2 project. Through a joint venture called Japan Arctic LNG B.V., Mitsui & Co and JOGMEC have a joint 10% share in Novatek's Arctic LNG 2 project on the Gyda Peninsula in Western Siberia (Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug). The imposition of sanctions and an oil price cap because of the war in Ukraine made it difficult for Japanese companies to remain involved in resource extraction in the Russian Arctic. Following U.S. targeted sanctions on the Arctic LNG 2 project in 2023, Japan Arctic LNG B.V. withdrew personnel and largely suspended financing and participation but maintained their equity stake.¹⁷

As Japan considers Sakhalin oil and gas development critical to its energy security, it has also maintained its investments in Russia's Sakhalin 1 and Sakhalin 2 oil and gas projects, north of Hokkaido. Sakhalin Oil and Gas Development Co, a consortium 50% owned by the Japanese government and 50% by private Japanese firms, maintains a 30 percent share in Sakhalin 1. Meanwhile, Mitsui and Mitsubishi own 12.5 and 10 percent respectively of Sakhalin 2. In 2024, Japan reportedly bought about 57.4%% of the LNG produced at Sakhalin-2. Long-term contracts with Sakhalin-2 currently account for approximately 9% of Japan's LNG imports. Japan continues to diversify its LNG away from Russia, but any abrupt change could test its energy security and affect global LNG prices.¹⁸

Japan's Arctic Policy

Japan's Arctic Ambassador Kazuko Shiraishi released the country's comprehensive *Arctic Policy* in October 2015. The policy outlined seven areas of focus: global environmental issues, science

and technology research and development, the rule of law and international cooperation, sea routes, natural resources, indigenous peoples, and the sustainable use of Arctic resources. This broad policy demonstrates Japan's deep and historic interest and commitment to the region. The report makes a direct connection to national security:

There is a risk that factors such as opening of new shipping route and the development of natural resources may become a cause for new friction among states. It is important to prevent moves to strengthen military presence in the region from leading to tension and confrontations. At the same time, while recognizing that these developments may become factors that change the international security environment, not only in the Arctic but for the surrounding states including Japan, it is necessary to pay close attention to moves by the states concerned and also to promote cooperation with the Arctic and other states.¹⁹

Japan's *Basic Plan on Ocean Policy* has been updated every five years since 2008. The Arctic was first mentioned in the *Second Basic Plan on Ocean Policy*. The fourth version, released in April 2023, built on the priorities of the importance of Arctic research, increased international cooperation and future use of the Northern Sea Route, all of which had been outlined in earlier versions. This newest plan, however, goes into more detail. It discusses strengthening Japan's observational capacity in the Arctic, supporting Japanese shipping companies using the Northern Sea Route, and promoting adherence to freedom of navigation in the Arctic Ocean. Overall, as an Arctic Institute commentary notes:

The Fourth Basic Plan on Ocean Policy reveals a more proactive, assertive, and ambitious tone across the main pillars of research, international cooperation, and sustainable utilization than its predecessors. In particular, with the fourth version further empowering sustainable utilization, Japan cements itself as an engaged steward rather than a bystander across Arctic development to set the standard for the entire region.²⁰

This more engaged approach was backed by the Japanese foreign minister at the time who spoke out on the need to create an international order in the Arctic based on the rule of law while working to deepen cooperation with Arctic nations.²¹

Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Priorities

From the *Arctic Policy* and *Fourth Basic Plan on Ocean Policy* documents, it is evident that Japan's main interests and priorities are scientific research, international cooperation, keeping the Arctic peaceful and rules-based amid increased military presence, protecting sea lanes and security along the Northern Sea Route and peacefully and collaboratively securing access to energy, mineral and fisheries resources. Japan has consistently emphasized these interests since the release of its 2015 *Arctic Policy*. Japan's most recent *National Security Strategy* and its latest *National Defence Strategy* were both released in December 2022. The *National Security Strategy* notes the Arctic's growing importance due to increased use of Arctic Sea routes in the summer, resulting from melting ice. The Strategy notes that Japan will likely "actively utilize the Arctic sea routes" in the future.²² Japan's latest *National Defence Strategy* does not explicitly mention the Arctic but instead provides an overall framework for Japan's defence capabilities.²³ The most recent *Defence White Paper* (2025) also does not refer to the Arctic but provides an overview of developments that could impact Arctic security.²⁴ Although very little has been said officially about Japan's defence and security interests and the Arctic, the Japanese Ambassador to Canada intimates in an article in *Gaiko*, Japan's diplomacy journal, that this is beginning to change:

Traditionally, Japan's Arctic policy has emphasized freedom of navigation, respect for international law, Arctic observation and research, global cooperation, and contributions to rulemaking. However, as geopolitical tensions rise, the National Security Strategy revised in 2022 recognized for the first time the need to address Arctic security issues. In April 2023, the Cabinet adopted the Fourth Basic Plan on Ocean Policy, calling for cross-governmental measures including security.²⁵

The long-standing and unresolved Northern Territories/Kuril Islands dispute with Russia could become an area of heightened tension. Japanese corporate investments in the Sakhalin oil and gas projects could have geopolitical implications. One positive recent collaboration was the November 2025 Memorandum of Cooperation between Greenland and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation to begin working together on peace, conflict resolution and sustainable development research in the Arctic.

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interests with Canada

While Japan's Arctic interests focus overwhelmingly on the Russian North, the North American Arctic has moved onto the international geopolitical agenda in 2025 and 2026. In March 2026, Prime Ministers Carney and Takaichi announced a new partnership between their two countries. Designed to deepen economic and security ties, as a sign of this new partnership, the leaders signed three memorandums of cooperation on: joint Coast Guard exercises; the enhancement of emergency response co-operation; and combatting illegal fishing. These accords could bring about a stronger relationship between Canada and Japan in the Arctic as was mentioned in the official release after the meetings: "Canada and Japan will increase Arctic scientific and technological cooperation as well as joint efforts on climate change and environmental observation."²⁶

Japan and Canada have long cooperated on Arctic research. Arctic research is discussed regularly at the Japan-Canada Joint Committee Meetings on Cooperation in Science and Technology and at the Canada-Japan Joint Economic Committee. Polar Knowledge Canada and the National Institute of Polar Research have been conducting joint research at the Canadian High Arctic Research Station (CHARS) in Cambridge Bay since 2016. In 2019, a "Canada-Japan Future Collaboration Workshop on Arctic Environment" workshop was held at CHARS, and the Embassy of Japan in Canada visited in April 2025.²⁷

Although there are no Arctic-specific defence and security agreements between Canada and Japan, various bilateral agreements emphasize shared priorities in the Arctic. In October 2022, the foreign ministers of Canada and Japan announced a joint action plan for building a free and open Indo-Pacific. The six areas of cooperation are: the rule of law; peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance; health security, energy security, free trade promotion and FTA implementation and environment and climate change.²⁸ The section on rule of law explicitly mentions cooperation in the Arctic, noting that "Canada and Japan will collaborate in maintaining maritime order in the Arctic Ocean and continue their strong collaboration in combatting illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing in the Indo-Pacific region."²⁹ In addition, Canada's *Indo-Pacific Strategy* (and implementation updates) discuss the best way to maintain the peace and security of the Arctic, uphold Canada's

Arctic sovereignty, and cooperate with other Indo-Pacific countries (and here Japan and South Korea are highlighted.)³⁰

At the Japan-Canada Defence Ministerial meeting on 13 September 2024, the ministers discussed “common regional and security concerns, including Indo-Pacific and the Arctic Circle,” and welcomed deepened defence cooperation.³¹ The ministers agreed to continue to implement the 2022 Canada-Japan Action Plan for Contributing to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Region, which helps to link the Arctic with broader North Pacific and Indo-Pacific security initiatives. *Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy* released in December 2024 also highlights Canada’s desire to work with Japan in the Arctic and references the joint action plan.³² At the November 2025 Japan-Canada Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, both Canada and Japan again reaffirmed cooperation on the Japan-Canada Action Plan for contributing to a free and open Indo-Pacific region.”³³ In late 2025 and early 2026, Japan and Canada signed two important defence-related agreements: a security of information agreement, and an agreement concerning the transfer of defence equipment and technology.³⁴ The security and information agreement is not specifically about the Arctic, but it provides a foundation for cooperation on defence and security in the region, including secure intelligence sharing and strengthening partnerships beyond NATO, which could help protect northern capabilities and link Arctic defence and security with Indo-Pacific security. This will help with sharing Arctic domain awareness, space and cyber threats, and allied coordination.

Although neither *Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy*³⁵ nor *Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada’s Defence*³⁶ specifically mention Japan in the context of national defence (although the former notes their shared priorities on maritime security), there are references to the need to deepen defence partnerships and investment in technologies in areas like sensors, cyber security, space and defence technologies. The security information sharing agreement (2025) and the agreement on defence equipment and technology (2026) will further facilitate Japan-Canada collaboration.

There have been additional signs of increased defence cooperation between Canada and Japan. Japan’s Self-Defense Forces sent observers to Operation NANOOK, an annual multinational Canadian Armed Forces-led exercise in the Arctic.³⁷ After the March 2026 meeting between the two Prime Ministers,

officials mentioned that Japan may now participate regularly in NANOOK exercises.³⁸ Japan's Ground Self-Defence Force sent observers to Exercise ARCTIC BISON, a Canadian Armed Forces annual training operation focused on cold-weather survival, in February 2025.³⁹ The Canadian Armed Forces participated, for the first time, in the Japan Ground Self-Defence Force's Exercise NORTH WIND 26 at the Hokkaido Maneuvering Area in January 2026.⁴⁰

Prime Minister Carney has made a concerted effort to raise Canada's international profile, largely to offset the egregious political insults and concerted attack on the national economy from US President Donald Trump. Japan was perhaps lower on the prime minister's travel list than many Canadian observers of Japan would have liked, but Carney did visit Japan in March 2026. The MOUs and agreement emanating from a friendly and collegial exchange, however, reinforced the reality that Canada is a small component in Japanese affairs and vice-versa. The references to the Canadian Arctic reinforce the simple reality that, in Japan's geopolitical calculations, Arctic North America is but a minor piece in a fast-changing and increasingly dangerous puzzle of international global affairs.

Points of Tension or Divergence

Although Canada and Japan enjoy a long-standing, diplomatically friendly relationship and are aligned on many international and Arctic issues, it is not clear that this convergence will translate into significant Arctic defence and security cooperation. There are at least eight areas of concern relating to Canada-Japan Arctic defence and security collaboration.

Strategic priorities and alliance geometry: From Japan's perspective, the United States is its central partner for defence and security policy. While Japan values Canada as a trusted partner, Canada is not a primary driver of Japan's Arctic or North Pacific security thinking. This was evident in 2023-2024 when Japan prioritized the creation of a US-Japan-South Korea trilateral security pact.⁴¹ Canada's proposal to explore a Canada-Japan-South Korea trilateral (as part of Canada's "North Pacific" framing in its Indo-Pacific Strategy) was seen by some commentators on Asian affairs as premature or misaligned.⁴² The Government of Japan felt that Canada should observe how the evolution of the US-Japan-ROK pact (to which Canada was not initially invited) and then identify where it could join to add value, rather than proposing parallel or competing

structures. This reflects a fundamental difference in Canadian and Japanese approaches to international affairs. Canada seeks flexible multilateralism, while Japan prefers alliance-anchored arrangements, especially when defence and security are involved. Given that Japan is a geographical neighbour to China and North Korea, East Asia remains the focus of its main defence and security risks.

Divergent expectations of Arctic navigation and sovereignty: There is a tension between Japan and Canada around Arctic sea routes and the future of commercial navigation. Japan has a strong interest in emerging maritime routes, particularly the Northern Sea Route (NSR). This interest is driven by concerns about energy security, shipping efficiency, the likelihood of increased shipping traffic along Japan's east coast, and long-term commercial planning. Canada's focus is on the Northwest Passage (NWP) which faces harsher ice variability, more complex routes and much less commercial reliability. Maritime infrastructure along Canada's Arctic coast remains extremely limited. Canada's emphasis is on sovereignty, control, and security in the Arctic rather than on encouraging transit shipping. In addition, Canada's NWP is tied geographically with the US and Greenland/Kingdom of Denmark and thus is protected under NORAD and NATO. Even though there are tensions and disagreements between Canada and the US, the context is significantly different than the NSR which runs along Russia's Arctic coast and is closely linked with expansive Russian infrastructure, regulation, and security priorities. China's Polar Silk Road is also closely linked to the NSR. These could impact Japan's route access and increase unwanted shipping and military traffic to the east of Japan. While Canada may want to extend sanctions against Russia to include the use of the NSR, Japan will have a more complex view that includes energy security, commercial opportunities, and general maritime security.

Capability and infrastructure gaps: Japan and Canada conceptualize Arctic security differently. Arctic awareness, navigation, scientific research, and infrastructure are not isolated objectives but part of Japan's broader effort to maintain a rules-based maritime order across multiple geographies. Canada, on the other hand, is trying to connect Arctic defence and security to the North Pacific and its Indo-Pacific outlook, but it remains constrained by its limited Arctic capabilities. The country's icebreaking capacity and maritime presence is insufficient. Other challenges include an overstretched coast guard, gaps in surveillance, logistical challenges, a shortage of dual-use facilities, the truncated

development of northern ports, and weak communications and related supports. From a Japanese perspective, this limited capacity to adequately operationally link the Arctic to the North Pacific and on to the Indo-Pacific makes Canada an only conceptually aligned partner rather than one able to deliver concrete outcomes.

The Utility of Arctic Science: Different approaches to Arctic science deepen this divergence. Japan is interested in expanding its scientific presence in the Arctic which Tokyo views as being linked to its security, surveillance, and maritime strategy. Canada takes a different approach to Arctic science, focusing until 2025 primarily on climate change and environmental protection. While Canada under Prime Minister Carney has outlined expansive ambitions in the Arctic, the country's lack of infrastructure and resources means that Japan logically looks to the Nordic countries to address its Arctic interests. Canada's limited Arctic capacity reinforces the perception that Canada's Arctic may be of some (limited) strategic importance but remains significantly underdeveloped. Japan has, for decades, approached the North American Arctic through the prism of scientific research, including oceanography, fisheries, climate observation, and satellite monitoring and data collection. Canada followed a similar pattern for most of the post-Second World War era, making occasional pledges to tighten Arctic security. While the fields of science and defence are related, the challenges of coordinating defence, research and public policy could lead Canada and Japan to miss opportunities or to have trouble aligning Arctic expectations.

Indigenous governance and jurisdictional complexity: Japan, with a less than stellar domestic track record in the field, consistently emphasizes its support for Indigenous partnerships in the Arctic, as demonstrated through Japan's application for Observer status at the Arctic Council. Senior Japanese officials, including Ambassador Kanji Yamanouchi, have acknowledged the importance of Indigenous-related understanding and partnerships. However, there appears to be limited understanding in Japan of Indigenous governance structures in Arctic and Northern Canada (and the rest of Canada, except for specific resource and infrastructure projects) and uncertainty about the dynamics of federal-territorial-Indigenous jurisdictions. For Japan, the complexity of Canadian federalism creates uncertainty about how to engage appropriately and efficiently, especially compared to countries with more centralized or unitary governance models.

Pace, patience, and opportunity-costs: Japan is accustomed to moving quickly in regions such as Southeast Asia or Latin America, particularly in areas of mining, resources, infrastructure and maritime cooperation. Canada's slow, complicated and expensive regulatory, political, and consultation processes have dampened Japanese commercial interest in Canadian resources and will likely continue to test Japanese patience. Consequently, Japan may remain engaged symbolically and conceptually to preserve the relationship with Canada and to protect stability in North America, while directing practical Arctic investments and defence and security attention toward the US or Nordic partners. At present, Canada is perceived as an extensive and time-consuming partner, with few prospects of major improvements in commercial or economic opportunities or sharply improved strategic outcomes.

Institutional uncertainty in Arctic security governance: Japan recognizes that the Arctic Council is no longer the pre-eminent forum for non-security-related Arctic issues, with little prospect of a quick return to prominence in the field. Canada appears to support the practice of flexible and selective minilateralism, which would involve a subset of Arctic-interested nations worked cooperatively on specialized regional topics or issues. With the United Nations marginalized in international affairs, the Arctic Council moribund, Russia sidelined, the United States acting irrationally, and China deemed untrustworthy by most Western nations, there are no obvious Arctic partnerships or groupings to address pressing issues related to the Far North. These political challenges create uncertainty for Japan about crucial questions in Arctic security. It is not clear which forum is best suited for defence- and security-related Arctic discussions. Equally, it is not clear how Canada envisions Japan's involvement in future Arctic arrangements. Major political distractions, such as Russian aggression in Ukraine and President Donald Trump's inchoate threats to Greenland, have left the world without a diplomatic or strategic platform to manage strategic interests in the Arctic. Canada and Japan, with few complementary interests or priorities, are left to chart their own path or, more likely, to quietly support distinct national interests without making substantial commitments or plans.

Missed opportunities from the Canadian perspective: Canada is not without its blind spots in the Arctic. For example, Canada may underestimate Japan's focus on science, shipping, critical minerals, and fisheries as not being security-relevant areas. Canada may not

fully appreciate the difficulty of developing an alignment with Japan and South Korea without US leadership also at the table. Canada also appears uncertain about how to finance its reinvigorated Arctic ambitions, even as it seeks to advance its strategies at the pace of contemporary geopolitics. Areas where Japan could add impact and value to Canada's ambitions include shipbuilding, satellite- and space-based surveillance, sensors, robotics, or jointly developed cold environment technologies. Movement on these and other areas remained limited and largely inconsequential to date, with few signs of major advancement. The reality is quite simple: Canada has not yet convinced Japan, or vice-versa, that there are shared and significant economic, defence, and security interests at stake in the Far North. Politeness and diplomatic conventions prevent both countries from speaking frankly and openly about the limited prospects for meaningful Canada-Japan collaboration in the North American Arctic. Broad, vague, and overly ambitious agreements and public statements create more paralysis than action. If Canada and Japan are to make significant contributions to the Arctic, emphasis should be placed on specific concrete initiatives, even if the resulting collaborations are unlikely to make newspaper headlines.

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6

Poland

P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Cordelia Buchanan Ponczek

“Poland, as one of stakeholders in the Arctic, cannot remain indifferent to the ongoing changes there, not only because it shares in the responsibility for those changes, but also because Poland will increasingly feel their consequences.”

Michał Łuszczuk, Piotr Graczyk, Adam Stępień, and
Małgorzata Śmieszek (2015)¹

Polish engagement in the Arctic is rooted primarily in multidisciplinary research. Poland has been actively involved in political cooperation in the Arctic region first as an observer in the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) and then in the Arctic Council as one of the first nations to gain observer status to that forum. Poland also is an observer in the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (which has been significantly disrupted and is restructuring after Russia’s withdrawal and Finland’s intention to do the same²) and is a party to the 1920 Spitsbergen (Svalbard) Treaty and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Poland is deliberate in its messaging to respect the sovereignty of the Arctic states, while simultaneously encouraging non-Arctic state cooperation (and identifying the need for better recognition and inclusion of non-state Observers). Poland has worked to develop a pragmatic dialogue of the Arctic Council chairs with state observers – the so-called Warsaw Format Meetings – which have convened regularly since 2010. The Warsaw Format is one of the few forums in which state observers have a chance to discuss problematic issues with each other and with the current leadership of the Arctic Council.³ While the Warsaw Format meetings have no decision-making authority, they function as a convening mechanism and help

to advance discussion of the Council's project and initiatives.⁴ By integrating Arctic issues into its Northern Dimension and transatlantic strategies, Poland seeks to position itself as a constructive actor in shaping cooperative frameworks for security, research, and environmental stewardship.

History

Polish Arctic policy is rooted in over a hundred years of the country's activity in the polar regions, which has encompassed scientific research, participation in various forms of international cooperation related to these regions, and economic initiatives. Polish expeditions above the Arctic Circle began in the interwar period, with the experiences from these activities forming a basis for the development of increasingly ambitious and extensive research in the Arctic and Antarctic in subsequent decades. Individuals such as Henryk Arctowski were important for establishing Poland's pre-independence role in scientific exploration.⁵ Poland acceded to the Svalbard Treaty in 1931, and its scientific presence in the Arctic region began during the Second International Polar Year in 1932 with a year-long expedition to Bear Island (1932/1933) led by Czesław Centkiewicz. Subsequent expeditions to Svalbard in 1934 and 1938 resulted in various Polish geographical names appearing on the maps of the region.⁶

Polish geological investigations began on Svalbard in 1934. Polish scientists conducted diverse stratigraphic, tectonic, sedimentological and palaeontological work, alongside detailed geological mapping, in the Hornsund area on south Spitsbergen between 1957 and 1960, in connection with the Third International Geophysical Year. To facilitate this research, the Polish Academy of Sciences built the permanent Stanisław Siedlecki Polish Polar Station in Hornsund in July 1957, which it handed over to the Governor of Svalbard for management the following year. The Station building was upgraded in 1978, and it has operated continuously since that time,⁷ with Poland also establishing a network of summer bases for university research to carry out geological, geomorphological, oceanographic, and biological research.⁸ Poland also operates the Nicolaus Copernicus University Polar Station (*Stacja Polarna Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernikamna Spirsberg-enie*), the country's northernmost research station, which has been open since 1975. Universities from Wrocław, Toruń, Poznań and Lublin, and the University of Silesia operate seasonal research bases

on Svalbard, making Poles the second largest scientific community on the archipelago after the Norwegians.⁹ Poland's research stations on Svalbard serve two important purposes: they contribute to Poland's physical Arctic presence as a regional stakeholder, and they contribute substantively to scientific research.

In anticipation of the 4th International Polar Year (2007-2009), Poland installed new means of communication (satellite links, television, Internet), new scientific instruments (including automatic weather stations, ion probes, GPS terminals, a chromatograph and new types of seismic apparatuses), and infrastructure. "The current equipment, infrastructure and living conditions at the Hornsund Polish Polar Station render it a model European research platform combining the advantages of a logistics base for continuous observations ... with those of a scientific facility housing several labs," its website boasts. "Traditional research programmes (meteorology, seismology, Earth magnetism) have gradually been supplemented with observations of the ionosphere, atmospheric electricity, UV, as well as perennial permafrost and glaciological monitoring." These activities bring "great global recognition" to Polish scientific achievements in polar research.¹⁰ Despite this ongoing "development of research infrastructure, regular scientific expeditions, the institutionalization of polar studies domestically, and mostly routine diplomatic activity internationally," the Arctic Institute notes in its country profile, "Polish authorities have not prioritized these regions in their foreign policy since the 1980s."¹¹ Accordingly, academic research on Poland's Arctic policy and interests is relatively sparse compared to other states with comparable levels of scientific and diplomatic activity.¹²

Nonetheless, there are indications that Poland sees the Arctic as a place of growing diplomatic and strategic significance. The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a position dedicated exclusively to polar issues in 2006, long held by the titular ambassador for the legal status of the Arctic and Antarctic. This facilitated the consistent participation of a Polish representative in the work of the Arctic Council and complementary efforts to strengthen Poland's position in Arctic cooperation. Concurrently, Polish diplomats and academic experts began formulating guidelines for a Polish foreign policy towards the Arctic region, presenting the preliminary "pillars" of Polish policy at Arctic Council meetings and scientific conferences. Further to this, Poland established an X (then Twitter) account ("@PolarTaskForce") to bring attention to Poland's

activities in the Arctic and in cooperation with the Arctic Council. Towards this end, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established the Task Force for Poland's Polar Policy in 2011, comprised of representatives from government agencies as well as the scientific and academic communities, to exchange information, strengthen internal cooperation, and coordinate national activities.¹³ The Polish MFA also adopted a "Strategy of Polar Research for 2017-2027" to explain the current state of Polish science and the plans for future development.¹⁴

Although cautious in defining its role in the Arctic to avoid possible perceptions that it is challenging the sovereign rights of the Arctic states, Poland actively contributes to political cooperation in the region. Since 2010, Poland has hosted the Warsaw Format meetings, a platform outside the Arctic Council's formal structures that allows the Observer States to meet amongst themselves and engage directly with the Council's Chairship via the Chair of the Senior Arctic Officials and representatives of the Arctic Council Secretariat. Although the meetings initially focused on science and ongoing polar research, Piotr Rakowski, the Senior Advisor for Arctic Policy at the Polish MFA (2017-2024), noted a discernible shift in "the Warsaw Format towards a foreign policy instrument." Poland has hosted eight meetings in its capital and, as the Arctic Council Secretariat describes, "the semi-political format has developed into a valued foreign policy instrument."¹⁵

The Committee on Polar Research and Polish Academy of Sciences oversees Polish scientific activities in the region. In 2015, eighteen scientific institutions established the Polish Polar Consortium with a mandate to enhance collaboration in polar research to improve understanding of regional environmental changes and their global effects. Poland has a research vessel, s/y *Oceania*, that is used for research expeditions in the European Arctic. Furthermore, the Polish research community is actively involved in international Arctic science cooperation via various networks (such as the International Arctic Science Committee, Sustaining Arctic Observing Networks, EU-Polarnet, and Beyond Outreach: Robotised Exploration and Mining in the Arctic Subsurface – BOREAS) and research projects.¹⁶

Poland's efforts in bringing together the non-Arctic state observers have responded to various shocks this decade. The COVID pandemic and then the seven like-minded Arctic states' "pause" in participation in official Arctic Council meetings following Russia's full-scale

invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (which many Polish sources see as a major inflection point in Poland's Arctic policy) meant a hiatus in the Warsaw Format Meeting. This left many Observers "in a state of uncertainty," Kristina Bär observed, making Poland "eager to reinvigorate the Warsaw Format as Council activities began to resume under the Norwegian Chairship." In response, Poland adopted "a more dialogue-oriented format" for the Warsaw Format Meeting in June 2024. "I see significant value in the Warsaw Format Meeting's ability to facilitate more flexible, brainstorming-oriented discussions on current and emerging issues," Rakowski noted. "It allows participants to explore and address topics that might not fit into the more formal agenda of Arctic Council meetings." In turn, this builds trust and mutual understanding amongst non-Arctic stakeholders.¹⁷ Because there are few rules and all decisions are non-binding, certain countries use it as a special platform to raise topics of particular interest to them. The most recent meeting was held in September 2025.

Poland's Arctic role has clearly evolved from a primarily scientific and research-based position to scenario in which Poland and Polish officials increasingly note the economic and geopolitical implications of involvement in Arctic affairs.¹⁸ Furthermore, Poland sees its presence and outreach in the Arctic and in Arctic policy as part of its membership in the European Union, and thus tied in part to the EU's Arctic policy and participation. In a speech to the Polish Sejm in May 2010, Under Secretary of State Jan Borkowski highlighted that the four pillars of Poland's Arctic approach supported the EU policy, with Under Secretary of State Maciej Szpunar confirming this two years later.¹⁹ The ongoing commitment to aligning Polish and EU policy has further ramifications for political, economic, and scientific interests.

Political, Economic, and Scientific Interests

Poland's political interests in the Arctic center on science diplomacy, environmental security, and multilateral engagement. Poland's four guiding pillars of Arctic policy are support for EU policy (mentioned above), compliance with existing legal regulations, cooperation with the Arctic Council, and supporting public diplomacy on Arctic issues.²⁰ It does not have any territorial claims in the region. Owing to its longstanding focus on Svalbard, Poland's closest bilateral relationship is with the Norwegians. Given Polish researchers' participation in international projects (often EU-

funded), Poland tends to prioritize multilateral collaboration in its official activities.²¹

As an Arctic Council Observer since 1998, Poland participates in Council working groups and task forces, hosts the annual Warsaw Format meetings (discussed earlier), and seeks to shape scientific and policy discussions.²² Furthermore, Poland leverages its long-standing research presence to inform and influence climate and environmental policy discussions. In turn, Poland believes that its scientific role enhances its international standing and supports its broader foreign policy objectives within the EU and NATO. Poland views the Arctic as a vital region to understand global climate change, energy security, and sustainable development, and it leverages its contributions to Arctic governance to strengthen ties with the Nordic states and to diversify its geopolitical reach. Furthermore, its contributions inform EU and NATO environmental policies and integrate Arctic issues into broader Northern Dimension initiatives.²³

In 2023, Polish experts “posit[ed] that the future of Arctic cooperation will depend not only on halting cooperation with Russia at the political level and within the Arctic Council, but also on the emergence of new competitive forms of collaboration in Arctic governance.” Michał Łuszczuk, Piotr Graczyk, Adam Stępień, and Małgorzata Śmieszek argue that

given the emerging divide between the Western and Russian blocs, the role of science diplomacy will likely increase substantially, gaining new dynamism. This suggests that Poland's Arctic policy, within its current framework, requires only minor conceptual adjustment, but a significant intensification of implementation. This means striving to achieve certain goals more quickly than originally planned, particularly regarding the enhancement of institutional and financial resources for entities involved in Polish science diplomacy in the Arctic.²⁴

In the economic sphere, Polish companies or their subsidiaries are involved in raw materials exploration and extraction activities in Canada and Greenland, hydrocarbon exploration on the Norwegian shelf, construction, shipbuilding and ship maintenance for vessels operating in Arctic conditions, and (to a limited extent) fisheries exploitation in the North Atlantic and Barents Sea. Poles also form one of the largest groups of migrants in Iceland and Norway, and represent a significant diasporic community in Canada.

Extraction projects in the Arctic region are of primary interest to Poland. Borkowski's speech to the Polish Sejm in 2011 specifically highlighted the natural resources of the Arctic, and particularly oil and gas. The Polish company ORLEN, whose primary shareholder is the Polish State Treasury (49.9%), with the other 50.1% of shares held by institutional investors including Powszechny Zakład Ubezpieczeń, Poland's largest insurance company, and PTE Allianz, a large pension fund, has significant interests in the Arctic. ORLEN has several oil and gas exploration and production licenses on the Norwegian Continental Shelf (held through ORLEN Upstream Norway, previously PGNiG Upstream Norway).²⁵ It produces around 40 million barrels of oil annually. Gas is transported to Poland via the Baltic Pipe, which assumed particular importance as Poland worked to wean itself off Russian hydrocarbons following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.²⁶ ORLEN also produces the Ekodiesel ULTRA Class 2 which is made for operating in Arctic conditions.²⁷ In 2023, it was announced that ORLEN would operate the Polaris carbon storage project in the Norwegian Barents Sea,²⁸ with the company having a 50% stake in the licence, although ORLEN withdrew from the project the next year.²⁹

An important but often overlooked component of Polish economic activity in the Arctic is the large number of Poles who are living and working in technical jobs in Norway and in oil and gas fields. These salaries and their resulting remittances are an important source of revenue for Poles living abroad (as well as their families back at home). On fishing opportunities, Poland's policy notes that Poland has interests in northern waters, given the historical Polish fishery in the Barents Sea, but that this falls under the competencies of the EU (to which Poland should defer accordingly). Poland's policy also notes the possibility for expanding the Polish shipbuilding industry to meet growing Arctic needs.³⁰

Arctic Policy

Since 2015, Polish Arctic policy has transitioned from a primarily research-focused agenda to a more formalized and integrated component of national foreign policy. This strategic shift was initially catalyzed by the 2015 expert document *Goals and Instruments of Polish Arctic Policy*, which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs commissioned from Polish academic experts. This report advocated that Poland should leverage its longstanding scientific legacy to secure regional diplomatic and geopolitical influence,³¹ and led the

Polish Council of Ministers to official adopt *From Past Expeditions to Future Challenges: Polish Polar Policy* in 2020.³² To operationalize this vision, the Polish government established the Governmental Committee for the National Polar Policy in 2022³³ to oversee inter-ministerial coordination and implement the national strategy articulated in the official policy as well as the Polish Polar Consortium's *Strategy for Polish Polar Research: A Concept for the Years 2017–2027*³⁴ and its *Polish Polar Research: Green-and-White Paper*.³⁵ One working group is dedicated specifically to the Arctic.

The documents confirm that Poland has shifted from rather fragmented and predominantly science-based Arctic engagement to a more coherent strategic polar approach embedded in Polish foreign policy. Taking cues from other European countries and recognizing that climate change and other drivers were heightening geopolitical and economic interest in the Arctic, Polish policymakers perceived the need to elevate the region as a political priority. The documents also draw clear lines between traditional areas of Polish concern (such as the Baltic Sea) and developments in the Arctic. The latter include structural frameworks such as governance, rules and norms, and legal issues, alongside more material issues such as shipping routes and access to resources.

This reprioritization is also reflected in Poland's reorganization of Arctic policy domestically. In turning to its Ministry of Foreign Affairs to bring multiple topics under one ministerial umbrella, Poland focused on horizontal coordination, including funding for science, diplomacy, environmental regulation, security topics, and economic activity, while ensuring that the MFA remains the lead coordinator for international relations.³⁶ In terms of economic development, however, the *Polska Polityka Polarna* document emphasizes Poland's caution about promoting commercial exploitation. While the country acknowledges regional economic opportunities, it seeks to avoid harming its reputation by overstepping regional environmental and international norms. This is in line with Poland's initial entry into the Arctic space as a research and scientific endeavour, and its respect for the sovereignty of the Arctic states.³⁷

Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Priorities

Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has had profound implications for Poland's security role and its relationship to other countries in the Baltic Sea region. Poland has rapidly escalated its military capabilities and defence spending since Russia's full-scale

invasion of Ukraine, emerging as NATO's top relative spender—allocating roughly 4.5% of GDP in 2025, with plans to reach 4.8% or even 5% in 2026. Its 2026 budget earmarks around €46.9 billion (~200 billion PLN), the largest defence allocation in Polish history. Warsaw is undertaking a sweeping modernization: replacing Soviet-era systems with Western equipment, acquiring 180 K2 Black Panther tanks (bringing its total to roughly 1,100), M1A2 Abrams, and K9 howitzers. It's also expanding its air combat and air-defence capabilities—buying F-35s, modernizing F-16s, adding FA-50 fighters, AH-64E Apache attack helicopters, Patriot air-defence batteries, AIM-9X Sidewinders, and AARGM-ER anti-radar missiles, as well as signing a \$780 million Javelin anti-tank missile deal. These moves reflect a determined effort to establish Poland as a cornerstone of NATO's eastern defence and deterrence posture.³⁸ Furthermore, Poland is advancing its naval modernization efforts through the purchase of three Saab A26 Blekinge-class submarines under the Orka program, alongside the commissioning of new Kormoran II-class minehunters and the development of the Ratownik support vessel.³⁹

Poland has approximately 530 kilometers of Baltic Sea coastline, bordered to the north by the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad. This access to the Baltic Sea is a source of economic security in terms of facilitating flows of energy, commerce, and trade, as well as a source of security concern. It leads leading regional security initiatives through its current presidency of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (until June 2026) and by advancing major infrastructure projects like the Via Baltica and offshore energy corridors that link Central Europe with the Nordic-Baltic region. Given that “all the CBSS countries are now the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation members,” the Polish MFA suggests that “it appears natural to use the CBSS as a useful space for discussing pressing security issues in the region, complementary to NATO and its structures, also on ad-hoc basis.”⁴⁰

Poland serves as a strategic anchor connecting the Baltic Sea to the European High North, seeing the regions as distinct but interconnected operational theaters. This stance is reinforced by NATO's regional defence plans and Joint Force Command (JFC) structure: while the other European Nordic countries (including new NATO members Finland and Sweden) are housed at Norfolk, Poland is at Brunssum. There is perhaps a tacit but not publicly-discussed understanding that, in the event of a kinetic war with Russia, Poland

would focus on Kaliningrad and Belarus, rather than any territory in the European High North/Arctic.⁴¹

RAND analysts note that the strategic environment in the Baltic Sea region has evolved significantly since 2022, characterized by escalating NATO-Russia tensions following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO, thereby expanding the direct NATO-Russia border and increasing the vulnerability of critical civilian infrastructure and undersea cables to Russian aggression.⁴² From worries of sabotage, such as GPS jamming and vessel conflicts associated with the “dark” or “shadow” fleet, to the threats of open kinetic conflict, Poland believes that it must be ready, along with other NATO allies on the Baltic Sea, to meet Russian actions. The rise of uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs) and underwater drones poses new threats and risks for Poland to handle in concert with European and NATO allies.⁴³ Lessons that Poland has learned from managing hybrid or gray zone activities in the Baltic Sea may also inform how NATO approaches protecting Arctic waters (although sabotage in the Baltic Sea relates to its unique operating environment, including its shallowness).

Poland’s military is primarily a land-based fighting force, but it has taken on several initiatives to enhance its maritime readiness and regional cooperation in the Baltic Sea. In late 2024, Prime Minister Donald Tusk proposed joint naval patrols with the Baltic and Nordic countries to complement NATO’s air patrols by sharing surveillance, collaborating to monitor and secure maritime zones, responding to threats, and ensuring the security of critical infrastructure. Poland’s “*Safe Baltic*” Act, signed into law in January 2026, significantly expands the operational powers of the Polish Navy, Border Guard, and other security services operating at sea and in adjacent airspace to protect critical maritime infrastructure and respond to hybrid threats. The legislation authorizes military forces to engage hostile targets in international waters and authorizes proactive measures to secure energy links and subsea assets.⁴⁴

Polish policy conveys a clear sense that its security comes from alliances and partnerships as well as investment in its own defence. Its contemporary security doctrine positions its membership in NATO as the foundational cornerstone of national defence, wherein the alliance’s collective deterrence framework (bolstered by the Article 5 mutual defence guarantee) serves as the primary institutional mechanism to safeguard Polish territorial integrity against revisionist threats. While NATO provides the multilateral framework for

collective security, Poland's Enhanced Forward Presence is significantly augmented by a robust bilateral "strategic partnership" with the United States, which it has actively courted (and protected) across US administrations. Of note, Poland is the first ally to fully operationalize Integrated Battle Command System (IBCS), which allows for real-time, multi-domain interoperability and seamless data fusion with allied command-and-control networks. This significantly enhancing NATO's eastern flank with advanced, integrated air defence capabilities.⁴⁵ Poland also is tightening ties with the NB8 (Nordic-Baltic Eight) countries, which commentators point to as a logical response to changing geopolitical realities that could reorient its foreign policy from a purely Central European focus to a Northern European one as well.⁴⁶

Poland has proved to be a reliable partner to European Arctic countries. In 2021, the Polish Air Force sent four F-16s and 140 people to the Keflavík Air Base for the NATO Icelandic Air Policing mission – the first time Poland participated.⁴⁷ In 2025, it deployed its HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket System) to Finland to participate in the NORTHERN STRIKE 25-2 exercise; this was another first for Poland, as it was the first time that Polish artillery operated in Arctic conditions.⁴⁸ To advance NATO interoperability, Poland has procured its Naval Strike Missile (NSM) Coastal Defence System from Norway's Kongsberg Defence & Aerospace. Although the system is focused on coastal defence of the Baltic Sea, it must be considered in light of an overarching mission to signal deterrence to Russia. Furthermore, Polish naval aviators and naval units are part of the ongoing NATO-led operations in the GIUK gap, including participation in the DYNAMIC MONGOOSE anti-submarine warfare (ASW) exercise hosted by the Icelandic Coast Guard and led by NATO Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM).⁴⁹ This includes Polish SH-2G Super Seasprite helicopters from the 43rd Naval Aviation Base in Gdynia, in the north of Poland on the Baltic Sea. The goal was to monitor Russian submarine activity. The Polish navy has occasionally taken on joint exercises in the Barents Sea, and it has an active presence in the Norwegian Sea and the North Sea as a part of naval standing groups.⁵⁰ In 2025, Poland's National Security Bureau (*Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego* – BBN) announced that Polish sailors would participate in patrols in the Baltic Sea, North Sea, Norwegian Sea, and the Atlantic Ocean.⁵¹ When thinking about NATO activities in the Arctic and High North regions, Poland will surely continue to take part, if just for token experience and presence, so long as this

remains an area of responsibility and focus for allies. Finally, Poland special forces train to deploy to the Arctic, and its winter warfare battalion (the 22nd Mountain Infantry Battalion) can operate in the region.⁵²

In short, Poland supports a Northern European focus as a means to contain Russia and protect the Baltic Sea. While it lacks the same Arctic-specific NATO posture or missions as the European Arctic countries and some non-Arctic state allies, it seeks to balance its commitment of military resources on the Eastern Flank with support to the NB8, with a primary intent on preventing a fundamental rupture in the transatlantic bond. This is salient in light of Trump's aggressive rhetoric regarding Greenland, which has tested NATO solidarity.

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interests with Canada

Canada and Poland share a strong mutual interest in Arctic scientific research and environmental stewardship. Poland's deep, historical research footprint provides a solid foundation for collaboration with Canada. Both nations recognize the importance of research, including Indigenous-led and community-based approaches in the Canadian context, to better understand and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Both countries also share common ground in their approach to Arctic governance and security, advocating for a rules-based international order and stability in the region. Their ongoing cooperation within multilateral fora such as the Arctic Council, the United Nations system, and NATO, promotes dialogue and shared principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The two countries' shared interests also extend to economic cooperation and energy security, particularly in the context of sustainable development and clean energy. Both nations aim to strengthen energy security and the clean energy transition, promoting industrial partnerships in areas such as critical minerals, offshore wind, and nuclear energy. A significant recent example is their agreement to collaborate on small modular reactor (SMR) technology, with Poland closely monitoring Canada's progress in deploying the first operational SMR in a G7 country.⁵³ This cooperation not only supports their respective economic interests but also contributes to developing effective responses to global challenges like climate change through technological innovation.

Issues of Divergence or Potential Concern

The Polish government supports the strategic integration of Northern and Eastern flank security, but recent exchanges between the government under Prime Minister Tusk, which tends to prioritize the EU and European issues, and President Karol Nawrocki, who advocates closer ties to the US, reveals divergent political opinion in that country. The Trump Administration's declared intentions to acquire Greenland by any means necessary, without ruling out the use of military force, links this debate to the Arctic, with the Greenland debacle threatening to open a major rift in NATO which would place Poland in a precarious position.

Prime Minister Tusk warned that a U.S. intervention in another NATO member's territory would be "the end of the world as we know it" and a "political disaster" for NATO solidarity.⁵⁴ Tusk drafted and signed a statement with Denmark's Prime Minister and leaders from Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and the UK, which warned US President Trump against taking steps to harm Greenland's sovereignty.⁵⁵ By contrast, when asked about the situation in a BBC interview, President Nawrocki said that the matter should remain between the prime minister of Denmark and President Trump.⁵⁶ In the same interview, Nawrocki emphasized that only Trump can stop Putin, and he emphasized that the United States was the key security guarantor to Europe. The Polish president referred to the US as his country's "very important ally" and he called on western European leaders to tone down their objections to Trump's conduct.⁵⁷ Polish Defence Minister Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz also rationalized that Poland would not send troops to Greenland in order to "preserve the unity of the alliance" amid escalating tensions, given that "there is no NATO without the United States, and no US strength without NATO." Responding to criticism from some military figures, including retired General Roman Polko, who called Poland's stance one of "cowardice," Kosiniak-Kamysz defended the decision as strategic. "There is no need for emotional reactions," he insisted. "Poland will continue to support allied relations and do all it can to prevent rifts within NATO."⁵⁸

In the current Greenland situation, both Canada and Poland emphasize respect for the rule of law and international norms, holding out hope for a diplomatic solution. But the Trump Administration's insistence on a perceived imperative to own Greenland, which Denmark and Greenland consider a "red line," could pose an existential threat to the future of NATO. Polish Deputy

Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski has stated that Poland will do “everything in our power to ensure NATO is not divided” over escalating tensions with respect to Greenland, suggesting that joint military exercises are a better way to address security concerns than territorial conquests. “Poland values the alliance with the US, and we also value and like Denmark, which is a key ally in the Baltic Sea region,” he emphasized. “Without the US, NATO lacks key capabilities, such as nuclear arms or global reconnaissance. The Baltic Sea is currently almost a NATO sea, where Denmark guards the Danish Straits.”⁵⁹ Thus, although Canada and Poland both support the Kingdom of Denmark’s territorial sovereignty,⁶⁰ there could be a divergence between the countries’ positions on how much to criticize the United States if it escalates the political crisis or decides to take the island using military force. In short, Poland fears for its safety because of its relative proximity to Russia and reliance on the US nuclear deterrent, and thus may prioritize its relationship with the US over its common interests with Canada in an emergency.

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7

India

Marc Lanteigne

“India has a significant stake in the Arctic. It is one of thirteen nations holding Observer status in the Arctic Council, a high-level intergovernmental forum that addresses issues faced by the Arctic governments and the indigenous people of the Arctic. India’s engagement with the Arctic region has been consistent and multidimensional. The country maintains that all human activity should be sustainable, responsible, transparent, and based on respect for international laws.”

Press Release by the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
17 March 2022¹

As one of the five “Asia-Arctic” states that were granted accredited Observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013,² India has sought to distinguish itself from the other four by emphasizing its history of scientific endeavours, not only in the Arctic but also in Antarctica and in the Himalayan region, the latter of which has frequently been referred to as the “Third Pole” given the region’s cryospheric conditions. India, along with neighbouring states such as Bhutan, Nepal and Pakistan, have maintained that the Himalaya Mountains, including the Hindu Kush, are also facing the acute effects of climate change in the form of ice erosion and changes to local weather conditions, including monsoons, which have an effect on temperature patterns, human activities, and the availability of food and fresh water supplies in South Asia.³ Beyond region-level concerns, New Delhi has been seeking recognition in the Arctic as a regional stakeholder, while seeking a delicate balance between the Arctic states’ governments and other major non-Arctic regional players. Indian officials have been making extensive use of

governmental and non-governmental regimes, including Track II mechanisms, to develop and promote a distinct Arctic identity.

India is seeking to gain respectability as an Arctic stakeholder, one which can make specific contributions to knowledge and development in the Circumpolar North. The country's diplomatic space in the Arctic, however, has been limited by several factors, including other non-Arctic states competing for stakeholder status,⁴ and particularly the rise of China as a regional competitor in Arctic affairs, as well as diplomatic divisions between Russia and the West in the wake of Moscow's full invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. Thus, India has been seeking an Arctic status based primarily on its scientific expertise and its concentration on Arctic sustainable development. As with other non-Arctic states seeking regional recognition, India has nonetheless found it difficult to compartmentalize the Arctic from foreign and strategic policies elsewhere. As a case in point, New Delhi's attempts to pursue a *de facto* policy of neutrality towards Moscow, as well as maintain a stable fossil fuel trade with Russia in the wake of global energy instability in the opening months of 2022,⁵ have complicated Indian policies of pursuing "whole of Arctic" diplomacy as Western mistrust of Russian⁶ and Chinese motives in the Arctic deepens.

History

India's history in the Arctic has been significantly shorter than that of several European Observers in the Arctic Council. India signed the Svalbard Treaty in 1920 while the country was still under British administration, but its modern Arctic engagement did not commence until after the turn of this century.⁷ Some Indian commentators argue, however, that the country's engagement of the Arctic could be traced back many centuries further to historical links between Indian peoples and Arctic travels, which have been a staple of Indian historical literature.⁸ In the modern era, Antarctica initially assumed higher prominence in India's developing polar interests. India's first Antarctic expedition took place in late 1981, under guarded conditions, and the country also became a consultative party to the Antarctic Treaty System in 1983. It opened two Antarctic bases, *Maitri* and *Bharati*, in 1989 and 2012 respectively, while also maintaining a supply base on the continent at the decommissioned station *Dakshin Gangotri*.⁹

The country undertook its first expedition to Svalbard in 2007, with the intention of studying local maritime conditions, flora and fauna,

and pollution. India promptly established its first Arctic research station, *Himadri*, at Ny-Ålesund in Svalbard the following year, seeking to secure recognition as a research actor in addition to its Arctic science and technology interests.¹⁰ At both poles, India has developed research agendas that are heavily tilted towards enhancing understanding of climate change on Indian environmental and socio-economic interests.

India's saw its securing of Observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013 as confirmation that Arctic States perceived it as a legitimate regional actor. After the decision was made, the Norwegian Foreign Minister informed the newly accredited Observers that "there is no such thing as a free lunch" and they would not be able to simply rely on regional credentials or expect a voice in the Council out of proportion to their contributions.¹¹ India's admission process succeeded despite diplomatic obstacles presented by soured Danish-India relations at the time, in the aftermath of an extradition dispute related to the 1995 "Purulia Arms Drop" affair, as well as Canadian misgivings about the growing throng of Observers diluting Arctic sovereignty and the rights of the Permanent Participants, fearing that this could prove the "thin edge of the wedge" towards an internationalization of Arctic governance.¹²

In advocating for an accredited Observer position, India, like the other applicants, needed to stress its interest in scientific cooperation and links between Arctic climate change and Indian scholarship. New Delhi responded by framing its Arctic engagement as in keeping with a responsible emerging power, while noting that many environmental threats in the Arctic were directly affecting local Indian weather patterns (especially monsoon patterns and seasons which are studied as being adversely affected by the erosion of the Arctic ice cap), as well as risks to coastal populations from global sea level rise.¹³ Indian commentators also acknowledged that their country still had a long road ahead in widening and deepening its polar research agenda, having to overcome domestic obstacles such as adequate funding and the need for a dedicated polar research vessel. The latter point was addressed in 2025 when the Indian government signed a memorandum of understanding with Norway's Kongsberg Maritime to construct a polar-capable research ship. India has also discussed joint icebreaker construction initiatives with Russia.¹⁴

Between India's achievement of accredited Observer status in 2013 and the publication of its first governmental white paper on the

Arctic nine years later (a draft version had surfaced online in late 2020, and was opened up for public comments),¹⁵ India engaged the Arctic with the characteristics of an ‘all-round’ observer with a disparate research agenda.¹⁶ Unlike other Asia-Arctic players who have at times sought to coordinate their Arctic research efforts (namely China, Japan and South Korea), India has taken a page from Singapore in developing a more unilateral approach to Arctic engagement.

Political, Economic, and Scientific Interests

Given India’s enduring regional rivalries with China and Pakistan, the security situation in the Indian Ocean, as well as being adjacent to the unstable political milieu in Southwest Asia, the country inhabits a difficult strategic and diplomatic neighbourhood. The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has sought to chart a careful balance between China, Russia, and the United States on a global level, and it now grapples with the complexities of closer alignment with Beijing as relations with Washington continue to cool.¹⁷ While the polar regions have never been a foreign policy priority for New Delhi, India has begun to write up a more extensive list of strategic priorities in keeping with its potential great power status. As the country’s foreign interests have become more multi-dimensional and multi-regional, India increasingly views the Arctic as an important stepping stone to being accepted as a great power player.

The Asian observers in the Arctic Council share a joint interest in better understanding the changed environmental conditions in the far north and their local and global effects, the economic opportunities being created as a result of the opening of the Arctic, and the potential for geopolitical cooperation and completion in the region.¹⁸ Unlike other Asian governments interested in developing robust Arctic engagement policies, New Delhi also had comparatively less direct interest than China, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea in the development of Arctic maritime shipping routes, given India’s geographical position in South Asia.

Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to suggest that New Delhi perceives no stake in developing Arctic shipping, given the potential economic benefits of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) connecting northeast Asia to Northern Europe, as well as concerns about balancing Beijing, which has made the NSR a tenet of its own Arctic strategies since 2017, as well as maintaining a strong relationship

with Russia both bilaterally and via organizations like the BRICS+ group.¹⁹ Russia, in seeking to diversify its Arctic partnerships, has also been receptive to increased regional cooperation with India. New Delhi has adopted a *de facto* neutrality policy towards the Vladimir Putin regime since 2022, and has benefitted from energy diplomacy in form of discounted oil imports from Russia, while declining to directly condemn Russia's invasions of Ukraine.²⁰ As well, any future Indian presence in the NSR is also seen as being highly dependent on Indian-Russian goodwill.

As for China, Beijing has thus far reacted to India's Arctic ambitions with caution, reflecting wariness of India seeking to leverage its strategies in the far north to advance its aspirations for great power status. Some Chinese commentators have suggested that New Delhi's attempts to develop an Arctic hedging policy between the West and Russia may not be viable in the long term, especially given the additional aftereffects of the post-2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine which further limits India's reach in the far north. One Chinese research paper also referred to New Delhi's limited "participation capacity," arguing that it cannot match other Arctic Observers in developing a robust research and economic presence in the region. The author also noted that there was room for Indian Arctic interests within greater Asia-Russia cooperation, as long as India does not seek to leverage its polar interests to become an Asia-Pacific "fulcrum."²¹ In short, China has expressed a preference for Indian Arctic policy to be multilateral in scope, and to not lean too close to Western interests.

A 2024 comment by a retired Indian military officer suggested that India could make effective use of its Russia ties in the Arctic to ensure that China would not develop an overly dominant role in the far north. Moreover, India views the Russian Arctic as a key source of both fossil fuels and strategic materials, both of which took on new urgency after the US targeted New Delhi with extensive tariffs during 2025, and then placed India at risk of energy crises by launching its early 2026 war in Iran.²²

In addition to the Himadri facilities overseen by the National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR), India's research interests in the Arctic have developed in new directions. In 2014, India's first multi-sensor moored observatory for underwater testing in relation to local climate change conditions, IndARC, was deployed in Kongsfjorden, western Svalbard, and an atmospheric laboratory opened at Gruvebadet, Ny-Ålesund, two years later.²³ India's

participation in the Arctic Council's working groups has focussed primarily on the Arctic Migratory Birds Initiative (AMBI) within the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF) working group. New Delhi has supported the Central and East Asian Flyways initiative through the AMBI, as well as monitoring initiatives and crackdowns on illegal hunting of migratory birds. Amongst other Indian initiatives within the working groups, the Gruvebadet Station has been active in collecting information about black carbon and methane emissions, in conjunction with the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP) working group, and Indian researchers have been active in various initiatives to study local marine pollutants.²⁴ Much of this work seeks to understand connections between Arctic climate change and direct and indirect effects on weather and monsoon patterns in South Asia.

Although the Indian government continues to prioritize scientific diplomacy in the Arctic, it has not been ignorant of the growing security concerns in the far north stemming from the possibility of intensified competition over access and resources, as well as the potential for spillover of great power competition into the region. Much of India's current Arctic thinking has fixated on Chinese interests there, as well as the degree to which Indian Arctic affairs could and should align with Russia's. Accordingly, Indian Arctic policy can be viewed as reactive, but also reflecting New Delhi's interests in ensuring that the country is not excluded from the Arctic as the region falls under an ever-brighter global spotlight.

Arctic Policy

As elucidated in India's 2022 government *White Paper on the Arctic*²⁵ (the only document of its type to be published by India thus far), New Delhi has sought a comprehensive approach to the far north based on six pillars: science and research, climate and environmental protection, economic and human development, transportation and connectivity, governance and international cooperation, and national capacity building. As the *White Paper* describes, along with Third Pole / cryosphere research connections, the Indian government seeks to understand how climate change in the Arctic may affect specific areas of Indian geography including glacier melting, a rise in coastal water levels, and radical changes in rainfall patterns which may affect critical agriculture. This particular research was to be carried in out under the aegis of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, and also within the

framework of developing and protecting the Indian economy under the *Aatmanirbhar Bharat* self-reliance philosophy unveiled by the Modi government in 2020.²⁶ The Arctic is seen as affecting the Indian economy both in terms of potential damage caused by climate change and ice erosion, as well as presenting possibilities in terms of potential new resources and transit routes.

In addition to environmental studies, India also views the Arctic as a primary component of its expanded space programme, including the use of satellites to monitor the areas around the North Pole and satellite-based communication that benefits people living or working in the region.²⁷ Like China, India insists that non-Arctic governments can and should play a significant role in far northern affairs, given the opening up of the Arctic and concerns about local environmental and geopolitical risks there. Similar to China, India's policies towards the Polar Regions are designed to promote its aspirations as a nascent great power.

New Delhi's Arctic strategy was released at a time when the region was adversely affected by geopolitical forces that have weakened regional institutions, including the Arctic Council, and raise the spectre of the Arctic becoming politically balkanized between Russia and the West. As a result, India has not only attempted to promote science diplomacy in the far north, but also has expressed interest in being a policy bridge between the "NATO Arctic" on one side and "Russia + friends" on the other. Striking this balance is further complicated by Russian interests in diversifying its Arctic partners away from an overdependence on Chinese expertise and financing by encouraging other members of the BRICS+ group and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as Russia's "friends," to play greater roles in Moscow-led Arctic policies.²⁸

India is a founding member of the BRICS+ and became a full member of the SCO in 2017. As one research article explained, the BRICS+ has the potential to be a platform for cooperation between large state members (China, India, Russia) in areas of resource exploration, co-development of the NSR as a major maritime trade corridor, and to act as an incubator for deepening joint educational and scientific initiatives, consistent with the 2020 Moscow Declaration which encouraged the development of avenues for joint research of various types between members. The group has also been framed as contributing to alternative forms of governance, including in the Arctic, and promoting transportation and connectivity enterprises.²⁹ The recently expanded BRICS+ has

especially been interested in deepening its research footprint in the Arctic, as evidenced in a May 2025 meeting in Brasília of the Working Group on Polar and Ocean Science and Technology, which included specialists from India as well as Russia and China, and addressed methods of “South-South” maritime research cooperation at both poles. Moscow has also expressed interest in bilateral research initiatives with India in the Arctic Ocean.³⁰

India’s Arctic policy will continue to reflect hard scientific interests along with economic and strategic concerns, as well as Indian pursuit of new diplomatic conduits in a region which New Delhi acknowledges to be of rising importance. There are several variables which the country will have to address in the near term, starting with the state of Arctic diplomacy in the wake of strained relations between Russia and the West, and the possibility of further political cracks between the United States in Europe over NATO policy. A fracturing of Arctic governance on the regional level may leave outsiders like India little choice but to pursue more bilateral forms of Arctic engagement, and may also increase the attractiveness of Russia-led Arctic regimes including the BRICS+.

Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Policies

As a non-Arctic state, India has avoided developing concrete policies regarding Arctic security, and unlike China has eschewed the deployment of military assets in the far north. The country’s 2022 White Paper did not specifically mention Arctic security, while noting that the region included “sovereign jurisdictions” as well as areas covered by international laws and treaties. The paper also stressed India’s support for legal regimes in the region, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and the need for India to promote “security and stability,” as well as advocating for further communication with key regional actors. Indian views on Arctic security tends to frame dynamics in terms of how great power politics may affect the region and how India’s interests may be affected.³¹ A more politically fractured Arctic and further “securitization” of the region by Arctic state governments will complicate Indian interests in understanding climate change risks and gaining access to the far north’s raw materials.³²

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interests

Canada and India have both recognized the changing nature of the Arctic in terms of both environmental security and geopolitics, and

both have professed an interest in ensuring that region remains stable and offers space for scientific collaboration, including combatting climate change, ice erosion, and local pollution, all of which have demonstrated effects well beyond the Arctic. Given that science diplomacy has been a core interest of India since its Arctic policies first emerged, it is likely to continue as a priority for New Delhi, and there are several pillars in India's *Arctic White Paper* which could potentially benefit from Canadian partnerships and information sharing.

In light of the growing divisions in Arctic governance on the Track I (governmental) level, there has been a growing enthusiasm in Indian policy circles towards making expanded use of Track II mechanisms to demonstrate Indian expertise in the far north and to coordinate with other Arctic and non-Arctic actors, including fellow "Asia-Arctic" specialists and policymakers. This was seen in recent breakout forums overseen by the Arctic Circle Assembly, including the March 2023 conference in Tokyo which highlighted various areas of Asia-Arctic diplomacy, as well as the Abu Dhabi Forum in January of that year which placed a strong focus on the Third Pole concept and featured scientists from India, other South Asian states, and the United Arab Emirates.³³ As with other forms of Track II diplomacy, these fora offer space for dialogues about issues that, given current political sensitivities, remain difficult to address on the state-to-state level.

The May 2025 Arctic Circle India Forum in New Delhi was, in many ways, the country's "coming out party" as a contributor to Arctic scientific and research discourses. Keynote speakers to that event included Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishenkar, Rear Admiral T.V.N. Prasanna (a frequent speaker at Arctic Circle events), and representatives from the Indian Parliament, the Ministry of Earth Sciences, and the Indian Council of World Affairs. In his remarks, Minister Jaishenkar noted India's challenges in developing an Arctic policy while military security concerns persist, while advocating for "Russia realism" in dealing with Moscow in the Arctic going forward. This logic emphasizes pragmatism and renewed communications, rooted in the notion that engaging Russia will produce better results than isolation –with India seeking the role of interlocutor.³⁴ The outbreak of a four-day conflict between India and Pakistan as the conference was drawing to a close³⁵ underscored how broader geopolitical issues are always in play.

Indo-Canadian relations have been improving after a period of cooled relations since September 2023, and both governments have responded well to the possibility of “recalibration” based on mutual interests in Asia-Pacific security and economic development.³⁶ Track II activities could offer opportunities for specialists from the two countries to coordinate and cooperate on Arctic policy, especially in areas related to climate change and marine pollution. This could also be extended into the Arctic Council’s working groups. India stands to benefit from Canadian efforts to develop its strategic materials sector, including rare earth extraction, and bilateral confidence-building measures (as well as Canadian efforts to diversify the country’s diplomatic initiatives in Asia) could make use of Arctic cooperation as one entry point.

Areas of Divergence or Concern

The major area of policy divergence between Canada and India in the Arctic involve questions about how close the latter’s Arctic policies will align with Russia and Russia-influenced organizations like the BRICS+. India has maintained that Russia, as the largest Arctic state, will need to be re-engaged in the near term on matters of importance to the entire Circumpolar North, including economic and environmental issues. India’s neutrality policy towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine stands at odds with the Canadian policy of isolating the Putin regime and seeking to counter Russian aggression in the Arctic.

As detailed in Ottawa’s 2024 *Canadian Arctic Foreign Policy*, the political and strategic divisions between Russia and Canada along with its NATO allies make it “exceedingly difficult” for any sort of bilateral cooperation to be possible, including in the Arctic.³⁷ The statement also notes that Moscow has been willing to engage in below threshold operations in the Arctic, including disinformation campaigns, and has shed its previous unwillingness to allow non-Arctic states to have a raised presence in the far north, especially given Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation since the development of the “Polar Silk Road” concept almost a decade ago.

India has been comparatively less prone to seeing Moscow as a threat in the Arctic, and continues to support civilian cooperation with Russian interests. Unlike China, however, which has been partnering with Russia in joint military and civilian (coast guard) manoeuvres including in the Pacific-Arctic, there is little indication that India seeks any sort of military presence in the Arctic. At present,

much of Indian hard security interests lie squarely within South Asia and the fragile situation with Pakistan, as well as the Indian Ocean and the possibility of blowback from the unstable power situation in Southwest Asia and the Gulf Region in early 2026.³⁸ Furthermore, India is unwilling to risk its current Arctic policies, which are based on cooperation development, by aligning militarily with Russia in the region. Moreover, there is still uncertainty about how closer Arctic relations between Russia and China will affect Indian interests there. Accordingly, it would be premature to assume that a potential Arctic troika (Beijing-Moscow-New Delhi) is in the making. Another area of divergence revolves around persistent Canadian concerns about Arctic sovereignty and the “primacy” of the Arctic states in regional decision making. In official statements, India has not challenged the Arctic sovereignty of Canada or other Arctic states, and has not questioned the integrity of laws, rules, and norms in the region. Although Canada is more open than was it fifteen years ago to engaging non-Arctic states in Circumpolar Northern affairs (even referencing the “Pacific Arctic” in recent policy statements),³⁹ Canada remains reticent to embrace any internationalization of Arctic governance. India, while sharing Canada’s concern that the Arctic cannot be insulated from geopolitical threats, is an increasingly vigorous proponent for non-Arctic states to participate more fully in future dialogues regarding regional governance, especially on economic and environmental issues that have global implications.

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8

Republic of Korea

Peter Huang

“The polar regions are far away from our country, but polar activities are close to us.”

Cho Seung-hwan, Former Minister of Oceans and Fisheries (2022)¹

Since initiating its involvement through science-led activities in the early 1990s, the Republic of Korea (ROK) has progressively transformed its Arctic approach into a comprehensive and strategically integrated framework embedded within its broader national development and foreign policy objectives. While Seoul remains a non-Arctic state, its sustained contributions to scientific research, expanding diplomatic footprint, and growing industrial capabilities have enabled it to position itself as a credible and increasingly influential stakeholder within Arctic governance structures.

The ROK’s Arctic engagement reflects a clear progression from science-led participation toward strategically integrated statecraft. What began as an effort to build credibility through polar research has evolved into a multidimensional approach that connects scientific contribution, economic ambition, and geopolitical positioning to steadily incorporate the Arctic into Seoul’s broader national strategy. Although recent geopolitical disruptions, particularly the suspension of cooperation with Russia, have constrained certain pathways, they have not altered the core logic of Seoul’s Arctic approach. Instead, they have accelerated a shift toward diversification of partners, capabilities, and trade routes, reinforcing the Arctic’s role in expanding the ROK’s strategic autonomy in a more uncertain global environment.

The ROK's Arctic engagement is not confined to the region itself, but instead reflects a broader strategic calculus aimed at enhancing supply chain resilience, securing access to energy and critical minerals, and expanding its role as a middle power in global governance. This outward-facing, opportunity-driven approach differs from Canada's more sovereignty- and security-oriented Arctic posture, yet the two are not inherently incompatible. Rather, their respective priorities create a basis for strategic complementarity.

While differences in strategic outlook and geopolitical positioning persist between Canada and the ROK, the depth of existing ties and the convergence of interests in areas such as scientific research, environmental governance, and Arctic-enabling capabilities present significant opportunities for partnership. As the Arctic becomes increasingly integrated into global economic and geopolitical dynamics, cooperation between Canada and the ROK offers a pathway to strengthen shared interests while reinforcing a stable and rules-based regional order.

History

The ROK's engagement in the Arctic can be periodized into two distinct phases, demarcated by its accession to the Arctic Council as a Permanent Observer in 2013. The pre-2013 phase, beginning in the early 1990s, served as a formative stage during which ROK's Arctic activities consisted primarily of scientific research and exploration, investment in polar infrastructure, and participation in international polar research networks, closely mirroring its earlier experience in Antarctica.² Across both polar regions, the ROK adopted a sequenced approach—science-led engagement first, capability development next—through which it cultivated credibility and legitimacy as a “functional” non-Arctic stakeholder. By 2013, more than two decades of continuous engagement in Arctic science and cooperative frameworks had generated sufficient diplomatic trust and institutional embeddedness to secure unanimous support from Arctic Council member states for Permanent Observer status.³

The ROK's admission to the Arctic Council in 2013 marked the onset of a qualitatively distinct phase in its Arctic engagement. Permanent Observer status formalized Seoul's participation in the Council's working groups and deliberative processes, facilitating direct input on environmental, scientific, and economic matters to advance its interests. Consequently, in the post-2013 period, the scope and ambition of the ROK's Arctic engagement expanded

considerably. Seoul deepened its participation in Arctic governance mechanisms, intensified its diplomatic outreach with both Arctic and non-Arctic states, and proactively hosted and participated in high-level intergovernmental forums.

More fundamentally, the prospect of ROK's entry into the Arctic Council incentivized Seoul to adopt a coordinated, whole-of-government policy approach toward the region. Prior to 2013, the ROK's Arctic activities proceeded in the absence of a comprehensive Arctic strategy and remained largely science driven. Since 2013, however, ROK's engagement in the Arctic has become mission-driven, reflective of the ROK's expanded political, economic, and environmental interests as reflected in *Arctic Policy for the Republic of Korea*.⁴ As questions surrounding emerging Arctic shipping lanes, energy and resource access, and climate governance gained prominence, successive administrations integrated Arctic considerations into broader national development and foreign policy frameworks. The result has been the gradual transformation of the Arctic from a peripheral site into a recognized strategic domain within Seoul's grand strategic calculus.

Under Park Geun-hye (2013-17), the ROK's Arctic engagement expanded markedly in both scope and institutional sophistication.⁵ Within the Arctic Council, ROK officials regularly attended Ministerial and SAO meetings and deployed a pool of forty experts across approximately ten working groups and task forces. Beyond multi-lateral engagement, Seoul institutionalized bilateral consultative meetings with Arctic states, including Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Russia. Notably, alongside the signing of the Korea-Canada FTA in 2015, Seoul and Ottawa agreed to expand cooperation into energy technology and Arctic research.⁶ That same year, Seoul appointed its first Ambassador for Arctic Affairs, signaling the elevation of Arctic diplomacy within the foreign policy apparatus.⁷ In 2016, Seoul initiated and hosted the inaugural Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic with China and Japan, institutionalizing Northeast Asian coordination on Arctic governance.⁸ Informally, it intensified participation in major Arctic forums, including Iceland's Arctic Circle Assembly, and launched its very own Arctic Partnership Week in Busan as a multi-stakeholder platform linking government, industry, and academia.

Park's successor, President Moon Jae-in, sustained, broadened, and further institutionalized ROK's Arctic engagement. Building on Seoul's 2013 Observer Status, his administration deepened

participation across the Arctic Council's Working Groups, Task Forces, and Expert Groups while expanding the pool of Korean experts engaged through the Korea Arctic Experts Network (KAEN). The ROK hosted the Arctic Circle Forum and institutionalized Arctic Partnership Week in Busan as recurring venues for Arctic dialogue; launched the Arctic Club in Korea to convene Arctic-state ambassadors for policy consultation; and continued trilateral coordination with China and Japan. Its expanding diplomatic and commercial footprint was also reinforced through parallel legal and normative commitments. On the international level, ROK reinforced its commitment to rules-based governance by signing the 2018 Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean (CAOFA)⁹ and later ratifying it, aligning its distant-water fishing capacity with precautionary, science-first regulatory norms.

These institutional and legal developments were underpinned by a suite of forward-looking policy frameworks. The second *Arctic Policy Master Plan (2018–2022)* shifted the language of engagement from preparatory participation to operational implementation;¹⁰ the *Polar Vision 2050*,¹¹ announced in 2018, articulated South Korea's aspiration to become a leading "polar-contribution country"; and the release of the *2050 Arctic Activities Strategy*¹² in 2021 introduced a long-term statecraft-oriented roadmap grounded in tailored bilateral cooperation, governance participation, sustainable development, and institutional consolidation. Taken together, Moon's tenure marked the transition of ROK Arctic policy from legitimacy-seeking observer conduct toward legislatively embedded, economically integrated, and strategically articulated middle-power engagement within the evolving architecture of Arctic governance.

In contrast to the more pronounced shifts in the economic and cooperation pillars, the scientific research and capacity-building directions reflect a greater degree of policy continuity accompanied by institutional deepening. In the *2013–2017 Master Plan*, scientific priorities centered on expanding research at the *Dasan Station*, using the icebreaker RV *Araon* for comprehensive Arctic Ocean research, strengthening climate modeling capabilities, and conducting feasibility studies for a second research icebreaker, alongside building observation systems for permafrost and environmental change.¹³ The *2018–2022 Framework* retains this science-led orientation but advances it through greater systems integration and applied output, including establishing an integrated Arctic environmental observation system linking ocean, satellite, and land

platforms; developing a polar climate prediction system and climate forecast services; and promoting construction of a next-generation research icebreaker.¹⁴ Similarly, while the first plan emphasized providing legal groundwork for polar cooperation and building a Polar Information Service Center, the second moves toward legal codification and long-term architectural consolidation by enacting the *Act on Promoting Activities in the Polar Region, developing a Comprehensive Polar Plan* covering both Arctic and Antarctic engagement, strengthening KoARC and education networks, and expanding public outreach.

Political, Economic, and Scientific Interests

The ROK's interests in the Arctic are multidimensional and extend beyond the region itself. Seoul perceives the High North not only as a frontier region of growing geopolitical significance, but also as a strategic platform through which it advances its wider ambitions. Seoul's Arctic engagement should therefore be understood within this broader geostrategic calculus.

The ROK's interest in the Arctic is primarily economically driven, with the region's emerging shipping routes and energy and resource endowments serving as the central drivers.¹⁵ The Northern Sea Route (NSR) across the north coast of Russia is the ROK's center of attention. Already seasonally navigable from mid-June to early November (especially for ice-strengthened vessels), the NSR represents a significantly shorter maritime corridor linking major ROK ports, especially Busan, with key European destinations such as Rotterdam.¹⁶ Compared to the traditional Suez Canal route, it reduces the sailing distance by approximately 7,000 kilometers. This geographic shortcut translates to transit times of 10-15 days less per voyage, depending on vessel speed and ice conditions, enabling fuel cost reductions of up to 30-40%.¹⁷ Coupling the boost in logistical efficiency is the potential of increased throughput of shipping volume between the ROK and Europe, which is particularly significant given the scale and growth of reciprocal trade.¹⁸

Increased commercialization of Arctic shipping also presents several incentives that underpin the ROK's economic interest in the region. First, it strengthens ROK's global leadership in shipbuilding by expanding demand for specialized Arctic-capable vessels. Korean shipyards have already demonstrated a competitive advantage in this segment through the construction of Arc7-class liquified natural gas (LNG) carriers for Russia's Yamal LNG project, with firms such as

Daewoo Shipbuilding & Marine Engineering and Samsung Heavy Industries delivering icebreaking ships capable of year-round navigation in ice conditions of up to 2.1 meters.¹⁹ The continued development of Arctic routes is likely to sustain and expand high-value orders in this niche segment. Second, the opening of the Arctic catalyzes adjacent industries, including digital infrastructure and next-generation energy systems. Notably, the subsea cable market is projected to grow at a Compound Annual Growth Rate of 7.1 percent through 2027, driven by the emergence of trans-Arctic routes linking Europe and Asia.²⁰ Third, Arctic shipping further embeds the ROK within global logistics networks by enhancing the strategic role of its ports, particularly Busan. Positioned as a prospective Arctic gateway in the Indo-Pacific, Busan could facilitate expanded trade flows between Asia and Europe.²¹ This role is likely to grow in strategic importance as inter-regional economic integration deepens, including anticipated EU–ASEAN free trade negotiations and Prime Minister Carney’s leadership to create a mega trade alliance linking Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership members (CPTPP) with those of the EU.²²

The ROK’s scientific engagement in the Arctic is driven by the dual imperatives of enhancing national climate security and resilience and advancing technological innovation. On climate, Seoul seeks to expand its high-latitude research capacity through the introduction of next-generation icebreaking research vessels, expansion of Arctic research stations and remote sensing capabilities, and participation in large-scale international scientific collaborations, including joint expeditions and data-sharing initiatives. This emphasis reflects the ROK’s recognition of the Arctic as a critical node in the global climate system, where rapid environmental shifts have measurable downstream effects on the Korean Peninsula. As noted in the *Master Plan*, Arctic Sea ice decline and associated atmospheric changes have been directly linked to extreme weather variability in Korea, including prolonged heatwaves and abnormal seasonal patterns. On the national level, such insights inform disaster preparedness, coastal risk planning, and energy demand forecasting, while on the global level they enable the ROK to contribute to climate monitoring and modeling efforts, advance knowledge production and scientific leadership, and strengthen its role in international climate governance frameworks.²³

The ROK’s scientific engagement in the Arctic is also driven by its pursuit of polar technological leadership. Research and

development (R&D) activities conducted in the region contribute to advancing key polar technologies, including ice-class vessel design, AI-enabled and autonomous navigation systems, sea ice and ocean observation sensors, satellite-based remote sensing platforms, and climate-resilient engineering solutions tailored to extreme environments. The Arctic's harsh and variable conditions further position it as a frontier test bed for next-generation technologies, including those relevant to space exploration and the construction of bases in extreme conditions. Finally, the region's unique biological resources underpin emerging avenues in polar bio-innovation, with demonstrated applications in pharmaceuticals (e.g. anti-diabetic compounds and cryopreservation agents) and agriculture (e.g. cold-resistant crops).²⁴

ROK's political interests are tied to securing a greater voice within Arctic governance structures and shaping emerging rules in a manner that reflects its interests as a non-Arctic stakeholder. The *2023-2027 Basic Plan* underscores that influence in the Arctic is contingent not on geography, but on sustained contributions to science, infrastructure, and multilateral cooperation.²⁵ Accordingly, Seoul seeks to strengthen its position by expanding participation in Arctic Council working groups and international research initiatives, while simultaneously deepening bilateral partnerships with Arctic littoral states to facilitate access and policy coordination. Capacity-building is also central. The planned deployment of a next-generation icebreaking research vessel and the expansion of high-latitude research activities are intended not only to enhance scientific output but to underpin diplomatic credibility in governance forums. In parallel, the ROK aims to transition from a passive participant to a more agenda-setting actor by increasing its contributions to joint projects, submitting policy proposals, and leveraging its technical expertise in areas such as climate monitoring and maritime infrastructure. Through this combination of scientific leadership, infrastructural investment, and proactive multilateral engagement, Seoul seeks to convert functional participation into greater normative and political influence within the Arctic governance system.²⁶

At its core, the ROK's political engagement in the Arctic serves to enable its longer-term economic ambitions. As noted by Dongmin Jin, Won-Sang Seo, and Seokwoo Lee, early domestic enthusiasm following Seoul's attainment of Arctic Council observer status in 2013 was driven largely by expectations surrounding the NSR and access to vast untapped energy resources.²⁷ However, the legal and

geopolitical realities of the Arctic—particularly the sovereign rights exercised by the five Arctic coastal states under UNCLOS and reaffirmed in the Ilulissat Declaration—significantly constrain direct access for non-Arctic states. In response, Seoul has adopted a strategy centered on respecting sovereignty, building trust-based cooperation, contributing to climate research, and supporting sustainable development.²⁸

Arctic Policy

In December 2018, the ROK announced its *Polar Vision 2050* statement at the Arctic Partnership Week in Busan, articulating the country's aspiration to become a leading “polar-contribution country” by mid-century through responsible, science-driven, and partnership-based engagement in both the Arctic and Antarctic. Falling within the familiar categories of “economic partnership with Arctic states,” “creating reciprocally beneficial cooperation,” strengthening scientific research efforts,” and “strengthening national capacity,” the strategic policies consisted of:

- Cooperating in further sustainable development and the rational utilization of regional resources;
- Fostering future-oriented industries for shared prosperity;
- Preserving social and cultural traditions as a common heritage;
- Extending interactions and building trust with local communities, including Arctic Indigenous peoples;
- Promoting proactive policy responses to climate change impacts;
- Enhancing national scientific capacity through innovation-driven research and practical applications; and
- Strengthening polar activity capacity through expanded research infrastructure and expert development.

The Vision placed heightened emphasis on recognizing the polar regions as shared assets of humanity, requiring environmental stewardship and sustainable development, and prioritizing engagement with local and Indigenous communities.²⁹

The *2050 Arctic Activities Strategy*, a six-page, long-term policy document released in November 2021, is designed to propel the ROK into the ranks of leading Arctic stakeholders by 2050 based on four pillars seeking to build trust with other Arctic stakeholders, broaden and deepen Korea's diplomatic footprint in the Arctic, align economic

engagement with sustainability principles, and consolidate long-term national capacity for Arctic engagement. Its emphasis on “tailored bilateral cooperation” explicitly prioritizes the eight Arctic coastal states and assigns sector-specific areas of cooperation accordingly. For instance, the ROK identifies Canada as a strategic partner and directs diplomatic engagement toward cooperation with Indigenous communities, reflecting the centrality of Indigenous governance in Canada’s Arctic policy. By contrast, Russia and Norway are designated as priority partners, with bilateral engagement focusing respectively on the development of the NSR and on fisheries cooperation. Separately, in the domain of green energy cooperation, the ROK seeks collaboration with Canada on microgrid technologies while cooperation with Russia and Norway respectively center on Arctic LNG projects and hydrogen economy initiatives and low-carbon maritime technologies.³⁰

Under President Yoon Suk Yeol (2022-25), the Republic of Korea largely sustained its trajectory of Arctic engagement, actively participating across the full spectrum of Arctic Council mechanisms while consolidating domestic coordination and legislative anchoring. Seoul also maintained an active convening role, hosting its annual Arctic Partnership Week and expanding its engagement with Permanent Participants—notably convening a seminar titled “Voices from the Arctic: Indigenous Perspectives on Marine Environment” in cooperation with the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) Canada at the Embassy of Canada in Korea in June 2024. On the diplomatic front, the ROK held regular communications with Arctic coastal states and demonstrated governance leadership by hosting the inaugural Conference of the Parties of the CAOFA in 2022.³¹

President Lee Jae-myung’s arrival in office in 2025 saw the Arctic return to the forefront of the ROK’s policy agenda. At his first Cabinet meeting, Lee pledged to relocate the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries (MOF) to Busan within the year in preparation for the “era of Arctic shipping”—a commitment that has since been fulfilled.³² The Arctic was subsequently codified as one of 123 national tasks formally adopted by the State Council—*National Task 56 “Building a K-Marine Powerhouse that Leads the Arctic Route Era”*—within the administration’s five-year state affairs plan.³³ Its prominence is materially underscored by the increase in MOF’s budget increase to 7.36 trillion KRW, with 1.66 trillion won allocated for port expansion and upgrades and 549 billion won for new icebreakers before 2030.³⁴ Strategically, the Arctic is embedded in Lee’s broader national

economic blueprint to revitalize Korea's southeastern region extending through Ulsan, Gyeongnam, Yeosu, Gwangyang, and centered on Busan.³⁵ By positioning Arctic logistics as a new growth engine for coastal industrial renewal, this initiative aligns directly with the administration's stated goal of achieving balanced regional development.³⁶

The *MOF's 2026 Work Plan* provides further detail about Lee's Arctic agenda.³⁷ Its core objectives include preparing for the commercialization of Arctic shipping, expanding national maritime transportation capacity, strengthening eco-friendly and high-value fleet competitiveness, and institutionalizing Arctic governance and monitoring capabilities. To this end, the plan outlines a 3,000 TEU pilot container voyage from Busan to Rotterdam in 2026; subsidies for ice-class vessels and state support for the domestic development of icebreaking container ships between 2026 and 2030; and the construction of a next-generation, dual-fuel polar research icebreaker. It further calls for the expansion of port infrastructure in the southeastern region, including the development of specialized Arctic cargo base ports for containers, LNG, and crude oil, alongside broader port upgrading under a "Busan Port 3.0" framework. Complementary measures include establishing a 24-hour Arctic route monitoring system, enhancing financial and insurance support mechanisms for participating shipping firms, establishing a dedicated Arctic Route Promotion Headquarters to coordinate cross-government implementation, preparing a Special Act on Arctic Route Utilization and Activation, and deepening international cooperation through active Arctic Council engagement and efforts to convene an Arctic Leaders' Summit in connection with the 2028 UN Ocean Conference to be held in Korea. These initiatives are likely to form the basis for the Arctic component of ROK's *2nd Master Plan for the Promotion of Polar Activities (2028–2033)*.

The 1st Master Plan for Promotion of Polar Activities (2023–2027) stands as the most authoritative and comprehensive articulation of the ROK's Arctic policy framework to date.³⁸ First, given that the Master Plan is adopted pursuant to the 2021 *Act on the Promotion of Polar Activities*, it possesses a statutory status in which earlier ROK Arctic policies do not. Second, it integrates and operationalizes previously established policy blueprints, consolidating them under a unified implementation architecture that bridges Arctic and Antarctic activities.³⁹ Third, and most importantly, the Plan is the product of the most extensive policy formulation process in ROK's polar governance

to date. Over an eight-month research and consultation period from March to December 2022, it incorporated diagnostic assessments of Korea's polar activity capacity; nationwide surveys of approximately 1,600 respondents spanning polar scientists, universities, academic societies, industry representatives, and members of the general public; expert roundtables on draft components covering R&D, Arctic industry, and international cooperation; inter-ministerial consultations involving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Science and ICT, and Ministry of Environment, among others; and on-site inspections of core infrastructure, including the icebreaking research vessel *Araon* and the *Dasan* Arctic Research Station in Ny-Ålesund.⁴⁰ The Plan provides the most comprehensive baseline from which to assess the ROK's present Arctic interests, capabilities, and long-term strategic orientation.

The *Master Plan* provides a detailed implementation roadmap that distinguishes this Plan from earlier Arctic policy documents. It assigns specific timelines, identifies lead and supporting ministries for each task, and sequences projects across the 2023–2027 period. The explicit mapping of responsibilities across the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Science and ICT, Ministry of Environment, and other agencies demonstrates a maturation of inter-ministerial coordination and embeds Arctic policy within a performance-oriented governance framework. Section VII of the *Master Plan* operationalizes the vision through five strategic pillars: (1) exploration of unexplored areas, (2) leadership in climate and environmental solutions, (3) establishment of a polar industrial foundation contributing to the national economy, (4) creation of a diversified cooperation ecosystem, and (5) expansion of public participation and human capital development. Each pillar is further subdivided into actionable components that translate the Plan's overarching vision into concrete policy commitments. Conceptually, the first strategy reflects the polar aspiration of “challenging the unknown,” while the second and third strategies give substantive expression to the goal of “leaping forward to the future.” The fourth and fifth strategies, in turn, serve as enabling frameworks, constructing the institutional, cooperative, and human infrastructure necessary to sustain and implement the broader strategic vision (see appendix for a detailed breakdown of key policy tasks and the corresponding lead ROK agencies).⁴¹

Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Priorities

The ROK's core defence and security priorities remain firmly anchored on the Korean Peninsula and, more broadly, the Indo-Pacific region.⁴² The persistent and evolving threat posed by North Korea continues to dominate Seoul's strategic calculus, imposing structural constraints on the extent to which the ROK can redirect attention and resources toward extra-regional theaters.⁴³ In this context, the Arctic has not been explicitly framed as a domain of defence or security interest in any of the ROK's Arctic policy documents, nor is it referenced in the national security strategy issued under the Yoon administration.⁴⁴ This formal omission, however, should not be conflated with strategic irrelevance. As mounting global geopolitical unrest increasingly intersect with the opening of the High North, the Arctic is likely to assume growing importance within the ROK's broader security outlook.

First, the ROK's economic interests in the Arctic are underpinned by structural economic security concerns rooted in its maritime dependence and resource scarcity. As a highly trade-dependent economy in which more than 99 percent of trade volume is seaborne, the ROK remains vulnerable to disruptions along critical maritime chokepoints—from the Taiwan Strait and the Strait of Malacca to the Red Sea and Suez Canal—where geopolitical tensions or logistical crises can raise insurance premiums, inflate freight rates, and generate delivery uncertainty.⁴⁵ The commercialization of Arctic shipping routes is thus becoming increasingly urgent and strategically important for the ROK. The Northern Sea Route, as highlighted above, offers a promising alternative corridor that can reduce transit times while diversifying route exposure.⁴⁶

Energy security and resource diversification constitute equally important ROK priorities in the region due to its high dependence on external energy and resource inputs. At present, the ROK imports over 90 percent of its energy, ranks as the world's third-largest importer of LNG, and depends on the Middle East for more than 70 percent of its crude oil, while possessing virtually no significant domestic reserves of hydrocarbons or critical minerals.⁴⁷ This structural dependence exposes the country to price volatility, supply disruptions, and geopolitical risks—including the potential for economic coercion over critical minerals such as rare earths—thereby constraining its strategic autonomy. Against this backdrop, the Arctic's resource endowment carries clear strategic significance as a potential offset. The region is estimated to hold approximately 13 percent of the

world's undiscovered oil and 30 percent of its undiscovered natural gas. It also contains substantial deposits of nickel, copper, and rare earth elements critical to batteries, semiconductors, automobiles, and defence technologies.⁴⁸

Second, as Seoul incrementally expands its presence and activity in the Arctic and as geopolitical competition in the region becomes more pronounced, it is reasonable to anticipate that Korea will articulate and assume a more defined set of defence and security interests in the High North. Two immediate dimensions are discernible. The first concerns maritime security, particularly the protection of emerging sea lanes that underpin the ROK's trade-dependent economy.⁴⁹ As Arctic shipping routes such as the NSR gain commercial relevance, safeguarding the stability of these corridors becomes a logical extension of Seoul's broader sea-lane security doctrine. This orientation is reflected in the Navy's long-term modernization blueprint, *Naval Vision 2045*, that envisions the development of a blue-water navy capable of sustained operations in distant seas, including areas proximate to the Sea of Okhotsk and the Bering Sea.⁵⁰ This plan includes the construction of next-generation KDDX destroyers, successive batches of Ulsan-class frigates (Batch III and the planned Batch IV designed for operations in distant seas), and other blue-water platforms, aimed at enhancing the ROK's capacity to operate in high-latitude environments should trade protection or crisis contingencies require.⁵¹ The second dimension is alliance duties. As Washington increasingly frames Alaska and the North Pacific as a strategic hinge amid intensifying Russia–China coordination, selective ROK contributions—whether through cold-weather interoperability, maritime domain awareness, or defence-industrial collaboration—offer a pathway to strengthen and modernize the bilateral relationship.⁵²

From a strategic lens, ROK's engagement in the Arctic and broader Eurasian continent (as seen under Park Geun Hye's Eurasia Initiative, Moon Jae In's New Northern Policy,⁵³ and now under Lee Jae Myung) reveals an underlying security logic that transcends economics and speaks to Seoul's strategic positioning. First, Seoul frames connectivity through Arctic Ocean routes and transcontinental rail and energy corridors as a mechanism to foster peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula by embedding North Korea within wider Eurasian trade and infrastructure networks. The underlying assumption is that economic interdependence reduces incentives for destabilizing behavior, while multilateral transport and energy

projects create stakeholders in regional stability beyond the two Koreas.⁵⁴ In this respect, Arctic maritime corridors complement overland Eurasian linkages by offering additional platforms through which Seoul can integrate the peninsula into broader economic circuits, thereby diluting the zero-sum logic that has historically dominated inter-Korean relations. Second, Arctic and Eurasian engagement speaks directly to the Republic of Korea's "dual reliance" dilemma: its dependence on the United States for security and on China for trade. By cultivating diversified trade corridors across the Eurasian continent, Seoul seeks to reduce dependence and exposure to any single great power while reinforcing its identity as a middle power capable of shaping, rather than merely reacting to, regional dynamics.⁵⁵ Engagement in emerging Arctic governance, shipping, and energy networks thus functions as a hedging action that expands ROK's strategic space, reinforces the ROK's alliance flexibility with Washington, and simultaneously mitigates the ROK's dependence on Chinese-centered trade flows. Viewed from this high-level vantage point, the Arctic can be understood as a structural instrument through which Seoul seeks to advance peninsular stability and maintain a balanced geopolitical posture amidst intensifying global uncertainty.

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interests with Canada

For Canada, the ROK represents a highly capable and strategically valuable partner in advancing Arctic priorities. Canada's ability to sustain a credible and long-term presence in the Arctic is increasingly shaped by factors beyond geography, including industrial capacity, technological capability, and supply chain resilience. In this regard, the ROK offers complementary strengths that directly address Canada's structural constraints. Its advanced shipbuilding sector, expertise in ice-class vessels, and capabilities in maritime systems, semiconductors, and advanced manufacturing can support Canada's efforts to enhance Arctic infrastructure, mobility, and operational readiness. At the same time, Canada provides what the ROK lacks, namely access to Arctic resources, including energy and critical minerals, as well as governance leadership and institutional legitimacy within Arctic frameworks. This alignment enables a practical division of roles in which Canada anchors regulatory and political authority while the ROK contributes technological capacity and implementation capability. Cooperation in areas such as defence industrial integration, Arctic logistics, and resource

development therefore strengthens Canada's ability to project capability in the North while advancing its broader economic and security objectives.

Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy explicitly recognizes the value of pragmatic engagement with non-Arctic partners whose capabilities and strategic outlook align with its principles. In this regard, the ROK stands out as a particularly well-matched partner. As a like-minded middle power committed to the rules-based international order, multilateralism, and scientific collaboration, the ROK closely aligns with Canada's core priorities, including respect for international law, support for sustainable development, and openness to knowledge-sharing and joint research. Its contributions to Arctic science, active participation in governance frameworks, and growing technological and industrial capabilities further reinforce its relevance as a constructive and capable stakeholder. Reflecting this alignment, Canada's policy explicitly identifies the ROK as a priority non-Arctic partner for regional cooperation.

Canada and the ROK share a set of overlapping interests within the Arctic, particularly in the domains of scientific research, environmental governance, and institutional participation. These areas represent the least politically contentious and most mature avenues for cooperation, grounded in both countries' commitment to rules-based governance and sustainable development. Scientific collaboration constitutes the most natural and historically grounded domain of cooperation. *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy* emphasizes science as a core pillar for understanding and responding to climate change, while the ROK's Arctic strategy has been explicitly science-led since the 1990s. Joint research initiatives—particularly in sea ice dynamics, climate prediction, permafrost degradation, and Arctic marine ecosystems—would allow Canada to leverage the ROK's technological strengths in remote sensing, satellite-enabled observation, and integrated climate modeling, while providing Seoul with expanded access to high-latitude research environments.

Second, both countries share a strong interest in environmental protection and climate governance, particularly in addressing transboundary challenges such as sea-level rise, methane emissions, and biodiversity loss. Canada's emphasis on Arctic stewardship and Indigenous-informed environmental management aligns with the ROK's increasing prioritization of sustainability, as reflected in its *Polar Vision 2050* and subsequent policy frameworks. Opportunities for cooperation include joint environmental

monitoring systems, coordinated responses to emerging ecological threats, and collaboration in multilateral initiatives such as marine protected areas and fisheries governance under CAOFA.

Growing convergence also can be observed in the domain of Arctic maritime safety and infrastructure development. As polar shipping activity increases, both countries share an interest in ensuring safe navigation, environmental protection, and regulatory harmonization. The ROK's expertise in ice-class vessel construction, maritime engineering, and port logistics can support Canada's efforts to enhance northern infrastructure, including hydrographic mapping, ice monitoring, and search-and-rescue capabilities. In this sense, cooperation "in the Arctic, for the Arctic" reflects a mutually reinforcing relationship in which Canada provides geographic access and governance leadership, while the ROK contributes technological capability and scientific capacity.

The *Canada–Republic of Korea Security and Defence Cooperation Partnership*, signed during Prime Minister Carney's visit to the ROK in October 2025, identifies consequential areas for bilateral cooperation.⁵⁶ Canada's defence modernization agenda outlines a comprehensive effort to rebuild Arctic-ready capabilities and reduce external dependence. The scale and scope of this effort—ranging from the planned acquisition of up to twelve conventionally-powered, under-ice-capable submarines, to investments in munitions production, long-range artillery systems, and next-generation tactical helicopters—create a significant opening for bilateral cooperation. As a leading global defence manufacturer, the ROK is positioned to support these priorities.⁵⁷ Decades of alliance interoperability with the United States ensure that Korean systems are compatible with NATO standards, facilitating seamless integration into Canada's existing defence architecture. Furthermore, South Korea promotes its advanced submarine platforms that are suited to meet Canada's under-ice operational requirements, cost-effective tactical helicopters suited for Arctic rapid response, modern artillery systems such as the K9, and broader capabilities in naval shipbuilding, aerospace, and integrated defence systems.⁵⁸ The ROK also leads in enabling sectors where Canada's Arctic capabilities remain exposed, including semiconductors, satellite systems, and advanced manufacturing.⁵⁹

For the ROK, Canada offers value through its upstream resource endowment, particularly in critical minerals essential to defence and advanced technologies. Canada possesses abundant reserves of

rare earth elements, cobalt, nickel, gallium, niobium, and tungsten—materials that are indispensable for semiconductors, batteries, sensors, and precision-guided systems.⁶⁰ Its Arctic regions further reinforce this advantage, hosting a diverse mineral base supported by both active operations and a growing pipeline of development projects. The federal government’s *Critical Minerals Strategy* provides a strong policy foundation for expanding extraction, processing, and value chain integration.⁶¹ This resource base aligns closely with the ROK’s strengths in downstream manufacturing, including semiconductors, batteries, and advanced defence systems. A bilateral framework linking Canadian extraction and processing capabilities with Korean industrial capacity would strengthen supply chain resilience, reduce dependence on single-source suppliers, and enable the secure production of Arctic-relevant technologies.

Finally, bilateral cooperation in science, technology, and human capital development offers a critical pathway to sustaining long-term Arctic capabilities. Joint research and development in areas such as satellite observation, climate modeling, autonomous navigation, and extreme-environment engineering would allow both countries to advance technologies essential for Arctic operations without requiring continuous physical presence. Canada’s strengths in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and space robotics complement the ROK’s expertise in advanced manufacturing and applied engineering, creating strong potential for collaborative innovation platforms. Institutional mechanisms to support this cooperation could include expanded university partnerships, joint research centers, and increased people-to-people exchanges, including graduate training programs and technical exchanges in polar science and engineering. Together, these efforts would contribute to the broader development of a sustainable and innovation-driven Arctic ecosystem.

In sum, closer Canada–ROK cooperation establishes a foundation for broader middle-power coalition building, including the development of minilateral frameworks spanning the Arctic and Indo-Pacific. As the strategic linkage between these regions deepens, such cooperation enables both countries to shape emerging norms, strengthen institutional coordination, and advance their shared interest in preserving a rules-based international order while reducing overdependence on great powers.

Issues of Divergence or Potential Concern

Canada and ROK's underlying strategic interest towards the region are fundamentally divergent. Canada's approach is defensive, focused on asserting sovereignty, safeguarding national security, and stabilizing an increasingly contested region. The Arctic is thus treated as a frontline domain requiring enhanced presence, surveillance, and resilience against both military and non-military threats, including cyber operations and foreign interference. In contrast, the ROK adopts an outward-facing, opportunity-driven posture. As a non-Arctic state, Seoul views the region as a platform to expand its strategic footprint—leveraging science, infrastructure, and diplomacy to access emerging economic and governance spaces. Rather than defending territory, the ROK's priority is to establish relevance and influence within it. This asymmetry—between a state seeking to secure its Arctic domain and one seeking entry into it—creates a structural divergence in strategic intent.

Canada and the ROK hold contradictory policy positions concerning Russia.⁶² While Canada's Arctic policy seeks to constrain Russian expansion in the region by reinforcing deterrence and alliance-based security frameworks, the ROK depends on Russia to advance its Arctic economic ambitions. As a "prisoner of geography," the ROK cannot avoid the geopolitical reality that meaningful access to Arctic economic opportunities is contingent on its bilateral ties with Russia. First, in the domain of maritime connectivity, Russia's NSR represents one of the few emerging trade routes for expanded trade access to Europe, particularly given the ROK's limited integration into inland continental logistics networks such as China's Belt and Road Initiative—an exclusion shaped by geopolitical constraints related to Pyongyang.⁶³ Moreover, in terms of Arctic resources, Russia possesses most the region's oil, gas, and critical mineral deposits. As such, Russia effectively serves as the gatekeeper to sustained ROK access to the Eurasian Arctic and its ability to capitalize on the commercialization of Arctic shipping routes.

Canada ranks relatively low in the ROK's hierarchy of Arctic partners. This is reflected in the ROK's most recent Arctic policy documents, where Canada receives minimal to no attention. Notably, Canada is largely absent from the assessment of major Arctic actors in its *2023–2027 Master Plan*, appearing only in reference to Canada's participation in the CAOFA.⁶⁴ This omission suggests that Seoul does not currently view Ottawa as a critical

stakeholder in advancing its Arctic priorities. The ROK's de-prioritization of Canada can be understood from both a geographic and functional point of view. Seoul's Arctic strategy is centered on access, logistics, and resource development across the Eurasian continent, where Russia and the Nordic states serve as pivotal partners. Within this framework, Canada's perceived utility in the region is comparatively limited. As reflected in the ROK's long-term Arctic strategy, bilateral cooperation with Canada remains narrowly defined, focusing primarily on Indigenous engagement—an area that, while important, do not directly advance Seoul's core economic priorities in the region.⁶⁵ In contrast to Russia's role as a critical gateway for logistics and resources, Canada is positioned as a secondary, niche partner within the ROK's Arctic policy formulation.

The ROK's leadership in promoting an expanded role for non-Arctic states in Arctic governance may constitute a further source of concern. While Korean policy formally acknowledges the legitimacy of the Arctic Council and the sovereign rights of Arctic coastal states, it also reflects a clear effort to expand the role of non-Arctic actors within regional governance.⁶⁶ Given the statutory limitations imposed on Observers within the Arctic Council, Seoul has advocated for a more inclusive governance framework not strictly bounded by geography. This position was explicitly articulated in the ROK's Observer Statement at the 12th Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in 2021, which expressed hope that “the Arctic Council will gradually evolve into a more open and inclusive organization so that observer states can make greater contributions to the Council's activities.”⁶⁷ This ambition is further reflected in Seoul's support for alternative and parallel platforms, such as the “Asian Arctic Club.”⁶⁸ While these initiatives are framed as complementary rather than competitive, they raise concerns among Arctic coastal states regarding the potential emergence of parallel governance structures that may dilute the authority of the Arctic Council. More importantly, such for a may not fully align with the priorities of Arctic states, particularly with respect to sovereignty, Indigenous governance, and environmental stewardship.

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9

The Netherlands

Benjamin T. Johnson

“The signal part which Holland has enacted on the theatre of the world cannot, in the sense of general achievements, be unfamiliar to the historical student. It is well known, moreover, that her place in the European sisterhood of states has in former times been one of importance far out of proportion to the small area occupied by the Netherlands on the map of Europe; and though in the particular domain of Arctic research the work of Holland cannot be compared with that of her great maritime neighbour, yet even in this respect her achievements have been far from insignificant. Here, however, it is to be feared, the work of the Netherlands has not been so well understood.”

Samuel Richard van Campen, *The Dutch in the Arctic Seas* (1876)¹

This chapter focuses on the Netherlands’ Arctic policy priorities, including its defence and security interests as a maritime state heavily exposed to climate change and economically dependent on international trade. Its status as an observer state to the Arctic Council structures much of its engagement through the lens of scientific cooperation and knowledge production within a rules-based Arctic governance system. The Netherlands is also invested in promoting the rules-based maritime order through the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and supporting a stable shipping regime. The combined interests in scientific cooperation, knowledge production, and a stable maritime order are reflected in the Netherlands’ polar strategy. While the Netherlands does not have a dedicated Arctic foreign policy or security strategy, recent think-tank publications that support Dutch policy reflect growing concerns centred on Russian militarization in the Arctic and

the implications for European security. Consequently, much of the Netherlands' engagement with Arctic security matters is through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and, to a lesser degree, the European Union (EU). Overall, Dutch Arctic engagement reflects the evolution of a maritime trading state adapting its historical reliance on navigation, science, and multilateralism to an increasingly securitized Arctic environment. There are minor differences in regional priorities compared to Canada because of each state's respective positionalities concerning the Arctic rather than political or structural differences. Despite these minor differences, Canada and the Netherlands enjoy strong historical ties and have like-minded governments and societies, and this special relationship presents opportunities for enhanced cooperation on Arctic issues, including security and defence.

History

The Netherlands is a seafaring nation well-versed in maritime navigation, including a rich history of exploration supporting scientific and commercial interests in the Arctic. Amsterdam's role as a major financial hub for global trade and Rotterdam's emergence as a critical trading port supported the Dutch Republic's growth as a maritime and commercial power. Dutch fascination with the polar regions was linked to commercial interests and national prestige, and to a lesser degree initially, scientific ambitions.² The emergence of the Netherlands as a major maritime power and trading partner paralleled its Arctic engagement in the 16th and 17th centuries. During this time, the Netherlands expanded its Arctic activity through its relationships to Scandinavia and Russia, developing fisheries and its industrial whaling economy while enhancing its navigation capabilities within a framework of expanding commerce rather than territorial expansion and new sovereignty claims.³ Like other European states, the Netherlands also sought to discover trade routes through the Arctic, including the Northeast Passage to Asia.⁴

Failing to find the Northeast Passage by the late 17th century, combined with other changes, contributed to a decline in Arctic activities. However, Dutch interest in Arctic exploration would be revived in the 19th century, though increasingly scientific in character. These later efforts were driven, at least partly, by private funding initiatives, such as through the Dutch Geographical Society, and by nation-building efforts to revive the Dutch historical legacy in the Arctic.⁵ Efforts to recall and expand on Dutch history in the Arctic

were exemplified by Samuel Richard van Campen's 1876 book, *The Dutch in the Arctic Seas*.⁶ The book's publication preceded Willem Barents's scientific expeditions and sought to commemorate Dutch Arctic history while advancing national prestige.⁷ The 19th century culminated with the Netherlands participating in the first International Polar Year in 1882–83. This event was marked by Maurits Snellen and his team stubbornly refusing to abandon their scientific duties after their ship became trapped in the ice in the Kara Sea and they survived a perilous three-week march over the moving ice pack to get to the Siberian coastline.⁸

While later Dutch Arctic engagement declined due to funding constraints and a lack of political support, these early interventions anticipated the Netherlands' contemporary relationship with the Arctic. Earlier efforts were primarily focused on exploration and commercial exploitation of the Arctic, whereas the Netherlands' shift toward building scientific knowledge and, more recently, environmental governance, underpins a modern Dutch policy centred on knowledge production and cooperation.⁹

Political, Economic, and Scientific Interests

The Netherlands remains highly dependent on maritime trade and frames its political, economic, and scientific interests in the Arctic through a lens that promotes economic competitiveness and Dutch expertise in various fields, especially the natural sciences.

Climate change presents a series of risks and opportunities for the Netherlands. Being a maritime nation with roughly a quarter of its territory lying below sea-level and over half of it susceptible to flooding, the Netherlands understands climate change and its amplified effects in the Arctic to have important consequences for itself, including sea-level rise, extreme weather events, and impacts on biodiversity.¹⁰ The Netherlands views the amplification of environmental effects in the Arctic to be especially consequential for the world, with the polar regions understood as areas of global relevance.¹¹ While the Netherlands faces several risks posed by climate change, the Dutch economy remains heavily dependent on maritime trade, which presents contrasting opportunities.¹² Rotterdam, the home of Europe's largest port, could be a major beneficiary of any Arctic shipping developments, especially as the Northern Sea Route (NSR) potentially shortens Europe–Asia shipping distances.¹³

The Netherlands is an Observer State to the Arctic Council (AC) and its research efforts support AC working groups and task forces. Dutch scientific engagement builds on its centuries of polar expertise and focuses on international research cooperation, underpinning its role in Arctic governance. The Netherlands is highly active and invested in Arctic research, and it identifies science as a primary policy tool for advancing its interests in the region.¹⁴ Major contributions include glaciology, oceanography, biodiversity, international law, engineering, and, increasingly, the social sciences.¹⁵ The country is also active in several Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME) working group projects for the Arctic Council and, along with Norway and Iceland, leads a group focused on “support[ing] the work of the Arctic Council and the Arctic States in their efforts to reduce ALDFG [abandoned, lost or otherwise discarded fishing gear] in the Arctic marine environment, prevent the potential negative impacts and mitigate the risks it may pose.”¹⁶

The Dutch Research Council (NWO) (a funding body analogous to Canada’s federal research funding councils) has a polar programme dedicated to supporting Arctic and Antarctic research.¹⁷ The Dutch university environment is highly internationalized, particularly through its polar research initiatives, which have built extensive foreign partnerships.¹⁸ These partnerships have been built out of necessity because the Netherlands lacks robust independent polar logistics infrastructure and therefore relies on strategic partnerships and shared facilities to conduct operations and research in the region.¹⁹

The scientific work pursuant to these initiatives directly supports Dutch governance efforts through international fora, including the Arctic Council. For instance, the Arctic Centre, based at the University of Groningen, actively participates in AC Working Groups and strengthens its efforts and connections in Arctic research. The Centre works to connect Dutch government representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries with researchers and identify gaps in knowledge relevant to AC working groups, while sharing them with the NWO and other relevant ministries.²⁰ Thus, the integration of public resources and policy is closely linked to and responsive to scientific needs.

Arctic Policy

The main Arctic policy of the Netherlands is outlined in its *Polar Strategy 2021-2025*, with a new strategic document expected in the

near future. As mentioned in the previous section, Dutch Arctic policy is framed through three core pillars: sustainability, international cooperation, and scientific research. These pillars underpin the Netherlands' strategic objectives of protecting the environment, strengthening international cooperation, and ensuring sustainable economic activity.²¹

The Arctic Council is the main consultative forum and mechanism for Dutch cooperation.²² The Netherlands is vocal in its support for UNCLOS as the legal foundation for much of Arctic governance and recognizes that the Arctic is largely under the jurisdiction of Arctic states.²³ Thus, the Netherlands seeks to carve out a meaningful role in Arctic governance through AC participation and engagement with other multilateral mechanisms (such as the International Maritime Organization), bilateral cooperation with Arctic states, and diplomatic engagement. Emblematic of these efforts is the Netherlands' dedicated Arctic Ambassador (currently Wampie Libon-van der Wal) based out of The Hague.

Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Priorities

Dutch security thinking over the last several years demonstrates continuity with earlier concerns but with an increased threat perception. The Netherlands' polar strategy reflects evolving Dutch apprehensions about growing instability in the international arena, including rising geopolitical tensions and the interconnection of political, military, economic, and ecological security considerations. While the Netherlands does not have a dedicated Arctic foreign policy or Arctic security strategy, it has become increasingly attuned to military and security threats stemming from and shaped by the perceived return of great power competition and the transformation of the European security environment following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The Netherlands' *2024 Defence White Paper: Strong, Smart and Together* only mentions the Arctic three times directly, although it emphasizes Northern European security through deterrence and defence.²⁴ The paper frames the Russian threat in terms of military aggression and foreign influence, while implicitly connecting Northern European deterrence to Arctic developments. Dutch efforts to modernize and expand the Royal Netherlands Navy (RNLN), including for anti-submarine warfare in Arctic waters amid increasing strategic rivalry and potential future geopolitical competition over natural resources, are emphasized.²⁵

Two security-focused reports released by the Clingendael Institute, a Netherlands-based think-tank, speak more emphatically to Arctic security and defence concerns.²⁶ *The Future of Arctic Security*, released in 2020, hints at the region's evolution from a place of stable governance toward a theatre of geopolitical tensions and competition.²⁷ The subsequent 2025 report, *Cold Calculations*, is more stark in its assessment and argues that the Arctic is now a strategically contested environment shaped by global rivalry.²⁸ These reports are *not* official Dutch policy, but they do *support* Dutch policy, including efforts to produce an updated Polar Strategy.²⁹ The core question for the Netherlands, according to *Cold Calculations*, is how to safeguard [Dutch] interests—economic, environmental, and security-related—while contributing to the stability and sustainability of the Arctic region? As a NATO and EU member, a trading nation reliant on maritime flows, and a country with sound expertise in climate adaptation and technology, the Netherlands has a stake, a responsibility, and expertise in shaping Arctic outcomes.³⁰

The defence and security concerns of the Netherlands are thus rooted in its position as a maritime state and wider concerns about European security, and particularly those involving Russia. *Cold Calculations* notes Russia's expanding capabilities, including its renewed Arctic bases, a strengthened Northern Fleet, its nuclear deterrence infrastructure, and its anti-access/area-denial network.³¹ Russia's expanding military capabilities in the Arctic are combined with its willingness to use them in and outside of the Arctic, particularly against EU states through hybrid warfare tactics, including malicious cyber activity, political interference, intelligence operations, and threats to infrastructure, all of which are relevant to the Netherlands given its high level of digital connectivity.³² In comparison, the threats posed by China are similar to the concerns of Canada and other states who warn that China is potentially mobilizing its outwardly benign Arctic engagement and scientific research toward advancing its own national interests.³³

The key mechanisms for Dutch engagement in Arctic security are through multilateral fora, specifically NATO and the EU. In February 2026, the Dutch sent their naval ship HNLMS *Johan de Witt* to Norway to participate in NATO's COLD RESPONSE exercise, now part of the alliance's recently announced Arctic Sentry initiative.³⁴ Consistent with its wider political, economic, and policy approach in the Arctic, the Netherlands does not seek an independent military role, but

rather, engages in a cooperative defence and security role with other Arctic states primarily through NATO, especially in its close relationship to Norway.³⁵

Commitments to expand military budgets among NATO members affect Dutch society closely, with the Netherlands' newly elected centrist government shifting its budget priorities toward military spending. Recent developments involving the United States and Greenland's strategic status have also led the Netherlands to affirm its commitment to NATO and to strengthen European cooperation. In addition to supporting NATO's COLD RESPONSE, the Netherlands Defence organization sent two Royal Netherlands Navy (RNLN) officers to Greenland for a reconnaissance mission led by Denmark "to evaluate the feasibility of a future NATO-led military exercise in the High North."³⁶ Overall, the threat posed by Russia and the increase in military spending aligned with NATO commitments and European rearmament are themes that are also shaping Dutch and wider EU discussions in and outside of the Arctic in the areas of digital sovereignty, economic trade, and European security.

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interest with Canada

While Canada and the United States might still be understood as "premier partners" in trade, defence, and security,³⁷ Canada likewise enjoys a special historical relationship to the Netherlands that is reflected in diplomacy and sentiment, lending itself to strong potential for further cooperation. This history includes Canada's role in the liberation of the northern Netherlands during the Second World War and the relocation of the Dutch royal family in Ottawa during the war, shaping contemporary public views and much of the relationship between the two countries. More recently, Canada and the Netherlands jointly brought a case against Syria to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for violations of the UN Convention against Torture.³⁸

Governance and scientific collaboration are important areas of shared interest. Canada and the Netherlands are vocal supporters of rules-based governance, including a commitment to UNCLOS and the international legal order and an underlying faith in the Arctic Council as a central cooperative institution.³⁹ Both countries have a shared interest in promoting safe maritime navigation standards and enhancing domain awareness, in addition to infrastructure resilience and protection.

Relatedly, Dutch scientific efforts and partnerships already extend into the Canadian Arctic, and there is a shared emphasis on science-led governance.⁴⁰ The Netherlands advocates for Indigenous well-being, as demonstrated through its participation in the Arctic Council's Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG) activities and its support for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and for Indigenous knowledge co-production in research and science-related activities.⁴¹

NATO's growing Arctic role and regional defence planning create opportunities for closer cooperation among allies. The Netherlands and Canada have mirrored efforts through NATO to increase military spending and explore shared opportunities. In particular, Canada and the Netherlands produced a Joint Vision statement during the February 2026 NATO Ministers' Meeting, "expressing both countries' intent to reinforce defence and industrial cooperation, including continued support for Ukraine and the exploration of new commercial opportunities and investments."⁴² *Cold Calculations* notes that Canada's Arctic policy continues to emphasize sovereignty and national interest, along with a security architecture that is deeply embedded with the United States but is much less embedded in European Arctic Defence structures.⁴³ Nevertheless, it notes that Canada's participation in multilateral exercises demonstrates a willingness to deepen regional cooperation,⁴⁴ a position contrasted with earlier Canadian caution regarding an expanded NATO role in the Arctic.

Issues of Divergence or Potential Concern

The Netherlands and Canada occupy distinct positions concerning the Arctic, with differences a matter of relativity rather than political or structural. For instance, Canada is focused on sustainable development in the Arctic. While the Netherlands also has embraced sustainability as a major framework for governance and policy action, its concerns around climate change are emphasized in its expert-led role in the Arctic in terms of scientific monitoring and knowledge production, which underpin its governance strategy as an Arctic Council Observer. The Dutch assert the Arctic as a space with global relevance through its Observer role and use of science diplomacy, whereas Canada is an Arctic state that places greater emphasis on sovereignty and defence issues in the region. This difference does not reflect a conflict or major difference

per se, but indicates their different positionalities and sensibilities as to national priorities.

Likewise, these positionalities affect their different sensitivities to knowledge production and Indigenous perspectives. While Dutch researchers are supportive of Indigenous knowledge and the principles of co-production, and the Dutch state supports UNDRIP, its Indigenous engagement is largely limited to that level. This stands in contrast to Canada's systematic integration of Indigenous knowledge into governance and policy frameworks, including its *Arctic Foreign Policy* and *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework*.⁴⁵ Again, these differences are largely positional rather than political or structural.

Both Canada and the Netherlands are considerate of the risks and opportunism posed by Arctic warming, but in different areas. Melting Arctic ice is potentially beneficial to European trade and specifically the port of Rotterdam, but the same climate change forces pose immense risk to the Netherlands. In contrast, Canada emphasizes sustainable development, but is wary of Arctic shipping due to environmental risks, infrastructure, and the sovereignty implications of transit shipping through its historic internal waters (commonly referred to as the Northwest Passage).

Canada and the Netherlands also share a strong affinity for protecting the rules-based maritime legal order. Potential differences of opinion, however, emerge in relation to the freedom of navigation of the high seas. For instance, the Netherlands has recently articulated and advocated for its freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific. The Royal Dutch Navy travelled to Vietnam in a joint show of support with the Vietnamese government, stating:

As maritime trading nations, Vietnam and the Netherlands both depend on open seas to facilitate international trade. The right of freedom of navigation in international waters is crucial to global trade and the economy, as military, diplomacy, and business efforts depend on and strengthen each other. The presence of the Royal Netherlands Navy in the Indo-Pacific region, and this time at the Port of Hai Phong, underlines the Netherlands' commitment to work with other countries to ensure maritime security all around the world through trust and friendship building.⁴⁶

The Indo-Pacific context is much different from Northern Europe or the Arctic. Nonetheless, it illustrates the Netherlands' broader maritime orientation and contextualizes how important a stable

shipping regime and maritime security are to the Dutch state. This fact is not incidental, as the Netherlands acknowledges its potential to benefit from any future Arctic shipping, stating that “new shipping routes and sea areas, which are becoming more important in an economic sense, such as the Arctic region, could increasingly require our attention in the coming [decades].”⁴⁷ Thus, the Netherlands is also a strong proponent of UNCLOS as a foundational governance mechanism for the Arctic through its promotion of freedom of navigation and predictable shipping regimes with stable international sea lanes.⁴⁸

Although Canada is also a strong proponent of UNCLOS, the Dutch position as a major maritime trading state could potentially experience friction with Canada’s position as an Arctic coastal state insisting that the Northwest Passage constitutes historic internal waters. The Netherlands has articulated its maritime rights, including the freedom of navigation, in a widely covered case involving a Dutch flagged Greenpeace vessel that was arrested by Russia.⁴⁹

Moreover, the Netherlands is especially concerned with the Russian shadow fleet, including in the Baltic and North Seas.⁵⁰ This priority shapes additional freedom of navigation concerns and security practices, although principally outside of the Arctic. For example, in 2024 the Dutch frigate HNLMS *Tromp* launched a seven-month patrol of the world’s seas to ensure security for maritime trade in the Red Sea.⁵¹

Lastly, the Netherlands frames its Arctic security role principally through NATO and is concerned about the maritime effects of Russian militarization in the Arctic, including risks to infrastructure, as well as Russia’s use of hybrid tactics. While Canada is strongly aligned with NATO’s efforts and has called for greater Alliance focus in the Arctic, there is some potential that the increasing attention to Arctic security and defence will open space for more influence by non-Arctic allies such as the Netherlands, expanding their role in Arctic security discussions and precipitating a concomitant shift away from Arctic state leadership in the region (which Canada promotes in its 2024 *Arctic Foreign Policy* statement).

In sum, the potential differences between Canada and the Netherlands are shaped by each state’s respective positionality with the Arctic, including the explicit differences between the Dutch emphasis on multilateral governance and Canada’s emphasis on national sovereignty and security. These positionalities do not reflect fundamental political differences. However, the Netherlands’ explicit

support for freedom of navigation and maritime stability may lead to future tensions with Canada in this area. The potential for such disagreement should not be overstated, however, as they are like-minded states with mutual commercial and foreign policy interests, a strong history of cooperation, and a shared commitment to the rules-based international order.

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Singapore

Justin Barnes and P. Whitney Lackenbauer

“As a small country, it is in Singapore’s interest to remain closely connected to the world and to understand how changes in climate patterns, environmental and economic developments, even in a distant region like the Arctic, can impact Singapore. We also seek to make friends and work with like-minded countries in co-creating solutions to address some of these challenges.”

Singapore’s Special Envoy for Arctic Affairs, Sam Tan,
at the inaugural Arctic Circle Japan Forum, March
2023¹

Singapore’s strategic engagement in the Arctic is primarily defined by its vulnerability to climate change and its proactive stance to safeguard its status as one of the world’s busiest transshipment and bunkering hubs, with a well-established ecosystem of professional maritime services and expertise.² As a low-lying equatorial city-state, Singapore views the acceleration of Arctic ice melt as a critical barometer for global sea-level rise, which poses a direct threat to its physical survival and has prompted multi-billion dollar domestic investments in coastal protection. Since attaining accredited Observer status at the Arctic Council, the state has leveraged its scientific and diplomatic resources to engage in discussions on sustainable development and contribute specialist knowledge on oil spill prevention, the conservation of Arctic migratory birds, and other working group activities.³ Singapore’s focus on the Arctic fits within their broader approach to the world, including a strong interest in contributing to global governance fora, understanding and addressing climate change issues, and developing possible economic opportunities while preparing for

potential commercial challenges.⁴

Singapore's informal Arctic policy also represents a calculated response to the potential disruption of global shipping routes that underpin its economy. Russia's promotion of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a commercially viable alternative to the Malacca Strait-Suez Canal passage threatens to bypass Singapore's status as a premier global transshipment hub. To mitigate this risk, however unlikely in the near-term, Singapore focuses on "exporting expertise" rather than resource extraction, positioning its domestic industries as expert partners in ice-class vessel construction and offshore engineering. Furthermore, Singapore engages in "soft power" diplomacy by providing postgraduate scholarships and capacity-building programs for Arctic Indigenous students to study at Singapore universities through the Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP) and, more specifically, the Singapore-Arctic Council Permanent Participants (AC PP) Cooperation Package.⁵ Through these capacity-building and educational opportunities, Singapore aims to build trust and strengthen its role as a responsible, non-Arctic stakeholder in regional development.

History

Singapore, a tiny city-state with a population close to six million people, is resource scarce but one of the world's most economically and technologically advanced nations.⁶ Although Singapore has never articulated any geopolitical interests or agendas in the macro-region, the country indicated its clear intention to play a role in Arctic governance in 2012. That year, Teo Chee Hean, Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Home Affairs, delivered a speech at the World Oceans Summit that described Singapore's recognition that climate change and reductions in Arctic ice will have global impacts on sea levels, weather patterns, and emerging maritime routes. Hean acknowledged that while Arctic states "have primary responsibility over the Arctic waters within their sovereign jurisdiction," non-Arctic states "also have a useful and legitimate role to play, for example with regard to maritime passages that will become open for international navigation for longer periods each year."⁷ Singapore recognized the Arctic's global environmental and economic significance during this period, and as a result was prepared to "engage actively and constructively" in related discussions.

An analysis of Singapore's interests and Arctic Council bid conducted in 2013 by Stewart Watters and Aki Tonami for *Arctic Yearbook* describes how Singapore began seeking an active role in the Arctic due to its "significant interest in global maritime affairs... and its strategic industries of port management and vessel construction."⁸ Singapore's state institutions and major commercial enterprises are closely linked, and Watters and Tonami reasoned that Singapore's expertise in complex port management and leadership in offshore marine and engineering helped explain the government's interest in the Arctic's potential. Internationally, Singapore sees itself as a key maritime stakeholder because of its "important role in the global governance regimes and institutions for ocean management and transportation as an island state and a major shipping hub."⁹

Singapore's bid to join the Arctic Council as an Observer state was ambitious and effective, in part due to the country's recognition that to achieve a consensus decision by the Council for their admittance would require a dedicated diplomatic effort. With the appointment of a Special Envoy for Arctic Affairs by Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in January 2012, the country actively pursued their inclusion by engaging in several Arctic-related events that year, including inviting the Council's Permanent Participants to visit the country in May 2012.¹⁰ According to Ian Storey, Singapore's diplomatic campaign was considered "among the most adroit and focused of the fourteen applications for observer status and garnered widespread support within the Arctic Council."¹¹

Singapore was admitted as an Arctic Council Observer state in 2013, and after securing Arctic Council observer status it "sought to make up for lost time by engaging in several areas of Arctic diplomacy, including on the Track II, sub-governmental level via various organisations and conferences," political scientist Marc Lanteigne explained.¹² After February 2022, however, Singapore either paused or slowed down its international collaborations in the Arctic. Its participation in the Arctic Council has been limited to modest projects, such as a Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF) working group project in which Singapore's National Parks Board tracks Arctic migratory birds that overwinter in Singapore.¹³ Singapore has more recently indicated it would follow the lead of the Arctic states on the resumption of Arctic Council work, underlining its interest to contribute while recognizing the authority of the Council's members on the matter.¹⁴

Political, Economic, and Scientific Interests

Singapore's interest in the Arctic ultimately stems from its broader commitment to international maritime governance and its strategic economic stakes in shipping opportunities that could emerge. Singapore has understandable interests in climate change, given that rising sea levels owing to thawing Arctic icesheets would have disastrous consequences for the maritime city-state.¹⁵ Sam Tan, Singapore's Special Envoy for Arctic Affairs, observed in 2023 that "as a low-lying country with 30% of our island not much higher than the sea-level, rising sea levels are a threat to the physical survival of Singapore."¹⁶ According to the Third National Climate Change Study released by the Centre for Climate Research Singapore in January 2024, sea level rise would have major implications for the country's water resources, biodiversity, public health, and food security.¹⁷

Singapore's strengths in port management and offshore marine engineering, which are closely tied to key sectors of its economy, are seen as a potential opportunity for the country in the Arctic. Further development of the Northern Sea Route also poses a potential challenge to Singapore's role as a global shipping hub for maritime cargo from Eastern to Western markets,¹⁸ with 70 to 80 percent of all oil bound for China and Japan passing through the Strait of Malacca.¹⁹ Accordingly, Singapore's business sector closely observes what is happening in Arctic transportation networks. Recognizing the need to diversify both its portfolio and the geographic scope of its investments, Singapore looks at potential megaprojects around the world – and the Arctic region is no exception.²⁰

Singapore's exploration of an economic partnership with Russia in developing the NSR prior to 2022 exemplifies the country's interest in leveraging its leadership in shipping and port management to expand its presence in the Arctic. Prior to February 2022, Russian sources identified three main directions of collaboration with Singapore in the Arctic.²¹ First, Singapore was a potential source of financing and technology to develop Russian seaport infrastructure in the Arctic and the Far East. The Russian side was particularly interested in cooperating with engineering companies Keppel Corporation and Semcorp Marine. It also looked to potential collaboration in hi-tech industries, including drilling, navigation systems, and monitoring, with Russian sources identifying up to 5,000 companies in Singapore working in these sectors. Furthermore, Singapore is a world leader in freight and cargo insurance, and Russian sources indicated that

Singapore-based companies were interested in providing insurance to facilitate cargo transportation in the Arctic.

Deals between Trafigura and Norilsk Nickel in 2008²² and between Trafigura and Russia's Rosneft in 2013²³ bode well for commercial cooperation between the two countries. In 2016, during a high-profile trip to Singapore, Russian delegation member Artur Chilingarov (a polar explorer, corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and a Hero of the Soviet Union) communicated that Moscow eagerly sought joint projects and collaboration with Singapore in the Arctic, especially to facilitate drilling on the Russian continental shelf. He also applauded Singapore's abstention from Arctic geopolitics and its concentration on economic and commercial opportunities.²⁴ Practical achievements, however, were limited. Following Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Trafigura froze its investments in Russia²⁵ and later sold its 24.5% share in Nayara Energy Limited (an Indian oil downstream energy and petrochemicals company in which Rosneft holds a 49.13% indirect minority interest).²⁶

Russian academic experts hold out hope that Moscow will attract Singapore's involvement in various Arctic projects and initiatives, which Singapore could use to showcase its infrastructure, communication, shipbuilding, and other innovative technologies. The experts also concede that uncertainty and geopolitical risks inhibit this prospect.²⁷ When Pavel Volkov, Russia's deputy director for the development of the Far East and the Arctic, was asked about the possibility of Singapore's and other foreign non-Western investors in Russia's Arctic projects, he deflected the question to mention unspecified Chinese and Indian projects.²⁸ The short-term opportunity space to revitalize the Russo-Singapore Arctic relationship appears non-existent.

In terms of contributing to Arctic governance, Singapore has also made clear indications related to its interest in participating in the Arctic Council and supporting scientific initiatives. A statement made by Singapore's Senior Minister of State, Sim Ann, at the close of Iceland's Chairship of the Council in 2021, highlighted the country's primary activities in these areas through:

active participation in various Council Working Groups, and sharing Singapore's best practices and knowledge in areas such as preventing oil spills, conserving biodiversity, marine shipping, and sustainable energy development. In the area of Arctic research, Singapore has contributed to the

scientific discourse on Arctic shipping governance; carbon cycling of permafrost soils; and sea-level change in the Arctic. In addition, we continue to offer a technical cooperation package to enhance human resource development and governance capacities for the Permanent Participants.²⁹

Arctic Council Observer Reports produced by Singapore covering their activities from 2019-2025³⁰ indicate that Singapore's primary efforts have been targeted towards participating in dialogue about safe and environmentally responsible Arctic shipping through the Council's Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR) and Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME) working groups, advancing the effective implementation of the Polar Code, and supporting decarbonisation of global shipping via International Maritime Organization (IMO) processes and innovation partnerships. Among other specific shipping-related dialogues, Singapore has contributed to discussions on accident prevention, preparedness, and response; oil pollution; Arctic shipping status reports; Black carbon and methane mitigation from shipping; and Arctic marine tourism shipping analyses and best-practice guidelines.

In parallel, Singapore has invested in Arctic scientific initiatives, primarily through CAFF, that seek to understand how cryosphere change affects global and Southeast Asian sea-level rise, and in biodiversity work that links Arctic migratory bird conservation to wetland protection along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. Singapore has shown an interest in supporting the sustainable development agenda through the SDWG and through direct engagement with the PPs to support Indigenous Peoples' priorities. These interests have been reflected in Singapore's long-running collaboration with Arctic Indigenous Permanent Participants through tailored training and study visits for representatives and youth; contributing to events related to sustainable energy development in the Arctic; and information exchange on strategies for building sustainability. Through the Singapore Cooperation Programme, Indigenous representatives have participated in courses on climate change adaptation, engaged in cultural exchanges on sustainable development and heritage preservation, and a postgraduate scholarship scheme that enables Arctic Indigenous students to pursue studies in public policy, public administration, and maritime studies in Singapore.³¹

In sum, Singapore's Arctic Council Observer reports demonstrate that the country's primary interests within Arctic governance frameworks have been:

- sustainable development and environmental protection
- safe, rules-based, and environmentally responsible shipping
- climate impacts and sea-level rise
- biodiversity conservation, especially related to migratory birds and wetlands
- capacity building and partnership with Arctic Indigenous Peoples
- support for Arctic governance and multilateralism through the Arctic Council and participation in other fora, including the Arctic Circle Assembly.

Arctic Policy

Singapore does not maintain a standalone Arctic policy document. Instead, its position on Arctic issues can be presumed through a combination of diplomatic statements, participation as an Arctic Council Observer, engagement with international maritime and environmental regimes, and broader climate diplomacy. As a low-lying, trade-dependent city-state, Singapore has framed Arctic developments primarily through their implications for global sea levels, climate stability and international maritime trade.³² Official statements have acknowledged the responsibility Arctic states have over waters in their sovereign jurisdiction while also arguing that Singapore, as a non-Arctic state, has a legitimate role to play, especially related to maritime navigation.³³

In practice, Singapore positions itself as knowledge-producing and norm-supporting non-Arctic state, leveraging its strengths as a maritime hub and research centre to promote a stable, well-governed, and sustainable Arctic. Singapore's activities at the Council from 2019-2025 indicate the country's primary focus on contributing to shipping safety, environmental standards, and science-based decision-making in Arctic affairs. Core principles of Singapore's positions regarding the Arctic include respect for Arctic state sovereignty, adherence to international law (particularly UNCLOS and IMO mechanisms including the Polar Code), and strong support for sustainable development and environmental protection.

Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Priorities

Singapore's Arctic posture has been explicitly multilateral, partnership-oriented, and focused on capacity-building. Singapore has no direct defence interests in the Arctic and has consistently avoided framing the region in military or strategic terms. Its official statements and Arctic Council interventions emphasize the importance of maintaining the Arctic as a zone of peace, governed through cooperation, science, and international law. Singapore's position reflects both its geographic distance from the region and its broader foreign policy preference for depoliticising functional cooperation in areas where great-power competition could undermine global governance.³⁴

Given the close link between economic success and national security in Singapore's developmental state model, however, economic challenges are treated as security issues. A future decline in Singapore's role as a key maritime hub would threaten its economic wellbeing and such challenges have been treated as security issues in the past.³⁵ While the impact of the NSR on Singapore may be exaggerated, the country sees engagement with Arctic governance as a hedge against potential risks and to better understand and influence Arctic developments.³⁶ This has underlined Singapore's focus on regulatory clarity, maritime safety and institutional stability in the Arctic governance context. The country sees climate change as a threat to domestic security, with many statements indicating concerns about the impacts of rising sea levels, changing weather patterns, and their potentially destabilizing effects on the small island state.

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interests

Canada and Singapore both strongly endorse multilateralism and the international rules-based order, including open trade and cooperation through global institutions. Both countries are committed to addressing climate change, including collaboration under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and joint membership in climate initiatives such as the Powering Past Coal Alliance, co-led by Canada and joined by Singapore in 2021. In addition to the Arctic Council, Canada and Singapore work together through multilateral fora that include the Commonwealth, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Association of Southeast

Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

Canada and Singapore have wide-ranging economic ties including extensive trade and investment. As of 2024, Singapore was the largest source of foreign direct investment into Canada from Southeast Asia (\$7.8 billion in 2024), with bilateral merchandise and services trade totalling in the billions of dollars annually (\$3.7 billion in 2024).³⁷ The two countries have been enhancing collaboration in research, technology, and innovation, a phenomenon that was reinforced by a joint statement in 2024 on science and technology cooperation that included areas such as artificial intelligence, green tech, biotechnology, and commercialization of these emerging technologies.³⁸ These economic ties provide a basis for practical collaboration and create incentives for both states to coordinate on global governance norms, including those relevant to the Arctic.

One of the strongest areas of convergence is maritime governance and shipping safety. Both countries support the IMO's Polar Code and advocate for high regulatory standards in Arctic navigation, a position reflected in the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore's implementation of and guidance on Polar Code amendments as a flag state.³⁹ Canada's experience as a coastal Arctic state complements Singapore's expertise as a global maritime regulator and port authority, creating opportunities for collaboration on best practices for regulating polar shipping.

Another strong area of convergence is the support of the Arctic Council's Permanent Participant organizations. Singapore has demonstrated its interest and capacity for engaging these Indigenous organizations, helping to support its goal of "reinforcing international recognition of Singapore as an effective, constructive, and principled partner."⁴⁰ Some Permanent Participant representatives have indicated that Singapore's interest in working with them has been genuine since the country became an Observer in 2013, indicating a distinct approach by the country compared to its involvement elsewhere in the world where Singapore typically operates on a government-to-government level.⁴¹ Canada's 2024 *Arctic Foreign Policy*⁴² and 2019 *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework*⁴³ have highlighted the important role the Permanent Participants and Indigenous Peoples play in Arctic governance, indicating a desire to expand the support for these organizations representing Indigenous interests in the Arctic. Singapore could be a partner in supporting these organizations and their priorities.

Climate science and environmental protection represent another important area of shared interest. Singapore's focus on Arctic climate research is important for understanding global climate systems and aligns with Canada's commitment to Arctic science and environmental monitoring. Joint initiatives or coordinated support within Arctic Council working groups could strengthen scientific cooperation while reinforcing evidence-based policymaking. Sam Tan, Singapore's Special Envoy for Arctic Affairs, stated in 2023 that as a small country, it is in Singapore's interest to remain closely connected to the world and to understand how changes in climate patterns, environmental and economic developments, even in a distant region like the Arctic, can impact Singapore. We also seek to make friends and work with like-minded countries in co-creating solutions to address some of these challenges.⁴⁴

Both countries also have a shared interest in building institutional resilience and multilateral governance. *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy* and defence policy update *Our North, Strong and Free*⁴⁵ declare an interest in working with like-minded states on preserving this international order. Singapore's diplomatic support for the Arctic Council's mandate and Canada's leadership role as an Arctic state converge in sustaining the Council as the central forum for Arctic cooperation – another important priority in Canada's Arctic foreign policy.

Capacity-building and technical cooperation, particularly in environmental management, marine pollution prevention, and sustainable shipping, also offer practical, low-politics avenues for engagement. Such cooperation allows Singapore to contribute meaningfully to the region without encroaching on Arctic state sovereignty, while supporting Canada's broader Arctic policy objectives and desire to maintain its "Arctic-state supremacy."⁴⁶ In general, Singapore "has shown a preference to work directly with the Arctic states than with the other observer states," Hema Nadarajah of the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada astutely observes. She notes that Singapore can continue to add value to the Arctic in research and innovation on issues like port infrastructure or energy solutions, the green transition and improving sustainability, and providing a counterweight to more powerful states seeking to undermine soft governance mechanisms and international law.⁴⁷ For Canada, these topics align well with its domestic and international interests,

particularly if Canada intends to pursue a leadership role as a middle power in the evolving international order.

Issues of Divergence or Concern

From a Canadian perspective, Singapore is not a problematic actor in the Arctic, but its engagement aligns more with Canada's environmental and rules-based governance agendas than with its sovereignty and security priorities. This raises a few *potential* areas of divergence based on interest-based differences that, so far, have not been a cause for concern. While Canada's Arctic politics are focused on questions of sovereignty, Indigenous self-determination, and other domestic initiatives in the North, Singapore's Arctic engagements remain both external and functional, focusing on global governance issues that can be addressed through international institutions and technical cooperation.

A central point of potential divergence relates to sovereignty and ocean governance. Singaporean officials have articulated views grounded in a strong interpretation of UNCLOS, emphasizing freedom of navigation as an issue of "vital interest," characterizing the high seas as the common heritage of humankind, and advocating for open, inclusive discussions on ocean governance involving all interested stakeholders.⁴⁸ While Singapore's global maritime outlook has not explicitly challenged Canada's Arctic position, their conceptual framing could potentially contrast with Canada's position on the various routes through Canada's Arctic Archipelago collectively referred to as the Northwest Passage, which Ottawa considers historic internal waters subject to full Canadian jurisdiction. Even abstract or generalized endorsements of expanding navigational freedoms in the Arctic is a source of quiet sensitivity for Canada given the centrality of asserting Canadian sovereignty in its Arctic-focused policies.

In terms of governance spaces, Canada remains cautious about agenda-setting by non-Arctic states in Arctic institutions. This is referred to in *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy*, released in December 2024, which calls for partnerships with like-minded states that recognize Canada's Arctic state supremacy. Although Singapore has been notably restrained in its participation as an Arctic Council observer by avoiding agenda-setting behavior and consistently affirming Arctic-state primacy in that forum, the broader context of growing global interest in the Arctic heightens Canadian concerns about incremental shifts in institutional norms.

In economic terms, Singapore's engagement with Canada in the Arctic has been almost entirely confined to discussions about maritime governance and shipping standards through the Arctic Council, reflecting its role as a global shipping hub and maritime regulator. Despite a positive trade and investment relationship between the two countries, there has been limited scope for economic collaboration specifically in the Arctic thus far. This is understandable considering that Singapore is a distant non-Arctic state, but the country did demonstrate its potential interest in investing in Arctic maritime infrastructure during a relatively short period of growing relations with Russia related to the Northern Sea Route prior to 2022.

Overall, Singapore and Canada's interests are not adversarial. Singapore has intentionally built its reputation as a "benign actor" in Arctic affairs through its active engagement in regional activities – an approach "that has been lauded by Arctic member states."⁴⁹ Singapore has largely avoided engaging in Arctic security discourse and has practiced a primarily global governance-focused approach to the region. While Canada's recent policies frame the Arctic as a strategic environment being shaped by great power competition, the two states should retain a focus on how Singapore's policies align with Canada's environmental and rules-based governance agendas. This will avoid broader tensions that could otherwise arise related to Canada's sovereignty-driven priorities.

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Spain

André Moreau

“The Arctic region represents a vast territory intersecting the global interests of various Arctic and non-Arctic states... non-Arctic states are significant stakeholders in the region.”

Spanish Senior Arctic Official Carlos Lopez Ortiz
(October 2024)¹

Spain’s engagement in the Arctic is rooted in its maritime exploration heritage, scientific research, and a strong commitment to multilateral governance. Despite its geographic distance from the region, Spain justifies its Arctic interest through a historical legacy of northern sea exploration and, more recently, through the Arctic’s growing relevance to global climate systems. Spain has been politically active in Arctic cooperation since gaining Observer status in the Arctic Council and has reinforced its institutional presence through membership in the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC), participation in European Union (EU) polar research frameworks, and the appointment of an Ambassador for Arctic Affairs. Spain is also a party to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which underpins its emphasis on rules-based maritime governance.

Spain deliberately frames the Arctic as a zone of peace, stability, and shared responsibility, consistently emphasizing respect for Arctic state sovereignty while supporting inclusive cooperation with other non-Arctic stakeholders. Its active participation in Arctic Council working groups and various international Arctic fora reflects an effort to contribute constructively to policy dialogue, science-based decision-making, and environmental protection and conservation. Shaped by its EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) memberships, Spain situates Arctic security

within collective and defensive frameworks rather than as national power projection.

As such, Canada emerges as a particularly aligned partner in Spain's Arctic outlook. Shared priorities around climate research, multilateral governance, and NATO allyship, coupled with established Canada-Spain cooperation in polar science, position Spain as a pragmatic, supportive non-Arctic actor whose Arctic engagement complements Canada's values of stability, law-based governance, and international scientific collaboration.

History

Despite its geographical distance from the Arctic, Spain justifies its interest in Arctic affairs by citing its historical legacy.² Spain's connections to the Arctic date back to early modern maritime expansion when Spanish navigators explored high northern Pacific latitudes in their search for the Northwest Passage.³ In the late 18th century, Spain sponsored a series of maritime expeditions into the northern Pacific as part of its imperial and navigational ambitions. From Spain's perspective, these voyages represent their early contributions to the advancement of scientific and geographic understanding of the Arctic and adjacent northern regions.⁴

Spain's contemporary engagement in the Arctic is driven primarily by concerns related to climate change, scientific research, and global governance.⁵ Over the past two decades, Spain has expanded its Arctic research activities and strengthened its institutional presence by gaining Observer status in the Arctic Council (2006), joining the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) (2009), and appointing an Ambassador for Arctic Affairs (2011).⁶ Spain is a strong proponent of multilateralism, supports international law under UNCLOS, and coordinates its polar activities through the Spanish Polar Committee which has seen an increase in resources dedicated to Arctic matters.

Spain's engagement in Arctic affairs is also shaped by its membership in the European Union.⁷ Spain contributes to and benefits from EU-level frameworks like EU-PolarNet, a Europe-wide polar research coordination network that fosters cooperation on Arctic and Antarctic scientific projects.⁸ All of these activities promote its underlying goals of promoting peace, sustainability, and cooperation in the region.

Although Spain has not adopted a formal Arctic strategy and instead released *Guidelines for A Spanish Polar Strategy* in 2016, its

approach emphasizes scientific research, sustainable fisheries, emerging navigation routes, and cooperation with Arctic partners. Furthermore, Spain views the Arctic as a region where stability and peace are essential. Accordingly, it supports NATO's role in cooperative security dialogues and upholds UNCLOS as a legal framework for peaceful maritime governance.⁹ While Spain participates in NATO's broader security ecosystem and discussions about Arctic defence postures to maintain regional stability and collective defence, it does so primarily as a supporter of collective security and not as a frontline Arctic military actor.¹⁰

Political, Economic, and Scientific Interests

Politically, Spain advances Arctic Council priorities through policy dialogue and outreach, participating in Warsaw-format meetings, international Arctic fora, and EU Arctic projects.¹¹ For example, it has promoted social sustainability in the Arctic by organizing a panel on "Gender Equality for More Sustainable Communities in the Arctic" at the 2024 Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavík.¹² Through such initiatives, Spain seeks to position itself as a constructive non-Arctic stakeholder committed to inclusive governance and sustainable development in the region.

Spanish scientific research in the Arctic is largely driven by economic considerations. Spain's economic interests in the Arctic region remain modest and largely relate to sustainable fisheries, energy security, and tourism. Given Spain's heavy reliance on imported energy resources, its energy concerns are likely to intensify in the coming years, particularly in light of the current government's plans to phase out most nuclear power plants. As a result, Spain ranks among the largest energy importers within the EU.¹³

Scientific research remains the primary vehicle through which Spain engages with the Arctic region. It participates actively in international Arctic science bodies, including International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) working groups, the International Conference on Arctic Research Planning IV process, and the Arctic Science Funders Forum. Spain also supports Arctic research infrastructure through involvement in EU-funded initiatives such as the Polar Research Infrastructure (POLARIN) project and the Forum of Arctic Researchers Operators (FARO) program, contributing logistical, technical, and operational expertise. Spanish state-funded research and oceanographic missions have taken place in Canada as

well as in other Arctic regions including Greenland, Svalbard, Fram Strait, and the Greenland Sea.¹⁴

Arctic Policy

Spain's Arctic policy has not been articulated through a standalone Arctic strategy, but instead emerges from different sources, including the *Guidelines for a Spanish Polar Strategy*, institutional practice, and foreign policy documents that increasingly acknowledge the Arctic's global relevance. Together, these elements portray Spain as a cooperative non-Arctic observer state that seeks legitimacy and influence through scientific contribution, environmental stewardship, and adherence to international law rather than strategic competition.¹⁵

Spain's *Guidelines for a Spanish Polar Strategy*, developed by the Spanish Polar Committee and published in 2016 by the Ministry of Science and Innovation, remains the foundational document shaping the country's Arctic posture.¹⁶ Although polar in scope, the *Guidelines* identify the Arctic as a region of heightened importance due to climate change and environmental vulnerability while also considering how Arctic Indigenous inhabitants are affected.¹⁷

These principles translate into a clear set of policy priorities. Spain emphasizes multilateralism as the appropriate mode of Arctic governance, with the Arctic Council serving as the central forum for cooperation.¹⁸ The country prioritizes climate and environmental research, viewing Arctic science as essential to understanding global climate dynamics which it then ties to how they may affect Spain and the Mediterranean region.¹⁹ Spain is also interested in the education and dissemination of polar region knowledge to promote the conservation of the environment and way of life values for residents.²⁰ The *Guidelines* and subsequent official statements underline the importance of peaceful cooperation, avoidance of conflict, and support for science-based decision-making, positioning the Arctic as a shared global responsibility rather than a zone of strategic rivalry.²¹

Institutionally, Spain's Arctic engagement is coordinated through the Spanish Polar Committee, which oversees national polar research priorities and supports Spain's participation in international Arctic scientific and governance bodies.²² As an accredited Observer to the Arctic Council, Spain has appointed designated officials for each working group and has sought to better align its national institutions with Council activities.²³ The Spanish Navy administers

the National Polar Data Centers which collect, manage, preserve, and disseminate scientific data generated through Spanish polar research.²⁴ Through these mechanisms, Spain does not seek to portray itself as a leader in Arctic affairs, but consistently seeks to present itself as a responsible, supportive, non-Arctic actor. It emphasizes partnership with Arctic States, cooperation with Indigenous Peoples, and respect for existing governance structures.²⁵

Looking ahead, Spain's *Foreign Action Strategy 2025-2028* signals a gradual evolution of its polar policy. In this strategic document, Spain states that "in a context marked by the increasing geostrategic interest of the polar regions, Spain's Polar Strategy for 2025-2035 will consolidate the country's commitment to the protection of these spaces." Official statements at conferences and workshops indicate that this forthcoming strategy will signal the growing relevance of the Arctic in Spain's foreign policy agenda.²⁶

Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Priorities

Spain's official discourse on Arctic defence and security frames the region as "a zone of peace" marked by stability, cooperation, and strict adherence to international law, rather than militarization or unilateral action. This approach aligns closely with broader Arctic Council, EU, and NATO narratives, and reflects Spain's strategic preference for collective security over national power projection.²⁷

Within NATO, Spain situates Arctic security within the Alliance's growing focus on the High North following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Spanish defence messaging emphasizes deterrence, situational awareness, and alliance solidarity, while carefully avoiding language that would imply independent Spanish military ambitions in the region. Spain supports NATO's enhanced attention to the Arctic through participation in strategic discussions, capability development, and burden-sharing, consistently framing these measures as defensive and stabilising rather than escalatory – particularly vis-à-vis Russia and China.²⁸

International law, and particularly UNCLOS, features prominently in Spain's Arctic security messaging. Spanish officials consistently stress that freedom of navigation, respect for maritime boundaries, and peaceful dispute resolution should guide responses to emerging security challenges, including increased military activity and strategic competition.²⁹ This legalistic framing closely mirrors

Canada's emphasis on law-based Arctic governance, even where the two states diverge on specific legal interpretations.

Spain has responded to heightened Arctic tensions with restrained, institutional messaging reiterating support for the Kingdom of Denmark's sovereignty, international law, and multilateral frameworks rather than engaging with provocative rhetoric. In January 2026, Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares reaffirmed Spain's backing of Denmark's territorial integrity regarding Greenland, which aligns with Spain's stance that the Arctic represents a shared diplomatic responsibility.³⁰ Unlike many of its European allies, however, Spain did not send any troops to Greenland and indicated that it would only deploy forces within the framework of a formally mandated EU or NATO mission.³¹ Spanish military experts argued that "Spain does not have the military capacity to act in an Arctic scenario" and therefore it "lacks the military capacity to act in Greenland."³²

Overall, Spain's engagement with NATO and alignment with partners such as Canada reflect a shared interest in preserving Arctic stability while adapting existing security frameworks to evolving geopolitical realities. Spain's discourse positions it as a norm-reinforcing, supportive actor whose Arctic security interests are inseparable from broader transatlantic cooperation and institutional governance.

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interests with Canada

Canada and Spain reinforced their strategic partnership through a series of security and economic milestones announced in late 2025. Spanish official messaging consistently frames the Arctic as a space where stability, cooperation, and legal certainty are best achieved through multilateral engagement rather than unilateral action. Within this discourse, Canada emerges as a particularly compatible partner, given shared commitments to science-based policymaking, rules-based governance, and alliance cohesion in the region.³³

Science and research cooperation represents the clearest and most explicitly endorsed opportunity for deeper Arctic engagement. Spain's *Foreign Action Strategy 2025–2028* places scientific diplomacy at the centre of its polar engagement and explicitly commits to "developing lines of collaboration on polar affairs with Canada."³⁴ Although most of Spain's polar science is conducted in Antarctica (where it is an Antarctic Treaty Consultative Party), its growing interest in Arctic research³⁵ is accompanied by deepening

bilateral cooperation with Canada in the south polar region.³⁶ The joint establishment of an Antarctic Ocean observatory marks a watershed in Canada-Spain scientific collaboration, and is cited as a model for science-led polar engagement that builds trust and can inform future Arctic collaboration.³⁷

A second area of convergence lies in rules-based Arctic governance. Spanish officials consistently emphasise the primacy of international law, particularly UNCLOS, freedom of navigation, and peaceful dispute resolution as the foundation for Arctic stability.³⁸ This legal framing is analogous to Canada's own views relating to the Arctic, providing space for coordinated diplomatic messaging.³⁹

Collective security and NATO alignment constitute another shared interest. Spain situates Arctic security firmly within NATO's collective deterrence and situational awareness posture.⁴⁰ Although Spain does not engage bilaterally with Canada on Arctic defence in operational terms, its discourse reflects a shared emphasis on NATO unity, legal certainty, and institutional coordination in the High North. Spain views Canada as a stabilizing transatlantic partner whose engagement complements broader institutional approaches to Arctic security. Accordingly, Canada's role as a key Arctic NATO member allows Spain to support regional stability through alliance mechanisms without needing to pursue an independent operational presence.

Spanish officials have welcomed closer Canada-EU defence cooperation, including Canada's agreement to participate in the EU's Security Action for Europe (SAFE) initiative, as a means of strengthening transatlantic cohesion and collective defence. SAFE represents a €150 billion financial instrument designed to facilitate defence procurement and expand joint opportunities for defence-related industries, thereby enhancing competitiveness in global defence markets.⁴¹ The announcement of Canada's participation in December 2025 reflects growing transatlantic economic and security cooperation, within which Spain plays an important role as a NATO member and EU actor.⁴²

Climate change and environmental security represent another clear area of convergence. Spanish Arctic messaging links climate impacts directly to maritime safety, environmental protection, and long-term security risks – areas where Canada's Arctic expertise is widely recognized.⁴³

Spain's Arctic engagement also reflects broader economic considerations, both within the Arctic itself and through its expanding

economic relationship with Canada more generally. Building upon strong ties under the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), ministers from both governments have committed to strengthening economic security and collaboration in critical minerals, clean energy, and advanced manufacturing, with the ambition of doubling trade volumes.⁴⁴

Issues of Divergence or Potential Concern

Spain and Canada face potential areas of divergence in Arctic and Arctic-adjacent maritime governance, based upon their differing legal interpretations of maritime boundaries, treaty applicability, and coastal-state authority under international law. While these differences have not produced direct bilateral disputes, historical precedents suggest they could become more salient as activity, resource competition, and strategic interest intensify in the Arctic.

A notable example is the 1920 Svalbard Treaty. Spain has adopted an expansive interpretation of the Treaty's non-discrimination and freedom of access provisions, arguing that they extend beyond territorial waters to all maritime zones measured from the archipelago, including the continental shelf under UNCLOS.⁴⁵ This position, articulated most clearly in Spain's 2007 Note Verbale, reflects a broader legal instinct to prioritize treaty-based access and to limit exclusive coastal-state control over offshore resources.⁴⁶ Spain and others' interpretation raises questions about the interaction between historic treaty regimes and the modern law of the sea, particularly given that the Svalbard Treaty was negotiated before the development of contemporary concepts such as the exclusive economic zone and continental shelf jurisdiction.⁴⁷

Canada, by contrast, has generally aligned with Norway's restrictive interpretation, which limits the application of the Svalbard Treaty to land territory and territorial waters while affirming Norway's exclusive sovereign rights over the surrounding fisheries protection zone and continental shelf. Although Canada is a party to the Svalbard Treaty, its involvement with the region is minimal. Canada has avoided endorsing interpretations that would dilute coastal-state authority beyond clearly defined maritime zones.⁴⁸ This position was formalised during bilateral fisheries discussions with Norway in 1994–1995, when Canada explicitly recognised Norway's sovereign rights in the Svalbard maritime zones and affirmed that the Treaty does not extend to those areas.⁴⁹

The implications of such a divergence are illustrated by Norway's detention of Spanish cod vessels in 2004 and 2006 for failing to comply with fisheries regulations in the Svalbard zone. Spain protested these actions on the grounds that vessels flying the flag of a Treaty Party are entitled to equal treatment, underscoring how differing legal interpretations can translate into geopolitical tension.⁵⁰ This episode highlights a potential fault line: Spain's preference for broad access under treaty regimes contrasts with Canada's emphasis on coastal-state jurisdiction, regulatory control, and conservation authority – an approach that could shape Canada's response to similar disputes in Arctic waters.

These contrasting legal instincts are further reinforced by historical precedent outside the High Arctic. The 1995 Turbot War between Canada and Spain demonstrated how disagreements over fisheries jurisdiction and coastal-state enforcement can escalate when access rights and conservation measures clash. Canada asserted an expansive interpretation of its enforcement authority to protect straddling fish stocks adjacent to its EEZ, while Spain opposed what it viewed as a dangerous precedent for unilateral coastal-state expansion. Taken together, Svalbard and the Turbot War suggest a persistent tension between Spain's access-oriented approach and Canada's sovereignty-centred interpretation of maritime governance – one that could re-emerge as Arctic fisheries and offshore resources become more contested.⁵¹

Another, though largely latent, area of divergence concerns Arctic shipping routes, particularly the Northwest Passage (NWP). Consistent with the longstanding legal position of the United States, Spain has traditionally favoured treating emerging Arctic sea routes as international straits subject to transit passage under UNCLOS.⁵² Canada, by contrast, maintains that the NWP constitutes historic internal waters subject to full Canadian sovereignty.⁵³ Spain has not challenged Canada's legal position, but its preference for an international navigation regime reflects a broader EU legal orientation that has historically emphasized freedom of navigation.⁵⁴

That said, Spain's position has evolved alongside shifts in EU Arctic policy. Since 2016, EU Arctic strategies have deliberately avoided taking explicit positions on the legal status of the NWP, instead prioritising maritime safety, environmental protection, and rules-based multilateralism.⁵⁵ Consequently, any Spanish concerns regarding Canada's regulatory approach would likely be expressed indirectly through EU institutions and multilateral fora rather than

through bilateral confrontation. Nevertheless, as expectations around Arctic shipping increase, this underlying divergence in legal perspective may assume greater practical relevance.

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12

Switzerland

P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Zachary Zimmermann

“Switzerland is a vertical Arctic state. ... It’s great that we can build a bridge between our high alpine region, which is so important for Switzerland’s identity, and the Arctic. This way we can also show our population that we are in the same boat.”

Grégoire Hauser, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (2019)¹

Switzerland's Arctic policy, formalized when it gained Observer status in the Arctic Council in 2017, is fundamentally anchored in science diplomacy and its extensive expertise in cryosphere and high-altitude research. Its strategy leverages the country's academic expertise to promote peaceful cooperation and sustainable development in the region. Key objectives include providing a supportive political framework for Swiss research institutions, fostering international scientific collaboration, and engaging in multilateral dialogue through platforms like the unofficial “High North Talks” convened by the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). Furthermore, by drawing strong parallels between the rapid climate change impacts in the Alps and the Arctic, Switzerland highlights its unique position to contribute valuable data and insights to global climate discussions.²

Switzerland’s Arctic policy reflects a “bottom-up” approach driven primarily by that country’s scientific community rather than government interests. It aims to strengthen Switzerland's standing as a leading research location for Arctic affairs and emphasizes a commitment to addressing the universal implications of climate change. The country’s neutral status also fundamentally shapes its Arctic policy in that it seeks to position itself as an impartial

mediator and a hub for science diplomacy in an increasingly fractured region.³ While national security concerns have prompted many countries to restrict international scientific partnerships, particularly in sensitive research fields, Swiss experts lament how this has fragmented global scientific networks and make it more difficult to collaborate on critical, shared challenges like climate change and future pandemics.⁴ “Switzerland stands out for its ability to connect different parties and for its unyielding commitment to multilateralism and inclusive cooperation,” Ambassador Alexandra Baumann touted in June 2025. “This constructive approach helps us to have an impact, even as an observer state.”⁵

History

Switzerland's Arctic engagement began in the nineteenth century as a extension of its expertise in high-altitude Alpine research, leading officials to designate their country as a “Vertical Arctic Nation.”⁶ A long tradition of fieldwork marked Switzerland as a global leader in cryosphere science. For example, Swiss meteorologist Alfred de Quervain led the first successful west-to-east crossing of the Greenland ice sheet in 1912.⁷ The meteorological and glaciological data collected during this expedition, and subsequent ones like the founding of the Expédition Glaciologique Internationale au Groenland (EGIG) in 1956, helped to established Switzerland as an important contributor to international polar research networks and helped to standardize long-term meteorological and glaciological monitoring practices.

The transition from scientific exploration to formal political involvement culminated when the Arctic Council granted Switzerland accredited Observer status in 2017. This diplomatic milestone recognized Switzerland's extensive contributions to polar science and its commitment to identifying and addressing the global impacts of Arctic warming. Since then, the Swiss Confederation has intensified its engagement by participating in the Council's scientific working groups⁸ and hosting unofficial, discreet international dialogues such as the GCSP “High North Talks” that seek to “provide a safe, neutral space where representatives from Arctic and non-Arctic states can build trust and define shared interests.”⁹ By 2026, Switzerland has integrated its polar expertise into its broader foreign policy, focusing on science diplomacy to bridge geopolitical divides and advocate for the peaceful, sustainable management of the Arctic.

Political, Economic, and Scientific Interests

Ambassador Stefan Estermann, Head of the Sectoral Foreign Policies Division for Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs in 2020, explained that:

Although a landlocked country in the heart of Europe, Switzerland stands at the forefront of polar research. Mostly because of the ice and snow that our country harbors naturally, many Swiss researchers have demonstrated a strong interest in the exploration of the cryosphere on a global scale for many decades, in particular in high altitude. Research on permafrost, ice and glaciers started in Switzerland and many scientific methods or instruments have been developed in the Swiss Alps. This research interest dates back to the 19th century. Since then, Swiss scientists have been deeply involved in international cooperation in the two poles, as well as in a third one: the Swiss Alps.

Bringing together high altitude with high latitude, scientific collaborations primarily focus on climate conditions and ecosystems in mountain and polar regions to measure the impact of human-induced changes on the environment and the global climate. We do have an interest, as a small but internationally active country, that the Arctic remains a peacefully managed space, open for scientific research for the benefit of all.¹⁰

Given its world-class research facilities and reputation for innovation, Switzerland emphasizes the scientific contributions that it brings to enhance the work of the Arctic Council and circumpolar partnerships more generally.

Switzerland's Observer report for 2018 highlighted that the country "is known for its long-standing and reliable commitment to peaceful international cooperation with Arctic nations, ranging from a large number of joint research projects with Arctic partners to a strong engagement in sustainable development in the region through multilateral bodies." It also emphasized that "the principles of promoting shared well-being, sustainable development, internal cohesion and cultural diversity, which are enshrined in the Swiss Federal Constitution, converge with the Arctic Council's overall objective of inclusiveness."¹¹ By extension, Switzerland's involvement in the Arctic falls clearly within its foreign policy objectives. The country's participation in the Arctic Council is

coordinated by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) Prosperity and Sustainability Division,¹² in collaboration with other ministries, particularly the Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research (EAER) and the Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications (DETEC).¹³

Switzerland's official statements emphasize that "research and politics must work hand in hand together and a regular dialogue with research institutions is as necessary as it is important." The Swiss Committee on Polar and High Altitude Research (SCPHAR) of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences serves as a coordination platform for Swiss scientists at various international research institutions, orchestrating their participation in the scientific work of the Arctic Council, the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC), the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR) and the Climate and Cryosphere project of the World Climate Research Programme (WCRP).¹⁴ Switzerland also has a close network of research teams working on Arctic-related topics, such as the Swiss Polar Institute founded in 2016 by the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL), WSL, ETHZ, the University of Bern and the University of Lausanne.¹⁵

Due to its long and extensive experience in polar and glaciological research, Switzerland considers itself to be "in a unique and privileged position to illustrate the global importance of the cryosphere."¹⁶ Greenland remains a major focus of Swiss research in the Arctic, including measuring the effects of erosion of the Greenland ice sheet on local environments. Other polar projects include studies of polar oceanography, greenhouse gases, and how climate change in the Arctic affects European weather patterns.¹⁷

Swiss scientists showcase their longstanding expertise in glaciology in international research projects such as the "long-lasting project by the Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research (WSL), the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (ETHZ) and the University of Colorado at Boulder, which is investigating the impact of climate change on the Greenland ice sheet." The test site at "Swiss Camp" calibrates twenty automatic weather stations on the ice cap that deliver data for the Greenland Climate Network (GC-Net).¹⁸

In its application for Arctic Council status granted in 2017, the country underscored its research missions dating back to the nineteenth century, its competencies in comparative climate and glaciology studies, and its work to foster partnerships with Arctic

Council member states in various regional projects, as well as its adherence to the Law of the Sea and its advocacy for Arctic Indigenous Peoples' rights. "Switzerland's new role in the Arctic Council is yet another sign that the country continues to move away from its traditional wariness towards membership in international organisations," political scientist Marc Lanteigne observed.¹⁹

Ambassador Stefan Estermann explained Switzerland's roles and priorities as an Observer State, stating that:

This status acknowledges Switzerland's Arctic interests and expertise to engage with the Arctic Council in peaceful international cooperation with a particular goal: to advance scientific knowledge and limit the environmental and socio-economic impact of changes in the Arctic. Being part of the Arctic Council is a way to recognize the work of our scientists in the field of polar and high-altitude research. Over the past decade, Swiss researchers have participated in several international Arctic projects involving multiple Arctic States and Observers.²⁰

Arctic Policy

Switzerland does not have an official Arctic or Polar Policy document. Instead, the following insights are derived from Switzerland's *Foreign Policy Strategy for 2024–2027* as well as its most recent activity report submitted pursuant to its role as an Observer State in the Arctic Council.

Switzerland's *Foreign Policy Strategy for 2024–2027* contains no direct reference to the Arctic or circumpolar north. The closest reference to this region is a description of the security situation in Europe, stating that "NATO has been fortified again as the anchor of European security and *has expanded to the north* [emphasis added]."²¹ Nonetheless, several of Switzerland's main foreign policy pillars inform its approach to the Arctic region. First, Switzerland elevates the environment as a "new priority for foreign policy."²² Relevant to the Arctic, Switzerland pays particular attention to protecting biodiversity and decreasing pollution, while reinforcing the role of international cooperation and existing multilateral frameworks to combat these issues. These priorities are also reflected in Switzerland's work in the Arctic Council working groups, namely the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF), the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP), and the Arctic Contaminants Action Program (ACAP).²³

Second, the Swiss foreign policy strategy underscores a knowledge-based approach, noting that Switzerland's leading position in "education, research, and innovation" provides a "good basis for high-profile science diplomacy."²⁴ Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis highlighted in 2019 that "science diplomacy is a key instrument for fostering cooperation between states." He also described science diplomacy as "an opportunity for Switzerland to showcase the excellence of its scientific base in support of global dialogue."²⁵ Switzerland engages in science diplomacy through its work as an Observer State in the Arctic Council by working with the Swiss scientific community to provide information to the working groups and by appointing Swiss scientists to attend and contribute directly to the working groups.²⁶

Third, Swiss foreign policy emphasizes "effective, focused multilateralism and a strong Swiss presence in the relevant forums"²⁷ to ensure that its interests are represented and advanced. Extending that principle to the Arctic region would suggest a continued effort by Switzerland to fully contribute to the Arctic Council in its role as an Observer State. This is reiterated in its 2025 activity report, which states that "Switzerland considers the Arctic Council as the leading intergovernmental forum ... in the Arctic."²⁸

Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Priorities

As a landlocked country with no territorial claims in the Arctic, Switzerland advocates for the region to remain a peacefully managed space open to research for the benefit of all humanity, mirroring its commitment to the Antarctic Treaty. By promoting science diplomacy, Switzerland seeks to act as a bridge-builder, using climate research as a "neutral" platform for international cooperation. Two Swiss experts suggest that "averting conflict can become Switzerland's role in Arctic science diplomacy" through its "scientific expertise, neutrality and the convening power of International Geneva."²⁹

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), a foundation established in 1995, promotes peace, security and international cooperation through various executive education, applied security policy research, and dialogue platforms that "promote discreet and frank exchanges between decision-makers, experts and practitioners from different fields." The High North Talks, founded in 2022 and facilitated by GCSP's Director of Mediation and Peace Support Paul Dziatkowicz, are intended to bring together diverse representatives

from all of the Arctic states (including Russia) and key non-Arctic states (including China) to “learn from each other, to get to know different perspectives and to work together on solutions to current challenges.” While unofficial, these gatherings represent one of the few remaining venues where stakeholders from both Western and non-Western Arctic and non-Arctic states can meet amid growing geopolitical fragmentation. “By elaborating guardrails and confidence-building measures, providing informal communication channels, and injecting creative ideas into the increasingly toxic official discourse, we can make a small contribution to maintaining relative stability in the Arctic,” Dziatkowiec explains. “My team is committed to contributing to these efforts to ensure a more secure and predictable future for this strategically important region.”³⁰

Switzerland and importance of going communication across geopolitical divides. Dziatkowiec observes that:

At the official level there is ... the multilateral system, and official diplomacy, with their various forums and opportunities for direct interaction at the policymaking level. Embassies and envoys are important tools in international relations, and naturally continue as always to have a critical function. So, discussions still happen – but these days they have a less constructive flavour, and are on a much more limited scale.

We have observed that since Russia’s war on Ukraine, there are significant constraints on constructive dialogue at the official (or ‘Track I’) level. This dynamic has spread across multiple forums and diverse issues, in a massive knock-on effect of Russia’s brutal invasion. Sadly but perhaps inevitably, this affects a wide spectrum of important and urgent international issues and concerns ... On the Arctic more specifically, there are still pockets of practical cooperation that offer some hope, and can serve as inspiration – for example on emergency response or fisheries. As mediators, we are the last ones who hold on to the positives, and conditioned to seize on openings – ... that despite everything, there is something to build on.³¹

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interest with Canada

Canada and Switzerland enjoy close and multifaceted bilateral relations, based upon strong people-to-people ties, shared fundamental values, and a commitment to supporting democracy,

human rights and the rules-based international order. Both countries also cooperate closely in multilateral forums and enjoy strong and diverse commercial relationships that cover the full spectrum of trade, investment and innovation. Furthermore, several hundred Swiss students and researchers come to Canada to participate in academic exchanges pursuant to university partnerships or to collaborate on research projects.³²

Canada and Switzerland share significant areas of common interest in the Arctic, primarily around scientific collaboration, mitigating climate change, promoting a stable and rules-based international order, and advancing the well-being of Indigenous Peoples.

The Government of Canada has identified “significant potential to build upon already strong collaborations in science and innovation.” In April 2023, Canada and Switzerland issued an expanded joint statement on science, technology and innovation, with particular focus on climate and sustainability as key themes for cooperation.³³ Both countries prioritize research on climate conditions and ecosystems in mountain and polar regions, recognizing them as sensitive indicators of global change and acknowledging that scientific data and cold-weather technologies developed for one region (the Alps or the Canadian Arctic) can often be applied in the other.

Both countries are committed to combating climate change and addressing transboundary pollution and ozone depletion in the polar regions. This requires international cooperation and global solutions, which they support through multilateral forums. They share an interest in conserving Arctic biodiversity and promoting sustainable practices for living resources in the region, including advocating against measures not supported by science or Indigenous Knowledge that seek to prohibit sustainable use. Towards these ends, both countries actively participate in Arctic Council working groups including AMAP and CAFF to advance initiatives that align with their focus on environmental cooperation and research.

Both Canada and Switzerland emphasize the importance of the rules-based international order, as articulated in the UN Charter and embodied in the multilateral system, to maintain the Arctic’s status as a peaceful and stable region. Accordingly, they are both dedicated to principles of multilateral co-operation, humanitarian assistance, and the rule of law. Furthermore, both countries advocate for the freedom of the press and seek to combat the negative effects of

disinformation.³⁴ Towards these ends, Switzerland's neutral status allows it to serve as a broader hub for dialogue, complementing Canada's diplomatic efforts as an Arctic state to ensure respect for Arctic state sovereignty and Indigenous rightsholders pursuant to international law, and also to participate in a fuller range of Arctic conferences than Canada (including Russia's annual "The Arctic: Territory of Dialogue").³⁵

Both countries promote an inclusive approach to Arctic diplomacy, that ensures the meaningful engagement of Northern and Indigenous Peoples in policymaking and implementation. Canada's policy is co-developed with Indigenous partners, a principle that resonates with Switzerland's stated goal of "actively engag[ing] with Arctic States, Indigenous Peoples and other Observers to promote sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic."³⁶

Both countries support promoting sustainable economic growth in the Arctic, which includes responsible development of critical minerals and investments in infrastructure that benefits local communities.

Issues of Divergence or Potential Concern

Canada views Arctic sovereignty and security as a core national interest and prioritizes the need for a strong military presence to monitor its northern lands and waters. This includes modernizing the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and enhancing military capabilities and infrastructure in its Arctic to deter potential aggressors, particularly in light of current geopolitical tensions with Russia. By contrast, Switzerland is a permanently neutral and non-Arctic state with no military presence in the region. While both countries' Arctic policies strive for a region that remains peacefully managed and low-tension area, governed by international law and science diplomacy, Switzerland is likely to criticize increased militarization by the Arctic states, including Canada.

The countries' views on regional economic development and associated environmental risks may also diverge. Canada seeks to promote sustainable economic growth in its North, including the responsible development of natural resources such as minerals, oil, and gas, which it considers essential to the prosperity of Northern communities. Switzerland, with its more singular focus on environmental and scientific outcomes, has a greater propensity to emphasize the significant risks associated with increased industrial

activity and shipping, such as oil spills and the re-release of legacy pollutants from melting permafrost. These non-commercial interests might lead to a more stringent stance on development activities compared to Canada's need to foster a diversified Northern economy.

While both countries champion the involvement of Indigenous Peoples, their approaches to direct engagement differ. Canada co-developed its entire Arctic policy framework with Inuit, First Nations, and Métis partners, integrating Indigenous knowledge into domestic governance and international diplomacy. While Switzerland expresses solidarity and listens to Indigenous perspectives as an Arctic Council Observer, it is removed from the direct land claim, co-management, and day-to-day governance issues that Canada manages domestically. This creates a practical difference in the depth of Indigenous involvement in policy formulation.

Furthermore, Switzerland's traditional *Alleingang* or "going it alone" position reflects its wariness about "becoming too integrated into the global community and moving too far away from neutrality in foreign policies."³⁷ As a result, Switzerland tends to approach Arctic governance and the region more broadly through multilateral, diplomatic, and scientific fora rather than through formalized security alignments. This contrasts with Canada's increasing integration into allied Arctic defence frameworks.

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United Kingdom

Ryan Dean

“While the United Kingdom is not an Arctic State, we have a strong and enduring connection to the region as the Arctic’s nearest neighbour.”

The Rt. Hon. Lord Goldsmith, Minister of State
Responsible for the Polar Regions (2023)

This chapter examines the key Arctic defence and security interests and priorities of the United Kingdom (UK) provided in its 2023 *Arctic Policy Framework* and Ministry of Defence (MoD) paper. This policy is congruent with Canada’s own Arctic defence and security interests and priorities. Since the UK first published an Arctic policy framework in 2013, the country’s policy had shifted from human security concerns towards confronting Russian air and maritime forces in the High North and North Atlantic. While Canada and the UK already have an extensive defence relationship in the Arctic and British policy emphasizes the European High North, there are multiple opportunities for further bilateral and multilateral cooperation. This includes British training in the Canadian Arctic and Canadian deployments to the European High North for exercises, and exchanges to gain operational experience in this region of the Arctic. UK language around freedom of navigation and UNCLOS differs from Canada’s, however, and Canada should be attentive to its possible application to the Northwest Passage in ways that could seek to undermine Canada’s sovereignty over its historic internal waters.

History

The UK has a long history of Arctic involvement that can be broken into four general phases of interests. The first period began in the 1400s and was driven primarily by economic interests. Explorers

such as Henry Hudson (1610-11) and Sir John Franklin (1845) probed the Arctic looking for new trade routes to China and India and kept an eye out for natural resources along the way. These resources, such as fur, fish, and whales, would later be harvested by commercial ventures like the Hudson's Bay Company. British exploration activities in what are now the Canadian Arctic Islands made Britain an Arctic state until these were transferred to Canada in 1880.

The twentieth century saw UK economic interest in the Arctic steeply decline and replaced by a growing strategic imperative. The First and Second World Wars demonstrated the importance of the North Atlantic and the UK's sea lines of communication to Canada and the United States. German ships and submarines breaking into the North Atlantic from the Arctic like the famous battleship *Bismark* highlighted the need to increasingly place the region into the UK's strategic calculus. Additionally, supporting White Russian forces during the Russian Revolution and later Soviet Union to resist Nazi Germany's invasion through the Arctic further highlighted the importance of the region. It is not surprising that during the Cold War, the UK became the "lynchpin in the defence of Norway and the North Atlantic against the threat of the Soviet Union, and its nuclear-armed submarines patrolled beneath the Arctic sea-ice," effectively linking these two strategic imperatives.¹

The early 1990s and the end of the Cold War saw UK strategic interests in the Arctic replaced largely by science. The UK's Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) established the UK Arctic Research Station at Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard, in 1991.² The UK became an initial Observer of the Arctic Council in 1996 and has contributed to its various Working Groups since.³ Over time, the Arctic was seen as increasingly important to understanding global climate change.⁴ By 2013, the UK published *Adapting to Change: UK Policy Towards the Arctic*, which is notable for being the first Arctic white paper published by a non-Arctic government.⁵ Focusing on human security and climate change,⁶ the document also began the process of socializing the UK as the "Arctic's nearest neighbour."⁷

Subsequent reports such as the *National Strategy for Maritime Security* (2014) introduced the narrative into British policy that climate change will open new shipping routes through the Arctic, bringing new maritime security threats.⁸ The House of Lords' report *Responding to a Changing Arctic* (2015) elaborated on this theme, explaining that the "MoD is aware of the importance of anti-submarine operations in this area and will need to keep this issue

under constant review” and recommending that the military develop its cold-weather capabilities and renew its maritime patrol capability.⁹ *Russia: Implications for UK Defence and Security* (2016) emphasized Russian military expansion in the Arctic and the waters and airspace of the High North – effectively the space between the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap and the Arctic Ocean – and recommended further study.¹⁰

The UK Defence Committee’s 2017 report *On Thin Ice: UK Defence in the Arctic* wove these narratives together, concluding that the UK “sustains a range of capabilities which could play decisive roles”¹¹ in the Arctic. In particular, the Royal Navy’s nuclear-powered submarines, aircraft carriers, and maritime patrol aircraft represent a formidable anti-submarine warfare capability with which to confront Russia.¹² This policy development was influenced by Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine as well as substantial UK defence contact with Norway and the United States (who form a “Northern Triangle”) focusing on maritime patrol, anti-submarine warfare, and joint Arctic warfare training and exercises.¹³ Scholars have observed that a “considerable Cold War legacy continues to influence British thinking regarding the security of its northern maritime area,” with an emphasis on Russian submarine activity near the GIUK Gap.¹⁴

Despite these developments, the UK Polar Regions Department’s 2018 report *Beyond the Ice* did not specify Russia as a threat nor the types of operations the MoD foresaw itself undertaking there. The “Defence” section of the document notes that while the Arctic Council’s mandate precludes it from engaging in military security, the forum is important for promoting cooperation and collaboration that builds confidence between Arctic States and their international partners. The Arctic Coast Guard Forum was also flagged as supplementing this role. In response to increased military activity in the region, the document highlights UK cold weather exercising and its participation in the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable. It also states that “NATO also remains a central plank for cooperation among its Arctic State members.”¹⁵ The report made no references to maritime security issues such as freedom of navigation, instead stating that the UK should take advantage of new trade routes from climate change should they arise.

Increasing international strategic competition and the UK’s decision to leave the European Union (EU) underpinned the 2021 national security policy *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*. Integrating security, defence, development, and foreign policy, the

Arctic makes a brief appearance as the last region of interest to the UK. Aiming for the High North to become one of high cooperation and low tension, the policy states that the UK will work with Arctic partners to ensure future “access to the region and its resources is managed safely, sustainably and responsibly.”¹⁶ The new framework, *Looking North: The UK and the Arctic*, is a result of the national security policy.

From 2013-2021, scholars observed that the premise for UK Arctic security shifted from climate change and soft security issues championed by the Foreign Office (FO) to the more traditional defence concerns of the MoD. Climate change originally drove both approaches to UK Arctic security, before the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine superseded this for the MoD.¹⁷ Another theme running through British scholarship is the notion of using the Arctic to distinguish the UK from other polities. Scotland has demonstrated an interest over time in the Arctic, partially to differentiate itself from a Brexit Britain.¹⁸ The articulation of the UK’s security concerns in the High North must also be situated in the process of differentiating Britain from its former partners in the EU.¹⁹

Political, Economic, and Scientific Interests

The UK’s scientific interests in the Arctic largely informs its political and economic interests.²⁰ October 2023’s *The UK and the Arctic Environment* by the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee explains that the country “has an outstanding and long-term reputation for scientific research in the Arctic.” This includes over seventy universities and research centres working on “a broad range of Arctic-related research areas in the biological, physical, geological, and social sciences” producing the fourth largest amount of published research articles behind Canada, Russia, and the US.²¹ Despite the wide range of scientific activities, they largely focus on climate change and how it is affecting the Arctic.²²

Climate change research is broken down by the UK into the three general categories of effects on the Arctic region, the people who live in the Arctic, and the how it impacts the UK. Major areas of concern related to climate change in the Arctic include permafrost melt, increased wildfires, and biodiversity²³ – especially efforts around marine conservation, pollution and marine litter, and migratory birds.²⁴ UK research on the people of the Arctic examines how climate change is disrupting and altering their lives.²⁵ In tandem with scientific research, the UK aims to project Arctic voices into

international conversations on climate change, stating that it “will continue to protect the rights, views and interests of the people of the Arctic.”²⁶ British scientific work also analyzes on how climate change in the Arctic will affect the UK, such as sea level rise, changing weather patterns, and ocean circulation.²⁷

The UK’s political interests are centred on the Arctic Council and its role as a State Observer that actively contributes significant research to the working groups of that regional forum.²⁸ In addition to supporting Arctic regional fora, the UK is striving to increase its bilateral cooperation with all the Arctic states except Russia given the latter’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine.²⁹ This cooperation aims to support British understandings of Arctic geopolitics from an international perspective,³⁰ while contributing to the human security of Arctic residents from a regional point of view.³¹

UK economic interests are premised on positive sum cooperation with Arctic states rooted in sustainable development.³² UK economic interests focus on better understanding potential new trade routes, noting that travel through the Northeast Passage along the Russian coast could “potentially [cut] travel times by 11 to 14 days between Europe and China,” but acknowledge that these “routes are likely to be hazardous and unpredictable.”³³ Other interests include energy, mining, and critical minerals, commercial fisheries, developing connectivity for Arctic communities, and providing maritime and financial services to the region.³⁴ Additional economic interests include participating in Arctic tourism, and deep sea mining.³⁵

Arctic Policy

Looking North: The UK and the Arctic is the UK’s third Arctic policy framework, updating 2018’s *Beyond the Ice: UK Policy Towards the Arctic* which had updated an earlier 2013 framework. Published on 9 February 2023, *Looking North* messages the UK’s whole-of-government approach to the region. This approach includes drawing on the UK’s “diplomatic excellence,” defence capabilities, and “world-class scientific expertise of the UK Arctic research community,” to work with international partners to help keep the Arctic “safe, secure, peaceful, and well governed.”³⁶

The *Looking North* is organized around four priority areas:

1. *Partnering and collaborating*: The UK, as a State Observer, remains committed to the Arctic Council. It will reinforce its participation in multilateral fora and strengthen its

bilateral relationships with Arctic partners and Allies, exploring opportunities for achieving shared objectives.

2. *Protecting the climate, people and environment*: The UK will continue to work to address the impacts of climate change, and will work with partners on environmental issues, including on Arctic science and research. It will continue to protect the rights, views and interests of the people of the Arctic.
3. *Preserving security and stability*: The UK will uphold the international order and freedom of navigation. It will protect its critical infrastructure in the High North and other national interests, and that of its Allies. It will continue to support the existing legal framework and constructive international cooperation. It will promote safe and responsible activity in the region.
4. *Promoting shared prosperity*: The UK will promote prosperity in the Arctic through sustainable and responsible economic development.³⁷

The Framework acknowledges that Canada and the UK “already enjoy close cooperation on Arctic issues,” building upon the countries’ 2008 and 2017 bilateral Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) on Arctic science and research oriented around climate change.³⁸ The UK continues to emphasize improving bilateral science and technology cooperation, with new projects that put the needs and skills of Indigenous communities “front and centre” to support Indigenous decision-making. Projects of interest include climate adaptation and mitigation, economics of climate change, resilience, sustainability, and Inuit community health and wellbeing.³⁹

Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Priorities

The Framework builds on the MoD paper *The UK’s Defence Contribution in the High North* published in March 2022. Defining the High North as encompassing the Arctic and parts of the North Atlantic, the paper marks this region as “important to the UK’s environment, prosperity, energy supply, and security.”⁴⁰ Citing Russian militarization of and Chinese interests in the Arctic, the paper also posits that the region could suffer from threats “spilling over” from elsewhere.⁴¹ On the possibility that the Arctic could become a region of high tension, *The UK’s Defence Contribution in the High North* seeks to enable the UK to “respond appropriately,”⁴² explaining that:

The UK has strong relationships with almost all Arctic states and has a responsibility to support our [the UK's] Allies and partners to preserve the stability and security of the region; we [the UK] have been operating there for many years. We will continue to support the existing legal framework and constructive international co-operation in the region. We will protect and, where appropriate, assert our rights against those who wish to challenge the rules-based international system and freedom of navigation or threaten the stability of the region in other ways. As a leading European NATO Ally, the UK is prepared to defend our Arctic Allies and respond to aggression. We will contest malign and destabilising behaviours and activity in the region which threaten our interests, the safety of the inhabitants of the Arctic, and the stability of the region.⁴³

The MoD intends to pursue the following four objectives for the High North:

1. Protect our Critical National Infrastructure and our other national interests, and those of our Allies.
2. Ensure our freedom to navigate and operate across the wider region.
3. Reinforce the rules-based international system, particularly UNCLOS.
4. Contest malign and destabilising behaviours.⁴⁴

The MoD paper lays out four methods to accomplish these goals. These include improving the UK's understanding of the region, working with Allies and partners to align policy, activity, and capability where possible across all domains, and maintaining a coherent defence posture in the region. The UK also aims to develop a sustainable, modern, and "proportionate Defence capability" in the region, including through investment in research and development.⁴⁵

The House of Lords' International Relations and Defence Committee published the report *Our Friends in the North: UK Strategy towards the Arctic* in November 2023. Citing the critical importance of the Arctic to the UK's security, environment, and energy supply, the report aims to assess if the region is properly resourced and how it fits into the country's overall security and foreign policy interests. It notes that the UK prioritises the European Arctic and its overlaps with the High North and parts of the North Atlantic. The committee anticipated additional Russian malign activity in the Arctic, further observance of Sino-Russo cooperation in the region, promotion of

sustainable development, and a renewed commitment to Arctic governance.⁴⁶

As one of his first acts as head of government, Prime Minister Keir Starmer ordered a strategic defence review owing to the rapidly changing geopolitical environment. Published on 2 June 2025, the study concludes that the Arctic will become increasingly important to the UK due to climate change reshaping the strategic context of 2040. The review notes that “the likelihood that the Arctic and High North will be ‘ice-free’ each summer by 2040, providing access to more actors and creating a new site for competition within the UK’s wider neighbourhood.”⁴⁷ This is particularly important for the Royal Navy and preparing it to operate in “new geographical realities created by climate change, with the High North becoming more important to the UK and its NATO Allies as it becomes more accessible.”⁴⁸

The Strategic Defence Review closely ties the High North to the North Atlantic with the Royal Navy’s plan to secure these seas for NATO through an Atlantic Bastion concept. Designed to address a modernized Russian submarine force that could operate in these waters, the Bastion is to be built around the new Type-26 anti-submarine warfare frigate, supported by a layered sensor network and drones enabled by Artificial Intelligence and collaboration with other government and commercial partners.⁴⁹ The deterrence and defence of the Euro-Atlantic is the second overall role driving UK defence.⁵⁰ The UK intends to pursue allies to participate with the Royal Navy in “minilateral action” to improve capability to improving NATO’s deterrence posture in Northern Europe and the High North.⁵¹

This concept was indirectly augmented by the Lunna House Agreement between the Royal Navy and Royal Norwegian Navy, announced 4 December 2025. The agreement is built around the two navies sharing at least thirteen Type-26 frigates: eight for the British and five for the Norwegians. These ships are intended to patrol the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap, monitoring Russian naval activities, ensuring lines of communications, and protecting undersea infrastructure like cables and pipelines.⁵²

On 6 February 2026, the UK took command of NATO’s Joint Force Command (JFC) Norfolk as part of larger burden sharing between the US and Allies. JFC Norfolk’s area of responsibility stretches across the North Atlantic and Arctic, leading at the operational level in the event of crisis or conflict, and was recently amended to include Finland and Sweden. As a result, the UK will play a more prominent

role in the Alliance's military leadership, especially regarding the Arctic.⁵³

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interests

The recent *Looking North* policy framework notes that the UK “already enjoy close cooperation on Arctic issues”⁵⁴ with Canada and wishes to enhance this collaboration. The document contains a section on Canada – along with the other seven Arctic States – outlining existing areas of cooperation (Arctic science and research, defence, and security) and potential areas for deeper cooperation (climate adaptation and mitigation, collaboration with Inuit communities, and cold weather training).⁵⁵ The section ends noting that the UK “will continue to strengthen our cooperation with Canada in the Arctic to contribute to achieving shared objectives, allowing the UK to learn from Canada’s expertise as an Arctic nation.”⁵⁶ This is congruent with Canadian defence policy outlined in *Strong, Secured Engaged (SSE)*, the defence chapter of Canada’s *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (ANPF)*, and the defence update *Our North, Strong and Free (ONSAF)*.

Pursuing new opportunities and areas of common interests are complicated by three issues. First, Canada and the UK have different interpretations of what constitutes “the Arctic.” Canada’s interpretation of the Arctic is centred on its own Arctic and the surrounding “North American” Arctic. In comparison, the UK does not have territory in the Circumpolar North on which to centre its notions of “Arctic.” Its policy documents focus on the GIUK Gap and the surrounding European “High North.” The Arctic is adjacent to these North Atlantic waters.⁵⁷ While Canadian policy is beginning to integrate this “European Arctic” into its planning,⁵⁸ the North American Arctic is largely absent from UK policy.

Second, Canada and the UK interpret NATO’s role in the Arctic differently. Both the UK framework and MoD paper focus on the role of NATO in the High North. *Looking North* explains that “the UK will advocate for NATO to take a more proactive long-term approach to the High North, acknowledging the leadership and expertise of our Arctic Allies”⁵⁹ which reflects the language used in *The UK’s Defence Contribution in the High North*.⁶⁰ By comparison, Canada focuses on the role of NATO across the larger Arctic as opposed to the European High North.⁶¹

Third, a robust defence relationship already exists between Canada and the UK in the Arctic. The UK has agreements with

Canada, the US, and Norway on enhancing co-operation in “the Arctic and High North.”⁶² Canada regularly invites the UK to participate in Operation NANOOK and Canada routinely contributes troops to NATO exercises in the High North. UK documents note the 2021 MOU signed between the Royal Navy and Canadian Coast Guard to train British sailors in icy waters,⁶³ while focusing on deepening interoperability with its Arctic Allies (including Canada) on anti-submarine warfare (ASW).⁶⁴ Additional defence cooperation will be built on this strong foundation.

Canadian and British Arctic defence policies agree as to where and what types of additional defence cooperation would be beneficial to both countries. The *CAFP* states there is an “evolving threat landscape in the Arctic” that Canada will partially address through “greater coordination and collaboration between the military forces of like-minded Arctic states, including in the context of NATO.”⁶⁵ The policy explains that the security of the European High North and North Atlantic is “of critical importance to Canada’s security and economic well-being.”⁶⁶ *ONSAF* is more specific:

Russia’s capabilities and its willingness to use them threaten both Europe and North America. Its offensive cyber, space, information operations, and conventional and nuclear missiles challenge NATO’s eastern boundaries as well as the Alliance’s northern and western flanks. The new geography of the Russian threat undermines our capacity to assist allies in Europe from a position of strength.⁶⁷

UK policy places the centre of strategic competition in the European High North, orienting its Arctic defence policy to contribute there. By contrast, UK policy posits the Canadian Arctic as a place to train,⁶⁸ while Canadian policy stresses the need to project presence across the Arctic.⁶⁹

Looking North specifically mentions that Britain will “seek additional opportunities to undertake UK cold weather training in Canada.”⁷⁰ The MoD paper elaborates that it intends to “bolster its cold weather capability to ensure that Arctic-appropriate equipment, activity, environmental support, and infrastructure are all developed and maintained.”⁷¹ This aligns with Canadian policy for the military “increasing its presence, reach, mobility, and responsiveness across the country, particularly in our changing Arctic and North.”⁷² Additional training or exchange cooperation could involve British Army and Royal Marine elements working with Canadian Rangers. New capabilities outlined in *ONSAF* such as the Arctic and Offshore

Patrol Vessels, and new vehicles “adapted to ice, snow and tundra” supplied by northern operational support hubs, could help to enable more British and NATO Arctic training in Canada, thus satisfying the policy goals of both countries.⁷³

The UK policy documents suggest several multilateral opportunities for personnel exchanges, exercises, and deployments to the European High North. The UK leads both the Joint Expeditionary Force (including Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) as well as the Northern Group (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, and Sweden).⁷⁴ While Canada is neither a Nordic nor Northern European state, arrangements to participate in or observe these activities in some capacity could improve Canadian understandings of the European defence perspective on the High North, help with the goal of situating NATO within the larger Arctic, and contribute to the Alliance’s defence and deterrence. Exercising with the Joint Expeditionary Force could also help advance “common plans” and improve “interoperability” with NATO Allies.⁷⁵

Other bilateral opportunities outlined in the UK documents include P-8A Maritime Patrol Aircraft and the dedicated Littoral Response Group (North) of the Royal Navy.⁷⁶ Joint deployments, exercises, and personnel exchanges between British and Canadian maritime patrol aircraft in the High North could also help with the proposed Canadian acquisition of the P-8A. The UK has committed to establishing a standing response force built around the Littoral Response Group,⁷⁷ generating an opportunity for the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) to exercise or temporarily deploy with this force. These options would contribute to ANPF’s commitment to working with “allies and partners throughout the Arctic region to enhance domain awareness, improve information sharing and strengthen interoperability and research security”⁷⁸ and help to achieve the goal of enhanced domain awareness articulated throughout *ONSAF*.

Issues of Divergence or Concern

UK language around freedom of navigation is a concern for Canada. Both *The UK’s Defence Contribution in the High North* and *Looking North* repeatedly reference freedom to navigation and the “centrality and integrity of” the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS).⁷⁹ The MoD paper states:

Coastal State reactions to the expected gradual increase in maritime traffic, such as the adoption of national

regulations, which are not in-keeping with UNCLOS, and which attempt to exert influence over both international and national waters, risk undermining UNCLOS in the region. The right to free and unfettered passage on the high seas must be safeguarded, as must the right of innocent passage and freedom of navigation through territorial seas and Exclusive Economic Zones, and transit passage through straits. The UK will not accept navigation terms which contravene UNCLOS and will remain vigilant to the undermining of UNCLOS by any actor, and is prepared to respond if needed.⁸⁰

Looking North moderates this language, explaining that “UNCLOS provides the legal framework for the exercise of the rights and responsibilities of coastal states, including in the Arctic, and for regulating the various uses of Arctic waters. It is a critical part of the international system, and the UK will continue to work with the international community to uphold it.”⁸¹ However, *Looking North* elaborates that the UK needs “to be prepared to protect and, where appropriate, assert [its] rights against those who wish to challenge the international order and freedom of navigation, or threaten the stability of the region in other ways.”⁸² This statement immediately follows text on China and Russia, implying that the statement is aimed at them. The MoD is more explicit in this linkage, stating that “we will continue to monitor closely and assess the approach adopted by both Arctic and non-Arctic states, including Russia, not least their military postures and any activity that violates international norms and agreements such as UNCLOS.”⁸³ Its paper explicitly lays out the “particular role” the UK plays within NATO of “protecting underwater critical national infrastructure and ensuring freedom to operate in the North Atlantic, especially in the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap.”⁸⁴ This language also can be interpreted as a criticism of Canada’s longstanding legal position that the maritime elements of its Arctic Archipelago constitute historic, internal waters.

Both *Looking North* and *The UK’s Defence Contribution in the High North* focus exclusively on the statutory law of UNCLOS without any reference to customary law. By contrast, Canada’s position maintains that UNCLOS neither covers all the rights of coastal states nor does it trump customary law. The MoD paper notes that the UK intends to focus on deep interoperability with the US, Canada, Denmark, and Norway. Cross-referencing this with the *Looking North* framework yields the passage: “The UK seeks to work with our partners and Allies in the region to reinforce international rights to

freedom of access and navigation in the Arctic. To this end, Royal Navy ships recommenced activity in the Arctic in 2020, alongside Arctic Allies such as Denmark, Norway, and the US, including to protect the centrality and integrity of UNCLOS.”⁸⁵ Canada is conspicuously absent.

Looking North also references the opening of new trade routes through the Arctic,⁸⁶ which implies the Northwest Passage. While UNCLOS is not mentioned in this block of text, it does reference growing UK interest in utilizing these potential new waterways. This sets up a scenario where the UK’s presence and lack of explicit recognition of Canada’s internal waters could generate a future bilateral crisis.

A potential avenue around the above scenario lies in the framework document statement that the UK will “continue to respect the rights, views, and interests of the people of the Arctic, including of the region’s Indigenous people through increased engagement on issues affecting Arctic indigenous communities.”⁸⁷ This indirectly reintroduces customary law into the UK’s position. It engages with Canada’s historic title to the waters of the Northwest Passage and its duties of protecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples throughout its Arctic.

Overall, *Looking North* is less belligerent in tone than the MoD paper released a year before. However, both documents obliquely engage Canada on the status of the waters of the Arctic Archipelago, implying divergence on the issue. Accordingly, Canada should continue to monitor the UK’s interpretation of freedom of navigation and how it might apply to Canada’s historic internal waters.

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Non-Arctic State Policies and Strategies: Alignments with Canada

Edited by P. Whitney Lackenbauer

This volume brings together the perspectives of various Arctic foreign and security policy experts to outline the strategies and interests of the thirteen non-Arctic state Observers to the Arctic Council. Their short, accessible overviews identify alignments with Canadian interests as well as points of divergence, providing insights to support “strong Canadian leadership to respond to the changing reality in the region,” rooted in expanded presence and partnerships.

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