



Image: Larissa Stünkel (Regionalprogramm Nordische Länder)

The European Union and the Emerging Arctic Security Land- scape

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At a glance

- › The European Union's (EU) ever-evolving role as a foreign and security actor is currently being reshaped by a rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape, marked most significantly by Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the current disruptions of the transatlantic relationship. While long defined by its soft power tools, internal diversity, and preference for multilateralism, the EU has found itself increasingly confronted with demands to develop a more assertive security posture. This shift is occurring not only in its eastern and southern neighbourhood but increasingly also in its northern backyard – the Arctic, a region that is presently (re-)emerging as a space of geopolitical competition. While the region has traditionally been marginal in, it now intersects with broader concerns over hybrid threats, energy dependence, climate change, and critical infrastructure—all areas where both the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) maintain significant (partly overlapping or complementary) competencies.

Competing Roles, Complementary Functions

The EU–NATO relationship has historically been marked by a mixture of institutional rivalry and operational complementarity.¹ Both organizations share 23 members and have articulated common values and overlapping goals, but they differ in mandate, structure, and capabilities. NATO remains the central institution for territorial defence and hard security, while the EU has concentrated its efforts on civilian, regulatory, and economic dimensions of security.

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, EU–NATO cooperation deepened, particularly in cyber defence and hybrid threats. This trajectory accelerated after 2022, with joint declarations reaffirming shared strategic objectives and an expanded agenda for coordination across domains like infrastructure resilience, energy security, and climate change. Notably, both NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept and the EU's Strategic Compass explicitly reference each other as key partners in an ever-contested security environment, both on a European and global scale.

Despite these efforts, the relationship is still hampered by institutional and political obstacles. Divergences persist in strategic cultures among EU Member States, the enduring Cyprus–Turkey dispute affects NATO–EU operational cooperation, and fears of duplicating NATO's role continue to hamper strategic thinking among some European policymakers. Nonetheless, both sides increasingly view each other not as competitors but as necessary complements in addressing multidimensional threats.

¹ Iso-Markku, Tuomas. 2024. "EU-NATO Relations in a New Threat Environment: Significant Complementarity but a Lack of Strategic." FIIA - Finnish Institute of International Affairs. January 2024. <https://fiia.fi/en/publication/eu-nato-relations-in-a-new-threat-environment>.

The Arctic as a Geopolitical Space

The Arctic region, long perceived as a low-tension zone, has become entangled in broader geopolitical rivalries; not only since February 2022 but essentially since relations between Russia and ‘the West’ deteriorated after Russia’s illegal invasion of Crimea in 2014.² China’s interest in the region, and discussions about the region’s mineral resource potential that are gaining more and more traction have only added to an already heated.³ For the EU, however, the Arctic has remained a somewhat peripheral concern over the past almost two decades, despite three Arctic Member States (Denmark, Finland and Sweden) and partners (Iceland and Norway), a history of Arctic policy development since 2008, the ongoing climate crises, etc.⁴

Over the years, the EU has sought to define its role in the Arctic largely through the lens of environmental protection, sustainable development, and scientific research. This framing has persisted even as the Arctic region’s security environment has deteriorated. The 2021 Joint Communication on *A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic* – the EU’s latest update of its Arctic policy – reiterates these themes and prominently emphasizes the EU’s geopolitical role in the Arctic yet still refrains from making explicit inroads into hard security matters.⁵

Since October 2021, a series of political developments – stemming from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine – have shifted the Arctic’s geopolitical context. Finland and Sweden’s accession to NATO, Denmark’s decision to abandon its EU defence opt-out, and Norway’s recalibrated defence posture vis-à-vis Russia point to a growing convergence between Arctic and European security concerns. The EU has, in turn, adopted stronger language around strategic autonomy and has begun to engage more robustly in areas such as maritime security and space-based situational awareness.⁶ Given these shifts, what are the broader repercussions for the EU in the Arctic, and how might these developments reshape the EU’s Arctic policy moving forward?

Evolving Security Practices

Today, and while still in a constant process of (re-)negotiations, the EU’s response to the Ukraine war demonstrates an evolving, albeit still hesitant, approach to hard security.⁷ Through the European Peace Facility, Member States have coordinated arms deliveries and training for Ukrainian forces.

² Østhagen, Andreas. 2021. “The Arctic Security Region: Misconceptions and Contradictions.” *Polar Geography* 44 (1): 55–74. doi:10.1080/1088937X.2021.1881645.

³ Raspotnik, Andreas, Erdem Lamazhapov, Iselin Stensdal, and Gørild Heggelund. 2024. “Critical Raw Materials: Interests of China and the European Union in the Arctic.” *Strategic Analysis* 48 (6): 733–45. doi:10.1080/09700161.2025.2459573.

⁴ Raspotnik, Andreas. 2018. *The European Union and the Geopolitics of the Arctic*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

⁵ Raspotnik, Andreas and Adam Stępień. 2025. “Oops, They Did It Again: The European Union’s 2021 Arctic Policy Update.” *The Arctic Institute - Center for Circumpolar Security Studies* (blog). May 9, 2025. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/oops-they-did-it-again-european-union-2021-arctic-policy-update/>.

⁶ Beaucillon, Charlotte. 2023. “Strategic Autonomy: A New Identity for the EU as a Global Actor.” *Insight. European Papers* Vol. 8 (2): 417–28. <https://doi.org/10.15166/2499-8249/664>.

⁷ Hoeffler, Catherine, Stéphanie C. Hofmann, and Frédéric Mérand. 2024. “The Polycrisis and EU Security and Defence Competences.” *Journal of European Public Policy* 31 (10): 3224–48. doi:10.1080/13501763.2024.2362762.

Simultaneously, the EU has developed new capabilities in critical domains such as cyber defence, sanctions policy, energy diversification, and hybrid threat response.

These developments are mirrored in the Arctic, where the EU's attention has turned toward safeguarding undersea infrastructure, monitoring maritime activities, and expanding space-based observation tools through initiatives such as Copernicus and Galileo. Maritime and space domains increasingly serve as platforms for projecting EU security capabilities beyond traditional military means.

While cooperation with Russia in the (European) Arctic has ceased, and participation in initiatives such as the Northern Dimension and Barents Euro-Arctic Council has been suspended,⁸ the EU continues to engage with its (other) Arctic partners.⁹ It does so largely through environmental, scientific, and economic mechanisms, reflecting its enduring preference for comprehensive security approaches.

Strategic Identity in Transition

The EU's evolving presence in the Arctic and its deepening alignment with NATO reflect broader shifts in its strategic identity. The Union remains an international entity *sui generis*: neither a conventional state nor a military alliance, but a hybrid structure with regulatory, financial, and normative power. As the Arctic becomes increasingly entangled in global rivalries—between Russia, China, and the United States—the EU is under growing pressure to define its place within this emerging order.

The dual challenges of internal fragmentation and external complexity continue to shape the EU's options. Within the Union, Member States have diverging threat perceptions and approaches to both Russia and China which complicates the Union's ability to have a broad consensus. Externally, the EU must navigate overlapping but distinct relationships with NATO, Arctic neighbours, and global powers, all while maintaining its own coherence and credibility.

Yet the developments of the past three years—particularly in relation to Russia—have altered the trajectory of EU security policy. While the EU's hard security role remains limited, its broader security posture is shifting visibly. A more integrated partnership with NATO, underpinned by differentiated but complementary roles, appears to be emerging.

Conclusion

The EU's position in Arctic security is evolving in tandem with its broader security transformation.¹⁰ While its Arctic engagement remains largely focused on comprehensive security, the post-2022 environment has brought hard security considerations to the fore. The interplay between EU and NATO

⁸ Yet, EU Member States continue to import LNG from the Russian Arctic, with [plans in place](#) to phase out these imports by 2027.

⁹ "The EU in the Arctic." n.d. EEAS. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-arctic_en.

¹⁰ Raspotnik, Andreas, and Adam Stępień. 2024. "The European Union and Arctic Security: First Steps Towards a New Paradigm?" *Strategic Analysis* 48 (6): 662–73. doi:10.1080/09700161.2025.2474771.

capabilities—across traditional and non-traditional domains—has grown increasingly important, particularly in northern Europe.

Though structural and political constraints remain, converging threat perceptions and practical cooperation suggests a trajectory toward more strategic alignment. As geopolitical competition intensifies in the Arctic, the EU and NATO are likely to find further cause for cooperation—each bringing distinct strengths to the shared challenge of securing Europe's northern frontier.

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