



June 2025

# Security Snapshot

European Office Brussels

## Think Arctic – a New Frontier for Europe?

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06/2025

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***The Arctic is witnessing rising geopolitical tensions, especially since Russia's military buildup and its invasion of Ukraine, strained US-China relations, and most recently, US threats to gain control over Greenland. In this securitizing context, the EU has yet to find its role.***

### What makes the Arctic relevant?

The Arctic region has no clear geographical definition but is often referred to as the area north of the ~66° latitude line known as the Arctic circle. It encompasses territory of the 8 Arctic states (A8), ordered by the descending size of their Arctic territory: Russia, Canada, Denmark (Greenland), USA (Alaska), Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland.

A primary reason for the Arctic's increasing importance is **climate change**. Temperatures there are rising at three times the global average, bringing yearly new heat records, which lead to the melting of vast amounts of Arctic ice that previously had hindered human activities and movement.<sup>1</sup> New sea routes are becoming available: the Northeast Passage (NEP) has the potential to reduce shipping costs between Europe and Asia in half by connecting Scandinavia with the Bering Strait, leading in large parts through claimed Russian territorial waters in

the section known as Northern Sea Route (NSR; which are only partially internationally recognised). The Northwest Passage (NWP) already today during summer times connects the North American East and West coast across claimed Canadian waters. By the mid-century, a Transpolar Route might directly connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans via passage between the Bering Strait and the GIUK gap<sup>2</sup> to Northern Europe. Unresolved overlapping maritime claims of the different riparian states display the long-time neglect of the region.

Additionally, potential **resources** become available due to the melting ice. There are still speculations and numbers vary, but significant rare earth minerals, oil and gas reserves are estimated to lie in both the Arctic Ocean's seabed and the northern landmasses.

### Who are the key players and their interests?

**Russia:** With over 24.000 km, Russia makes up ~53% of the Arctic's total coastline, while its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) spans over ~4 mil km<sup>2</sup>, topped by extended territorial claims of an additional ~1.2-1.7 mil km<sup>2</sup>. This means that **Russia controls and claims over a third of Arctic territory**. On top of the standard EEZ of 200 nautical miles (ca. 370 km) countries enjoy

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<sup>1</sup> [2023 Arctic Report Card: image highlights | NOAA Climate.gov](#)

<sup>2</sup> GIUK gap = the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap, a naval choke point of strategic importance between the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans

under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea<sup>3</sup>, Russia extends its claims by another 350 additional nautical miles on the basis of the Lomonosov and Mendeleev Ridges which, according to Russian data, extend from its Eurasian continental shelf until the North Pole. This makes Russia by geographical position alone a key player in the Arctic region. Its fleet of (partially nuclear-powered) icebreakers is the largest of all Arctic states. Increasing reliance on trade with China and the Asia-Pacific region due to Europe's and North America's ongoing sanctions regime makes an easy access via the Arctic to the Pacific very important. Finally, **revenues from the oil and gas industry** make up a significant amount of Russia's GDP at ~20%<sup>4</sup>. The Russian regime relies on resource extraction for its survival and has strong economic interests to expand this in the Arctic.

**Norway:** Norway's key interests in the Arctic revolve around balancing its economic, environmental, and security concerns. It shares a land and much longer maritime border with Russia - stabilising this is a key national interest of Norway. At the same time, it is a NATO member like all A8 except Russia. Norway shares the rights of commercial and scientific use of its Svalbard archipelago with other states, in line with the **Svalbard Treaty** from 1920. Like Russia, Norway heavily relies on oil and gas extraction and its export, equally making up ~20% of its GDP<sup>5</sup>, with a lot of future potential in an Arctic expansion of such activities.

**Canada:** Canada's Arctic interests are tied to its sovereignty and the well-being of its northern communities. The Canadian Arctic comprises a vast and sparsely populated region rich in natural resources which hold long-term economic potential, where only 0.3% of Canada's popula-

tion reside<sup>6</sup>. This is apparent in Canada's priority setting, as other Arctic riparian states show a more focused Arctic agenda due to prioritising their Arctic territories: the U.S.' Alaska and Denmark's Greenland have a stronger voice and determination to lobby for the importance of the Arctic in their state's respective foreign and development policies. **Ottawa has been underinvesting** in relation to the country's size and Arctic territory, with currently no functional deep-water port above the Arctic circle and little patrolling and enforcement capabilities. However, there are **efforts to establish deepwater port facilities** in the Northern territories as parts of a renewed Arctic strategy<sup>7</sup>. The latter is of rising importance to Canada as it claims large paths of the NWP as domestic waters, which are, however, not recognised by the other A7. Still, there exists a gap between Canada's rhetorics and its actions compared with its Arctic neighbours.

**USA:** The US security interests have long developed vis-à-vis Russia, as a legacy of the Cold War when the Arctic was a region of contention. Exacerbated by Russia's War in Ukraine, when cooperation in the Arctic turned into great power competition again, the US sees the **need for military build-up** as it is lagging behind Russia and China in its Arctic military capabilities. The Biden administration acknowledged the Arctic's increasing importance due to climate change and geopolitical shifts, resulting in a new Arctic Strategy<sup>8</sup>, the investment in ice breakers and environmental action. While the Trump administration also recognizes the **geopolitical importance**, it emphasizes the **economic interests**, particularly the energy and resource potential of the Arctic. With this, the US follows up on its "drill baby drill" approach under Trump I when it issued extensive drilling licenses in Alaska. Evidently, due to recent publicity, Greenland, an autonomous part of Denmark but also

<sup>3</sup> [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea | EUR-Lex ; EUR-Lex - 21998A0623\(01\) - EN - EUR-Lex](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Follow the Money: Understanding Russia's oil and gas revenues - Oxford Institute for Energy Studies](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Oil and gas in Norway - statistics & facts | Statista](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Canada and the Arctic: An Ambiguous Relationship | The Arctic Institute - Center for Circumpolar Security Studies](#)

<sup>7</sup> [north-strong-free-2024-v2.pdf](#)

<sup>8</sup> [National-Strategy-for-the-Arctic-Region.pdf](#)

the part of the North American continental shelf, has always been of strategic security interest to the US. Hence, it has maintained exclusive military presence over decades as per agreement with Denmark.

**China:** China considers itself a “Near Arctic State” and attempts to be seen as an Arctic power. Yet, in comparison to other actors, China views the Arctic in a larger maritime strategic governance context. Becoming an Arctic power is part of **China’s ambition to be a great maritime power**. Furthermore, Chinese engagement and influence materializes through significant investments in research and dual-use infrastructure in the region. Worth mentioning is also China’s increasing alignment and **security cooperation with Russia**, which concerns the Arctic as well. For instance, both militaries exercised together in the Bering strait in 2023.

### How is the EU’s Arctic security at stake?

The EU’s role in view of security issues in the Arctic overlaps with NATO’s activities. With **Denmark, Finland and Sweden**, three EU member states are considered Arctic states. Finland’s and Sweden’s accession to NATO in 2023 and 2024 has made them and hence the EU an integral partner in the Arctic. As such, the EU’s security in the Arctic primarily needs to be regarded through its three Arctic member states.

Most importantly, this materializes through **hybrid threats** by Russia. Cyberattacks on targets in Finland and Sweden have increased after joining NATO. This also includes interference in radio and radar signals. In 2022, GPS disruptions in Finnish Arctic space were five times as high as previously. While hybrid activities of mapping and sabotaging undersea cable infrastructure targeting Europe have been most prominent in the Baltic Sea, these activities are also ongoing in the Arctic Ocean. Russian disinformation campaigns proclaim that the EU and

the US would destabilize the Arctic region.<sup>9</sup> From an economic perspective, the Arctic is of rising importance for the EU: European **trade** heavily depends on safe sea routes. Because 80% of global goods are shipped via sea and of the freeing up of Arctic routes, the region is a crucial part of European maritime security.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the Arctic plays an increasingly important role for European efforts to diversify its **energy** supply from like-minded partners, e.g. Norway.

### What is the EU’s Arctic policy?

The **EU’s official Arctic policy** was updated in 2021 and guided by the principle of a “safe, stable, sustainable, peaceful and prosperous Arctic”<sup>11</sup>. It also acknowledges the increasing militarization, conflictual potential due to territorial claims, and resource competition. Considering Russia being a major player in the Arctic, its war against Ukraine and radical consequences for cooperation in the Arctic, the EU’s guiding principle has been put into perspective. Since the EU has considered itself rather a facilitator in the region than positioning itself as a security actor, the EU’s Arctic activities concentrate on science diplomacy and environmental engagement. Therefore, the EU’s security engagement in the Arctic mainly takes place in the context of NATO. In this regard, the **European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (CoE)**, which combines EU and NATO joint efforts and is located in Finland, is a relevant example in pursuing European security interests.

The EU applied for observer status to the **Arctic Council**, the major Arctic intergovernmental forum composed of the A8. Yet, as of today the EU’s observer status is being denied by Russia. However, Finland, Sweden and Denmark as EU member states are full-fledged members of the Arctic Council.

<sup>9</sup> [23\\_11\\_21\\_Countering\\_Russia's\\_Hybrid\\_Threats\\_in\\_the\\_Arctic\[15\]\\_ES\\_EK](#)

<sup>10</sup> [The EU as an Actor in the Arctic | The Arctic Institute – Center for Circumpolar Security Studies](#)

<sup>11</sup> [The EU in the Arctic | EEAS](#)

**What is the EU's future role in the Arctic?**

In the context of this changing security landscape, the EU has to adapt to new geopolitical realities in the Arctic. Despite EU territory only

being marginally situated in the Arctic, increasing efforts to defend its respective interests is crucial.

**Expert Comment: Karen van Loon, Clingendael & Egmont Institute**

*“The European Arctic is emerging as a strategic focal point for hybrid threats, where climate change, resource potential, and new shipping routes intersect with geopolitical tensions. While the EU has made progress in addressing hybrid tactics—such as cyberattacks, disinformation, and critical infrastructure sabotage—gaps remain, especially in the Arctic.*

*Russia's increased military activity and influence operations in the High North, often with tacit Chinese support, highlight the growing risks. Disruptions to satellite navigation, cyber intrusions into energy and communications infrastructure, and mapping of undersea assets near European territory illustrate how hybrid threats exploit limited regional monitoring and response capabilities.*

*Arctic security primarily falls under NATO and national authorities, but the EU has a role to play. Initiatives like the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats and Arctic research funding are important, yet EU-wide engagement in Arctic security remains limited. Strengthening resilience in the region will require closer cooperation between the EU, NATO, Arctic states, and indigenous communities.*

*A further challenge lies in differing national approaches. While some EU member states advocate stronger ties with authoritarian powers, others push for greater caution. This divergence complicates a coordinated response to hybrid tactics that seek to exploit such divisions.*

*As hybrid activities in the Arctic intensify, the EU must ensure that resilience-building measures extend to its northernmost regions. Enhancing cyber capabilities, improving infrastructure security, and increasing awareness of hybrid threats among local communities are critical steps. A more cohesive strategy that balances economic, environmental, and security concerns will be essential to safeguard European interests in the Arctic.”*

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