

# EGMONT POLICY BRIEF 387

– SEPTEMBER 2025 –

## The Arctic: A Strategic Shift for Europe. A Unique Opportunity for Belgium

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*“The EU is in the Arctic. As a geopolitical power, the EU has strategic and day-to-day interests, both in the European Arctic and the broader Arctic region.”*

With this clear assertion, the European Union published its updated Arctic policy in October 2021, titled “A stronger EU commitment to a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic.” Since then, the geopolitical landscape in and around the Arctic has shifted rapidly, requiring greater focus and an adapted response from the European Union as a whole.

Since the publication of the **EU’s 2021 Joint Communication**,<sup>1</sup> the Arctic’s strategic landscape has shifted dramatically. The war in Ukraine has disrupted Arctic cooperation, halting dialogue with Russia within the Arctic Council, and Finland and Sweden’s accession to NATO has altered the regional security architecture, leaving Russia increasingly isolated among the Arctic Eight. These shifts have challenged the concept of “**Arctic exceptionalism**,” revealing how the region is becoming more deeply entangled in global geopolitical rivalries. Meanwhile, the intensifying effects of climate change are amplifying the Arctic’s economic and strategic value.

As a result, the Arctic’s relevance now extends well beyond the eight Arctic states, drawing **increased attention from non-Arctic actors**. Challenges in the region, particularly those related to climate and security, have global implications, prompting greater engagement from external players, including the European Union. These

shifts highlight the need for **the EU to reevaluate its Arctic strategy**, addressing escalating security concerns and the rising influence of global actors in the region.

Amid the Arctic’s shifting climate and growing geopolitical tensions, **Belgium must act swiftly to position itself as a key player** in regional security and stability. Developing a Belgian Arctic policy, alongside an updated EU Arctic strategy, is no longer just necessary, it is crucial for securing Belgium’s role in this rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape.<sup>2</sup>

### STRATEGIC STAKES IN THE ‘ARCTIC GREAT GAME’

Over the past decade, the Arctic has transformed from a remote periphery into a highly strategic zone where global powers—**Russia, China, and the United States**—compete for influence, resources, and control over emerging trade routes. What once was framed predominantly as a region of scientific interest and environmental fragility is now at the heart of military planning, infrastructure investment, and **great-power rivalry**. Climate change, which has accelerated ice melt, is revealing not only vast resource wealth but also new geopolitical opportunities and risks.

#### *Russia’s Arctic ambitions in the shadow of geopolitical fallout*

Russia holds the largest Arctic territory among the eight Arctic states and has long regarded the region as critical to both its economy and national security. Russia also broadly uses nuclear energy in the Arctic, with a significant share of its nuclear arsenal deployed on Arctic-

based submarines. These submarines form the core of its second-strike capability, making the region pivotal to Russia's military strategy.

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and even more sharply after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moscow has escalated its military posture in the High North. Russia's continued remilitarisation of its Arctic territories since 2014, combined with the revision of its Arctic strategy in February 2023 - which removed references to international cooperation and emphasised alignment with non-Western partners - has contributed to an increasingly complex and tense regional environment.<sup>3</sup> This strategic pivot not only aligns with Russia's broader decoupling from the West but also signals its intent to use the Arctic as a gateway for alternative global alliances.

Beyond the military dimension, the Arctic is vital to Russia's economic resilience. Russian Arctic territories are rich in hydrocarbons and critical minerals, which the Kremlin seeks to exploit to offset the impact of Western sanctions. The Northern Sea Route (NSR), which hugs the Russian coastline, is central to this ambition. Operated by a mix of state entities and so-called "shadow fleets" designed to evade sanctions, this corridor allows Russia to export oil and gas, particularly to China, without relying on Western infrastructure.

#### ***China: A non-Arctic power with global ambitions***

China, though geographically distant from the Arctic, has declared itself a "near-Arctic state" and has expanded its presence in the region through scientific research stations, investment in infrastructure, and its "Polar Silk Road" strategy.<sup>4</sup> For Beijing, the Arctic offers both economic opportunities and strategic leverage. The region's critical minerals are essential to China's industrial ambitions, and Arctic shipping routes could significantly reduce transit times between Asia and Europe.

While China's initial involvement in the Arctic was largely framed as scientific and commercial, its posture is shifting toward geopolitical competition. Since Russia's invasion

of Ukraine, China has deepened its ties with Moscow in the Arctic, providing capital, technology, and markets that Russia can no longer access from the West. Their cooperation now extends to areas once considered off-limits, including potential dual-use scientific installations and joint infrastructure projects along the NSR. This growing **Sino-Russian alignment has drawn NATO's attention**, with the 2024 Washington Summit explicitly warning about the strategic implications of their partnership in the High North.<sup>5</sup> China's expanded presence in the Arctic signals a broader assertion of global influence, challenging the traditional dominance of the Arctic states.

#### ***The United States: An Arctic power facing strategic constraints***

The United States, as one of the eight Arctic states, has long maintained a strategic interest in the region,<sup>6</sup> particularly through its sovereignty over Alaska. The Arctic has historically been viewed by Washington as a strategic northern frontier, due to its proximity to Russia, its environmental and scientific relevance, and the presence of valuable natural resources. Despite this longstanding presence, the U.S. has faced limitations in its Arctic capabilities. Its icebreaker fleet remains comparatively small, and port infrastructure suited for large-scale Arctic operations is limited.<sup>7</sup> These stand in contrast to the growing infrastructural and military engagement seen from Russia and China.

Recently, U.S. interest has extended to the Arctic's mineral resources, with a particular focus on securing access to critical minerals, as seen during the Trump administration's engagement with Greenland. However, its non-ratification of UNCLOS limits U.S. influence in maritime governance, highlighting the gap between its Arctic ambitions and the growing presence of other powers, raising questions about the adequacy of current U.S. Arctic policy.



## HOW EUROPEAN COUNTRIES ARE SHAPING THEIR ARCTIC POLICIES

In an era where the Arctic has shifted from a zone of cooperation to a theatre of strategic rivalry, some European states are recalibrating their policies to match the changing geopolitical, environmental, and economic landscape. Among the most instructive examples are **France, Germany, and the Netherlands**, three non-Arctic EU members that nonetheless recognize the far-reaching consequences of Arctic developments on their national and continental interests.

France's interest in the Arctic is far from new. As early as the 1960s, France established a scientific presence in Svalbard, reinforcing its image as a serious polar actor. However, with its updated national Arctic strategy, **France's Arctic approach has evolved from primarily scientific to overtly strategic**. This shift reflects a broader recognition that the Arctic is no longer just a region for environmental stewardship or research, but has become a "barometer of global instability," as French Defence Minister Sébastien Lecornu described it.<sup>8</sup>

This strategic evolution is underscored by France's official stance that it **"has a duty to contribute actively to the stability of the Arctic alongside its allies and partners, to preserve its freedom of action, and to equip itself with military capabilities adapted to this demanding environment."**<sup>9</sup>

In response to increasing militarization, highlighted by the fact that seven of the eight Arctic states are NATO members, France has developed **a dedicated Arctic defence strategy** focused on preserving regional stability and **protecting its own strategic interests**. This strategy is anchored on three pillars: positioning and legitimacy, cooperation and multilateralism, and capability development.

This Arctic policy positions France as both a **responsible stakeholder** and a **key strategic actor**, reinforcing its broader goals as a permanent UN Security Council member, a leading EU state, and a NATO ally, while enhancing the security and stability of the Euro-Atlantic region.

Germany's Arctic policy, published in September 2024, recognizes that the war in Ukraine has transformed the Arctic from an isolated region into one closely linked with security developments in the North and Baltic Seas and the broader North Atlantic, **fundamentally reshaping Germany's engagement in the region**.<sup>10</sup>

The policy highlights the **importance of the Arctic to Germany** as a space critical for security, scientific research, and international cooperation. It outlines measures for **safeguarding security and stability**, including addressing geopolitical tensions and supporting NATO and EU engagement. It also gives priority to defending the rules-based international order and **building resilience**, ensuring that Arctic governance adheres to international law and sustainable practices. In addition, Germany prioritizes **climate action**, nature conservation, environmental protection, and sustainable development, recognizing the Arctic as a frontline of climate change that requires responsible stewardship, while remaining a valued cooperation partner in international Arctic research.<sup>11</sup>

While not an Arctic state, **the Netherlands approaches the region with clear strategic awareness**. As a trading nation heavily dependent on secure and open maritime routes, the Netherlands views Arctic developments as having important consequences for its economic and strategic interests. The potential opening of the Northern Sea Route, for example, could dramatically affect Dutch ports like Rotterdam and critical undersea infrastructure, prompting the Netherlands to weave Arctic concerns into broader security, economic, and foreign policy planning.<sup>12</sup>

**The Netherlands recognizes that developments in the Arctic have far-reaching impacts beyond the region itself**. The melting of sea ice, threats to undersea communication cables, and the opening of new shipping routes all have direct consequences for Dutch national security, the economy, and critical digital infrastructure. In response, Dutch policy focuses on strengthening cyber defence, fostering maritime innovation, and upholding international legal standards.



The Dutch navy, well-equipped for Arctic conditions, plays a key role in NATO's deterrence efforts in Northern Europe, particularly in anti-submarine and missile defence operations. Additionally, the Netherlands applies its **expertise in climate adaptation, scientific research, and dual-use technologies** to strengthen Arctic resilience and governance.

Much like France, the Netherlands combines its technological, military, and economic resources to safeguard its interests and promote stability in the Arctic. As geopolitical tensions intensify, particularly with Russia's militarization and China's growing presence, the Netherlands is preparing to update its Polar Strategy (2021-2025) to ensure its policies are aligned with the changing security challenges in the Arctic.

### IS IT TIME FOR THE EU TO UPDATE ITS ARCTIC STRATEGY AND BELGIUM TO DEFINE ITS ROLE?

The Arctic is no longer a purely cooperative domain governed by shared interests, it is becoming an arena of rivalry, competition, and realpolitik. This evolving reality demands an **EU Arctic policy that is more adaptive, more assertive, and better integrated into the Union's broader security and foreign policy strategies**. Strengthening strategic foresight, investing in presence (civilian and scientific, if not military), and enhancing partnerships with Arctic allies will be critical.

For Belgium, this is a moment to reflect and act. While not an Arctic state, Belgium is part of the European Union, NATO, and the broader multilateral order now being tested in the High North. **Belgium's lack of a formal Arctic strategy** stands in contrast to the growing engagement of other non-Arctic EU states like France and the Netherlands, as well as neighbouring countries such as Germany and the UK, all of which have developed such strategies. With its long-standing, international renowned expertise in polar research (more than 125 years), climate diplomacy, and rule of law advocacy, Belgium is well-positioned to shape the evolving Arctic landscape.

The EU views access to Arctic resources as a strategic security imperative, particularly in the context of its Green Deal objectives and its pursuit of strategic autonomy. Given the strategic importance of the region, **Belgium should prioritize its involvement**, recognizing its potential to advance national security, climate, and economic interests. By aligning its strengths with the EU's broader Arctic objectives, Belgium can play a key role in ensuring Europe's commitment to peace and stability in the region.

France, Germany, and the Netherlands show that **Arctic responsibilities are not limited to Arctic states**, but they also highlight the need for a clear strategic vision. Belgium's opportunity lies in translating its existing strengths into a structured Arctic engagement,<sup>13</sup> before the Arctic's future is defined entirely by others.

The Arctic can no longer be viewed as a distant or isolated region, it has become an emerging frontier of strategic importance. **If Europe is to uphold its vision of a peaceful, sustainable, and prosperous Arctic**, it must first recognize the region for what it has become: a space increasingly shaped by geopolitical competition and the potential for confrontation.

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## Endnotes

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