



THE ARCTIC IS NOT (JUST) A BATTLEFIELD, IT'S A NEIGHBORHOOD:

THE EU'S NEW ARCTIC POLICY, HISTORICAL TIES AND SECURITY IN THE ARCTIC

The EU's strategic interest in the Arctic lies in strengthening the Union's influence in the region. In an increasingly contested Arctic, the EU now hopes to secure its seat at the Arctic table and establish itself as a strong fourth power amidst growing strategic interest from China and Russia on the one side, and the U.S. on the other. Hoping to leave its bystander position in the region behind, the Union is expected to focus increasingly on security in its upcoming strategy.

This focus becomes visible in the narrative shift numerous EU representatives employ when talking about the EU-Arctic relationship recently: Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stressed the EU's commitment to Arctic security in her speech at the World Economic Forum this January, and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security, Kaja Kallas, stated at the Arctic Frontiers conference that "it is time for a fresh EU Arctic Policy, one that reflects the times we live in and the world we want to see, including a secure Arctic."

"There's more to the region than just security" -Jason Moyer

While these statements reflect the move towards securitisation in the EU Arctic discourse, the post-2022 security environment has also exposed a growing divide among policymakers and analysts. On the one hand, figures such as former EU Ambassador to the Arctic Anne-Marie Coninx advocate for the "adoption of a robust and security-focused Arctic strategy". On the other hand, scholars like Jason Moyer advises against reducing the region to securitisation, cautioning that "there's more to the region than just security"

Amid these calls for increased securitisation of the region, the fundamental question arises whether the EU is, or should become, a security actor, or whether there are other, better ways in which the EU can expand its involvement in the region. What other dimensions, aside from (hard) security exist to the EU-Arctic partnership, and might the EU taking on the role of a security actor in the region might become "one thing too many"?

What is the EU's role in Arctic security today

The European Union is not primarily a security or military actor. Yet, there exist ways in which the EU can further its security interests in the High North, and has historically done so: One of the EU's main levers in fostering security and resilience is: investments. Following this year's Greenland crisis, the EU has agreed to a €50 million investment surge to Greenland, which, aside from supporting local infrastructure, businesses and education initiatives, is hoped to increase resilience. However for now, the EU's capacities for securitising the Arctic remain largely limited to civilian, regulatory and economic dimensions of security, especially as NATO remains the central actor for territorial defence and hard security.



BREAKING THE MYTH OF ORBÁN'S INFLUENCE ON EUROPEAN POPULIST FOREIGN POLICY

Beyond Militarisation: Preserving the EU's Traditional Strengths?

Although the EU has traditionally not been perceived as an Arctic actor, around 200.000km² of EU territory lies north of the Arctic circle, and three of the eight Arctic states are EU member states. Norway and Iceland are members of the EEA, and Russia and Greenland are the EU's direct neighbors. These geographic connections strengthen the EU's claim to relevance in the Arctic. However, they also expose a key tension: while the EU is physically and economically embedded in the region, it has historically lacked the political and security presence that defines traditional Arctic powers.

The increasing international interest in the region, which is rooted in factors such as growing attention to climate change and geopolitical tensions connected to narratives about strategic relevance, trade routes and resource extraction, has not bypassed the EU.

This growing attention prompts numerous stakeholders to focus on security and militarisation. For the EU, this might be beyond the alliance's competences and distract from well-established EU-Arctic ties, Jason Moyer argues. Building up these competences is resource-demanding and might be inefficient, given that other actors already increasingly specialize in Arctic security, as exemplified by NATO's increased focus on the region. Moyer stresses that the EU can instead expand its investments in ecological protection, Indigenous partnerships, education, and sustainable economic development, rather than just becoming yet another player in the Arctic security field.

"Increased securitization is one approach to the Arctic, however it has not always featured prominently as a strategic priority for most Arctic nations. The reality of those living in the region might find the abrupt shift to security conversations out of step with their reality, where local and environmental issues are front of mind."
-Jason Moyer

Adding to these considerations, EU involvement in the Arctic has not always been universally welcomed. Some Arctic states historically opposed EU membership due to concerns about national sovereignty and control over natural resources, especially fisheries and energy. Moreover, historical experiences shape how some Arctic communities perceive European involvement. Colonial legacies, particularly those connected to Denmark's rule over Greenland, continue to influence political and social attitudes toward European institutions. Clingendael Researcher Karen van Loon notes that the EU has often struggled to build trust in Greenland. EU delegations are sometimes viewed with skepticism, partly due to the perception of the EU as an external actor imposing policies from afar.

These historical sensitivities could mean that a purely strategic, security-focused approach could lack trust on the ground. Without trust-building, attempting to establish itself as a security power alongside players like NATO can weaken the EU's long-term position in the region.

Why the EU Is Under Pressure to Step Up on Arctic Security

Conversely, many experts argue that the EU has neglected the topic of Arctic security for too long, and especially in a context of a weakening transatlantic relationship, the EU should strategically position itself as more than just through economic and regulatory power.



Director of the High North Center for Business and Governance at Nord University in Bodø, Andreas Raspotnik, notes that “the EU should have focused on Arctic security sooner”. Despite complex EU-NATO relations, he argues, the new EU-Arctic policy should and will contain a stronger focus on security. The issue, however, remains the implementation of these policy stances. This is why Anne-Marie Coninx calls for concrete means to implement the security measures outlined in the new policy.

Suggesting a middle ground, van Loon argues that while the EU should increase its emphasis on security in the next Arctic strategy, it should not abandon its traditional priorities: “Instead, security should be integrated into the EU’s broader policy architecture, linking Arctic policy with the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, the European Green Deal, EU maritime and infrastructure security policies, research and innovation programmes and the EU’s wider foreign and security policy frameworks.”

Institutional EU Involvement in the Arctic region

Aside from the question whether the EU expands its presence in the Arctic through security-related policy or not, a third possible scenario would involve expanding the EU’s presence in the Arctic through deeper institutional integration with Arctic states: On August 29, Iceland will hold a referendum on relaunching EU membership negotiations. Iceland's Foreign Minister Þorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir points to the mutual benefits Iceland’s accession to the EU would bring: for Iceland, Union membership would promise security and economic benefits, whereas the EU could strengthen its presence in the Arctic and "benefit from having the geostrategic and wealthy Iceland in the bloc.” However, a recent poll suggests that a majority of Icelanders currently opposes the restart of the negotiations.

Iceland’s accession to the EU could positively influence the debate about EU membership in Norway, where currently only 30% of the population supports full Norwegian EU membership. According to a proposal Andreas Raspotnik and Robert Habeck put forward in January 2026, the EU should offer immediate EU membership not only to Norway and Iceland, but especially to Greenland now, to position the EU and Europe by extension better in an increasingly contested international arena.

Conclusion

EU-Arctic relationships are undeniably undergoing a period of change. Influential voices from within the EU call for increased security-involvement of the EU in the Arctic, whereas some researchers hope for a continuation of the existing cooperations in fields like sustainable development, and a focus on business development and ecology, pointing out the difficulty of implementing EU security policy in a region like the Arctic. However relevant the focus on geostrategic competition and securitisation is, it is equally important to remind ourselves that the Arctic is home to 4 million people. It is not just a geostrategic battlefield, but a neighborhood with businesses, schools, cultural sites and an interest to maintain and upkeep them. Therefore any approach that the EU takes towards securing power and extending influence into the region must come with the approval of the people living in the region. Initiatives like the upcoming Icelandic EU referendum are good markers of how much EU we will see in the Arctic in the future, and with which mandate.