



Study Guide
for
the European Council

**Topic Area: “Preserving the ‘High North, Low Tension’ Doctrine: Ensuring EU
Stability and Strategic Presence in the Arctic”**

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1. Welcoming Letter

Distinguished Heads of State or Government,

It is our utmost honor to officially welcome you to the sixteenth edition of Rhodes Model Regional Cooperation (Rhodes MRC 2026) and more specifically, to the European Council, an intergovernmental European institution of foremost importance in defining the Union's general political direction and priorities, ensuring its strategic stability and security.

This year's topic, "Preserving the 'High North, Low Tension' Doctrine: Ensuring EU Stability and Strategic Presence in the Arctic", brings to the table one of the emerging challenges the European Union will come to face in the following years. The shifting Arctic landscape, characterized by newly-discovered natural resources and navigable shipping routes, has resulted in an increased interest in the area and new challenges that the EU must face in order to secure stability in the Arctic region.

As Heads of State or Government of your respective countries, you are called upon to navigate the issue at the highest decision-making level. This study guide will function as a starting point for your research, providing you with the necessary information and the most important points of discourse surrounding the topic. However, we heavily urge you to extend your research beyond the study guide's content and conduct a country-specific policy assessment for the nation you represent.

Throughout your preparation for this challenging committee, as well as during the conference, the two of us will assist you every step of the way. We sincerely hope this conference will be an enormous opportunity for you to challenge yourself, grow your skills, and eventually excel both academically and personally. We are looking forward to meeting you in Rhodes!

Sincerely yours,

Alexandra Moutropoulou, President of the European Council

Myrsini Nalmpanti, President of the European Commission

2. Introduction to the European Council

The European Council was initiated at the Paris Summit in December 1974. This summit was hosted by President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing with the intention of establishing an informal forum for discussion between heads of state or government. The European Council acquired a formal status in the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, where it was defined to provide the impetus and general political guidelines for the EU's development.¹ Finally in 2009, with the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon (2007), the European Council transitioned into a fully-fledged and official institution of the European Union. This status is formally anchored in Article 13 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which officially lists the European Council as part of the EU's single institutional framework. Its specific composition, functions, and the establishment of its own President are further detailed in Article 15 of the same Treaty.

Therefore, the European Council is one of the 7 official EU Institutions and defines the general political direction and priorities of the European Union. It is composed of the Heads of State or Government of each of the 27 member states, the President of the European Council, and the



President of the European Commission. The President of the European Council chairs its meetings and drives forward its work at its level on issues concerning the Common Foreign and Security Policy. EU leaders convene at least four times a year in formal European Council meetings, commonly referred to as "EU Summits". These regular sessions are typically held in Brussels and usually last up to two days. However, in

response to urgent global developments or critical internal crises, the President of the European Council can also convene extraordinary (or informal) summits, allowing leaders to meet flexibly outside the standard schedule.

¹ European Council, "50 Years of Working Together." Europa.eu, December 4, 2024. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/50-years-of-working-together/>.

The European Council is not a legislative body; it defines the EU's overall political direction and priorities², traditionally by adopting conclusions, which are the documents that represent the highest level of political agreement in the Union. As the first full-time president of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy said: "In periods of crisis, there is a concentration of power. Someone has to make decisions. The European Council is a place for this³". Thus, the European Council does not negotiate or adopt EU laws, but these conclusions are used to identify specific issues of concern for the EU and outline particular actions to take or goals to reach.

3. Introduction to the Topic Area

The Arctic Region, also referred to as the High North, has emerged, especially in recent years, as a region of increasing strategic importance and great geopolitical controversy. At the center of this transformation are the eight Arctic States and more specifically: Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden, and the United States, who exercise sovereignty and jurisdiction over the area⁴.

As the Arctic warms nearly four times faster than the global average⁵, the melting of sea ice is simultaneously creating new maritime vulnerabilities and economic opportunities. From Trump's bid to buy Greenland⁶ to Putin's push to further militarize the High North and to continue the War in Ukraine, freezing any formal cooperation with Moscow, the Arctic has re-emerged on the international stage.⁷ The emergence of potential new shipping corridors and access to critical raw materials, essential for the European Green Deal⁸, has drawn increased attention from global powers such as Russia and China. Russia's continued military modernization along its northern coastline and China's self-identification as a "near-Arctic state», as it is stated in China's White Paper on the Arctic Policy⁹, have disrupted the long-

² Consilium. "What the Council Does," 2024. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/what-the-council-does/>.

³ Ibid

⁴ Arctic Council. "Arctic States." *Arctic Council*, 2017, arctic-council.org/about/states/.

⁵ Rantanen, Mika. "The Arctic Has Warmed Nearly Four Times Faster than the Globe since 1979." *Communications Earth & Environment* 3, no. 1 (August 11, 2022): 1–10. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s43247-022-00498-3>.

⁶ Monde, Le. "Trump Plots Offer to Buy Greenland as NATO Ally Denmark Seethes." *Le Monde.fr. Le Monde*, January 7, 2026. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2026/01/07/trump-plots-to-buy-greenland-rubio-plans-us-denmark-meeting_6749186_4.html.

⁷ Rosenberg, Steve. "Putin Says Greenland 'nothing to Do With Russia' in Nod to US," March 28, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c7432451e170>.

⁸ "The EU's Strategic Ambitions in a Changing Arctic." *EuropeanRelations.com*, September 19, 2025. <https://europeanrelations.com/the-eus-strategic-ambitions-in-a-changing-arctic/>.

⁹ ASIL. "China's White Paper on the Arctic: Legal Status under International Law," October 7, 2025. <https://asil.org/insights/volume-22-issue-7/>.

standing stability of the region. Thus, military posturing, resource competition, and climate diplomacy are unfolding in parallel, reshaping the political map of the High North.¹⁰

For the European Union, the question is no longer whether the Arctic matters; it is whether Europe can shape the region's future or be forced to adapt to rules set by others. The Arctic is no longer a distant concern but a vital component of Europe's internal security and climate resilience. By enhancing its presence in the North, the EU strives to ensure that the Arctic remains a place of peace and sustainability rather than a place of conflict. The Union's current position is defined by the "High North, Low Tension" doctrine¹¹, which seeks to preserve the region as a zone of peaceful cooperation governed by international law¹². In 2021, the EU set out a dedicated Arctic Strategy built on three pillars: tackling climate change and protecting the environment, fostering sustainable development for Arctic communities, and strengthening international cooperation. The strategy frames Arctic engagement as both a contribution to the European Green Deal and a way to secure the Union's geopolitical interests.

By positioning itself as a leader in climate diplomacy and a guardian of multilateralism, the European Union aims to ensure that the Arctic remains a stable, rule-based environment even as it becomes a focal point of global strategic competition. In light of the changing geopolitical and geoeconomic context, the EU is currently in the process of updating its Arctic Policy in 2026.¹³ Since no single country owns the Arctic, the EU works with partners like Norway, Iceland, and Greenland to solve problems together through diplomacy.¹⁴

4. Key-words and Definitions

Strategic Autonomy¹⁵: The ability of a state or an organization to set its own priorities and make independent decisions without being constrained by external powers. It involves developing the necessary military, economic, and technological means to act alone when required, while still cooperating with international partners.

¹⁰ "The EU's Strategic Ambitions in a Changing Arctic." Security. *EuropeanRelations.Com*, September 19, 2025. <https://europeanrelations.com/the-eus-strategic-ambitions-in-a-changing-arctic/>.

¹¹ Græger, Nina . "'High Politics' and Everyday Practices at the Border: Emerging Communities of Practice in the High North." Oxford Academic , January 2025. <https://academic.oup.com/isagsa/article/4/1/ksad075/7602886>.

¹² "EU Arctic Policy - European Commission Launches Call for Evidence and Public Consultation - Oceans and Fisheries."

¹³ "The EU in the Arctic | EEAS." https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-arctic_en.

¹⁴ "The EU's Strategic Ambitions in a Changing Arctic." Security. *EuropeanRelations.Com*, September 19, 2025. <https://europeanrelations.com/the-eus-strategic-ambitions-in-a-changing-arctic/>.

¹⁵ GEOPOL.UK Editorial. "Strategic Autonomy." GEOPOL, February 4, 2026. <https://geopol.uk/concepts/strategic-autonomy/>.

CFSP¹⁶: The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is the organized, agreed-upon foreign policy of the European Union (EU) for mainly security and defense diplomacy. Unlike many other areas of EU law, the CFSP is characterized by intergovernmental cooperation, meaning member states retain significant sovereignty and usually must reach a unanimous agreement to act.

CSDP¹⁷: The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is a key element of the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), enabling the EU to play a leading role in conflict prevention, crisis management and international peacekeeping. It provides the EU with a flexible operational tool, drawing on both civilian and military assets, to respond to complex international challenges.

Dual-Use Infrastructure¹⁸: Facilities, networks, or systems designed to serve both civilian and military purposes simultaneously.

Hybrid Threats¹⁹: The coordinated and synchronized actions used by state or non-state actors to target the systemic vulnerabilities of democratic states and institutions. They combine conventional and unconventional methods such as cyberattacks, disinformation, and economic pressure to achieve strategic goals while remaining below the threshold of open warfare.

Northern Sea Route (NSR): The Northern Sea Route (NSR) is a shipping lane officially defined by Russian legislation as stretching from the Barents Sea (specifically the Kara Gate) in the west, across the Arctic Ocean along the Russian coast, to the Bering Strait in the east. It constitutes the largest portion of the broader Northeast Passage (NEP)²⁰.

The Northwest Passage (NWP): The Northwest Passage (NWP) is a maritime shipping route through the Arctic Ocean, winding along the northern coast of North America through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago. It connects the Atlantic Ocean in the east (via the Davis Strait and Baffin Bay) to the Pacific Ocean in the west (via the Bering Strait).²¹

¹⁶ European Commission. "Common Foreign and Security Policy." [commission.europa.eu](https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/common-foreign-and-security-policy_en), 2025. https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/common-foreign-and-security-policy_en.

¹⁷ European Union. "The Common Security and Defence Policy | EEAS Website." [www.eeas.europa.eu](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/common-security-and-defence-policy_en), August 12, 2021. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/common-security-and-defence-policy_en.

¹⁸ Libguides.com. "EC Library Guides: Dual-Use Technologies: Introduction," 2025. <https://ec-europa-eu.libguides.com/dual-use-technologies/introduction>.

¹⁹ Consilium. "Hybrid Threats," 2019. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/hybrid-threats/>.

²⁰ Humpert, Malte. "The Future of the Northern Sea Route - a 'Golden Waterway' or a Niche Trade Route." The Arctic Institute, September 15, 2011. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/future-northern-sea-route-golden-waterway-niche/>.

²¹ Humpert, Malte. "The Future of the Northern Sea Route - a 'Golden Waterway' or a Niche Trade Route." The Arctic Institute, September 15, 2011. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/future-northern-sea-route-golden-waterway-niche/>.

5. Legal Framework

First and foremost, the fundamental Treaties which constitute the cornerstones of the Union are the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), where its mandate, powers, and authorities are described.

Treaty on European Union²²

Article 21²³ of the TEU emphasizes that the Union's action on the international scene should be guided by the principles of democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law. Furthermore, Article 21 encourages the EU to act in cooperation with international organizations -regional or global-. Thus, the EU is one of the world's largest financial contributors to several UN agencies²⁴ and a staunch defender of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union²⁵

Beyond its environmental mandate, the EU's Arctic involvement is underpinned by specific legal frameworks which bridge the gap between ecological preservation and industrial necessity.

Articles 191-192 TFEU

These articles provide the legal mandate for the EU to act as a global leader in Arctic conservation. Since the Arctic acts as the "world's refrigerator," the EU uses this competence to regulate pollutants that travel north, such as black carbon and chemicals. This legal basis allows the EU to push for the highest environmental standards in Arctic shipping and mining, arguing that the region's fragility requires "precautionary" legal limits that go beyond standard international law.

²² "CONSOLIDATED VERSION OF THE TREATY ON EUROPEAN UNION." *Official Journal of the European Union*, October 26, 2012.

²³ Legislation.gov.uk. "Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union," 2020. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/eut/teu/article/21>.

²⁴ www.eeas.europa.eu. "EU Funding to the UN System | EEAS," n.d. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-funding-un-system_en.

²⁵ Wipo.int. "WIPO Lex, Treaties, Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union," 2025. <https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/treaties/textdetails/19848>

Article 194 TFEU

This article focuses on the security of energy supply and the transition to green energy. In the Arctic context, it serves a dual purpose: it supports the development of renewable energy (like wind and geothermal in the Far North) and governs the "sustainable" extraction of critical raw materials. As the EU seeks to end its dependence on foreign autocracies for minerals needed for batteries and magnets, Article 194 provides the framework for investing in Arctic mining projects that meet strict European social and environmental criteria

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)²⁶

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) established in 1982, has served as a foundational framework for governing the Arctic Ocean. UNCLOS “sets international rules on ownership and management of marine resources”. The UNCLOS is relevant for the five Arctic littoral states (Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Norway, Russia, and the U.S.). These states are granted ‘exclusive economic zones’ extending 200 nautical miles (370 kilometers) from their coasts, in which they have sovereign rights over natural resources. In addition, the convention offers a framework for establishing maritime boundaries and defining the limits of the continental shelf, with the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf serving as a crucial mechanism for settling disputes. In the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration, the Arctic Five reiterated their dedication to UNCLOS, emphasizing the importance of international law in adjudicating territorial assertions. However, a notable paradox within this framework is that the United States remains the only nation among the Arctic Five that has not formally ratified the convention, largely due to long-standing domestic political opposition regarding national sovereignty.

Multiannual Indicative Programmes (MIP)

The Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) is a 7 year strategic document - currently covering the period 2021-2027 - that elaborates on EU’s engagement with civil society as part of the CSO thematic programme. Its content focuses on three main pillars. First of all it aims to prioritize areas and objectives aligned with EU political and development strategies, including the Global

²⁶“UNCLOS - United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,” n.d. <https://www.unclos.org/>.

Gateway, Sustainable Development Goals, and climate action. In addition, it indicates financial allocations that guide the distribution of funds over the seven-year period.

Furthermore it monitors and evaluates mechanisms with results and performance indicators, including baselines and targets to gauge progress and impact.²⁷ The adoption of the country and regional MIPs will significantly contribute to climate actions, social inclusion and human development and migration and forced displacement and to achieve gender and biodiversity targets.²⁸ Under the specific MIP for Greenland (2021–2027), the EU has allocated €225 million to support the territory's sustainable development. By aligning Greenland's funding with the Global Gateway strategy, this specific MIP ensures that the Arctic territory can diversify its economy away from a reliance on fisheries and raw sectors, while fostering social inclusion and sustainable growth.²⁹

6. Main discussion of the Topic

6.1 The Changing Arctic Landscape: Present and Future

Once insulated from rivalry, the Arctic now faces mounting insecurity as geopolitics, climate risks, and new actors fracture regional governance. No longer the region of “high north, low tension” the Arctic, specifically its security landscape, has undergone an immense transformation and is emerging at the forefront of strategic competition.³⁰ Undoubtedly, since the bipolar era of the Cold War, the strategic approaches to the region have evolved significantly.³¹

²⁷ International Partnerships. “Global Europe - Programming,” 2020. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-technical-assistance/funding-instruments/global-europe-programming_en.

²⁸ PubAffairs Bruxelles. “Global Europe: The European Union Sets out Priority Areas for Cooperation with Partner Countries and Regions around the World - PubAffairs Bruxelles,” December 21, 2021.

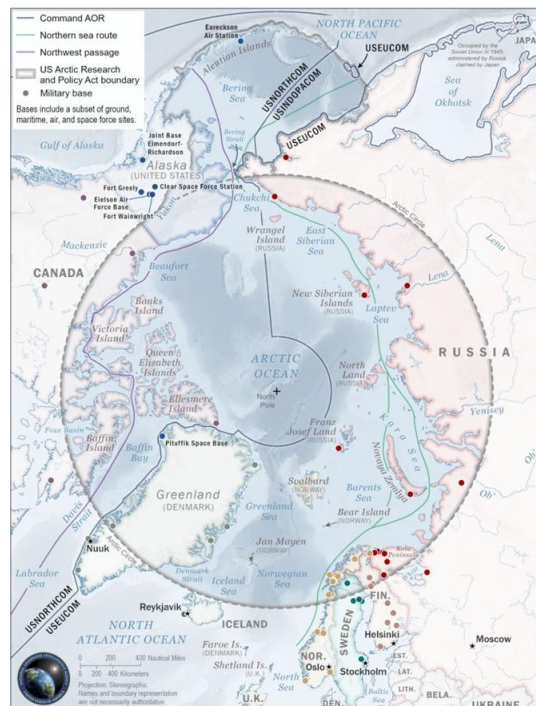
<https://www.pubaffairsbruxelles.eu/eu-institution-news/global-europe-the-european-union-sets-out-priority-areas-for-cooperation-with-partner-countries-and-regions-around-the-world/>.

²⁹ www.eeas.europa.eu. “The EU in the Arctic | EEAS Website,” n.d. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-arctic_en.

³⁰ Haldar, Sayantan. “The Future of Arctic Security and Stability.” orfonline.org. OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION (ORF), February 6, 2026. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-future-of-arctic-security-and-stability>.

³¹ “The Future of the High North,” NATO OTAN Allied Command Transformation (website), May 12, 2023 <https://www.act.nato.int/>.

At this specific time, the Arctic regions are experiencing expanded geopolitical tensions and geo-economic competitions, which concern not only the Arctic regions but the whole world. Especially after the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the Arctic and Europe's security landscape was reshaped due to an increase in hybrid and military activities. In the current geopolitical and geo-economic context, the strategic importance of the Arctic region for the EU is clear, with challenges and opportunities that EU policies should address. Estimates suggest that the eroding permafrost and melting of sea ice will result in rising sea levels across the world, significantly changing weather systems, and affecting monsoon patterns.



According to the PAME-Arctic Shipping Status Report #1, there was a 37% increase in ships in the Arctic Polar Code area between 2013 and 2023, with a 111% increase in total distance sailed.³²

Climate change is opening the Arctic to both resources and routes, and political, economic, and security challenges in other regions are likely to drive an even faster pace of growth in Arctic ships over the coming decade. These might seriously impinge on the global climatic balance and adversely affect the lives and livelihoods of people, especially those inhabiting coastal areas. Furthermore, the race for access to natural resources and rare-earth minerals has further prompted contests to seek greater influence and even control over the region. The challenge over the next decade is the pace of mitigation. There is no guarantee that reconstruction or reinforcement of existing infrastructure will keep pace with damage due to changing climate patterns. Political constraints, prioritization, and the massive cost of managing Arctic infrastructure will significantly impact the likely preparation or response. In the North American and European Arctic, democratic governments frequently find themselves focused more on their Subarctic regions, where the majority of their populations reside, while the smaller

³² "Arctic 2035: Opportunities, Issues and the Future," 2024. <https://nativefederation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/AFN-Arctic-April-2024.pdf>.

populations of the Arctic regions provide insufficient tax bases for the necessary additional spending.

Over the next decade, it is most likely that the fundamental impacts of climate change in the Arctic will shape both the risks and opportunities in the region, often at the same time. Increased access means increased opportunities, but also greater competition and risks of accidents. Governance mechanisms and reinvigorated strategic competition in the Arctic have altered because of the shifts in international relations, more specifically, the future of Russia's relations with NATO and the U.S.

6.2 EU's Strategic Approach to the Arctic

The EU plays a fundamental role in the High North, focused on different but overlapping goals. Although the EU's formal role in Arctic governance remains limited, as a participant in the Arctic Council (but only as a de facto and non-permanent observer), it can employ soft power capabilities.³³ The EU covers a vast expanse, including areas considered high seas and the seabed beyond areas of national jurisdiction. Due to its multiple links to the Arctic, the EU has shown an increasing strategic interest in the region. It has become a strategic horizon for the EU because of climate change, resource competition, and shifting geopolitical alignments. For the Union, ensuring stability is of the utmost importance because it is associated with the integrity of supply chains and the resilience of critical infrastructure. According to the diplomatic service of the European Union, developments in the Arctic regions have far-reaching impacts beyond the region, affecting both the EU and the wider world, for example, cascading global effects, societal and human security impact, and environmental impact. The extended sea level rise because of the continuous glacial melt has threatened the coastal communities globally. Thus, the 2021 EU Arctic Policy advocates peaceful cooperation, sustainable development, and actions against climate change with a focus on local civilians. To promote these efforts, the European Commission appointed a new Special Adviser on the Arctic. This designation underlines the Commission's strong commitment to reinforcing the EU's strategic engagement in the Arctic, as confirmed by President Ursula von der Leyen at the World Economic Forum in

³³ Marshallcenter.org. "High North Security Dialogue '24," 2024. <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/policy-briefs/high-north-security-dialogue-24>.

January 2026.³⁴ More specifically, the EU's strategic foresight is established through Horizon Europe (2021-2027) because the EU supports Arctic research with €163 million allocated to studies regarding climate change, pollution, biodiversity, and permafrost thaw monitoring. All these are acting as diplomatic tools, supporting the EU's influence in Arctic policies. Furthermore, the EU-Greenland Partnership features significantly increased funding, providing regulatory leverage as well as resource access. As a result, a direct coordination is created with the aim of Arctic development and the visibility of EU presence.

The Arctic's vast mineral reserves, especially those of rare earth elements and hydrocarbons, are becoming increasingly important in the EU's strategy to enhance energy security and reduce dependency on Chinese-dominated supply chains. Although the operational mining projects in the Arctic remain very limited, the aim focuses on developing a sustainable value chain for raw material.³⁵

6.3 Threats and Challenges

6.3.1 Military Buildup

Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 jolted global politics, the Arctic has emerged as a heated zone of competition. Russian and Chinese joint military drills prove that they project power into the High North, seeking to secure military control over sea passages, building military and economic infrastructure, and staking claims to valuable natural resources beneath the land and seabed.³⁶

The Arctic Ocean was highly militarized during the Cold War. The Soviet Union, as well as the United States, stationed nuclear deterrence forces on the Northern reaches of the Arctic. The strategic importance of the Arctic Ocean is qualified by the geographical proximity between the United States and the former USSR (now Russia) – ballistic missiles could easily strike the enemy by flying over the Arctic. In a nuclear exchange, the shortest distance between Russia and the US is over the Arctic, as Russian ballistic missiles would likely be launched from submarine bases

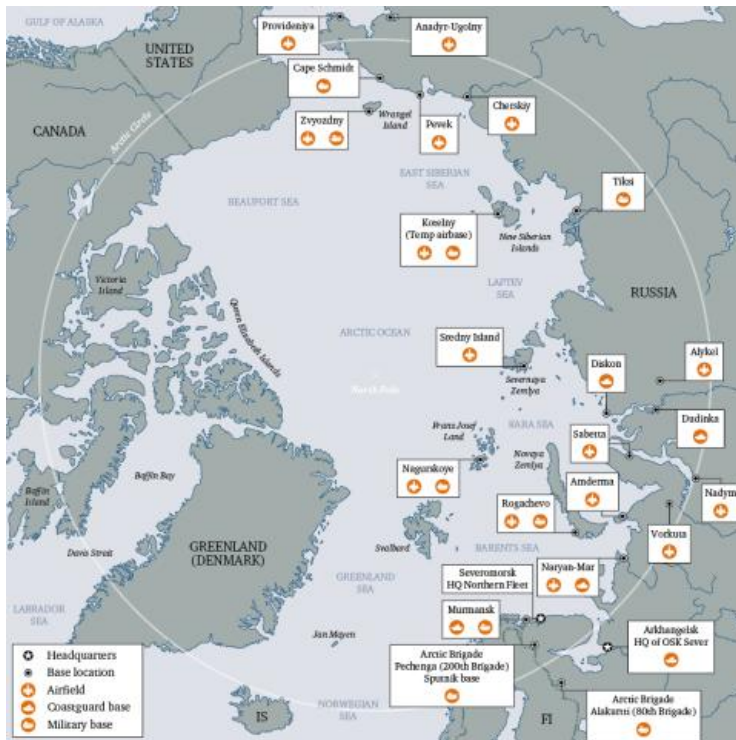
³⁴ "European Commission -Press Release the European Commission Designates Special Adviser for the EU-Arctic Relations," April 13, 2026. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/ip_26_799/IP_26_799_EN.pdf.

³⁵ Wojtek. "Greenland and the EU's Arctic Ambitions - Future Europe Journal." Future Europe Journal - Bridging the gap between policy and research, October 2025. <https://feu-journal.eu/issues/securing-the-essentials-in-a-turbulent-world/greenland-and-the-eus-arctic-ambitions/>.

³⁶ Steptoe. "Great Power Competition in the Arctic: Implications for International Trade." <https://www.steptoe.com/en/news-publications/stepwise-risk-outlook/great-power-competition-in-the-arctic-implications-for-international-trade.html>.

near the Kola Peninsula, through poorly monitored airspace with low visibility across Greenland.³⁷

The desire to enhance domestic defense capabilities, safeguard national economic assets, assert



sovereignty in Arctic waters, and create a strategic presence in the Northern Atlantic from which to project power is driving increasing Russian military buildup throughout the Arctic. Since 2007, Russia has reopened fifty previously closed Soviet-era military bases, and since 2014, it has invested heavily in rebuilding its military infrastructure, including 475 new structures across its Arctic military sites, as well as 16 new deep-water ports³⁸. In 2014, Russia opened a new Unified

Strategic Command, called “OSK Sever,” to strengthen the security of its vast Arctic borders and secure its Arctic interests³⁹.

Within this militarization, however, there is a calculated exploitation of the inherent ambiguity of dual-use infrastructure⁴⁰, which is constructed under the guise of political, economic, or scientific purposes while potentially serving military objectives. Structures such as these include the new and modernized facilities in the Far North; through satellites that provide weather forecasts, navigation, or communications, they additionally offer information, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) to the armed forces.⁴¹ This merging of roles is not an aberration but a

³⁷ Saxena, Abhishek. “The Return of Great Power Competition to the Arctic.” *The Arctic Institute - Center for Circumpolar Security Studies*, October 22, 2020. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/return-great-power-competition-arctic/>.

³⁸ Analytics, F. P. “Military Buildup and Great Power Competition.” *Foreign Policy*, May 4, 2026. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/15/arctic-competition-defense-militarization-security-russia-nato-war-games-china-power-map/>.

³⁹ Saxena, Abhishek. “The Return of Great Power Competition to the Arctic.” *The Arctic Institute*, October 22, 2020. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/return-great-power-competition-arctic/>.

⁴⁰ Newsome, Peyton. “COMMERCIALIZATION AND DUAL-USE SPACE CAPABILITIES IN THE ARCTIC,” October 21, 2025. <https://tedstevensarcticcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/26-P-0131-cleared-COMMERCIALIZATION-AND-DUAL-USE-Newsome-1.pdf>.

⁴¹ EUSPA. “Secure SATCOM, Market and User Technology Report ,” 2023. https://www.euspa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-03/euspa_secure_satcom_report_2023.pdf.

structural shift, as the Arctic is emerging as a testing ground for commercial-military integration in space. Due to its geographical location, the region is crucial for polar-orbiting satellites and ground-to-satellite communication. Nevertheless, this reliance comes with challenges such as the interdependence of civilian and military systems, along with the ambiguity of dual-use technologies, whose roles are difficult to distinguish. Therefore, while dual-use assets reduce costs and expand capabilities, they simultaneously muddy the waters by increasing exposure to cyber, physical, and operational threats, which have an impact on both the civilian and defense sectors.

Condemning the growing militarization of the Arctic, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) point to Russia's extensive military restructuring, including the establishment of its "Maritime Collegium"⁴². This, in combination with China's clear interest in the region, has escalated regional tensions and undermined regional stability. Furthermore, past rhetoric from Donald Trump regarding the potential purchase of Greenland has added a layer of diplomatic friction, challenging the EU's efforts to maintain regional cohesion and highlighting the island's immense strategic and resource value. In response, the EU needs to strengthen cooperation with its NATO allies. EU-US cooperation in the area, MEPs add, is fundamental to contain Russia and China and ensure our common security.⁴³

6.3.2 Control over Maritime Routes

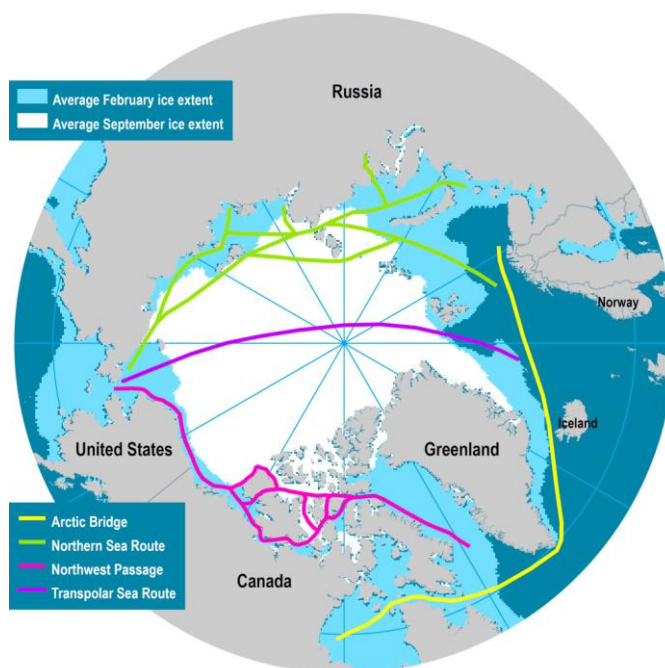
The conflict in the Middle East and perturbations in the Strait of Hormuz have highlighted the fragility of the global maritime system. Against this backdrop, Arctic shipping routes are attracting renewed interest, as climate change makes navigation along them easier. Maritime transport accounts for over 80% of global trade, concentrated between three major regions – East Asia, Europe, and North America – and structured around a limited number of strategic

⁴² warn MEPs. "Arctic: MEPs Warn of Military Build-up and Geopolitical Competition | News | European Parliament." Europa.eu, November 26, 2025. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20251120IPR31495/arctic-meps-warn-of-military-build-up-and-geopolitical-competition>.

⁴³ "Arctic: MEPs Warn of Military Build-up and Geopolitical Competition | News | European Parliament." November 26, 2025. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20251120IPR31495/arctic-meps-warn-of-military-build-up-and-geopolitical-competition>.

corridors⁴⁴. This concentration makes global trade particularly vulnerable to geopolitical shocks. The Arctic has thus primarily become an arena of growing strategic rivalry.

The opening of new maritime routes in the Arctic, specifically the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the Northwest Passage (NWP)⁴⁵, represents both a strategic necessity and a profound geopolitical challenge for the European Union. As the ice melts, these corridors offer the potential to drastically shorten shipping distances between Europe and Asia, reducing transit times by up to 30% compared to the Suez Canal.⁴⁶ This shift is vital for the EU's economic resilience, especially as it seeks stable access to critical raw materials found in the High North that are essential for the European Green Deal.



However, the EU's ability to utilize these routes is heavily constrained by the current political climate. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has "frozen" cooperation with Russia, which controls the majority of the infrastructure along the NSR. As Russia reorients its economy away from Europe to Asia, the potential of the Northern Sea Route as a transport lane is becoming more important. The Northern Sea Route allows Russia and China direct access when trading in oil and gas. China is investing in infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route, building logistics capabilities for all-year container routes.⁴⁷ Increased activity in the NSR and NWP comes with a few geopolitical concerns. The first is that of sovereignty. There is no clarity in either of these shipping lanes as to who actually has power over who can pass and what standards they must adhere to in order to do so. Without this information, there will be increased uncertainty and,

⁴⁴ Coface. "Arctic Routes: An Alternative for Global Trade?" 2026. <https://www.coface.it/en/news-economy-and-insights/will-arctic-shipping-routes-really-reshape-the-map-of-global-trade>.

⁴⁵ Humpert, Malte. "The Future of the Northern Sea Route - a 'Golden Waterway' or a Niche Trade Route." The Arctic Institute, September 15, 2011. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/future-northern-sea-route-golden-waterway-niche/>.

⁴⁶ "Arctic Shipping: Opportunity, Constraints, and the Long View." . <https://www.ics-shipping.org/news-item/arctic-shipping-opportunity-constraints-and-the-long-view/>.

⁴⁷ Steptoe. "Great Power Competition in the Arctic: Implications for International Trade." <https://www.steptoe.com/en/news-publications/stepwise-risk-outlook/great-power-competition-in-the-arctic-implications-for-international-trade.html>.

therefore, more possibilities for misunderstandings between states. Another pressing challenge involves the rise of transnational crime driven by expanding maritime corridors. Arctic nations must enhance their monitoring capabilities to detect illicit maritime activity. Otherwise, the region may witness an increase in unlawful resource extraction (such as illegal fishing) and maritime trafficking.⁴⁸

Furthermore, the EU faces significant normative and environmental hurdles in managing these routes. While the EU promotes "Green Shipping Corridors" and the use of satellite data like Copernicus to ensure safety, it lacks a direct security mandate to protect these assets. The presence of China, a self-declared "near-Arctic state" with clear interests in expanding economic infrastructure, adds another layer of complexity to EU-US efforts to contain rival influence.

In accordance with China's White Paper on the Arctic, the country's strategy is outlined, with the aim of transitioning from a "state close to the Arctic" to a "major Polar Power."⁴⁹ Recalling that Arctic governance concerns all stakeholders, China is promoting cooperation on Arctic issues within the framework of the "Belt and Road" Initiative. In particular, the Deputy Foreign Minister confirmed that China and Russia will strive to achieve effective alignment of the "Belt and Road" Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the creation of which is led by Moscow.⁵⁰ Such cooperation includes the joint construction of a "Polar Silk Road" (PSR). Emphasis was further placed on the PSR's development as a collaborative effort, thereby countering the notion that the BRI and the PSR could potentially become a unilateral imposition by China. Despite Beijing's rhetoric about a "community with a shared future for mankind"⁵¹ and assurances of respect for the sovereignty of Arctic states, the West and the international community view Chinese intentions with deep suspicion, interpreting its increasing investments and the expansion of its naval power as an attempt to convert economic influence into geostrategic and military power.

⁴⁸ Gricius, Gabriella. "Geopolitical Implications of New Arctic Shipping Lanes." *The Arctic Institute - Center for Circumpolar Security Studies*, March 18, 2021. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/geopolitical-implications-arctic-shipping-lanes/>.

⁴⁹ SECCI, Giulia. "A 'SNOW DRAGON'? CHINA'S STRATEGY IN THE ARCTIC AND ITS GEOPOLITICAL AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS." Thesis. *Corso Di Laurea Magistrale in Relazioni Internazionali*, 2020.

⁵⁰ "Russia-China Dialogue: The 2020 Model," n.d. <https://russiancouncil.ru/papers/Russia-China-2020-Report58-En.pdf>.

⁵¹ Godehardt, Nadine. "China's Claim to a New World Order." *Stiftung Wissenschaft Und Politik (SWP)*, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.18449/2025C42>.

For the EU, this means that maritime routes are no longer just commercial opportunities but are now "heated zones of competition" where military control over sea passages is actively sought by rival powers.⁵² To address these challenges, the EU must balance its environmental leadership with a strengthened strategic presence to ensure that the opening of the Arctic does not lead to a breakdown of the international order.

6.3.3 Hybrid Threats

Hybrid threats usually refer to coordinated harmful activities that are planned and carried out with harmful intent. They aim to undermine a target, such as a state or an institution, through a variety of means, often combined. These means may include information manipulation, cyberattacks, economic influence or coercion, covert political maneuvering, coercive diplomacy, or threats of military force. In addition to the security risk, they pose a threat to democracy, targeting its core values and aiming to fracture society and undermine political decision-making.⁵³

Hybrid threats in the Arctic have become a significant concern for the European Union, as the



region's increasing accessibility creates new vulnerabilities in critical infrastructure and democratic processes. These threats often manifest as "gray zone" activities, actions that fall below the threshold of open conflict, such as GPS jamming, cyberattacks on maritime navigation

systems, and the spread of disinformation aimed at undermining regional cooperation.

Cyberattacks have intensified across the High North, with hundreds of incidents reported against government, energy, and telecommunications networks in member states since 2022. These operations mostly include malware intrusions and espionage campaigns linked back to Russian-linked threat actors. Notably, Arctic subsea cables and energy infrastructure are particularly vulnerable, which are difficult to secure due to their vast length, limited surveillance

⁵² "The EU in the Arctic | EEAS." . https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-arctic_en.

⁵³ Consilium. "Hybrid Threats." <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/hybrid-threats/>.

capability, and vulnerability to sabotage, yet essential to national and Allied communications.⁵⁴ The EU faces specific challenges in protecting undersea fiber-optic cables and energy pipelines, which are vital for the Union's digital and energy security but are difficult to monitor in the harsh polar environment. For example, in October 2023, the Baltic connector gas pipeline and telecommunications cables between Finland and Estonia were damaged, while Finnish investigators identified a Russian- flagged vessel and a Chinese vessel as the prime suspects.⁵⁵

Following the adoption of the Strategic Compass for security and defence in March 2022, the EU established an EU hybrid toolbox⁵⁶. The toolbox comprises preventive, cooperative, stability-building, restrictive, and support measures, as set out in the Council conclusions (approved in June 2022) on a framework for a coordinated EU response to hybrid campaigns. The purpose of the toolbox is, on one hand, to help identify complex and multifaceted hybrid campaigns and, on the other hand, to coordinate tailor-made and cross-sectoral responses. In addition, in May 2024, the Council also approved the guiding framework for the practical establishment of EU hybrid rapid response teams, in order to adequately support member states against the rising hybrid warfare.⁵⁷

6.4 Past Actions and Current Developments

Building on strategic shifts following 2022, the European Union has moved from a passive observer to an active geopolitical power in the Arctic. This evolution is defined by a "geopolitical necessity" to safeguard EU interests while promoting its core values of the rule of law, sustainable development, and rules-based multilateralism. The Arctic Ocean has long been a region of strategic military importance, notably during the Cold War when the United States and the Soviet Union stationed nuclear deterrence in its northern reaches. Today, the region has transitioned into a focal point of intensified strategic rivalry following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.⁵⁸ This conflict effectively "froze" cooperation within the Arctic Council, leading Russia to cease sharing climate data and pivot toward a military and economic partnership with China.

⁵⁴ Landriault, Mathieu, NAADSN Coordinator, and Aleksis Oreschnikoff. *Hybrid Threats and the New Arctic Security Landscape*. https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/25sept-Hybrid-Threats-Arctic-Security-Landscape-NAADSN-Policy-Brief_ML-AO.pdf

⁵⁵ Standish, Reid. "Hunt For Answers Continues Over Chinese Ship's Suspected Role In Damaging Baltic Pipeline." Features. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 21:17:23Z. <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-baltic-pipeline-damaged-russia-newnew-polar-bear/32667867.html>.

⁵⁶ Consilium. "Hybrid Threats," 2019. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/hybrid-threats/>.

⁵⁷ Consilium. "Hybrid Threats." <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/hybrid-threats/>.

⁵⁸ "The EU in the Arctic | EEAS." https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-arctic_en.

In response to Russia's unprecedented military aggression against Ukraine, and the involvement of Belarus, the European Union, together with its Member States and its partners, has suspended cooperation with Russia and Belarus in several regional frameworks, regarding the Arctic and the Baltic Sea initiatives. Despite those shifts, the European Union has asserted its role as a "geopolitical power" with a strategic necessity to ensure the region remains safe, stable, and peaceful.

A key tool that determines the Union's approach to the Arctic region is the EU's Arctic Policy, as outlined above. Furthermore, the European Green Deal (EGD) is at the heart of the EU's Arctic engagement, addressing the unprecedented crisis point of Arctic warming. The EU seeks to stimulate an innovative green and blue transition to benefit the inhabitants of the Arctic. Under Horizon Europe⁵⁹,

the EU continues its massive investment in Arctic science, which totaled approximately €200 million between 2014 and 2020.⁶⁰

Apart from these



initiatives, the European Critical Raw Materials Act⁶¹ promotes sustainable extraction in the European Arctic. This project aims to build resilient value chains for minerals essential to the green transition while involving local and Indigenous communities.⁶²

When it comes to Greenland, it shall be recognised that it's an integral part of the EU's Arctic Policy. The EU has long-standing relations with Greenland based on its status as an Overseas Country and Territory (OCT)⁶³. As the largest recipient of EU financial support under the OCT scheme, Greenland receives direct support for its own priorities in education and green growth,

⁵⁹ Research and innovation. "Polar and Ocean Research," January 22, 2025. https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/research-area/environment/climate-change-science/polar-and-ocean-research_en.

⁶⁰ Rodrigues, Céline. "European Green Deal and the EU Arctic Policy Aligned." *Atlas Institute for International Affairs*, July 23, 2025. <https://atlasinstitute.org/european-green-deal-and-the-eu-arctic-policy-aligned/>.

⁶¹ European Commission. "European Critical Raw Materials Act," 2024. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/green-deal-industrial-plan/european-critical-raw-materials-act_en.

⁶² EU Regional Policy in the Arctic. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2_en_act_part1_v7.pdf

⁶³ International Partnerships. "Greenland," 2023. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/countries/greenland_en.

including sustainable raw materials and renewable energy. To deepen cooperation with Greenland, the European Commission established a permanent European Commission Office in Nuuk in March 2024, enhancing cooperation and increasing the visibility of EU action on the ground.⁶⁴

7. Conclusion

As the analysis has demonstrated, it has become clear that the Arctic has transitioned from a remote frontier of scientific inquiry into a primary scene of global strategic competition, requiring the European Union to adopt a more assertive and cohesive geopolitical stance. As the "High North, Low Tension" doctrine faces pressure from military buildup, hybrid threats, and the suspension of traditional multilateral cooperation, the Union must strike a balance between its unique blend of soft and hard power tools.

Moving forward toward the 2026 update of the Arctic Policy, the EU's success will depend on its ability to balance internal strategic autonomy with strong external partnerships. Strengthening ties with the "Arctic Seven (A7)" and NATO allies, alongside deepened bilateral cooperation with Greenland, could be crucial in order to counter the expansion of the influence of rival powers and competitors. Ultimately, the European Union's presence in the High North serves as a vital anchor for regional stability, ensuring that the Arctic remains a space of low tensions - as it was originally agreed on - defined by sustainable development and peaceful cooperation rather than a new place for exploitation and conflict in Europe's neighborhood.

8. Points to be Addressed

1. How can the EU keep the Arctic a zone of "low tension" now that new military threats arise, and how can it ensure credible defense for its members?
2. What further measures should the EU take to protect undersea infrastructure from potential hybrid threats (e.g. sabotage or cyberattacks) ?
3. How can the EU cooperate with partners and international organizations to ensure that new Arctic sea lanes remain open for all countries to use the existing infrastructure?

⁶⁴ "The EU in the Arctic | EEAS." https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-arctic_en.

4. How could the EU improve its relationships with Arctic neighbors to address common challenges?
5. In what ways can the EU project security and preserve stability in the Arctic despite its currently disrupted relations with Russia and China, and through what strategies can it limit their influence?
6. What measures should the European Union take to protect the climate and promote the environmental goals of the Green Deal, as new capabilities arise in the Arctic region?

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