

European Securitisation of the Arctic: Moving Beyond NATO

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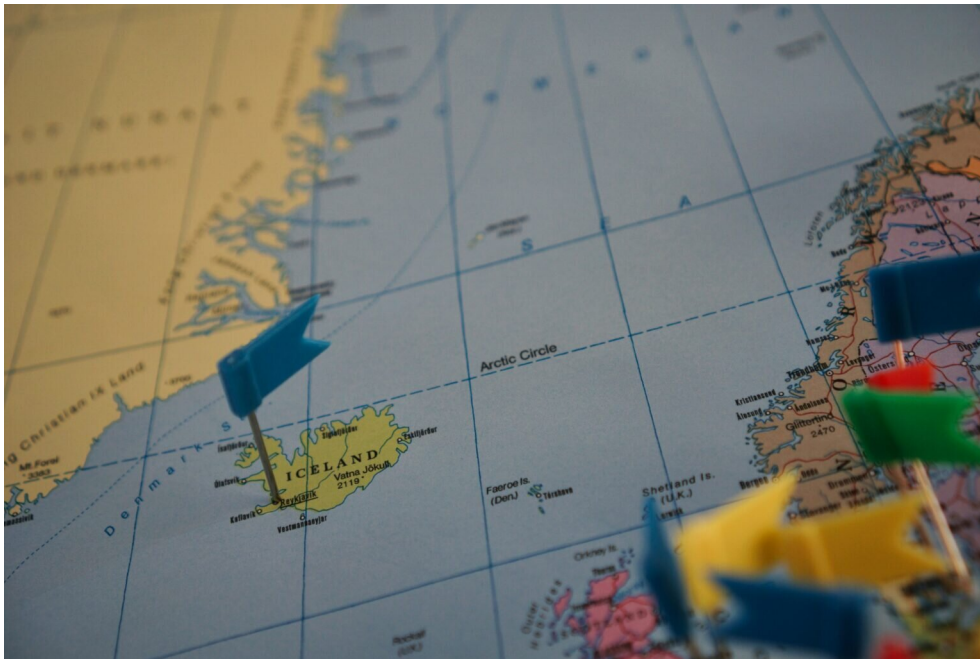


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In January, EU High Representative Kaja Kallas told the Arctic Frontiers Conference that the region can no longer be understood apart from Europe's broader security anxieties. Weeks later, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen echoed the sentiment at the Nordic Council, describing the Arctic as a place where "nature and geopolitics" now collide with unmatched intensity. Neither speaker leads an Arctic state, yet their language signals how far Arctic security has travelled from the sole concern of the eight Arctic Council members to a preoccupation of the European Union's most senior officials, and of countries with no Arctic coastline at all.

This sentiment is mirrored in the new Dutch Arctic strategy. While a long-time seafaring nation with significant Arctic history (which is why you can still find Nieuw-Friesland on a map of Svalbard), the Netherlands is not an Arctic state and has never mentioned its Arctic security concerns as prominently as in this year's Polar strategy. This shift in strategies is emblematic not just for a more securitised Arctic discourse, but for the

broader development of European security consciousness and infrastructures, growing more independent from the US.

Similar to Kallas and Von der Leyen, the Dutch strategy observes a changing security situation in the Arctic. The most pressing development that the document observes is that the Arctic is no longer a region of peace. As examples, the strategy notes how Russia has intensified its militarisation of the region, China has declared itself a 'near-Arctic' nation, and the US, in its new National Security Strategy, views the Arctic as a key area.

With these developments, the Dutch Polar Strategy sees a growing tension between NATO and Russia, increased risks to critical infrastructure and potential disruptions to trade routes and energy supply. The most pressing issue for Dutch security interests is seen as a mix of hybrid or seabed warfare and denial of maritime accessibility. These risks would directly hurt the energy security and trade interests of the Netherlands. According to the Strategy itself, such geopolitical risks, climate change and the strategic position of the Arctic have led to the region now becoming an 'integral part' of the Dutch International Security Strategy.

Despite the heightened importance of the Arctic, the Dutch posture remains remarkably similar. The Netherlands wishes to intensify its efforts in the Arctic, in order to secure its interests and to preserve stability and the international legal agreements concerning the region. However, throughout the document it is stressed that all increased efforts will primarily be conducted through NATO. This is in line with the Netherlands' long tradition as an Atlanticist state. Though the Netherlands does take part in actions not related to NATO, like the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), the strategy strictly points out that this is only done when it does not encroach upon NATO's tasks. Seemingly, the Netherlands still puts a lot of faith in NATO and the US, even with the Strategy recognising the tensions around Greenland within the Alliance. Furthermore, the Strategy spends little time discussing the fact that the Arctic Council is seriously constrained, with its members having stopped their direct cooperation with Russia. It recognises that this situation has lowered the effectiveness of the Council, but it does not propose any actions to remedy this situation. Essentially, the Dutch Polar Strategy seems to be aware of the increased geopolitical importance of the Arctic, without offering any grand new ideas or solutions.

This turn to geopoliticisation of the poles in the current strategy compared to the last Dutch Polar Strategy is not an outlier, but a phenomenon observable across different Arctic strategies, from Arctic and near-Arctic states alike, that show increasingly securitised Arctic discourses.

The significance of the Dutch strategy therefore lies less in the concrete policies it introduces than in what it reveals about contemporary European security thinking. Despite proposing few novel initiatives, the strategy adopts the same geopolitical framing that increasingly characterises Arctic policy across Europe. This can be observed in Von der Leyen's speech at

the Nordic Council earlier this year, in which she states that “Nowhere (...) the forces of nature and geopolitics [are] clashing with more intensity than in the Arctic.” As the EU is currently also drafting a new Arctic strategy, numerous voices now call for a clearer EU security posture on the Arctic.

The trend towards securitisation in the Arctic is a reflection of a broader, general (re-)turn to securitisation in a period of increasing geopolitical tensions and anxieties across Europe. Faced with growing concern about further escalation from Russia on the one hand and uncertainty about transatlantic partnerships on the other, many European countries now call for a more sovereign security architecture.

The realisation of this ambition can be seen in France: In March, French President Emmanuel Macron introduced the concept of ‘Forward Deterrence’ in his île Longue speech, a concept by which he hopes to ‘Europeanise’ French nuclear deterrence. This allows France to temporarily deploy strategic forces into a partner’s territory and thus create a ‘coalition of the willing’ with other European countries. Crucially, Macron was explicit in his speech that this framework sits alongside NATO’s nuclear mission rather than inside it, a deliberate French carve-out that keeps the initiative under Paris’s control rather than the Alliance’s. The states Macron mentions in connection with the dialogue around forward deterrence, however, are Belgium, Greece, Denmark, Sweden, Poland, Germany, the UK and the Netherlands – all NATO member states. This illustrates an emerging pattern in European security: new defence arrangements are increasingly being constructed alongside NATO rather than through it.

The effects of these French policies also have a significant impact on the Arctic security infrastructure, as the latest country to join France’s initiative is Arctic state Norway. Having signed the so-called Narvik Agreement with France on May 27th, the Forward Deterrence framework now enables France to deploy fighter jets in northern Norway, opening a number of new operational and targeting opportunities in the Russian Arctic for France and its partners. But France is not alone with this approach; Norway’s own pattern reveals a similar logic: in under six months, it stacked bilateral defence agreements with the UK (the Lunna House Agreement), Germany (the Hansa Arrangement), and now France. Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre himself described this sequence as a “hedging strategy,” even while reaffirming that NATO remains the foundation of Norwegian security.

Considering this, the EU’s own actions signal the same: the Commission’s appointment of Jyrki Katainen as Special Adviser on EU-Arctic relations, and the March 2026 EU-Iceland security partnership, suggest the Union’s own Arctic strategy update will lean into exactly this kind of securitisation. The Dutch Polar Strategy’s turn toward geopolitics, therefore, is not an isolated update, but rather one more chapter in a rapidly securitising European playbook.

Within this new playbook, two things stand out. Firstly, Europe is increasingly concerned with the geopolitical importance of the Arctic. The Dutch revealing a new Polar strategy, and the EU currently working on revising its own strategy, indicates that the Arctic is no longer a niche topic for Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm or Helsinki. Instead, the securitisation of the Arctic has become a wider European affair. Secondly, this wider securitisation reveals another European concern. Europeans do not completely rely on NATO or the United States anymore. Instead, European states have signed various new agreements, which focus on defence and the Arctic, without involving NATO or the Americans. Europe's securitisation is thus marked by an increased interest in the Arctic and a decreased trust in NATO and the US.