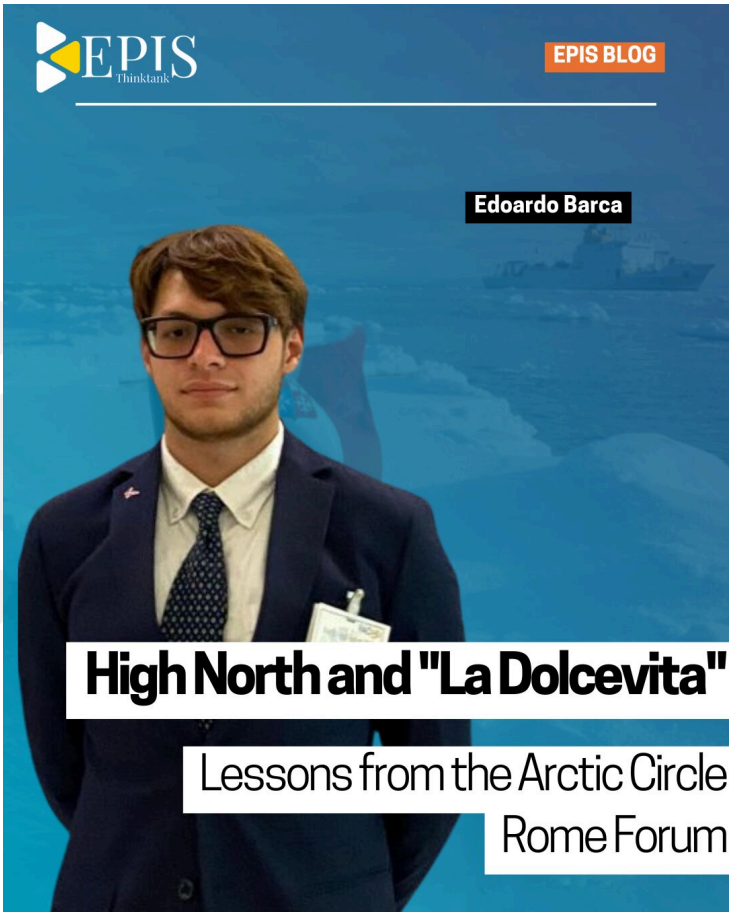
High North and “La Dolcevita”

29 MARCH 2026

Edoardo Barca



On March 3 and 4, 2026, the headquarters of the National Research Council (CNR) in Rome hosted the “Arctic Circle Rome Forum – Polar Dialogue”. The event, a watershed for the promotion of Italian Arctic policy, was born as a discussion centre for international civil society in a phase of profound crisis for Arctic multilateralism. The Arctic is regulated by two different institutions: the Arctic Council, which is the government centre, and the “Arctic Circle”, the civil society forum for diplomatic and trade negotiations. As part of the EPIS delegation, I followed a wide selection of the panels proposed, spanning from civil-military cooperation, environmental security, international arctic relations, and indigenous advocacy in the Poles.

In particular, the Roman forum sanctioned the end of the era of Arctic exceptionalism, the idea that the North could be a zone of peace isolated from global dynamics. The "free zone" has broken down, and the region has joined the interconnected reality of global security, where the Arctic, Antarctica, and the Himalayas (the so-called "third pole" of the world) influence, and are influenced by, Mediterranean and global dynamics. In this scenario, Italy exploited the event to publicly present the new Italian Arctic Policy, an evolution of the 2015 strategic concept, and a strategic document that reflects the integrated regional vision of the MUR (Ministry of University and Research), MAECI (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation), and the Ministry of Defence. The interministerial formula marks a break from the purely academic world, underlining the importance acquired by the North for the National System. Here's the gist of this experience:

1. The globalisation of Arctic security

The forum highlighted the fall of the safe zone that was the North, and the region is being considered more and more as a core aspect of their foreign security policies. After the 2022 Ukraine invasion, the Arctic Council began stalling in their decision-making process due to Russia's attrition, endangering democratic institutions and multilateral cooperation. This situation is creating a rising concern over regional security for NATO-affiliated Arctic states, mainly the US, Canada, and Iceland, and their allies with important stakes in the area.

One of the main focuses of the conference was the position and the role of Italian science diplomacy in the North, and their commitment to ensure the security of their scientific operations via the Navy's operation "High North" and the Civil-Military Cooperation projects under the NATO umbrella. As Italy is the leader of the International CIMIC Group, the presence of Italian military officers was dense (and I also spotted one of the main supporters of the Italian North agenda, Vice Minister of Defence Isabella Rauti!), with many senior officials taking the role of panel's speakers over CIMIC operations and regional security debates.

2. China, Italy, and the "near Arctic states" dilemma

This status has been formally rejected by the United States and other Arctic nations, who maintain there is no legal "intermediate" category between Arctic and non-Arctic states. This position is not concerning for China, which continues the project of the Polar Silk Road, focusing on infrastructural security and economic leverages with host countries.

3. The elephant in the room: Russian placement in the forum

The forum had to navigate the reality of Russia's overwhelming presence in the region despite its international isolation, and also its complete absence

in the roster of speakers and officials in the forum. Considering that the Russian Federation contains more than half of the Arctic region, Russia remains a dominant "declining but relevant" power with extensive infrastructure and military facilities. A significant theme was the "partnership of convenience" between Moscow and Beijing. Russia provides the geography and military footprint, while China provides the capital and technology to bypass Western sanctions.

The forum reflected on the necessity of finding "creative measures" to prevent total fragmentation. There was a consensus that while Russia's aggression must be contested, the Arctic's environmental and safety challenges (such as search and rescue) eventually require some form of functional dialogue to avoid regional chaos.

EPIS