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Looking towards the North: Belgium's role in the Arctic

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The Arctic region has re-emerged as an area of geostrategic importance and is attracting increasing attention from Belgium. Accelerating climate change has altered living conditions in the region. The prospect of greater commercial activity and rapid technological advances, combined with growing interest from non-Arctic states, means that the region is increasingly connected to, and an integral part of, the rest of the world. As this process unfolds, the Arctic could impact the global balance of power and the conditions of rivalry and competition between the great powers. While this may occur peacefully, the possibility of sudden, rapid changes and unpredictable shocks are no guarantee for stability.

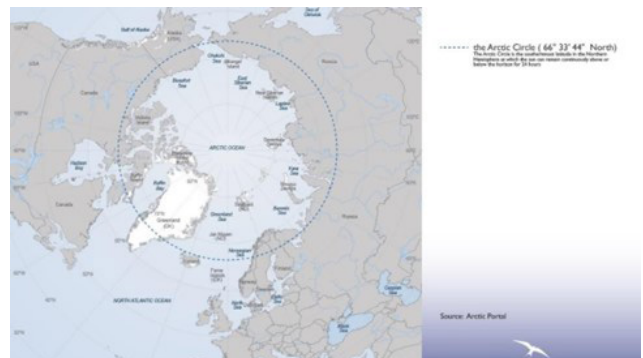
The Arctic is warming nearly four times faster than the rest of the planet. Climate change is transforming the region and creating significant challenges in the areas of security and defence, access and navigation, energy, infrastructure, cooperation, and governance. As a result, states in the region and elsewhere are turning their attention to the Arctic. This has important implications for the region's security and stability.

The region has also been higher on the agenda in Belgium in recent years. On December 21, 2021, the Chamber of Representatives approved with near unanimity a resolution on the Development of a Belgian Strategy with regard to the Arctic, which addresses the Climate Crisis and Security Challenges in the Region.¹ The Arctic is also mentioned in the 2021 National Security Strategy² as a region at risk of new sources of conflict and in the context of economic security, following the increasing accessibility

of northern shipping routes. Foreign Minister Hadja Lahbib pointed out in her 2022³ and 2023 General Policy Note on Foreign Relations, European Affairs, Foreign Trade⁴ that the Arctic will become increasingly important, both in terms of climate change and geostrategic and economic challenges.

MORE THAN THE NORTH POLE, SNOW, AND POLAR BEARS

The Arctic is a series of subregions rather than a monolithic entity characterized by snow and ice. The region, often defined as the zone above the Arctic Circle, consists of Canada, Denmark (via Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, the United States and Sweden. Geography and climate vary widely in the region, which is inhabited by more than four million people, including several indigenous populations. This diversity has important implications for accessibility and human activities in the Arctic.



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Unlike Antarctica, a continent surrounded by water that does not belong to any country and governed under the Antarctic Treaty System, the Arctic is an ocean surrounded by the eight aforementioned states that, according to international law, have jurisdiction over all land, inland waters, territorial seas, and exclusive economic zones (EEZ) in the region, with the exception of the North Pole and the Arctic Ocean. Territorial disputes are dealt with within this framework.

In the Arctic, there is an extensive and layered governance structure in place to handle regional affairs. The Arctic Council is the main forum for intergovernmental cooperation in the region, in which the eight Arctic states are represented, along with six indigenous peoples' organizations and 32 observers including non-Arctic states, international organizations, interparliamentary organizations and NGOs. An observer role for Belgium, as recommended in the National Security Strategy, would provide our country with a platform to monitor evolutions in the region and participate in working groups on the environment, climate, and sustainable development.

FROM SELF-PROCLAIMED "ARCTIC EXCEPTIONALISM" TO THE REALITY OF 24/2/2022

The Arctic has long been on the sidelines of the international stage. Its remote and largely inaccessible environment made the region irrelevant to most defence-related matters, with the exception of its role in strategic deterrence during the Cold War. Since the late 1990s, the region was often described as a zone of "Arctic Exceptionalism," a peaceful region with few tensions that was fully committed to international cooperation and seemed immune to many of the world's geopolitical problems. That perception came under pressure after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and since the February 24, 2022 full-scale invasion, the term no longer applies to the region.

Since then, the other 7 Arctic states have paused all activities of official regional cooperation in which Russia participated. While the West is distancing itself from Russia, Moscow is increasingly turning its gaze to the

East and South to build Arctic partnerships, including in the economic sphere and in terms of scientific research. These developments could fundamentally change the dynamics of cooperation in the region and the strength of its governing bodies.

Over the past decade, the Arctic has increasingly attracted the attention of states within and outside the region due to climate change, technological advances, and a return to competition between major powers. For Russia, which has the longest Arctic coastline and the largest population in the region, the area is of vital economic and strategic importance. The Arctic has a prominent role in its national security strategy and military doctrine, which translated into the upgrading of the Northern Fleet to a full military district in 2021. The growing Russian military presence in the area is characterized by Moscow as a defensive need to protect the country, including its resources, as the region becomes more accessible due to climate change. Moreover, Russia's nuclear counterattack capability is located on the Kola Peninsula in the Arctic Circle.

Russia's focus on its Arctic region also has economic reasons: most of its current oil and gas production is carried out in the area, and a large proportion of its oil and gas reserves are located there. Not only does the region contribute significantly to Russia's GDP, but it is also of great importance in terms of exports and investments in the country, despite the current sanctions' regime. Belgium also plays a role in this process: to date, the Port of Zeebrugge remains a hub for the distribution of Russian LNG from the Yamal Peninsula to European markets and the Far East, among others.

Furthermore, Russia is committed to commercializing the Northern Sea Route (NSR) for trans-Arctic container shipping. This route, theoretically the shortest sea route between Europe and Asia, is not currently a commercially viable alternative to the Suez Route. The NSR is ice-free and navigable for only a few months of the year. It is costly due to the transit fees levied by Russia, and is highly subject to weather changes that make transit times unpredictable and further increase the cost. Moreover, heavy investment is needed in infrastructure that has

been in poor condition since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the impact of container shipping on the fragile Arctic environment cannot be underestimated. Nevertheless, Russia continues to operate the NSR and is increasingly turning to Asian states and Middle Eastern partners for its economic activities in the Arctic as the country is becoming more isolated politically and economically.

The Arctic is also of strategic importance to the United States, although it has a relatively small Arctic territory with Alaska. The US historically did not play a dominant role in the region, but in recent years has become more actively involved in governance, security, scientific research, and environmental management of the area. For example, the U.S. re-opened its consulate in Greenland in 2020 and is currently appointing an Arctic ambassador.

With its strategic location between North America, Europe and Asia, the Arctic is an interesting transit route for commercial shipping, including cargo and commodities including oil, natural gas, minerals, and fish stocks. Therefore, ensuring the security and stability of the region is crucial to protecting U.S. economic interests. The US also sees monitoring the impact of climate change as a priority to effectively address potential security concerns.

The Arctic is important to U.S. national security. It serves as a potential route for threats, including intercontinental ballistic missiles and other strategic military capabilities. Monitoring and maintaining situational awareness in the region is essential for early detection and response to potential threats. Therefore, the US is investing in capabilities, such as new icebreakers, as well as military bases and units that can operate in the region. Furthermore, the US is strengthening its partnerships and alliances with like-minded Arctic states to promote regional stability, improve information sharing and coordinate defence and security efforts in the region.

China has become more prominent in the Arctic in recent years. The country defines itself as a “*near Arctic state*” and has expressed its ambition to become a polar superpower. This materialized not only in its observer status at the

Arctic Council and the publication of an Arctic Policy, but most importantly in the development of a Polar Silk Road, which is part of the Belt and Road initiative. China is investing in the region in infrastructure and capabilities that have dual-use potential, including investments in Arctic ports, submarine cables and nuclear-powered icebreakers. Although China is trying to gain a foothold in all Arctic countries, it is particularly active in Russia. Moscow welcomes Chinese investment in the expansion of its Arctic infrastructure, resource exploitation and the opening of the NSR as long as it serves its interests. Security also plays a role in the strategic partnership between the two countries: China is participating in military exercises in the region, and the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Chinese Coast Guard have signed a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in maritime law enforcement.

The changing geopolitical situation in the region has heightened tensions in the Arctic and caused increasing instability. Finland and Sweden, Arctic countries that had a long tradition of neutrality, applied for NATO membership, radically changing the security situation in the region.

HOW TO DEAL WITH SECURITY IN A “ZONE OF PEACE AND DIALOGUE”?

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, military interest in the Arctic has increased, translating into a greater military presence in the region. Russia has renewed a number of Cold War military bases, and Western countries are following suit. The frequency of military exercises in the region has also increased significantly. Military security cooperation within the framework of the Arctic Council was excluded from the outset. On the initiative of the US, this exception was included in the Ottawa Declaration, the organization's founding treaty. At the same time, the pressure and importance of discussing politico-military issues is increasing in order to nip potential conflicts in the bud and maintain regional cooperation. The strategic importance of the region for both Russia and NATO, Russia's increasing military activities, and China's growing interest in the Arctic reinforce this trend.



Although the Arctic Council does not handle military Arctic security issues, there is international cooperation in the region. It should be noted that activities related to collective defence should be handled primarily by the countries in the region, which have the expertise and capabilities to operate in the extreme climatic conditions of the Arctic.

Multilateral	NATO
Regional	Arctic Coastguard Forum Arctic SAR Agreement Arctic Security Forces Roundtable Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) Northern Chiefs of Defense Meeting Northern Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO)
Bilateral	Cooperation among Arctic states and their allies North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD)

Schematic overview of defence-related partnerships in the region

In addition to NATO, regional partnerships include the Northern Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO), the Arctic SAR Agreement, the Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACF), the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR), the Northern Defence Chiefs Meeting, the Northern Group and the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). Russia is not involved in these initiatives. Some of these partnerships are also open to non-Arctic states. It is recommended that Belgium explore what projects it can join to increase its interoperability and share its expertise. Belgium is the only North Sea country that is not a member of the JEF and the Northern Group but participates in large-scale international exercises in the region, such as Trident Juncture and Arctic Challenge Exercise 2023. There are also many partnerships at the bilateral level of which the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) is the best known.

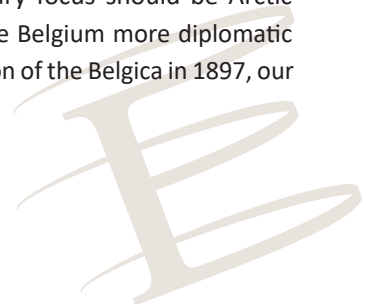
NATO has no permanent military facilities north of the Arctic Circle and undertakes limited activities in the area. With Finland's accession and Sweden's pending membership, Russia is the only non-NATO state in the region, increasing the potential for tensions and confrontations in the area. The increased accessibility of the area and the disappearance of natural protective barriers due to climate change may also lead to tensions. Furthermore, allies will need to adjust their planning and posture to the increasing Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic and the hybrid warfare tactics Russia is implementing in countries such as Norway, Finland, and Sweden, where a recent increase in low-intensity attacks and economic and intelligence activities is noted. It is important for NATO members to gain a common understanding of this threat and agree on appropriate response scenarios.

Russia's goal of developing its Arctic region and its need to cooperate with other countries to do so reduces the risk of conflict in the region. But it is possible that tensions elsewhere in the world could affect interrelationships in the region. So, it remains important to monitor whether the security situation in the region will remain stable in the longer term.

A ROLE FOR BELGIUM?

The growing importance of the Arctic requires Belgium to increase its engagement in the region. Our country would benefit first and foremost from an interdepartmental vision at the federal level, with input from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defence, Climate and BELSPO, among others, that translates into a Belgian Arctic Policy. To this end, a thorough analysis of opportunities and threats in the region is recommended.

By participating in major multinational exercises in the region, Belgian Defence is working on its readiness to operate in the Arctic in support of the needs of its allies. Given Defence's limited deployable capabilities in the region, our country's primary focus should be Arctic research, which will also give Belgium more diplomatic clout. Since the first expedition of the Belgica in 1897, our



country has been a pioneer in polar science and plays a leading role in various disciplines of climate research. Continuing to support and fund science and innovation is a must.

It is recommended to apply for observer status at the Arctic Council in due course in order to be involved in the decision-making processes in the region and to share Belgian expertise in the working groups working on issues such as the environment, climate and sustainable development. It's also advisable to strengthen Belgium's presence in Arctic forums and actively engage in dialogue with the countries of the region.

Karen van Loon joined the Egmont Institute in July 2022 as a Researcher in the European Affairs Programme. Her research interests include the Arctic, Eastern Europe, arms control and nuclear non-proliferation.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.dekamer.be/doc/flwb/pdf/55/2027/55k2027007.pdf>
- 2 https://www.premier.be/sites/default/files/articles/NVS_Online_NL.pdf
- 3 <https://lahbib.belgium.be/sites/default/files/articles/Note%20de%20Politique%20G%C3%A9n%C3%A9rale%20-%20Beleidsnota%202022-2033.pdf>
- 4 <https://www.dekamer.be/doc/FLWB/pdf/55/3649/55K3649024.pdf>





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