



What the Various States (Officially) Want in the Arctic

The United States and Russia have one, and so do Norway and Finland: an official Arctic strategy. The Arctic states are not the only ones to have set down their goals and priorities with regard to the northern polar region, however. Other countries at varying distances from the Arctic Circle have likewise adopted strategy papers of this kind, including China and India as well as Germany.

It comes as no surprise that all countries have declared their intention to take climate change seriously in the Arctic too, to use resources sustainably and to respect international law in all matters concerning the region. But in addition to the commonplace policy statements that are to be found in virtually all these strategy papers, the emphases contained in them nonetheless offer some interesting insights into the differing motives for engagement in the region – or at least the impression the various states are seeking to convey in this regard.

At the end of 2022, the United States issued what is currently the most recent of the strategies under consideration here. One particularly clear difference between this one and the oldest strategy under consideration – that published by Denmark in 2011 – is in the area of security policy. While Russia still figures as a partner in the Danish paper, the response to Russia's war against Ukraine pervades the entire US document.

But even setting aside the differences between the strategies due to their differing dates of issue, they still reflect varying priorities: the scale ranges from a domestic focus on indigenous concerns (Canada) to the primacy of security and economic exploitation (Russia), and from a values-based approach (Sweden) to a decidedly matter-of-fact, interest-driven approach (Norway). An overview:

Denmark (2011)

“[...] hopefully once and for all dispelling the myth of a race to the North Pole.”

- Strategy actually intended for the period up to 2020; new version still not published, however
- Paper issued jointly by Denmark and the governments of the Faroe Islands and Greenland, the latter having their own independent powers in relevant areas (e.g. use of resources)
- More optimistic tone with regard to Arctic security compared to more recent strategies
- Emphasis on confidence-building measures; but Denmark also aims to establish an “Arctic Response Force” from within the ranks of its own armed forces

- Cooperation with Russia to be expanded; increasing engagement of north-east Asian states is also viewed optimistically in principle
- Rapid clarification of Denmark’s territorial claims is sought with regard to continental shelf off Greenland
- Use of fossil and metal resources – especially in Greenland – advocated with due regard to sustainability; limited whaling in the Faroe Islands and Greenland should also be possible
- General foreign and security policy strategy of January 2022 already takes into account the more difficult security situation: Russia named as source of tensions; “Arctic capacity package” announced for armed forces

→ <https://bit.ly/3FlkA8x>

China (2018)

“A champion for the development of a community with a shared future for mankind, China [...] has spared no efforts to contribute its wisdom to the development of the Arctic region.”

- China derives its right to a say in Arctic affairs from the impact of climate change in the Arctic on ecosystems in China
- Declares itself to be a “Near-Arctic State”
- Own engagement in the Arctic claimed to some extent to be downright altruistic; basic principles are “respect”, “cooperation”, “win-win result” and “sustainability”
- Goal of developing a “Polar Silk Road” together with interested partners; state and private Chinese actors encouraged to invest in transport infrastructure as well as the development and exploitation of oil, gas and metal deposits – taking into account sustainability criteria

- UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and in particular its provisions on freedom of navigation, at the centre of Arctic governance from China’s perspective – not the Arctic Council, of which China is not a full member
- Security policy largely omitted, only general commitment to peaceful development based on international law

→ <https://bit.ly/3mOQeED>

“The natural conditions of the Arctic and their changes have a direct impact on China’s natural environment and Chinese people’s work and life. [...] This is an undeniable geographical, natural and social reality.”

Zhao Lijian, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, at the Regular Press Conference on 31 Aug 2022. Source: <https://bit.ly/3Kuy6tA>

Canada (2019)

“Canada sees a future in which the people of the Arctic and North are full participants in Canadian society”

- The situation of indigenous peoples is a major focus of Canada’s Arctic strategy; the goal is to improve living conditions and increase participation; reconciliation is a key concern
- Status of the Northwest Passage as Canadian waters repeatedly highlighted

- Reference to changing geopolitical situation in the Arctic; region “of critical importance to the natural security and defence of Canada and North America”; Canadian army to increase participation in multinational exercises in the region; expansion of military presence and modernisation of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) operated jointly with the US

→ <https://bit.ly/3YGMiDx>

Germany (2019)

“With these Arctic policy guidelines, the Federal Government is assuming greater responsibility for the Arctic region with a view to shaping it sustainably for the future.”

- Climate, environment, sustainability and research at the heart of Germany’s Arctic policy
- Fairly restrictive with regard to the use of resources in the Arctic, repeated call for designation of further protected areas; nevertheless, commitment to integrate the Arctic “into a diversified resource security system”

- Advocates “freedom of navigation in Arctic waters” in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea
- Section on security policy comparatively short, unspecific and unemphatic: sources of increasing tensions not named (“several states”); NATO and EU to devote more attention to the importance of the Arctic from the point of view of security policy, but: “The Federal Government rejects any attempt to militarise the Arctic”

→ <https://bit.ly/3zykeld>

Sweden (2020)

“People, peace and the climate are at the centre of Sweden’s Arctic policy.”

- Values-based strategy: strengthening of human rights, democracy, rule of law in all international cooperation on the Arctic, promotion of gender equality, reference to “feminist foreign policy”
- Relations with Germany are attributed special relevance in connection with Arctic issues
- Clear reference to a changed security situation in the Arctic; as in Cold War times the region is referred to as a “dividing line between western countries and Russia”; strategy sees risk

of arms race and calls for close observation of China and its possible military cooperation with Russia regarding the Arctic; own military capabilities in northern Sweden to be further strengthened

- Great importance attached to the fight against climate change and to environmental protection; rather cautious position on possible extraction of minerals; call for “robust regulation” so as to ensure maximum security in oil and gas extraction
- Efforts to achieve “redress and reconciliation” with indigenous Sámi people

→ <https://bit.ly/3ZFR6u8>

Russia (2020)

“a strategic planning document to ensure the national security of the Russian Federation [...] and [...] defend the national interests of the Russian Federation in the Arctic.”

- Strategy defines Russia’s key national interests in the Arctic, including securing “sovereignty and territorial integrity”, maintaining the Arctic as a “territory of peace, stability and mutually beneficial partnership” and developing the Northern Sea Route
- Threats and challenges to “national security”: population decline in Russian Arctic, insufficient development, military build-up by other states, and “actions by foreign states and (or) international organizations” to obstruct the Russian Federation’s “legitimate economic or other activities” in the Arctic
- In the economic sphere, the focus is on the utilisation of resources: expansion of private investment (“while maintaining state control over the operation process”), improvement of infrastructure at transshipment points for mineral resources connected to the Northern Sea Route, increase in oil and gas production

Norway (2021)

“Norway’s Arctic policy revolves around security, stability and interest-based international cooperation.”

- Matter-of-fact, pragmatic orientation; clear emphasis on national interests in the areas of economy and security
- Strengthening defence capability in the Arctic as a key concern; investment in fighter aircraft, maritime reconnaissance, submarines; the importance of military exercises with the US and other allies is also emphasised
- NATO as the “cornerstone of Norway’s security”; security is based on the “guarantee of Allied reinforcements in the event of war or crisis”

“It has been absolutely clear for everyone for a long time that this is our territory, this is our land [...]. We are responsible for ensuring our Arctic coast is safe [...].”

Sergey Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister, at a press conference in Moscow in May 2021.
Source: <https://bit.ly/3ZUObNL>

- Goal is to improve military effectiveness in the Arctic and to build and modernise military infrastructure
- Special feature: strategy concludes by formulating indicators for measuring implementation of state policy, including: life expectancy in the Arctic, unemployment rate, share of raw material extraction, volume of LNG production and share of modern weapons in the region

→ <https://bit.ly/3Jk4TQM>

- Reference to changes in what were previously cooperative relations with Russia, e.g. due to the annexation of Crimea; modernisation and rearmament of the Russian military as a “challenge to the security of Norway and other Allied countries”; nevertheless, emphasis on the importance of lowering tensions
- Emphasis on the potential of Arctic resources in terms of value creation; support for the exploitation of new oil, gas and mineral extraction areas

→ <https://bit.ly/3ZEbOuu>

🇮🇸 Iceland (2021)

“Iceland is the only Arctic State that can be deemed to lie entirely within the Arctic [...].”

- Iceland’s Arctic strategy takes the form of a parliamentary resolution with attached explanatory memorandum
- Growing interest of foreign states in the Arctic generally viewed positively, providing they abide by international law and respect the “status of the eight Arctic states”
- In the area of security policy, Russia is identified as the main cause of growing tensions; Russia has legitimate security interests in the region, but its activities are much more extensive than is necessary to safeguard these interests
- As a state without a standing army, Iceland’s main pillars of defence are NATO membership and security agreement with the US
- Rather cautious with regard to the use of resources, with priority given to environmental protection, while at the same time endeavouring not to be left out of potential new economic opportunities as a result of melting ice

→ <https://bit.ly/3T8DG7z>

🇫🇮 Finland (2021)

“As cross-cutting themes of all Arctic cooperation, Finland emphasises requiring compliance with the principles of sustainable development, gender equality and non-discrimination.”

- Four priorities: climate change, inhabitants, expertise, infrastructure /logistics; security only touched on in introduction
- Explicit reference made to Sustainable Development Goals in connection with all goals and measures
- Security policy statements in introductory section rather reserved: Russia named as source of increased tensions; in addition to reference to role of own armed forces and NATO, however, emphasis on dialogue and confidence-building measures
- Restrictive position with regard to fossil fuels from the Arctic: development of new deposits would be “incompatible” with the goals set out in the Paris Agreement
- Plan to establish a truth and reconciliation commission for the indigenous Sámi people
- Goal of promoting business opportunities for Finnish expertise in pursuing economic activity in cold conditions

→ <https://bit.ly/4049ywg>

European Union (2021)

“The EU’s full engagement in Arctic matters is a geopolitical necessity.”

- Importance attached to the fight against climate change and environmental destruction; “making the Arctic more resilient”, for example by establishing environmental regulations, but also by demanding that oil, coal and gas are not extracted in the region; reduction of own soot emissions
- EU seeks official observer status on the Arctic Council
- Announcement of the establishment of a European Commission office in Nuuk to pursue the development of relations with Greenland
- Arctic states as “potentially significant suppliers” of important minerals, one aim being to reduce dependency on China, for example; access to sufficient resources “key for the EU’s [...] strategic autonomy”

→ <https://bit.ly/3ztZVfk>

“The Arctic is changing rapidly, owing to the impact of global warming, increased competition for natural resources and geopolitical rivalries. These developments show that Europe must define its geopolitical interests broadly to promote stability, safety and peaceful cooperation in the Arctic.”

Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 13 Oct 2021. Source: <https://bit.ly/3MjfnCr>

India (2022)

“To harmonise polar research with the third pole – the Himalayas.”

- Reasons given for entitlement to have a say: changes in the Arctic – especially the melting of the ice – have huge implications for India’s national development; also great synergies between Arctic research and India’s experience of research in the Himalayas, the “third pole”
- Science and research have a prominent role in India’s Arctic strategy; concrete objectives such as expanding the previous 180-day presence to a year-round presence at India’s Himadri research station
- Exploration and extraction of raw materials – such as fossil fuels and metals – generally tend to be seen in a positive light; government and private actors in India are encouraged to invest in this area
- Fairly indirect demand to keep the Arctic sea routes free for international shipping (“uphold international law and in particular UNCLOS, including the rights and freedoms contained therein”)
- Short and rather vague section on security (“promote security and stability in the Arctic region in accordance with international treaties and covenants”)

→ <https://bit.ly/3l33o0N>

United States (2022)

“[The strategy] acknowledges increasing strategic competition in the Arctic since 2013, exacerbated by Russia’s unprovoked war in Ukraine [...]”

- Four pillars: security, climate change and environmental protection, sustainable economic development, international cooperation and governance
- Policy towards Russia as an important aspect: Russia is said to be upgrading its military and developing new economic infrastructure, seeking to restrict free passage through “excessive maritime claims along the Northern Sea Route”
- Deterrence as a central component of security policy orientation; expansion of cooperation with allies and strengthening of military presence; at the same time, emphasis on the importance of risk minimisation and prevention of unwanted escalation
- Various “strategic objectives” in the field of climate change, including support for local communities to adapt to and be resilient to climate change, expansion of climate change research, protection of Arctic ecosystems
- Strengthen the resilience of US supply chains by exploring the potential for “sustainable and responsible critical mineral production”

→ <https://bit.ly/3YD51Qx>

“The Arctic as a region for strategic competition has seized the world’s attention [...]”

Antony Blinken, US Secretary of State, at the Arctic Council’s Ministerial Meeting on 20 May 2021. Source: <https://bit.ly/3zw3u4l>



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The Arctic. Between Conflict and Cooperation