

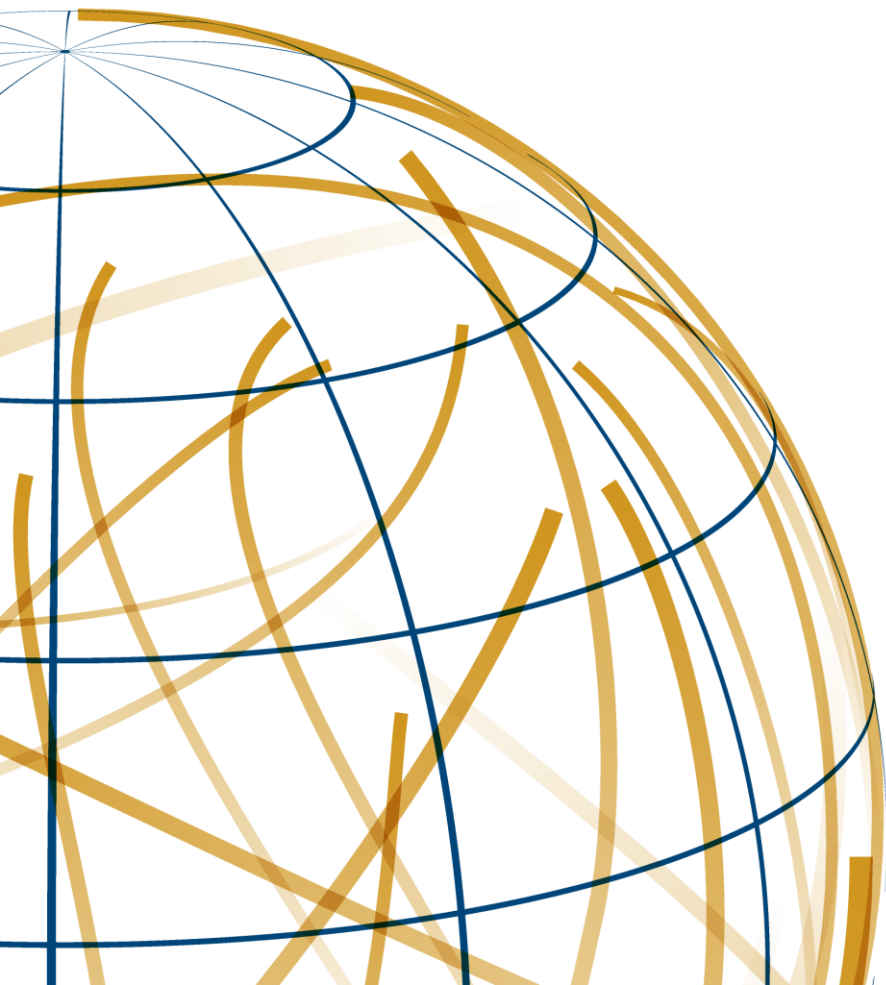
**SWP Research Paper**

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*Helge Adrians, Michael Däumer, Tobias Etzold and Michael Paul*

# Germany as Arctic Security Actor

New Guidelines for German Arctic Policy under  
More Difficult Conditions



**Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for  
International and Security Affairs**

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April 2026, Berlin

- The Arctic and the Arctic-North Atlantic region are gaining in geopolitical relevance as Arctic shipping routes and resources become more accessible. Germany should step up its political, military and economic engagement in this part of the world.
- A successful German Arctic policy requires closer cooperation both with Arctic states and with partners in the EU and NATO, Germany's stronger engagement with security policy and the improved integration of civilian and military capabilities.
- The Arctic-North Atlantic region is to be regarded as a single strategic space and viewed in the context of European security. For its part, Germany should actively contribute to the stabilisation of this space and help preserve the fragile balance in the Arctic.
- A German Arctic strategy should not only reaffirm principles such as those of a rules-based order and multilateralism; it should also seek to protect them by means of clearly defined political, economic and security policy instruments.
- In the long term, a German Arctic strategy must go beyond the 2024 guidelines and identify concrete steps to safeguard German interests in the region. It must also establish clear priorities, outline political and security-policy measures, mobilise resources and both generate and demonstrate overall capacity for action.
- Germany's new Arctic policy should be more consistently embedded in a policy framework for Europe as a whole. By ensuring close alignment with EU foreign and security policy and playing an active role in the shaping of the EU Arctic strategy, Germany can represent its own interests more effectively and at the same time contribute to Europe's capacity to act in the region.

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### Germany as Arctic Security Actor New Guidelines for German Arctic Policy under More Difficult Conditions

In September 2024, the German government under Chancellor Olaf Scholz published new guidelines for a German Arctic policy. Like the earlier strategy papers on the Indo-Pacific (2020), Africa (2020), the Sahel region (2020), China (2023), national security (2023) and the national security and defence industry (2024), the Arctic policy document contains a multitude of plausible objectives, which include safeguarding the security interests in the region not only of Germany but also of the EU and NATO and promoting a better understanding of the Arctic's role in the global climate system. Beyond the general declarations of interest and support, however, the guidelines offer little in the way of concrete implementation plans or coherent strategic logic. Measures are subject to funding availability, which undermines the credibility of the document's ambitious claims and fails to ensure predictability at either the national or international level. The partial suspension of the debt brake for defence spending alleviates this problem to some extent; but there is still no real long-term vision of how specific means are to be used to achieve the stated objectives. This poses the risk of resources and measures being deployed inefficiently or on the basis of entrenched thought patterns.

While earlier German Arctic policy guidelines viewed cooperation and multilateralism as guarantors of peace and security, the current approach is the reverse: peace and security are now seen as the prerequisite for maintaining international cooperation and stability in the Arctic. This is not merely a change of perspective; rather, it reflects the growing importance of the security dimension in the region.

But how can stability and security be maintained under today's more difficult conditions? What role should Germany play in the Arctic-North Atlantic region and what will it be willing and able to contribute in concrete terms to regional peace and stability over the medium and long term? While the guidelines leave room for interpretation here, they do emphasise diplomatic presence, military visibility within the framework of alliances, greater resilience, infrastructure development and the establishment of stra-

tegic early-warning capabilities. These general ambitions will have to be pursued and supplemented by means of appropriate measures (including, where necessary, unilateral formats). For example, dialogue mechanisms could be activated or military cooperation intensified, as has been achieved with the maritime security partnership that was established by Germany, Norway and Canada and that Denmark joined in June 2025.

The German government under Chancellor Friedrich Merz will face the major challenge of ensuring national and Alliance defence in two maritime directions: to the northeast in the Baltic Sea region and to the northwest in the Arctic-North Atlantic region. Meeting that challenge will require intensified operational support for allies and partners in North Europe and North America, as well as closer coordination with those countries. It will also require the planning and prioritisation of strategic projects that are financially feasible. Only in this way can Germany be perceived as a reliable and credible actor in the Arctic.

At the same time, Germany must put greater emphasis on promoting its national interests. It is essential that supply chains and access to raw materials and energy from the European Arctic are secured. Deposits of rare earths in that region are becoming increasingly important.

Furthermore, the changed security environment demands the closer integration of civilian and military capabilities in order to safeguard society-wide interests. The same applies to scientific projects that generate security-relevant knowledge, which, in turn, can make German Arctic policy more resilient.

The German government now faces the crucial challenge of transforming the 2024 Arctic policy guidelines into a coherent, implementable and forward-looking national Arctic strategy. More than the mere updating of existing positions is required. What will be needed is a genuine policy shift at the end of which Germany will have defined its long-term role in the Arctic. For that to happen, security thinking must be systematically anchored in politics, administration and society. It must be based on clear priorities and realistic impact expectations and reflected in the coherent use of foreign-policy instruments. Germany must learn to think strategically, to plan for the long term and to act with security-policy foresight. This will entail the reliable provision of financial resources and the development of specific expertise – for example, through the promotion of security-policy degree courses and the integration

of Arctic issues into scientific networks and training programmes. At the same time, the German government must seek closer cooperation with Arctic EU member states and European observer countries in the Arctic Council so that joint efforts can be undertaken to increase Europe's geopolitical presence and its ability to act in the High North. For Germany, this means actively embedding its own security, climate and research interests in an overall European strategy rather than pursuing those interests in isolation. Germany's Arctic guidelines must be based on strategic foresight, financial reliability, international alliance capability and innovation-driven technological capacities; and at the same time, it must reflect the security reality of a region that is becoming ever more important geopolitically and thus increasingly contested. If the German government succeeds in forming this strategic framework in a consistent manner, Germany will not only make a major contribution to Europe's resilience and capacity to act in the Arctic; it will also strengthen its own foreign-policy sovereignty in today's changing world order.

# Germany's Interests in the Arctic

As a country located at the centre of Europe, Germany has a particular interest in a reliable international security structure. The same applies to the Arctic as a focal point of global climate change and a theatre of geopolitical rivalry. Even in that remote region, peace and security are being called into question owing to the competition between the United States and China and amid the threat of Russia's war policy. This is the assumption that underlies the new German Arctic policy guidelines, as is made clear at the very beginning of that document: "Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has fundamentally changed the geopolitical environment for Germany's Arctic policy."<sup>1</sup> It is therefore the intention of the German government "to assume an active role in security policy in order to support its NATO allies and EU partners in the region".<sup>2</sup>

Germany – the world's third-largest economy and one of the largest consumers of raw materials – conducts most of its foreign trade by sea and thus depends on secure maritime routes. Because of this dependence, the German Navy bears particular responsibility for protecting the country's coastal waters as well as the adjacent marine areas and the sea lines of communication.<sup>3</sup> For the foreseeable future, the Arctic shipping routes – the Northern Sea Route, the Transpolar Route and the Northwest Passage – will remain

covered by sea ice and will thus be too difficult for commercial shipping to navigate, preventing the establishment of continuous maritime traffic. This situation is beginning to change, however. In future, Arctic passages will offer a cheaper and faster Atlantic – Pacific connection between Asia, Europe and North America. The Pentagon's Arctic Strategy of July 2024 suggests that the region could witness "its first practically ice-free summer" by the year 2030.<sup>4</sup>

An "ice-free" Arctic is defined as less than 1 million square kilometres of the ocean being covered by sea ice.<sup>5</sup> For a variety of reasons, this does not mean that smooth maritime traffic in the Arctic Ocean will be possible immediately: as recently as the winter of 2021 – 22, the passage of more than 20 ships was blocked by sea ice on the Northern Sea Route. Nevertheless, it is increasingly likely that plans dependent on the navigability of Arctic transit routes and associated port projects – whether in Kirkenes in Norway or in Busan in South Korea – will be realised. Therefore, from both an economic and security perspective, the waters of the polar region are set to become relevant as a connecting corridor for non-Arctic actors such as Germany, France and the United Kingdom on the Atlantic side of the Arctic Ocean and China, Japan and South Korea on the Pacific side.

Fossil fuels are not the only Arctic resources that are gaining in importance. Twenty-five of the 34 raw materials classified by the European Commission as strategically important – including copper, lithium and rare earths – can be found in Greenland, for example. In November 2023, the EU and Greenland established a strategic raw materials partnership to

1 Federal Government, *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines. Germany and the Arctic in the Context of the Climate Crisis and the Zeitenwende*, Berlin: German Foreign Office, September 2024, 4, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2676060/5496910022404f7cf68049f1b10e4d5a/arktis-leitlinien-data.pdf>. Unless stated otherwise, all websites were last accessed on 14 November 2025.

2 Ibid., 6.

3 Michael Paul and Göran Swistek, *Deutschland im arktisch-nordatlantischen Raum. Russlands militärische Aktivitäten brauchen Aufklärung*, SWP-Aktuell 74/2021 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, November 2021), 1–2, doi: 10.18449/2021A74.

4 US Department of Defense, *2024 Arctic Strategy* (Washington, D.C., 2024), 6.

5 Michon Scott, "Ask a Scientist: What Do Scientists Mean by 'Ice-free Arctic'?", (Boulder, CO: National Snow and Ice Data Center [NSIDC], 23 October 2023), <https://nsidc.org/learn/ask-scientist/what-do-scientists-mean-ice-free-arctic>.

support the development of mining projects. The construction of essential infrastructure in Greenland is to be funded through the Global Gateway initiative.<sup>6</sup> This is mentioned only in passing in the German guidelines; but in line with the objectives of Global Gateway, the German government emphasises the importance of responsible and sustainable resource extraction in the Arctic, which can contribute to the security of Germany's raw material supply.<sup>7</sup>

"The importance of the Arctic to Germany has continued to grow during the last few years",<sup>8</sup> Germany's Arctic policy guidelines state. This trend will persist. The region is gaining in strategic, economic and security relevance as it increasingly comes into focus not only as a transport corridor and economic area but also as a geopolitical zone of tension that poses significant security challenges. Russia began reviving and expanding its military presence in the region as early as 2007.<sup>9</sup> For its part, the People's Republic of China has become increasingly engaged in the Arctic,<sup>10</sup> which raises numerous questions, particularly in conjunction with Russia. If growing numbers of Chinese ships use the Northern Sea Route, the region's already inadequate maritime infrastructure is likely to become a problem. Moreover, the question arises as to whether Article 234 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) will continue to apply when the sea ice recedes.<sup>11</sup> In the long term, it will not be possible to deny foreign ships access.<sup>12</sup>

6 European Commission, "EU and Greenland Sign Strategic Partnership on Sustainable Raw Materials Value Chains", press release, Brussels, 30 November 2023.

7 Federal Government, *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines 2024* (see note 1), 5 and 7.

8 Ibid., 11.

9 See Michael Däumer, "From Zone of Peace to Hotbed of Conflict? The Geopolitical Importance of the Arctic", in *The Arctic – Between Conflict and Cooperation*, 1/2023 (Berlin: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 18 April 2023), 14.

10 Michael Paul, *China's Arctic Turn. Reasons, Developments, Perspectives*, SWP Comment 8/2025 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2025), doi: 10.18449/2025C08.

11 Article 234 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) allows coastal states to adopt regulations to protect the marine environment in ice-covered sea areas within their exclusive economic zones if those sea areas pose a particular danger for navigation owing to the condition of the ice. *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, 10 December 1982, [https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos\\_e.pdf](https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf).

12 "It is doubtful that Russia will allow us to sail through their sea route. But if it is an international passage, Russia

In January 2021, former US Secretary of the Navy Kenneth Braithwaite announced that he intended to conduct a "freedom of navigation operation" (FONOP).<sup>13</sup> At the end of President Donald Trump's first term in office, the US administration had apparently considered such an operation unlikely to succeed; in any case, it could lead to a dangerous escalation.<sup>14</sup> Germany will have to address these issues of maritime law if it is to safeguard its national interests.

China intends to ensure its permanent presence in the Arctic Ocean by building another heavy icebreaker, thereby underscoring its ambition to become a "polar great power". The Trump administration is seeking to counter the Chinese ambition and associated threat to US security interests by building new icebreakers and developing missile defence capabilities, among other things. Such activities increase the risk of the great-power rivalry in the Arctic involving non-Arctic states. The risk scenarios range from repeated security incidents to the blocking of transatlantic sea lines of communication in the event of military conflict in Europe. For this reason, the choke point between Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom – the so-called GIUK Gap, which was important during the Cold War – has become militarily relevant once again. In recognition of the importance of the northern flank, Germany has already taken steps to protect it. Those measures must be continued and institutionalised.

cannot control it in the same way as their territorial waters. If they allow China but not the rest of the world, it creates tensions due to lost equal opportunities." Admiral Rob Bauer (Royal Netherlands Navy), chairman of the NATO Military Committee, quoted in Trine Jonassen, "China's Intentions in the Arctic Are Unclear – And That Is a Growing Concern", *High North News*, 21 October 2024.

13 Paul McLeary, "Navy Secretary: US Plans Patrols Near Russian Arctic Bases", *Breaking Defense*, 5 January 2021.

14 Rebecca Pincus, "Rushing Navy Ships into the Arctic for a FONOP Is Dangerous", *US Naval Institute. Proceedings* (January 2019), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2019/january/rushing-navy-ships-arctic-fonop-dangerous>.

# The German Arctic Policy Guidelines

Following a lengthy interministerial coordination process, the German government under Chancellor Olaf Scholz published new guidelines for Germany's Arctic policy in September 2024 as the last in a series of strategic papers that include the Indo-Pacific Guidelines (2020), the Africa Compass (2020), the Sahel Strategy (2020), the China Strategy (2023) and the National Security Strategy (2023). The guidelines, which begin with an outline of the general relevance of the Arctic for Germany, are divided into three thematic sections: 1) security and stability; 2) the rules-based order and resilience; and 3) climate, nature conservation and environmental protection as well as sustainable development. These sections are assessed below, with a particular focus on aspects relevant for security policy.

## Security and Stability in the Arctic

Geopolitically, the Arctic can no longer be regarded as an isolated region: "Security and stability in the Arctic are closely tied to the security situation in the North and Baltic Seas, as well as the North Atlantic."<sup>15</sup> It therefore continues to be in Germany's interest — as stated in the 2019 guidelines — "to counter existing geopolitical tensions in the region and to prevent conflicts (of interest) and potential crises in the Arctic"<sup>16</sup> in order to preserve the polar region as a low-conflict area, to use the resources found there in a peaceful and sustainable manner and to safeguard freedom of navigation. However, since the 2019 guidelines were

issued, the geopolitical situation has deteriorated dramatically: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the increasing militarisation of the Arctic by Russia and Trump's nationalist foreign policy under the slogan "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) all call fundamental assumptions of German security policy into question. Is there still a common understanding among NATO members — including the United States — about area responsibility, task fulfilment and deterrence within the Alliance?

Under President Trump, security-policy coordination with Europe has become characterised by growing strategic uncertainty. Multilateral commitments are treated selectively by Washington and often subordinated to short-term interests. Thus, the principle of shared area responsibility in the Arctic is being undermined. And that raises the question of to what extent Europe is capable of acting within an increasingly multipolar Arctic geopolitical system.

Germany conducts most of its foreign trade by sea. Key raw materials for its major industries are obtained almost exclusively through maritime transport.<sup>17</sup> Because of this dependence on secure sea lines of communication, the German Navy has a particular responsibility to protect Germany's coastal waters as well as the adjacent maritime areas and sea lines of communication. A country with such a strong external trade orientation must be aware that "if there is any doubt, military force may also be necessary in an emergency in order to safeguard [its] interests, for example, free trade routes".<sup>18</sup> German President Horst Köhler came under fierce criticism for that statement — as if he had been concerned only about crude eco-

<sup>15</sup> Federal Government, *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines 2024* (see note 1), 11.

<sup>16</sup> Federal Government, *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines: Assuming Responsibility, Creating Trust, Shaping the Future* (Berlin: German Foreign Office, August 2019), 42, [https://www.arctic-office.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/www.arctic-office.de/PDF\\_uploads/Germany\\_s\\_Arctic\\_Policy\\_Guidelines\\_2019\\_Web.pdf](https://www.arctic-office.de/fileadmin/user_upload/www.arctic-office.de/PDF_uploads/Germany_s_Arctic_Policy_Guidelines_2019_Web.pdf). See Federal Government, *China-Strategie der Bundesregierung* (Berlin: German Foreign Office, 2023).

<sup>17</sup> Federal Armed Forces, German Navy Headquarters, *Jahresbericht 2023. Fakten und Zahlen zur maritimen Abhängigkeit der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Rostock: German Navy Headquarters, August 2023), 166.

<sup>18</sup> Köhler quoted in "Militäreinsatz für deutsche Wirtschaftsinteressen?", *Zeit online*, 27 May 2010

conomic interests rather than also about societal prosperity and security — and subsequently resigned from office in May 2010.

At the time, the obvious question was not asked, namely, “how Germany, as a member of a maritime alliance such as the North Atlantic Alliance, is going to safeguard its interests at all if it does not give political priority to the protection of the sea lines of communication”.<sup>19</sup> Commitment to international regimes and a rules-based order must not exclude the recourse to military means: “International rule systems need to be underpinned by the option to impose coercive measures in the event of a violation. The maintenance of maritime forces therefore also serves the international regime.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Commitment to a rules-based order must not exclude the recourse to military means.**

For this reason, today’s German Navy regularly takes part in exercises in the High North — whether as part of NATO’s Standing Maritime Groups or within the framework of bilateral cooperation with Norway, among other maritime deployments. The sub-Arctic North Atlantic has become one of the standard operating areas of the German Navy while the North Sea forms the decisive link to national and collective defence in a crisis or defence scenario.

Like Canada and the United States, Germany and its European partners attach great importance to increasing the security and resilience of countries in the Arctic-North Atlantic area. That goal can be achieved through the expansion of military and civilian infrastructure, the establishment of a stronger maritime presence and intensified information-sharing, including input from non-military actors. These measures are becoming increasingly important — for two reasons. First, there is the need to deter China and Russia, which are increasingly using the Arctic to project power vis-à-vis Europe. Second, the Arctic is of central significance for the defence of the Atlantic sea lines of communication between North America and

Europe<sup>21</sup> — a factor that, as the US Department of Defense emphasised in its Arctic Strategy of 2024, has regained relevance in light of recent developments.

The United States remains the largest provider of maritime capabilities within NATO; but owing to China’s power politics, those capabilities are increasingly required beyond Europe and its periphery and are thus being deployed mainly where confrontation with the People’s Republic can no longer be ruled out. Since Trump’s first term, security policymakers have been paying ever more attention to the Arctic. That focus should not detract, however, from two stark realities. First, decades of neglect have led to serious capability gaps.<sup>22</sup> Second, those shortcomings are even more pronounced in the Pacific Arctic — on which the United States will become more focused because of Alaska’s location and the tensions with China — than in the Atlantic Arctic.

The new US Arctic policy under Trump’s second Presidency is characterised by a more aggressive course aimed at the forceful assertion of US interests in the region. His repeated threats to annex Greenland, if necessary by force, have affronted NATO ally Denmark and dented transatlantic trust. Such behaviour undermines the existing security architecture, in which the United States enjoys privileged access to the island and works closely with Denmark. Against the backdrop of the “Asia pivot” announced in 2011 (later called “rebalancing”) and the impact of today’s MAGA policy, it is all the more urgent for Europe that its economically strongest nation — Germany — adopts a more independent and credible approach to confronting immediate threats to European security<sup>23</sup> and that it does so in cooperation with its European partners. In the long term, it will be not be possible

<sup>21</sup> US Department of Defense, *2024 Arctic Strategy* (see note 4), 2.

<sup>22</sup> For a long time, proponents of a more intensive US engagement in the Arctic unsuccessfully sought to persuade Congress to approve funding — for new icebreakers, for example. They included Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, who in March 2015 eventually succeeded in establishing an “Arctic Caucus” in the Senate. See Michael Paul, *U.S. Arctic Security Policy. North American Arctic Strategies, Russian Hubris and Chinese Ambitions*, SWP Comment 40/2023 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2023), doi: 10.18449/2023C40.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Paul and Göran Swistek, “Maritime Choice: Indo-Pacific versus Arctic-North Atlantic Priorities”, in Günther Maihold et al., ed., *German Foreign Policy in Transition*, SWP Research Paper 10/2021 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, December 2021), 40–42.

<sup>19</sup> Ulrich Schlie, “Deutsche Sicherheitspolitik seit 1990: Auf der Suche nach einer Strategie”, *SIRIUS* 4, no. 3 (2020), 304–14 (310).

<sup>20</sup> Tjorven Bellmann and Jasper Wieck, “Maritime Sicherheit in der deutschen Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik”, in *Maritime Sicherheit im 21. Jahrhundert*, ed. Heinz Dieter Jopp (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014), 119–33 (130).

to uphold the argument that Europe and the Atlantic Alliance are of central importance to US security unless Germany and Europe take greater responsibility for their own security.<sup>24</sup> US foreign policy under Trump makes clear that Washington's security priorities are shifting, which only increases the need for Europe – and Germany in particular – to build up military capabilities in order to be able to defend the continent.

The Arctic presents new security challenges for Berlin. NATO's northern flank is a difficult area to monitor because of geographical conditions and the lack of an effective security architecture. The “active role in security policy”<sup>25</sup> in the Arctic-North Atlantic region envisaged in the 2024 guidelines can be pursued diplomatically in cooperation with the Arctic states; ultimately, however, it depends on the ability of the German armed forces to fulfil this role militarily on the northern flank. A stronger naval presence can be achieved only through a significant financial commitment and the implementation of the plans laid out in the German Navy Objectives for 2035 and Beyond (*Zielbild Marine 2035+*), which aims to expand, modernise and strengthen the fleet.<sup>26</sup> Here the focus is on the introduction of new technologies such as unmanned systems and artificial intelligence as well as on the generation of new capabilities.

“The strategic and military significance of the Arctic will continue to grow for the foreseeable future,” the guidelines state.<sup>27</sup> But what conclusions are to be drawn from this?

<sup>24</sup> “The United States’ ability to cope with the pressures of great-power competition hinges on securing Europe and preserving the trans-Atlantic alliance. While it is true that there are serious and pressing national security problems in Asia and the Middle East, these can only be dealt with effectively once the Atlantic foundation of Washington’s global strength is secure. To conduct a future pivot to Asia, the United States needs a fulcrum in Europe – not vice versa.” Wess Mitchell and Jakub Grygiel, “U.S. Strategy Should Be Europe First, Then Asia”, *Foreign Policy*, 6 September 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Federal Government, *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines 2024* (see note 1), 6.

<sup>26</sup> Federal Armed Forces, *German Navy Objectives for 2035 and beyond* (Rostock: German Navy Headquarters), 20 April 2023, <https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/organization/navy/news/german-navy-objectives-2035-plus-5625058>; Jürgen Wagner, “Zielbild Marine 2035+: Aufrüstung nach NATO-Vorgaben”, *Telepolis*, 10 March 2023, <https://www.telepolis.de/features/Zielbild-Marine-2035-Aufruestung-nach-NATO-Vorgaben-7541519.html?seite=all>.

<sup>27</sup> Federal Government, *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines 2024* (see note 1), 16.

- First, because the eastern flank cannot be secured without the northern flank, Germany and its allies at the Skagerrak and Kattegat must be able to maintain a permanent connection between the North Sea and the Baltic Sea so that forces can be moved in and out.
- Second, and consequently, the objective must be to improve and enhance the granularity of the maritime situational picture in order to prevent surprises, such as the sabotage of critical infrastructure above or below water. Indeed, it was to this end that the German Navy assumed a leadership role in the Baltic Sea region through the establishment of the Commander Task Force (CTF) Baltic in Rostock on 1 October 2024. CTF Baltic is intended to play a decisive role in deepening cooperation between NATO navies in the Baltic Sea and further increasing their interoperability.<sup>28</sup>
- Third, Germany needs a navy whose capabilities reflect the country's dependence on secure sea lines of communication, the tense geopolitical environment and the resulting security-policy expectations. Amid all the focus on the eastern flank, it is easily forgotten that in a crisis or defence situation, the German Navy must be deployed just as robustly on the northern flank and, above all, in the North Sea. As was the case during the Cold War, it must protect the access of transport ships en route from North America to NATO ports, on the one hand, and secure both the naval task groups deployed in the North Sea and the adjacent infrastructure against threats from all domains, on the other. Currently, the German Navy can fulfil this mission only to a limited extent, not least because it lacks modern equipment.

### **Non-Arctic, non-European actors – above all, China – are increasingly pursuing strategic interests in the Arctic.**

The challenges that the military significance of the Arctic present for Germany are further intensified by the fact that, alongside Russia, there are non-Arctic, non-European actors – above all, China – that are increasingly pursuing strategic interests in the region.

<sup>28</sup> Federal Armed Forces, “Commander Task Force Baltic Established” (Rostock: German Navy Headquarters, 21 October 2024), <https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/organization/navy/news/commander-task-force-baltic-established-5850832>.

For years, the People's Republic has been expanding its presence in the Arctic<sup>29</sup> by investing in economic and scientific projects while simultaneously developing military capabilities, as the German guidelines note.<sup>30</sup> It is wholly insufficient to draw the very general conclusion that such efforts are having an impact merely “on the security of the NATO allied territory and that of Germany's EU and NATO partners, international shipping and aviation in the region, as well as the defence of the international rules-based order”.<sup>31</sup> In fact, it is the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Allies – as the core of NATO's security guarantees – that must be protected through the adequate presence of the Bundeswehr in the Arctic.<sup>32</sup> For this reason, NATO exercise activity in Arctic waters geared towards potential Russian targets in the Arctic-North Atlantic region (such as Svalbard and Gotland) should be made permanent and normalised. Russian naval manoeuvres should be countered either by ad hoc or permanently established naval formations of NATO states deployed in the Arctic. Moreover, there should be a diplomatic response to any joint Russian-Chinese exercises in the Arctic-North Atlantic region. Recently, such manoeuvres have been taking place more frequently in the Pacific – for example, off the coast of Alaska and in the Sea of Okhotsk.<sup>33</sup>

Germany, France and the United Kingdom – like Japan and South Korea – are non-Arctic states but their security interests are affected in both the Arctic-North Atlantic and the Arctic-Pacific theatres. Germany is already involved in exchanges on Arctic security issues within the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) and at the meetings of the Arctic Chiefs of Defence (AChOD). It also supports Nordic regional security cooperation, including within the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF), especially through participation in exercises and training projects.<sup>34</sup> It may nevertheless be necessary for non-Arctic actors to establish a new forum to exchange views on their specific security requirements in the Arctic – for ex-

ample, in the form of an Arctic Security Stakeholder Roundtable.

The 2024 German Arctic policy guidelines articulate a security strategy that is based on cooperation and confrontation aimed at deterrence so that the Arctic remains a low-conflict region and the growing security challenges can be met. Germany seeks to contribute to stability in the Arctic by advocating that the region be used for peaceful purposes only and that international norms and codes be respected. The main objective is the multilateral engagement of Arctic stakeholders, including through regional forums at which conflicts of interest can be resolved by consensus.

The German government is closely monitoring security developments in the Arctic – not least Russia's increased military presence<sup>35</sup> and its growing cooperation with China – and emphasises close coordination with NATO and the EU.<sup>36</sup> It urges those alliances to play a more prominent security role in the Arctic and seeks to strengthen the Bundeswehr through enhanced situational awareness capabilities and regular joint exercises with partners in the region.<sup>37</sup>

Another focus is the intensification of military and armaments-industrial cooperation with NATO and EU partners aimed at ensuring the necessary security-policy capacity to act in the Arctic. At the same time, Germany supports the safeguarding of both freedom of navigation and rights of passage under UNCLOS.

**While the guidelines signal a bigger security role for Germany in the Arctic, there is virtually no indication of any concrete measures.**

The guidelines signal a bigger security role for Germany in the Arctic, but there is virtually no indication of any concrete measures. Although the intensification of military cooperation and training activities is mentioned, operational concepts are lacking, as is any detailed outline of what a sovereign German security strategy for the region might look like. All in all, Germany's Arctic policy remains too closely tied to NATO and the EU, which means its ability to act depends on geopolitical dynamics within the Alliance and, in particular, on the fluctuating attitude of the United States towards its Alliance commitments.

<sup>29</sup> Paul, *China's Arctic Turn* (see note 10), 1.

<sup>30</sup> Federal Government, *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines 2024* (see note 1), 16.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> See Yu Koizumi, “Russian Pacific Fleet Redux. Japan's North as a New Center of Gravity”, *War on the Rocks*, 22 October 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/10/russian-pacific-fleet-redux-japans-north-as-a-new-center-of-gravity/>.

<sup>34</sup> Federal Government, *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines 2024* (see note 1), 17.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

In the long term, it must be expected that German merchant vessels will start using Arctic shipping routes. Because of the harsh climatic conditions and security risks, those vessels will require military escort and protection measures.

The German government's declared intention "to continue and further expand its defence cooperation and joint procurement initiatives with NATO and EU partners in the Arctic region"<sup>38</sup> is to be welcomed. And it is understandable that, given Russian rearmament, there are numerous priority projects aimed at strengthening national and collective defence. However, with regard to the Arctic–North Atlantic region, Arctic-capable assets should be tested and procured.

### Rules-based Order as Security Issue: Germany's Normative Claim in the Arctic

Germany's 2024 Arctic policy guidelines assign central importance to the rules-based order, which is seen as an indispensable foundation for stability, security, and cooperation in the region. "Preserving this order creates stability and the conditions for peace, security and human development."<sup>39</sup> As was the case in earlier guidelines, the German government emphasises its commitment to the "peaceful use of the Arctic on the basis of recognised norms and codes".<sup>40</sup>

The rules-based order is built on principles such as respect for international law, the peaceful settlement of disputes and multilateral cooperation in international forums (including UNCLOS and the Svalbard Treaty). As geopolitical tensions intensify, this order is coming under growing pressure. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has severely shaken the international system; and its increasing militarisation of the Russian Arctic and acts of "hybrid" warfare in the North and Baltic Seas are perceived as a direct challenge to security and cooperation in the Arctic–North Atlantic region. At the same time, China – which has declared itself a "near-Arctic state" – is increasingly developing ambitions in the Arctic and is seeking to exert growing influence over the governance of the region. While Germany wants to preserve the current system of governance, the United States under Trump has been pursuing an exclusive "MAGA"

policy and thereby gradually distancing itself from the order it helped establish after the Second World War. This has generated enormous uncertainty in Berlin and the capitals of the Arctic states (such as Copenhagen and Oslo), not least about whether Washington is prepared to use military force against a NATO ally to annex Greenland. At this stage, it is essential to defend the rules-based order with the support of like-minded states.

The geopolitical shifts currently under way not only threaten international and regional governance structures but also have a direct impact on the livelihoods and rights of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic. The prerequisite for a credible rules-based order in the region is that the rights and perspectives of the native communities are taken into consideration. The peoples of the Arctic are directly affected by ecological, economic and security-related changes. Since they are a crucial factor for the success of sustainable governance in the region, they must be involved in all decision-making processes that concern them.<sup>41</sup> Germany can make a significant contribution here through its scientific expertise and multilateral orientation – for example, with programmes aimed at strengthening local resilience, participatory research projects and the advocacy of international norms protecting indigenous rights.<sup>42</sup> In this way, the rules-based order would be anchored not only in legal terms but also within society, thereby strengthening its legitimacy.

As a leading polar-research nation, Germany has supported the multilateral framework of the Arctic Council ever since that body was founded in 1996. Through the Council, in which it has observer status, Germany has direct access to political processes in the Arctic and indirect influence over the development of the region's governance framework. Thus, it is no small matter that the Council's ability to function has been significantly curtailed – especially at the political level – since the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.<sup>43</sup> Despite having only observer status, Germany is represented in four of the Council's six working groups, which form the core of its activities. Its contributions have been regularly recognised in the past, particularly in the fields of science and environmental policy. Such recognition could now offer a strategic opportunity for Berlin. Amid the

38 Ibid., 18.

39 Ibid., 20.

40 Ibid., 18.

41 Ibid., 44.

42 Ibid., 38.

43 Ibid., 21.

ongoing geopolitical tensions, cooperation among the Western Arctic and non-Arctic states — especially within NATO — is becoming increasingly important.

Another key focus of the guidelines is the implementation and further development of the Polar Code. This regulatory framework of the International Maritime Organization is essential both for shipping safety in the Arctic and for the protection of the region's fragile ecosystems. Germany advocates not only compliance with the Polar Code but also the strengthening of that code, as climate change and the associated melting of ice are creating new risks.<sup>44</sup> In this context, Russia's so-called shadow fleet — which comprises ageing tankers that are registered in exotic jurisdictions, have opaque ownership structures and unclear histories, and often lack adequate insurance — poses a growing threat.<sup>45</sup> Not only are those vessels an environmental hazard; they also undermine the rules-based order that Germany seeks to uphold, as they operate below the radar of the formal maritime transport system.

The guidelines stress the fundamental importance of the transatlantic security architecture for security and order in the Arctic, to which the United States makes a major contribution.<sup>46</sup> But under Trump's second administration, the question is once again being raised as to whether the Arctic Council can continue to function solely as a forum for civilian and environmental issues — one that excludes security issues. If that were to be the case, there would be additional strain on the rules-based order and the need for cooperation would increase between all actors interested in the preservation of that order in the region.

Russia is regarded as the dominant actor in the Arctic, not least because of its geography: with more than 50 per cent of the Arctic coastline under its control, it has a significant strategic advantage in terms of direct access to the region. That advantage allows it to act as a key actor with the power to determine the prevailing order in the region. Germany is well aware not only of this but also of Russia's general departure

from the rules-based international order<sup>47</sup> and its ever-closer cooperation with China<sup>48</sup> aimed at shaping a power-based world order. The developments in the Arctic show that stability and security in this space can hardly be guaranteed without a realistic assessment of Russia's interests and power-projection capabilities.

**That is why, at first glance, the EU appears to serve as an Arctic security anchor, albeit without the necessary hard power.**

According to the guidelines, today's geopolitical reality has far-reaching implications for the security and economic dynamics in the Arctic and requires a differentiated, multilateral approach to the issue of a regional security architecture.<sup>49</sup> Since Russia is no longer considered a partner for cooperation on this issue, the guidelines emphasise the need for Germany to deepen cooperation with partners in the EU and NATO as well as other states with the same security and value-based interests in order to develop viable cooperation formats without Russian participation.<sup>50</sup> It is seen as crucial that these activities be more deeply embedded in EU and NATO structures so that the rules-based approach can be preserved in an increasingly insecure and militarised Arctic. From a transatlantic perspective, Canada's growing orientation towards Europe illustrates to what extent the United States has itself become a source of uncertainty. That is why at first glance the EU appears to serve as a security anchor, albeit without the necessary hard power.

The preservation of the rules-based order remains a major challenge. For its part, Germany is aiming not only to increase its diplomatic efforts but also to take concrete steps towards developing the necessary instruments of power<sup>51</sup>: a stronger maritime presence in the North Atlantic, a role in shaping NATO's Arctic policy and the use of economic levers to exercise influence in the region. In keeping with the guidelines, those steps must be taken now; and EU programmes such as the Global Gateway initiative, the European Defence Fund (EDF) and innovation funding under

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>45</sup> Benjamin Hilgenstock, Oleksii Hrybanovskii and Anatolii Kravtsev, *Assessing Russia's Shadow Fleet. Initial Build-Up, Links to the Global Shadow Fleet, and Future Prospects* (Kyiv: Kyiv School of Economics, June 2024), 13, <https://kse.ua/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Global-Shadow-Fleet-June-2024.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> Federal Government, *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines 2024* (see note 1), 16.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 6, 16.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 18, 23–24.

Horizon Europe can be used for that purpose. In the absence of such measures, Germany's ability to act in the Arctic will remain limited. In addition, diplomatic engagement with Pacific states such as Japan and South Korea should be expanded in order to maintain a rules-based order in the Arctic and secure the use of Arctic shipping routes through investments in maritime infrastructure, including in the European part of the Arctic-North Atlantic region.

The 2024 guidelines reflect both a commitment to the rules-based international order and an awareness of how vulnerable that order is. In that document, the rules-based order is seen not as an expression of particular Western interests but as a universal principle of an international system based on generally recognised rules of international law, multilateral agreements and the Charter of the United Nations. With regard to the Arctic, this means that compliance with universal norms must also be ensured in a regional context – for example, by protecting existing legal regimes such as UNCLOS and supporting multilateral forums like the Arctic Council. At the same time, Berlin recognises that Germany and its partners will be able to protect those principles effectively only if the Arctic remains an integral part of a stable framework of Western security and cooperation structures.

Thus, there is an urgent need to develop a strategic culture based on clearly defined priorities, credible instruments and a multilateral value system. Establishing such a culture can help safeguard national interests over the longer term and assert a coherent multilateral security architecture. The future of the Arctic as a peaceful and stable region will depend largely on whether order-oriented states such as Germany are able to jointly uphold those principles and defend them against revisionist tendencies.

## Climate, Environment, Research and Sustainable Development

In the 2024 guidelines, the polar region is described as an “important part of the Earth's overall climate system”.<sup>52</sup> The document emphasises a conservation-oriented approach that demands strategies for adapting to the climate crisis.<sup>53</sup> Even though this broad thematic complex takes third place in the guidelines – after security and the rules-based order – the Ger-

man government continues to advocate ambitious climate and environmental protection, the preservation of the Arctic's unique environmental and living conditions, and the protection of its biodiversity. Until now, such issues have been the focus of Germany's Arctic activities and thus an integral part of its polar research. For example, in 2023 the German Environment Agency released a pilot study on monitoring plastic waste along Arctic coastlines using remote sensing and airborne methods.

The guidelines envisage a range of measures to be implemented, including the formulation of binding rules for environmentally compatible resource extraction, the designation of further protected areas and the reduction of emissions of black carbon and sulphur and nitrogen oxides – for example, in shipping. However, they tend to be vague about how those measures are to be implemented and what Germany's contribution should be.

With regard to economic activity and resource management in the Arctic, there appears to be a lack of engagement on the part of the German Ministry for Economic Affairs. A future German Arctic strategy would need to address those issues in more detail and establish priorities – especially as regards supply chains and the provision of raw materials and rare-earth metals.

Arctic research remains essential for understanding fundamental global processes related to climate and environmental change. German science has a strong international reputation in this field. Berlin wants to build on that tradition and continue making an important contribution to the scientific exploration of the polar region – for example, by stepping up cooperation with research institutions in the western Arctic littoral states through the relocation of research projects that earlier had been conducted with Russia.<sup>54</sup> In Arctic and marine research, however, another *Zeitenwende* is required: German society can no longer afford the peacetime practice of keeping scientific and military research separate. In future, data collected in the service of science must also be usable for military purposes. Self-imposed commitments by scientific institutions (including universities) to conduct research exclusively for civilian purposes are anachronistic in light of Chinese and Russian activities and detrimental to Germany's interests in national and collective defence.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 38.

**For Germany, it is becoming increasingly necessary to reconcile highly prized academic freedom with the country's security-policy interests.**

democratic societies but also strengthen Germany's security-policy capacity to act within the Alliance framework.

For its part, China pursues a doctrine of military-civil fusion. Research institutes work directly for the Chinese armed forces and the defence industry. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute has listed more than 90 institutes that conduct research on behalf of the People's Liberation Army and the Chinese armaments sector. The most important are the seven universities known as the "Seven Sons of National Defence"; these are all subordinate to the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, which controls China's defence industry.<sup>55</sup> While a "Chinese solution" is certainly not appropriate for Germany and Europe, Germany's security and the requirements of national defence necessitate research openness vis-à-vis the Bundeswehr, including the sharing of findings and research data.

For Germany, it is becoming increasingly necessary to reconcile highly prized academic freedom with the country's security-policy interests.<sup>56</sup> In a recent position paper, the German Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) suggested "questioning the separation of civilian and military research" and examining "funding incentives for increased cooperation".<sup>57</sup> Given the growing security challenges, not least from authoritarian states with highly integrated civil – military research structures, it is evident that ideologically motivated isolation – such as that practised by academic institutions through civilian-use clauses – is increasingly putting countries at a strategic disadvantage. Open cooperation between science and security institutions that is legally and ethically responsible could not only enhance the resilience of

55 Alex Joske, *The China Defence Universities Tracker. Exploring the Military and Security Links of China's Universities*, Report 23/2019 (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute [ASPI], November 2019), 6; ASPI, *China Defence Universities Tracker*, <https://unitracker.aspi.org.au/>.

56 Deutscher Bundestag, *Strategie der Bundesregierung zur Verzahnung von ziviler und militärischer Forschung*, Bundestags-Drucksache 20/13699 (Berlin, 1 June 2023), <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/136/2013699.pdf>.

57 Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), *Positionspapier Forschungssicherheit im Lichte der Zeitenwende* (Berlin, 2024), 1, [https://www.bmbf.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/2024/positionspapier-forschungssicherheit.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=4](https://www.bmbf.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/2024/positionspapier-forschungssicherheit.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=4).

# Arctic Policy in Transition: The Security-Policy *Zeitenwende* in Germany's Guidelines

A comparison of the German Arctic policy guidelines of 2013, 2019 and 2024 reveals a striking transformation that is reflected both in thematic priorities and in strategic orientation.

In the 2013 guidelines, German Arctic policy was shaped by the idea of “Arctic exceptionalism”. That is, the region was seen as a space of peaceful cooperation, somewhat detached from the geopolitical tensions that prevailed elsewhere in the world. Germany emphasised the importance of international agreements such as UNCLOS and engaged with the Arctic Council primarily as an observer. From a strategic perspective, the region played a minor role only. The focus was on climate and environmental policy in the Arctic. For this reason, it was perceived, above all, as a geo-ecological space whose protection had to be ensured within an international framework.

In the 2019 guidelines, there was a cautious shift in tone. While the German government continued to stress cooperative elements, it was acknowledged that the growing tendency to question multilateral standards and norms was putting a burden on cooperation in the Arctic. Nevertheless, the government continued to regard multilateral cooperation as the fundamental prerequisite for stability and peace in the region.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, it gave more weight to climate change, which was seen not only as an environmental problem but also as a security risk for the Arctic and beyond. The German government noted that divergent interests regarding raw materials and sea routes, unresolved territorial disputes and potential resource conflicts could increase the threat of non-cooperative behaviour and thus the likelihood of tensions in the

region.<sup>59</sup> This phase marked the beginning of a subtle shift: the Arctic was no longer seen simply as a space of cooperation but also as one of confrontation, where crises or even conflict might emerge. Security-policy issues assumed a more prominent role, albeit owing to latent concern rather than a perceived immediate threat.

In the updated 2019 guidelines, there was no explicit reference to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 – an event that had severely damaged international trust in the government in Moscow and marked the starting point of the ongoing confrontation between Russia and the Western states. This deliberate omission was presumably intended to keep the channels of dialogue open and avoid jeopardising stable cooperation within the Arctic Council.<sup>60</sup> However, any future Arctic strategy will have to consider how security vis-à-vis Russia is to be conceived and organised in the Arctic going forward.

## **In the 2024 Arctic policy guidelines, the security dimension moved to centre stage.**

The 2024 guidelines signal a turning point that is in line with what Chancellor Olaf Scholz described in February 2022 as the *Zeitenwende* of German security and defence policy overall. Since then, there has been much greater emphasis on the general relevance of defence. Both defence spending and military support for Ukraine have increased markedly. At the same time, a more strategic and geopolitical approach to

<sup>58</sup> Federal Government, *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines 2019* (see note 16), 2 and 19.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>60</sup> A comprehensive analysis is to be found in Bastian Matteo Scianna, *Sonderzug nach Moskau. Geschichte der deutschen Russlandpolitik seit 1990* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2024), 421–30.

foreign policy has been adopted, whereby national security is reprioritised and systemic rivalry with authoritarian states recognised. Security and stability in the polar region are now regarded – in contrast with the 2013 and 2019 guidelines – as the prerequisite for peaceful cooperation and multilateralism in the Arctic. The German government justifies this policy shift by pointing to the end of the idea of “Arctic exceptionalism”.<sup>61</sup> It believes that owing to the changed security reality, this concept can no longer serve as a viable basis for strategic planning. Thus, a reorientation of German Arctic policy is necessary – one that puts stronger emphasis on security considerations and intensified cooperation with NATO and EU allies.

The 2024 guidelines reflect this paradigm shift by highlighting the role of NATO and the EU in the Arctic, stressing the importance of closer coordination with Western partners and sharpening the focus on stability and deterrence. The Arctic is now regarded as an integral part of the security strategies of NATO and the EU. In line with Germany's 2023 National Security Strategy (NSS), the guidelines reaffirm the need for “defence capability”, “sustainability” and “resilience”.<sup>62</sup> This security-policy reorientation of Germany's Arctic policy goes hand in hand with the deepening of its partnerships with EU and NATO members, including Finland and Sweden, whose accession to the Alliance is regarded by Berlin as making a significant contribution to the strengthening of NATO's northern and eastern flanks.<sup>63</sup>

With regard to environmental policy, the 2024 guidelines further intensify the linkage between climate protection and national security interests. Climate change is no longer viewed as a mere environmental problem but as a direct threat to Germany's security and resilience. More specifically, the accelerated ice melt in the Arctic is seen as posing an existential risk for the world, exacerbating global environmental problems and leading to economic and security-policy consequences. Thus, the 2024 guidelines constitute not only a climate strategy but also a security strategy in which climate change is identified as a major risk factor for national and international stability.

<sup>61</sup> Federal Government, *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines 2024* (see note 1), 4.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

Germany's economic interest in the polar region has evolved, too. While the 2013 guidelines stressed the economic opportunities arising from climate change, not least through the development of new oil and gas deposits,<sup>64</sup> the emphasis shifted significantly in the 2019 version. Following the Paris Climate Agreement of 2015 and the adoption of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>65</sup> in the same year, the promotion of fossil fuel extraction in the Arctic was downgraded and ceased to be pursued as a German economic objective. The need for environmental responsibility, which had already been formulated in 2013, remained a central element, but the economic dimension was accorded less importance in 2019 and linked to the sustainable use of the Arctic and the corresponding environmental standards. By contrast, the 2024 guidelines put greater emphasis on the growing significance of the polar region for the supply of raw materials, while continuing to stress the indispensability of responsible resource use. Rapid warming in the Arctic is changing the economic framework and providing new opportunities to access critical raw materials essential for the green transition and the security of strategic supply chains. From a German perspective, Arctic resources can help strengthen the resilience of Germany and Europe in terms of the supply of raw materials,<sup>66</sup> provided their extraction complies with the highest environmental standards.

Today, the Arctic is seen not just as a source of raw materials but as a strategically relevant region whose sustainable development can contribute to securing Europe's raw-material supply at times of geopolitical upheaval and disrupted supply chains.<sup>67</sup> This shift in perception reflects the broader geopolitical uncertainties triggered by the war in Ukraine and other recent crises. Thus, a new German raw-material strategy coordinated at the interministerial level<sup>68</sup> should take the Arctic into account.

<sup>64</sup> Federal Government, *Leitlinien deutscher Arktispolitik. Verantwortung übernehmen, Chancen nutzen* (Berlin: German Foreign Office, November 2013), 4, [https://www.arctic-office.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/www.arctic-office.de/PDF\\_uploads/Leitlinien\\_deutscher\\_Arktispolitik.pdf](https://www.arctic-office.de/fileadmin/user_upload/www.arctic-office.de/PDF_uploads/Leitlinien_deutscher_Arktispolitik.pdf).

<sup>65</sup> Federal Government, *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines 2019* (see note 16), 32.

<sup>66</sup> Federal Government, *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines 2024* (see note 1), 5.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> See Federal Government, *Rohstoffstrategie der Bundesregierung. Sicherung einer nachhaltigen Rohstoffversorgung Deutschlands*

### The Arctic is now regarded as a strategically relevant region whose development can contribute to securing Europe's supply of raw materials.

Scientific research plays a central role in all three versions of the guidelines, albeit with differing points of focus. In 2013, the Arctic was primarily a space for independent research and the study of ecological processes. In the 2019 guidelines, scientific activity was seen, above all, as a means of better predicting and managing the impacts of climate change. In the 2024 version of the guidelines, polar and climate research is explicitly identified as a strategic necessity for achieving global climate targets and strengthening Germany's resilience to the consequences of climate change.

As the comparison of the 2013, 2019 and 2024 guidelines reveal there has been a shift from a cooperation- and environment-oriented Arctic policy towards a policy that is driven mainly by security and economic factors. In other words, while cooperation and multilateralism were earlier intended to ensure security and peace in the Arctic, that relationship has now been reversed: security and peace are intended to ensure international cooperation and stability. Today, the Arctic is viewed as a strategically important area closely linked to German interests in resilience and economic stability. However, it remains unclear whether Germany's ambitions vis-à-vis the region can be fully realised in practice and whether the guidelines meet the geopolitical challenges of the 21st century.

### High Ambitions, Low Capacity for Implementation: Rethinking Priorities Strategically

While the guidelines set out strategic objectives, they remain – like the 2023 National Security Strategy – largely of a general nature when it comes to describing how those goals are to be achieved. This conceptual and structural weakness affects not just engagement in the Arctic but German foreign and security policy as a whole.<sup>69</sup> The lack of overarching strategic thinking renders the term “strategy” abstract and

mit nichtenergetischen mineralischen Rohstoffen (Berlin: Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, December 2019).

<sup>69</sup> See Carlo Masala, *Bedingt abwehrbereit: Deutschlands Schwäche in der Zeitenwende* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2023).

incapable of offering real guidance for action. This deficit is also reflected both in the inadequate institutional structures for translating strategy into practice and in the absence of operational instruments.

Against this backdrop, the 2024 German Arctic policy guidelines appear ambitious; however, they remain non-binding and vague on key points. This is evident not least in the reservation about funding formulated in a footnote: “All statements about planned measures that require funding from the Federal budget are subject to the budgetary and financial planning rules.”<sup>70</sup> Such caveats are not unusual in government strategy documents,<sup>71</sup> but they carry particular weight in a security- and foreign-policy context – especially when Germany, as then-Chancellor Olaf Scholz emphasised in early 2023, is intent on “becoming the guarantor of European security”.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Federal Government, *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines 2024* (see note 1), 12.

<sup>71</sup> Federal Government, *National Security Strategy. Robust. Resilient. Sustainable. Integrated Security for Germany* (Berlin: German Foreign Office, June 2023), 29: “We will include the projects described in this Security Strategy in the relevant ministerial budgets within the federal budget by means of prioritisation, should funds not already have been allocated to them. Given the considerable demands on our public finances at present, we will strive to implement this Strategy at no additional cost to the overall federal budget.” The German government made a virtually identical statement in its China strategy. See Federal Government, *Strategy on China* (Berlin: German Foreign Office, 2023), 9: “The Federal Government will include the projects described in this Strategy on China in the relevant ministerial budgets within the federal budget by means of prioritisation, should funds not already have been allocated to them. Given the considerable demands on our public finances at present, we will strive to implement this Strategy at no additional cost to the overall federal budget.” See also the Federal Government, *Climate Protection Programme 2023* (Berlin, 2023), 2: “All measures are subject to the availability of funding and to the reservation of the federal government's fiscal constitutional competence/jurisdiction”; German Federal Government, *National Security and Defence Industry Strategy* (Berlin: German Ministry of Defence and German Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Action, 4 December 2024), 4: “The Strategy will be implemented within the scope of the Federal Government's budget and financial planning, in close cooperation between the relevant ministries, while acknowledging their distinct responsibilities.”

<sup>72</sup> Olaf Scholz, “The Global Zeitenwende. How to Avoid a New Cold War in a Multipolar Era”, *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 1 (January-February 2023), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>

## How can partner states put their trust in Germany's declarations of intent when the country's strategy paper casts doubt on their binding nature?

This discrepancy between ambition and capacity for implementation raises fundamental questions: how can partner states put their trust in Germany's declarations of intent – or even its security commitments – when the country's strategy paper casts doubt on their binding nature? The implicit reservation about funding signals strategic uncertainty and undermines the credibility of German initiatives in the international arena.

What is now required is a resetting of priorities, for which the following strategic compass is intended to provide guidance. Otherwise, Germany's Arctic policy guidelines will remain yet another example of finely worded plans and intentions that lack the capacity to be implemented.

### Strategic Compass for the Arctic: Fields of Action and Priorities

The growing need for Germany to assume greater responsibility in the Arctic arises from the security, economic and environmental interests in a region that is increasingly becoming a litmus test for German and European capacity to act as well as for international stability.<sup>73</sup> The 2024 guidelines make clear that the framework conditions in the Arctic have changed significantly, owing to Russia's remilitarisation of the region, China's expanding influence and profound climatic changes. At the same time, they reveal a gap: although there is acknowledgement of the new reality, Germany still lacks a broad political and societal consensus – particularly between government, parliament and key security-policy actors – that would allow priorities to be clearly identified and strategically necessary measures to be implemented.

[germany/olaf-scholz-global-zeitenwende-how-avoid-new-cold-war](#).

<sup>73</sup> See NATO, *The Future of the High North* (Norfolk, VA: Allied Command Transformation, 12 May 2023), <https://www.act.nato.int/article/the-future-of-the-high-north/>; European Commission and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *A Stronger EU Engagement for a Peaceful, Sustainable and Prosperous Arctic*, JOIN(2021) 27 final (Brussels, 13 October 2021), 2–3.

An effective and sustainable strategy for Germany's engagement in the Arctic requires an integrated security approach analogous to that of the National Security Strategy – namely, one that combines security, diplomatic, economic, climate, environmental and research policies and addresses both short- and long-term objectives.

The 2024 guidelines provide a solid framework; however, their successful implementation demands that a stronger German diplomatic and military presence be established in the region in a planned and coherent manner. In addition, the country will have to form strategic partnerships at the bilateral, multilateral and minilateral level in a way that demonstrates greater commitment and aims at more substance. This entails aligning existing and new co-operation formats with the specific security challenges of the Arctic and, together with partners (individual states, the EU and NATO), further developing joint courses of action. Through minilateral cooperation – for example, with states such as Denmark, Norway and Canada, which are particularly affected or committed – security-policy measures can be implemented more quickly and in a more targeted manner, especially when larger multilateral formats are blocked, only partly capable of acting or completely paralysed. Of particular relevance in this context is the military safeguarding of the region, together with closer security coordination with transatlantic allies and flexible adaptation to changing geopolitical conditions.

Equally important is a more systematic and continuous engagement with Arctic issues in political debates and decision-making processes in Berlin. Its increased relevance notwithstanding, the polar region remains largely a niche topic in German foreign and security policy and features only rarely in the political discourse. Paradoxically, the importance of the Arctic for Germany was reflected neither in the coalition agreement of the SPD-Greens-FDP government of November 2021 nor in that of the coalition agreement of the CDU-CSU-SPD government of April 2025. Indeed, the Arctic was not even mentioned in those agreements, despite climate protection and adaptation to climate change being identified as priorities.

In the years between the publication of Germany's Arctic policy guidelines in 2013, 2019 and 2024, there was limited advancement towards the further elaboration of a coherent German Arctic policy. The long-awaited shift from guidelines of a largely non-binding nature to a concrete and coherent strategy has not occurred. And so far, there have been no Bundestag

debates on the Arctic, just a handful of questions and position papers from parliamentary groups on the growing relevance of the Arctic-North Atlantic region.<sup>74</sup> While political interest does appear to be growing, it tends to be short-lived and unstable. If Germany is to achieve tangible results and meet its responsibilities, its political engagement with Arctic issues needs to be more systematic and comprehensive – both at the national and international level.

## Intensifying Cooperation with Allied Arctic States

In order to establish an effective German Arctic security policy, cooperation with NATO Arctic states – in particular, Norway, Denmark, Iceland and new members Finland and Sweden – should be intensified. These five Nordic countries are generally important for Germany as partners and interlocutors on Arctic matters.

For the Nordic countries, the Arctic is of major significance for their domestic, foreign and security policies. Since 2022, the security relevance of the region has increased dramatically, especially for Finland and Norway, which share borders with Russia in the High North. While the Nordic states sometimes find it difficult to accept external “interference” in Arctic affairs – for example, in the case of Norway when raw materials are at issue – Germany’s expertise, experience and research- and scientific-cooperation resources are particularly valued and needed. In recent years, the Nordic countries have increasingly come to see Germany as an important, like-minded partner on the European and international stage – one that can help them advance their own interests.

### Norway, in particular, has become a partner for Germany in access to the Arctic.

Unlike the 2013 German Arctic policy guidelines, the 2019 and 2024 documents do not include a separate paragraph explicitly highlighting the importance of bilateral, multilateral and minilateral cooperation with Arctic littoral states as a means with which non-

Arctic states can exercise at least some influence on developments in the polar region. Nonetheless, Norway, in particular, has become an important partner for Germany and especially German energy companies. At the same time, Germany is regarded by Norway as a special partner in the High North. Since 1999, the government in Oslo has pursued a uniquely explicit Germany strategy, which has been regularly updated and adapted to the latest geopolitical developments. Norwegian-German cooperation in the northern regions has been part of that strategy since 2007. The 2019 version of the Norwegian strategy aimed at promoting German understanding of Norway’s interests in the High North and to develop joint cooperation projects.<sup>75</sup> In the most recent version, published in March 2024, Germany is described as an important partner in areas such as shipping, energy, research and environmental protection. As in 2019, core objectives are identified as further developing the Norwegian-German dialogue on the High North and promoting political contacts, consultations at official level, business seminars and research cooperation.<sup>76</sup>

In recent years, Norwegian-German defence and security cooperation has increased significantly, particularly in the maritime domain (the 212CD submarine project, joint military exercises, protection of critical maritime infrastructure), and is relevant for Norway’s High North. In July 2025, the prime ministers of Norway and Germany, Jonas Gahr Støre and Friedrich Merz, issued a joint statement declaring their intention to boost cooperation, especially in defence and the armaments industry. The High North is to continue to play a significant role in realising that intention. In order to maintain stability and security in maritime spaces such as the High North, it was decided, among other things, to expand the already extensive maritime cooperation between the two countries into an integrated operational partnership in the North Atlantic and the North Sea, including enhanced protection of critical underwater infra-

<sup>75</sup> Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Die Deutschland-Strategie der norwegischen Regierung 2019* (Oslo, June 2019), 15, [https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/departementene/ud/dokumenter/planer/tysklandstrategi\\_ty2019\\_neues.pdf](https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/departementene/ud/dokumenter/planer/tysklandstrategi_ty2019_neues.pdf).

<sup>76</sup> Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Die Deutschland-Strategie der norwegischen Regierung* (Oslo, March 2024), 7, <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/28109f74d956419488003f648beca8ac/e-1023-t-tysklandstrategi.pdf>.

<sup>74</sup> In March 2026, a hearing took place in the Bundestag focused on security issues in the Arctic and Antarctic. Michael Paul (SWP) and Volker Rachold (AWI) were invited as speakers.

structure.<sup>77</sup> More recently, in February 2026, Norway and Germany concluded a new bilateral defence agreement, the “Hansa arrangement”.

Sweden, too, regards Germany as an important partner in the Arctic. In its Arctic strategy, released in 2020, the Swedish government referred directly of all non-Arctic states only to China and Germany and emphasised the particular importance of cooperation with Germany on Arctic matters, noting Berlin's growing interest and ambitions in the region. Sweden also sees Germany as a close partner in promoting multilateralism, a rules-based world order and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.<sup>78</sup> In the areas of security and defence, the two countries cooperate closely — above all, in the Baltic Sea region.

Similarly, Germany and Iceland have expanded their cooperation in recent years. On 20 October 2025, Defence Minister Boris Pistorius and Icelandic Foreign Minister Þorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir signed a letter of intent aimed at closer security cooperation. The main focus here is on maritime logistics to support air and maritime surveillance, the protection of critical infrastructure and cyber defence. For its part, Germany intends to increase its military presence in Iceland by, among other things, establishing a strategically important port of call and logistics hub for German naval combat ships, submarines and support vessels on an island regarded as a “bridge across the North Atlantic and a gateway to the Arctic”.<sup>79</sup> Further, German P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft are to be deployed in Iceland on a rotational basis.

Since 2024, Norway and Germany have been working with another non-European Arctic littoral state, Canada, to establish a trilateral maritime partnership focusing on the Arctic and, in particular, on arma-

ments projects.<sup>80</sup> Within this framework, Canada, which wants to renew its ageing submarine fleet, is considering a joint German-Norwegian offer that would give it early access to the new 212CD class submarines.<sup>81</sup>

## Embedding Germany's Arctic Policy in a European Framework

The geopolitical *Zeitenwende* has reached the Arctic. In the 2024 guidelines, Germany makes this unambiguously clear: in future, it will continue to embed its Arctic interests within the transatlantic framework and at the same time make an active and essential contribution to strengthening Europe's weight in the Arctic-North Atlantic region. For now, Europeans will remain dependent on US capabilities and capacities both in the entire NATO space and in the European Arctic. However, in the medium and long term, they must be able to act more autonomously. That autonomy is to be achieved through the provision of more troops and equipment, particularly in the High North of the Nordic NATO countries. National unilateralism or ad hoc bilateral formats no longer suffice to respond to the security, environmental and economic challenges in a region that is increasingly shaped by systemic rivalry, competing resource interests and strategic confrontation.

For a capable European policy in general and an effective Arctic policy in particular, Germany requires a strategically oriented partnership policy. Instead of focusing primarily on the cohesion of the European Union as a whole or the lowest common denominator, the German government could promote issue-based, flexible and capable coalitions that would be able to effectively represent EU interests in dynamic geopolitical constellations. Although the EU has not yet been formally admitted as an observer to the Arctic Council — despite several attempts in recent

<sup>77</sup> Government of Norway, *Joint Declaration between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Kingdom of Norway* (Oslo, 22 July 2025), <https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/departementene/smk/nyheter2025/joint-declaration.pdf>.

<sup>78</sup> Government Offices of Sweden, *Sweden's Strategy for the Arctic Region* (Stockholm, 2020), 19, <https://www.government.se/contentassets/85de9103bbbe4373b55eddd7f71608da/swedens-strategy-for-the-arctic-region-2020.pdf>.

<sup>79</sup> Federal Ministry of Defence, “Pistorius in Reykjavik: Germany and Iceland Deepen Military Cooperation”, 20 October 2025, <https://www.bmvg.de/en/news/germany-iceland-planning-strengthen-military-cooperation-6057516>.

<sup>80</sup> Murray Brewster, “Canada, Germany and Norway Discussing a Security Pact to Cover the North Atlantic and Arctic”, *CBC News*, 20 June 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-germany-norway-nato-submarines-1.7240569>.

<sup>81</sup> “Canada Explores German-Norwegian Designed Submarines in Strategic Naval Upgrade”, *Ready Aye Ready*, 18 February 2025, <https://readyayeready.com/canada-explores-german-norwegian-designed-submarines-in-strategic-naval-upgrade/>.

years<sup>82</sup> — it is nevertheless present in the region and capable of acting there. This is thanks to the three Arctic Council member states Denmark, Finland and Sweden as well as the six EU members with observer status in the Council — Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain — which have a tradition of conducting research in the High North and participate in transnational programmes in the areas of climate protection, science and sustainability. Other actors on which the EU could draw include: the European Economic Area states Norway and Iceland, which have close ties to the Union; Switzerland, which is linked to the EU through bilateral agreements; and the United Kingdom, a former EU member. Both Switzerland and the UK have observer status in the Arctic Council. Now is the time for the EU's cooperation initiatives to be politically consolidated, institutionally coordinated and strategically expanded.

**If the EU is to play a role in shaping the Arctic in future, it must identify common interests and forge political alliances.**

The political need for Europeanisation arises from two opposing dynamics. On the one hand, the EU and its European partners are becoming more vulnerable owing to an aggressive, revisionist Russian foreign policy that is particularly evident in the High North and the return of a US president who openly questions the rules-based order and repeatedly shakes the confidence of the Europeans in NATO reassurance. On the other hand, there is a growing expectation that European member states of the Alliance will act in a more sovereign, united and autonomous way — including in the EU's wider geopolitical sphere of interest, to which the Arctic undoubtedly belongs.

If the EU is to play a role in shaping the Arctic in future, it must identify common interests, forge political alliances and create the structural conditions in which to function as a credible actor.<sup>83</sup> To this end, it

is not only logical but imperative that Germany's Arctic policy be embedded in a European framework.

Therefore, Germany should do the following at the EU level:

1. Pursue strategic coordination with Arctic EU member states: Germany does not have to define Arctic interests for the entire EU; but, together with the Arctic member states and the EU countries with observer status in the Arctic Council, it should develop a new EU strategy for the polar region. The territorial, economic, cultural and security realities of Europe's Arctic states must form the basis of any European Arctic strategy.
2. Establish a European Arctic platform: A central coordinating body under the auspices of the EU — for example, in the form of a "European Arctic platform" — could serve as a hub for foreign-policy, scientific and economic activities in the Arctic. The objective would be to synchronise existing initiatives and projects, link Arctic-relevant programmes in the areas of climate policy, research and infrastructure and cultivate a political voice in Arctic-related debates, including vis-à-vis NATO, the United States and the sub-Arctic partner states Norway and Iceland.
3. Invest in Arctic infrastructure and research: European funds — for example, from the "Green Deal",<sup>84</sup> "Horizon Europe" or the new EU security fund — could be used in a targeted manner for projects in Northern Europe that are strategically relevant to the Arctic, including ports, maritime search-and-rescue capabilities, satellite observation systems, research vessels, icebreakers and polar training centres. Such infrastructure is extremely important not only for economic but also for security reasons, not least given the need for a stronger maritime presence in the region.
4. Set international standards — through the use of Europe's normative power: It is in the area of regulatory and normative governance that the EU has the greatest leverage. In the Arctic, together with its member states, the Union could establish standards for sustainable resource policy, environmentally responsible shipping, the protection of biodiversity and ESG-compliant investment. Europe's "climate-policy voice" must continue to be heard

<sup>82</sup> The European Commission applied for observer status in December 2008. In the most recent enlargement round in 2013, the application was approved in principle, but no final decision was taken. Following Russia's partial invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the ensuing Western sanctions, Moscow rejected the admission of the EU.

<sup>83</sup> See European External Action Service, *The EU in the Arctic* (Brussels, 22 January 2025), [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-arctic\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-arctic_en).

<sup>84</sup> European Commission, *The European Green Deal. Striving To Be the First Climate-neutral Continent* (Brussels, 2019), [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal\\_de](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_de).

in the Arctic, as climate change is taking place there at above-average speed and having a direct impact on Europe. A stable, long-term ecological and geopolitical order in the Arctic can be ensured only if binding transnational rules are established and integrated into multilateral structures in a consistent manner.

5. Strengthen diplomacy and security resilience: Independently of any shifts in Washington's course, the EU should strengthen its diplomatic and security policy capacity to act in the Arctic. This does not imply militarisation but rather increased strategic resilience, which can be achieved through joint EU–NATO cooperation, civilian security architectures (such as disaster response and ice patrols) and diplomatic initiatives undertaken with Norway, Canada and Iceland. In the medium term, the new Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC), which NATO opened in the north of Norway in October 2025, could become a hallmark of Europe's assuming greater responsibility within the Alliance vis-à-vis the Arctic and cooperation with NATO.<sup>85</sup> The CAOC, which will coordinate air operations in the High North as well as in the North Atlantic and the Barents Sea, is under Norwegian command, while prominent roles are assigned to the Arctic EU and NATO member states Finland and Sweden.

As a leading power within the EU, Germany could serve as a catalysing force for this new European Arctic course – not by assuming a dominant posture but by acting as a strategic networker with a clear political will. The objective must be a visible, autonomous and lasting EU presence in the Arctic. That presence should be characterised by responsible conduct; it should be rules-based and resilient; and it should defend European interests without lapsing into nationalist behavioural patterns.

### Strengthening Diplomatic Initiatives and Multilateral Forums

As the Arctic Council is currently paralysed at the political level owing to geopolitical tensions, Germany could play a pivotal role in redefining cooperation between Western Arctic and non-Arctic states. The establishment of an Arctic forum that would

allow non-Arctic states such as India, Japan and South Korea to make significant contributions to the stability and governance of the region would be a decisive step. Indeed, an Atlantic-Pacific forum committed to globally agreed rules (such as UNCLOS) could help compensate for the reduced functionality of the Arctic Council and strengthen the rules-based order in the Arctic. Owing to its international reputation as a leading polar research nation, Germany would be well placed to launch and help shape such an initiative. Since the Arctic Council was founded in 1996, Germany has consistently supported the multilateral format of the Council, while its engagement in the Arctic is receiving growing recognition, particularly in the fields of science and environmental policy, as is evident from Germany's strong representation in the Council's working groups and its outstanding reputation as a cooperation partner in international Arctic research.<sup>86</sup> Thus, any has the potential to act as a bridge-builder between Arctic and non-Arctic states by linking its scientific reputation to diplomatic initiatives. However, an Arctic forum should be established not as a competitor to the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) but as a complementary platform.

### Germany could advocate the establishment of an Arctic Security Stakeholder Roundtable that also includes Pacific partners.

In close coordination with like-minded allies, Germany could launch a new diplomatic forum – for example, an Arctic Security Stakeholder Roundtable – and play an active role in it. The roundtable could include both NATO states and Pacific partners. This would not only deepen the dialogue with non-European actors but also foster the political will to prevent conflict. Within such a framework, measures could be explored that are also in the interest of the Arctic states – for example, providing protection against so-called hybrid activities and improving maritime domain awareness (MDA) in the Arctic-North Atlantic region.

<sup>85</sup> Kai Greet, "New Combined Air Operations Centre Opened by NATO in Norway", *The Aviatonist*, 11 October 2025.

<sup>86</sup> Outstanding contributions have been made in this field by the Alfred Wegener Institute (AWI) for polar and marine research and by the German Arctic Office at the AWI in Potsdam.

## Expanding Economic Cooperation

In parallel with pursuing the implementation of security-policy measures, Germany, as an important economic and scientific nation, should play a more prominent role in the Arctic. Promoting cutting-edge research in the fields of climate change, biodiversity and sustainable development is not simply a way of generating knowledge; it is also a lever for exercising influence in multilateral forums and helping shape international standards. Similarly, closer economic cooperation with the Arctic states – for example, in the areas of renewable energies, raw materials and maritime logistics – could strengthen Germany’s strategic position in the Arctic over the long term.

Germany’s economic position in the region is based on its successful maritime industry, its global trading networks and its innovative research. As the German Shipowners’ Association notes, a capable navy is “in the intrinsic interest of German ship-owners”<sup>87</sup> as it ensures free and secure access to global trade routes. This applies to the shipping routes through Arctic waters: while they may be gaining in importance as a result of climate change, they will continue to be used under challenging conditions.<sup>88</sup>

Moreover, the Arctic is becoming increasingly important for Germany as a resource region. Deposits of rare earths, lithium, nickel and cobalt, which are crucial for the energy transition and digital technologies, make the region geo-economically relevant. Because it does not mine those resources itself, Germany depends on stable and diversified supply chains. Over the long term, the stronger involvement of German companies in international raw-material projects – for example, in cooperation with the Nordic countries, Greenland and Canada – could enhance the country’s security of supply and deepen political partnerships. In this context, Greenland, which has large resource endowments and whose geostrategic importance is growing, could be a key partner, including through EU programmes and bilateral projects with the Kingdom of Denmark.

<sup>87</sup> Irina Haesler, “Strategische Partner”, *Marineforum* 6 (2023): 14.

<sup>88</sup> See Michael Paul, *Arktische Seewege: Zwiespältige Aussichten im Nordpolarmeer*, SWP-Studie 14/2020 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2020), doi: 10.18449/2020S14.

## Boosting Scientific Cooperation

Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, international scientific cooperation with Russia in the Arctic has come to a standstill. Because almost half of the Arctic landmass is Russian sovereign territory, there are significant gaps in Arctic research,<sup>89</sup> making it considerably more difficult to monitor and understand climatic changes in this sensitive region. To close the data gaps, German polar research must develop alternative strategies. Cooperation with Western partners such as the United States, Canada, the Scandinavian countries and other polar research nations should be intensified. Greater use should be made of Germany’s own research infrastructure, while new scientific projects should be launched and data-sharing encouraged. Further, Germany should support research initiatives within international organisations such as the Arctic Council and the European Union so that common standards can be set and synergies exploited. In addition, Germany must become more independent technologically – for example, through the acquisition of satellite systems, autonomous measuring platforms and its own icebreakers.

A central desideratum remains the modernisation of the German research fleet. Germany’s polar research hinges on the new research icebreaker that is scheduled to enter service in 2030 as the successor of the *Polarstern*. Launched in 1982 and measuring 118 metres long, the *Polarstern* made possible the 2019–20 MOSAiC (Multidisciplinary drifting Observatory for the Study of Arctic Climate) research project, which involved researchers from around the world. At that time, however, the support of Russian icebreakers was also needed. Such support can no longer be expected at present. While an end to the war in Ukraine could offer new scope for scientific cooperation in the Arctic – provided there is a new security environment based on clear rules and mutual trust – it is unrealistic that the previous status quo will return. Whether cooperation with Russia will ever be possible again and, if so, to what extent depends largely on how the war ends, the condition in which Russia emerges from the conflict and the foreign and security policy it subsequently pursues.

<sup>89</sup> Rachel Nuwer, “Fehlende russische Daten schaden der Arktisforschung”, *Spektrum der Wissenschaft*, 23 January 2024, <https://www.spektrum.de/news/fehlende-russische-daten-schaden-der-arktisforschung/2204986>.

Despite the political tensions, there is still sporadic contact with Russian scientists — for example, through joint publications and conferences. This cooperation at the individual level continues to be important, as long as it complies with sanctions law and does not endanger the safety of those involved. Above all, it can allow the remaining channels of communication to stay open and thereby keep alive the possibility of resuming cooperation in the long term.<sup>90</sup>

By strengthening its own research infrastructure, strategically expanding economic cooperation with partners in the Arctic and protecting key maritime industries, Germany can safeguard its position in the region. A holistic strategy that combines economic interests, security-policy imperatives and scientific expertise is essential, especially if Germany wants to preserve its role as a responsible actor in the High North.

### Military Presence and Normalisation of Exercise Activity

In contrast with the Indo-Pacific, there is a relatively low risk of escalation in the Arctic. Nevertheless, the number of security-relevant incidents that could lead to escalation is growing. Against this background, protection against so-called hybrid activities in the Arctic is becoming increasingly important. In recognition of this reality, the German government “attaches great importance to the exchange of experiences and best practices — including on issues of resilience — especially with the European Arctic states”.<sup>91</sup> In order to increase resilience against espionage, covert sabotage and even open attacks, a comprehensive operational picture is required. The objective must be to detect any signs of malicious activity at an early stage so that timely action can be taken to prevent such activity or limit the damage. And the prerequisite for that to happen is improved cooperation in intelligence collection and data-sharing.

<sup>90</sup> See “Russia-U.S. Relations in 2025: Can Arctic Science Diplomacy Mend Strategic Fences?”, transcript of a workshop organized by the Arctic Initiative of the Belfer Center and the Davis Center for Russian and Eastern European Studies, Harvard University, *You Tube*, 5 December 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQsoAYFUhEM>.

<sup>91</sup> Federal Government, *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines 2024* (see note 1), 17.

### Protection against so-called hybrid activities in the Arctic is becoming increasingly important.

Such cooperation will require specialised capabilities. Given the size of the Arctic-North Atlantic area and the comparatively small armed forces of the Nordic countries, it is clear that those capabilities are currently insufficient. Germany can make an important contribution here. The required Bundeswehr capabilities must be fit for the Arctic — a precondition that the German Ministry of Defence (BMVg) should enshrine as a general principle in the planning and procurement of all new platforms rather than in selected systems only.<sup>92</sup>

To date, Germany's military activities in the Arctic-North Atlantic region have lacked a clear geographical focus, with support having been provided wherever NATO and partner nations identified a need. A more focused approach will require flexibility on the part of the armed forces and the systems they deploy. This can be achieved in four ways.

*First*, Germany is able to increase its presence at short notice by conducting or participating in exercises in the Arctic-North Atlantic region and thereby contribute to deterrence. Such exercises have already taken place on several occasions in the past — in August 2025, for example, the fleet replenishment ship Berlin was deployed to Iceland, Greenland and Canada<sup>93</sup> — and are likely to continue to take place in future. Another important step would be the navalisation of army units, that is, enabling ground forces to conduct operations in the maritime domain (in bays or on islands, for example).

*Second*, Germany has already begun to procure systems being used by nations in the Arctic-North Atlantic region. They include P-8 Poseidon maritime reconnaissance and patrol aircraft, which, following the handover of the first planes in October 2025, are the

<sup>92</sup> See Knut Abraham, “Deutschland braucht einen neuen Blick auf die Arktispolitik”, *TableMedia*, 17 October 2023, <https://table.media/security/tablestandpunkt/deutschland-braucht-neuen-blick-auf-die-arktispolitik>.

<sup>93</sup> It is easy for naval and air forces to relocate equipment and personnel to remote areas. See Hans-Uwe Mergener and Michael Nitz, “Deutschland wird noch in diesem Jahr mit der Marine in der Arktis präsent”, *Europäische Sicherheit und Technik* (online), 2 July 2025, <https://esut.de/2025/07/meldungen/61113/deutschland-wird-noch-in-diesem-jahr-mit-der-marine-in-der-arktis-praesent/>.

largest combat aircraft in today's Bundeswehr.<sup>94</sup> Canada, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States all operate this model. The German Navy intends to increase its existing order of eight aircraft to a total of twelve.<sup>95</sup> The operational reach of the planes can be extended through unmanned (combat) aerial vehicles (UAVs/UCAVs) under the "loyal wingman" concept. For this reason, the German Navy reported the need for six such systems in 2023<sup>96</sup>; two years later, that figure was increased to between eight and twelve.<sup>97</sup> In what was an unusually short timeframe for German procurement, the Bundestag approved the federal budget in December 2025. One month later, in January 2026, the Bundeswehr announced it had acquired eight MQ-9B Sea Guardian medium-altitude long-endurance (MALE) UCAVs, together with ground control stations, for the German Navy.<sup>98</sup> The delivery of the drones to German naval aviation is scheduled to begin in 2028.<sup>99</sup>

*Third*, Germany possesses – or has initiated the procurement of – capabilities that are urgently needed by its allies in the Arctic-North Atlantic region, including the 212CD class submarine. It is already cooperating with Norway in the procurement of such boats; and it could extend that cooperation to Canada, which has long sought to modernise its submarine force.<sup>100</sup> To do so quickly and thereby increase NATO's presence in the Arctic, Germany and Norway could

opt to make one of the six jointly ordered submarines available to their transatlantic ally. Canada, for its part, would have to repay such assistance by placing further orders. This could reduce costs and prolong the production run, thereby securing jobs and expertise.

*Fourth*, large-scale maritime surveillance with manned platforms is possible to a limited extent only. Alternatives are provided by autonomous systems in the air and at sea as well as by sensors in space. Companies based in Germany have the expertise required to develop and manufacture such capabilities. In view of the rapid innovation cycles of those technologies, ways should be found to accelerate or bypass Germany's procurement processes, which tend to be lengthy. Since autumn 2024, the German Navy has relied on "operational experimentation" (OPEX),<sup>101</sup> that is, the testing of new systems that are still being developed under operational conditions. Another option would be to establish permanent experimental units – an approach that the US Navy has been pursuing since autumn 2021 through Task Force 59, which is part of the Fifth Fleet, responsible for the Middle East.<sup>102</sup> Since 2024, the Sixth Fleet, responsible for Europe and Africa, has established a similar unit – Task Force 66.<sup>103</sup> In 2025, NATO followed suit with Task Force X.<sup>104</sup> The idea is to use unmanned systems through leasing or hire-purchase arrangements for as long as that technology remains state of the art. While the proposed third Standing NATO Maritime Group for the Arctic could be expected to consist of

**94** See Jonas Brandstetter, "Erste Poseidon P-8A übergeben", *Behörden Spiegel*, 9 October 2025, <https://www.behörden-spiegel.de/2025/10/09/erste-poseidon-p-8a-uebergeben/>.

**95** See *Kurs Marine. Den Gegner abschrecken, die Freiheit auf See verteidigen* (Rostock: German Navy Headquarters, 14 May 2025), 38, <https://www.bundeswehr.de/resource/blob/5939752/c083fa236013e9dfd9b8bba0049a35/kurs-marine-2025-broschuere-final-data.pdf>.

**96** See *Kurs Marine 2035+. Energischer Einstieg in unbemannte Systeme und Künstliche Intelligenz* (Rostock, 15 September 2023), 10f., <https://www.bundeswehr.de/resource/blob/5727830/1273b4cff2988935599083e5f15b1ba3/kurs-marine-2035--data.pdf>.

**97** See *Kurs Marine* (see note 95), 38.

**98** See Bundeswehr, "Bundeswehr bestellt Drohnen zur Seefernaufklärung und U-Boot-Jagd", 12 January 2026, <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/meldungen/bundeswehr-mq-9b-drohnen-seefernaufklaerung-u-boot-jagd-6057512>.

**99** *Ibid.*

**100** See Murray Brewster, "German, Norwegian Officials Urge Canada to Join 'Familiar Family' in Buying New Submarines", *CBC News*, 4 June 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/germany-norway-military-subs-1.7551526>.

**101** See Mario W., "OPEX Blue Whale. Deutsche Marine setzt auf experimentelle Verfahren", *Bundeswehr* (online), 27 November 2024, <http://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/marine/aktuelles/deutsche-marine-experimentelle-verfahren-5862322>.

**102** See Peter Ong, "U.S. Navy's New Task Force 59 Teams Manned with Unmanned Systems for CENTCOM's Middle East", *Naval News*, 9 September 2021, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2021/09/u-s-navys-new-task-force-59-teams-manned-with-unmanned-systems-for-centcoms-middle-east/>.

**103** See Heather Mongilio, "Navy Sets Up New Uncrewed Task Force in Europe, Africa", *USNI News*, 11 July 2024, <https://news.usni.org/2024/07/11/navy-sets-up-new-uncrewed-task-force-in-europe-africa>.

**104** See Lisa-Martina Klein, "Task Force X: Warum die NATO auf Leasing maritimer Drohnen in der Ostsee setzt", *TableMedia*, 17 June 2025, <https://table.media/security/analyse/task-force-x-warum-die-nato-auf-leasing-maritimer-drohnen-in-der-ostsee-setzt> (updated 24 June 2025).

major surface combatants,<sup>105</sup> an experimental unit equipped with unmanned systems would be more likely to ensure permanent maritime surveillance. The United Kingdom is pursuing the latter approach with “Project CABOT”, which envisages the use of large unmanned underwater vehicles to monitor the GIUK Gap.<sup>106</sup> For its part, Germany could launch a similar project with Norway to monitor the line that runs between Svalbard, Bear Island and Finnmark (the Bear Gap). As in the case of the UK project, the aim would be the early detection of the movement of Russian forces — in particular, submarines.

## Strategic Adaptation to an Uncertain Future

While the new guidelines offer a comprehensive approach to drawing up a new German Arctic policy, their successful implementation requires a coherent strategic orientation. Germany should strengthen its presence in the Arctic, deepen partnerships and develop a long-term security strategy that reflects the geopolitical realities of the region. Only through a holistic and proactive approach can Germany consolidate its role as a stabilising actor in the Arctic and safeguard its national interests.

In the long run, it remains a desirable objective that the Arctic return to being a region in which co-operation prevails. Confidence-building measures and the maintenance of communication channels — particularly through Track-2 diplomacy — can contribute to achieving that goal.<sup>107</sup> Even though Russia is currently pursuing a confrontational rather than co-operative policy, it will continue to play a dominant role in the Arctic. Therefore, it is important to main-

tain informal dialogues and think about future security architectures in the region.

But in the coming years — or possibly even decades — strengthening deterrence and defence capabilities will remain the most realistic policy option. North European countries such as Norway have had positive experiences with a combined deterrence and reassurance strategy.<sup>108</sup> That strategy could serve as a model for the future.

To conclude, the following action should be taken:

- **Establish a comprehensive “strategic culture”:** Security policy should be more oriented towards long-term strategic visions, coherent priorities and realistic expectations of impact, especially in such geopolitically sensitive regions as the Arctic.<sup>109</sup> It is not sufficient to draw up ad hoc responses to geopolitical shocks. Germany must define persistent geopolitical interests while at the same time fostering a culture of strategic thinking whose focus is not technocratic details but planning that extends far into the future. This includes promoting degree programmes in strategic studies at universities and research institutions. An example of such a programme is the “Master in Intelligence and Security Studies” (MISS), offered in a cooperative venture between the Bundeswehr University Munich and the Federal University of Applied Administrative Sciences. Though aimed primarily at members of the intelligence services and the Bundeswehr, it shows that there is demand for specialised training of this kind. Similarly, the University of Bonn offers a Master’s programme in “Strategy and International Security”, which provides students with in-depth knowledge of strategic studies and security

<sup>105</sup> See Rachael Gosnell and Lars Saunes, *Integrated Naval Deterrence in the Arctic Region – Strategic Options for Enhancing Regional Naval Cooperation*, Newport Arctic Scholars Initiative Report no. 2 (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 23 July 2024), 10 and 22, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nasi/2/>.

<sup>106</sup> See Richard Scott, “UK Sets Out Project CABOT Ambition to Deploy Autonomous ASW Screen in the North Atlantic”, *Naval News*, 18 February 2025, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/02/uk-sets-out-project-cabot-ambition-to-deploy-autonomous-asw-screen-in-the-north-atlantic/>.

<sup>107</sup> Michael Paul, *Back to the Future of the Arctic. The Enduring Relevance of Arms Control*, SWP Comment 18/2024 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, May 2024), doi: 10.18449/2024C18.

<sup>108</sup> Since the Cold War, Norway has pursued a dual security strategy of deterrence and reassurance. Deterrence vis-à-vis potential adversaries — in particular, Russia — is maintained through NATO membership, military modernisation and regular exercises. At the same time, Norway avoids provocative steps by exercising voluntary self-restraint — for example, by prohibiting the permanent stationing of foreign troops in peacetime or the storage of Western nuclear weapons — in order to prevent escalation and to preserve stability in the region.

<sup>109</sup> Holger Janusch and Thomas Dörfler, *Strategie mit Logik: Eine neue Nationale Sicherheitsstrategie braucht eine “Theory of Success”*, BAKS-Arbeitspapier Sicherheitspolitik 5/2025 (Berlin: Federal Academy for Security Policy [BAKS], 2025), [https://www.baks.bund.de/sites/baks010/files/arbeitspapier\\_sicherheitspolitik\\_2025\\_5.pdf](https://www.baks.bund.de/sites/baks010/files/arbeitspapier_sicherheitspolitik_2025_5.pdf).

policy.<sup>110</sup> And in June-July 2025, the first Arctic Summer School, organised by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation (SPF) and the Arctic University of Norway (UiT), took place in Tromsø. The school enables doctoral students to acquire Arctic expertise.<sup>111</sup>

- **Build binding international cooperation:** Germany should not only support multilateral forums; in cooperation with the EU and NATO, it should also promote the conclusion of bilateral and mini-to multilateral agreements to safeguard the Arctic. Such agreements strengthen the international legal framework and enhance collective security.
- **Prioritise resources and measures:** The Arctic-North Atlantic region is too vast to be controlled in a traditional manner — namely, by patrol ships alone. Nevertheless, manned platforms remain essential for carrying out specific tasks at specific locations that cannot yet be performed by automated technology. Sensors above and below water offer allow a comprehensive situational picture to be generated. However, they can be deployed and interconnected only in cooperation with allied partners.
- **Provide clearer funding commitments:** A key building block for the successful implementation of the guidelines is the binding commitment to provide financial resources. Without sufficient funding, the security and economic ambitions articulated in the guidelines cannot be met. To ensure the financing of military equipment and essential infrastructure in a reliable manner and independently of the regular defence budget, the German government has exempted defence-related expenditure equal to or in excess of 1 per cent of German GDP (around €44 billion) from the debt brake. Further, it is intended that new special infrastructure fund will also serve military purposes. The security-policy and military component of Germany's Arctic policy is part of this framework.
- **Strategically adapt Germany's Arctic policy:** Since Donald Trump's return to the White House, the strategic coordinates of transatlantic policy have been shifting fundamentally, including for

<sup>110</sup> See University Bonn, Master of Arts, Degree Program Strategy and International Security, <https://www.uni-bonn.de/en/studying/degree-programs/degree-programs-a-z/strategy-and-international-security-ma>.

<sup>111</sup> Organised by Gunnar Rekvig (SPF/UiT), the three modules of the Arctic Summer School — Climate Change, Security and Governance — were led by Hiroyuki Enomoto (NIPR), Michael Paul (SWP) and Christopher Rossi (UiT), respectively.

the Arctic. Berlin's task is not only to implement but also to further strategically develop the 2024 guidelines on German Arctic policy in light of the recent geopolitical upheavals. In a more unstable security environment — not least one in which the reliability of US commitments is increasingly called into question — transatlantic cooperation remains important; but in the medium and long term, Germany must put greater emphasis on European partnerships, its own resilience and an Arctic strategy that is anchored in security policy and can be implemented in practice. It is only through a coordinated European Arctic policy that the EU can emerge as a credible security actor in the region.

- **Develop long-term planning with military components:** In view of Russia's remilitarisation of the Arctic, Germany should — in coordination with NATO partners — take steps aimed at deterrence and the defence of Western interests in the region. These could include not only the deployment but also the stationing of specialised forces, such as mountain infantry units.

## Abbreviations

AChoD	Arctic Chiefs of Defence
ASFR	Arctic Security Forces Roundtable
ASPI	Australian Strategic Policy Institute (Canberra)
AWI	Alfred Wegener Institute, Helmholtz Centre for Polar and Marine Research
BMBF	German Ministry of Education and Research (after May 2025: German Ministry of Research, Technology and Space)
BMVg	German Ministry of Defence
CAOC	Combined Air Operation Center
CTF	Commander Task Force
EDF	European Defence Fund
ESG	Environmental, social and governance
EU	European Union
FONOP	Freedom of navigation operation
GIUK	Greenland — Iceland — United Kingdom
IMO	International Maritime Organization
MAGA	Make America Great Again
MOSAIC	Multidisciplinary drifting Observatory for the Study of Arctic Climate
NIPR	National Institute of Polar Research (Tokyo)
NORDEFECO	Nordic Defence Cooperation
NSIDC	National Snow and Ice Data Center
NSS	National Security Strategy
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SNMG	Standing NATO Maritime Group
SPF	Sasakawa Peace Foundation
UiT	The Arctic University of Norway (Tromsø)
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

