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THE ARCTIC

GERMANY'S NEW ARCTIC

POLICY AT THE TIME

OF THE *ZEITENWENDE*

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POLAR WATCH

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REVISED BY: Lesley Jessop (USA).

GRAPHIC DESIGN AND LAYOUT: Stéphane Hergueta

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The “High North, Low Tension” Doctrine Severely put to the Test

Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine has fundamentally changed the geopolitical environment for Germany’s Arctic policy. The vision of the North Pole as a pole of peace has been seriously undermined.

Although Germany is not an Arctic State, it has significant and long-standing interests in the region. Scientific research, informing German Arctic policy, plays a central role in Germany’s Arctic engagement. Thanks to its observer status in the Arctic Council since 1998, Germany contributes to the scientific and environmental work of the Council working groups. Overall, the objective of German Arctic policy is to support peaceful cooperation, sustainability and the respect of international law. Cooperation between the West and Russia in Arctic research has been a mainstay of “Arctic exceptionalism” since the end of the Cold War.



The German Research Icebreaker *Polarstern* (in English, “*Polar Star*”) has been the Alfred Wegener Institute's flagship since 1982. With a length of 118 meters, this 12 000-ton vessel is capable of sailing 300 days a year and wintering in the ice. *Credit: AWI/Mario Hoppmann.*

‘What role can scientific cooperation, the cornerstone of international relations in the Arctic, still play in the future between the West and Russia?’

The expression “Arctic exceptionalism”¹ was coined to describe peaceful and cooperative international relations in the Arctic insulated from global geopolitics. This doctrine however has lost much of its validity since the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Against the backdrop of climate change and increased geopolitical tensions the question arises as to what role scientific cooperation, the cornerstone of international relations in the Arctic, can still play in the future between the West and Russia.

The Arctic’s transformations during recent years, driven by climate change, geopolitical shifts and increasing economic interest in the region and its resources, have had direct implications for Germany, including Germany’s climate policy, future economic stability, maritime access and global security. As a result, Germany’s Arctic engagement has evolved considerably since its first Arctic Policy Guidelines were published in 2013. Its title “*Assume responsibility, seize opportunities*” clearly shows that at that time the focus was to a large extent economic. With melting sea ice opening up access to resources, shipping routes and emerging markets for technological innovations, the Arctic was viewed as a region of opportunity. Its 2019 update “*Assuming Responsibility, Creating Trust, Shaping the Future*” placed climate change and environmental protection at the centre of Germany’s Arctic policy, aligning it more clearly with sustainability goals. The third iteration of the Guidelines “*Germany and the Arctic in the Context of Climate Crisis and the Zeitenwende («turning point» or «change of era»)*” released by the German Federal Government in September 2024 represents a strategic reorientation of Germany’s Arctic policy. This version of document directly responds to a changed geopolitical situation, marked by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine², the increased militarisation of the Arctic and the potential erosion of the rule-based international order. Climate change is still considered a key challenge but the central focus is now on security and stability. In this context, the Arctic policy is now closely tied to Germany’s broader foreign and security policy, reflecting the “*Zeitenwende*”. For the record, the origin of this expression comes from German Chancellor

¹ “Arctic exceptionalism” has its roots in a speech made by President Mikhail Gorbachev in Murmansk, Russia, on October 1, 1987: “Let the North of the globe, the Arctic, become a zone of peace. Let the North Pole be a pole of peace”. Following on from this declaration, the establishment of the Arctic Council in 1996 was a response to a desire to ward off the strategic past of the Arctic that had prevailed during the Cold War, by developing a cooperative science-based regime protected from the vicissitudes and geopolitical tensions at the lowest latitudes. Ironically, Norway, which has long promoted Arctic exceptionalism through the slogan “High North, Low Tension”, was the Arctic State that most strongly encouraged NATO involvement in the High North, due to the militarization of the Russian Arctic.

² The Arctic exceptionalism had already begun to falter in 2014. After the invasion and the annexation of Crimea by Russia in February-March, 2014, Canada and the USA jointly boycotted the Arctic Council Task force for Action on Black Carbon and Methane (TFBCM) meeting held in Moscow, April 2014, in protest against Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea. On March 3, 2022, a few days after the Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, seven of the eight Arctic Council member States announced that they would boycott the Council meetings to be held in Russia during the Russian Chairmanship.

Olaf Scholz's speech to the Bundestag on February 27, 2022, three days after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He declared at that moment that this war of aggression marked the beginning of a “new era” (“*Zeitenwende*”), explaining that “*nothing would be the same again*”. This “new era” proclaimed by Olaf Scholz is reflected in numerous policies implemented by the governmental coalition in the military (end of pacifism, modernising the army), energy (limiting Germany's dependence on Russian gas) and economic (strengthening resilience and strategic autonomy) fields.



Box 1: German-Russian Scientific Cooperation in the Arctic³

Almost half of the Arctic territory is Russian territory. Especially with regard to permafrost research, Russia is of great importance due to the concentration of permafrost in Siberia. Russia was also an important longtime partner for German research in the Arctic. For example, researchers from the Alfred Wegener Institute (AWI) and their Russian and other German partners have been using the Samoylov station in the Siberian Lena delta since 1998 and have conducted permafrost and other research there. The 2019 Multidisciplinary drifting Observatory for the Study of Arctic Climate (MOSAIC) expedition of the German icebreaker *Polarstern* would also not have been possible without Russian partners and icebreaking expertise and logistical support. This cooperation had been promoted at the ministry level through various agreements. In addition to this bilateral framework, cooperation between Russian and German researchers has also occurred within multilateral organisations such as the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) and the Arctic Council working groups. Besides institutionalized cooperation, close relationships between researchers have formed over the past decades since the end of the Cold War. These close personal ties are the last form of scientific cooperation remaining after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent breakdown of scientific relations. However, due to the repression of civil society in Russia (e.g., the law on "foreign agents"), communication with Russian researchers is possible but restricted and may even put them at personal risks. *Credit: AWI/Lianna Nixon*

This “new era” was also a turning point regarding Arctic cooperation based mainly on scientific cooperation (Box 1). After the start of the Russian war of aggression against

³ Science Diplomacy in the Polar Regions, German Arctic Office, July 2023.

Ukraine, Germany as well as other Western States suspended official scientific cooperation with Russia at the institutional level. Russian State-funded institutions were excluded from ongoing projects, and their financial support was stopped. Since then western researchers have had little access to the Russian Arctic. Yet the latter encompasses about 50% of the land surfaces north of the Arctic Circle as well as the world largest continental shelf (the Siberian shelf), and as such used to being a major destination of western research field work. From a scientific perspective, the consequent lack of data represents a massive limitation to further research on climate and environmental changes. Scientific cooperation between western democracies and Russia now continues to only take place in isolated instances, as in the case of the Conference of the Parties to the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement.

The new German Arctic Policy Guidelines begins with a reminder of Germany's main interests in the Arctic and then sets out three major priorities. Germany's interests in the Arctic are primarily scientific and relative to environmental protection and its broader climate policy. Economic interests, for example in Arctic shipping routes, are characterized by a strong commitment to sustainability.

The first Guidelines major priority refers to "Safeguarding security and stability". It points out that the doctrine of "Arctic exceptionalism" no longer applies and that the Arctic can no longer be considered as a model for peaceful cooperation and stability. The Arctic which was once characterised by low levels of tension is now affected by significant geopolitical challenges. Russia's increased military activity in the High North as well as China's growing strategic ambitions and its self-proclaimed identity as a "near-Arctic State" have prompted Germany to reconsider its Arctic strategy. In the Guidelines, the German Government emphasises its commitment to Arctic security through NATO and EU frameworks and underlines the importance of carefully observing geopolitical developments. This also relates to the region's strategic interconnectedness with the broader Euro-Atlantic security landscape. Germany, however, does not plan a militarised presence in the Arctic.

The second Guidelines major priority, "Defending the rule-based order and strengthening resilience" emphasises that the Arctic must remain a region governed by international law, with special reference to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In the Guidelines, Germany expresses strong support for multilateral agreements and peaceful conflict resolution, especially with regards to the demarcation of waters and extended continental shelves (Fig. 1). Emphasised is the German interest in protecting international sea routes and the principle of freedom of navigation. Furthermore, the document highlights that non-Arctic States have legitimate interests in maintaining the

Arctic's legal integrity and stability, in particular, regarding shipping, environmental governance and the impact of the climate crisis.

Last but certainly not least, the third Guidelines major priority "Fostering climate action, nature conservation and environmental protection" as well as sustainable development is subdivided into three parts. The first part "Consistently advancing climate action, nature conservation and environmental protection" emphasises that the Arctic is warming at four times the global average and that the climate crisis is transforming the Arctic more rapidly than any other region of the world. This accelerated change has far-reaching global consequences, including sea level rise and changes in atmospheric circulation patterns, directly affecting Germany. The urgency for both mitigation and adaptation measures is stressed in the Guidelines.

Box 2: Germany, a high-profile polar research nation⁴

With a high profile in polar research, strong political engagement and active participation in discussions about the future and sustainable development of the Arctic, Germany is an international actor in the High North. Arctic research in Germany is currently conducted by numerous research institutes, universities, non-university research institutions, non-governmental organisations, authorities and foundations. The Alfred Wegener Institute, Helmholtz Centre for Marine and Polar Research (AWI) is the most important coordinating institute. Founded in 1980 and now with around 1500 employees (of which 500 are scientific personal), it is internationally recognised as a centre of excellence in polar and marine research. In 2024, the total budget amounted to €236.6 million. The AWI maintains a variety of air (research aircraft Polar 5 and Polar 6), ground (the German-French research base AWIPEV in Spitsbergen), and sea-based research infrastructure (the research icebreaker *Polarstern*) and also makes them available to other research institutions. In 2017, the AWI established the German Arctic Office in close coordination with the competent federal ministries in order to improve the exchange of information and cooperation between German Arctic stakeholders from science, politics and business. By way of the twice-yearly Arctic Dialogue, the office provides a platform for an effective interministerial exchange with the key actors in German Arctic research. This direct access makes it possible to contribute scientific results to relevant political decision-making processes.

Germany's Arctic climate policy is in line with the Paris Agreement and its own national net-zero strategies. In response, Germany is committed to reducing emissions of black carbon and methane and supports the enforcement of strict environmental standards for Arctic shipping. The second part "Fostering cutting-edge research in the Arctic", acknowledges that science is the cornerstone of evidence-based Arctic policy (Box 2).

Preserving Arctic research as an arena of peaceful and transparent international cooperation is a central objective in a challenging geopolitical environment. However, the

⁴ Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines, Federal Foreign Office, September 2024.

Guidelines also point out that in light of current circumstances, Russia is no longer considered a partner in Arctic research. Consequently, German researchers are strengthening the collaboration with partners from like-minded countries.

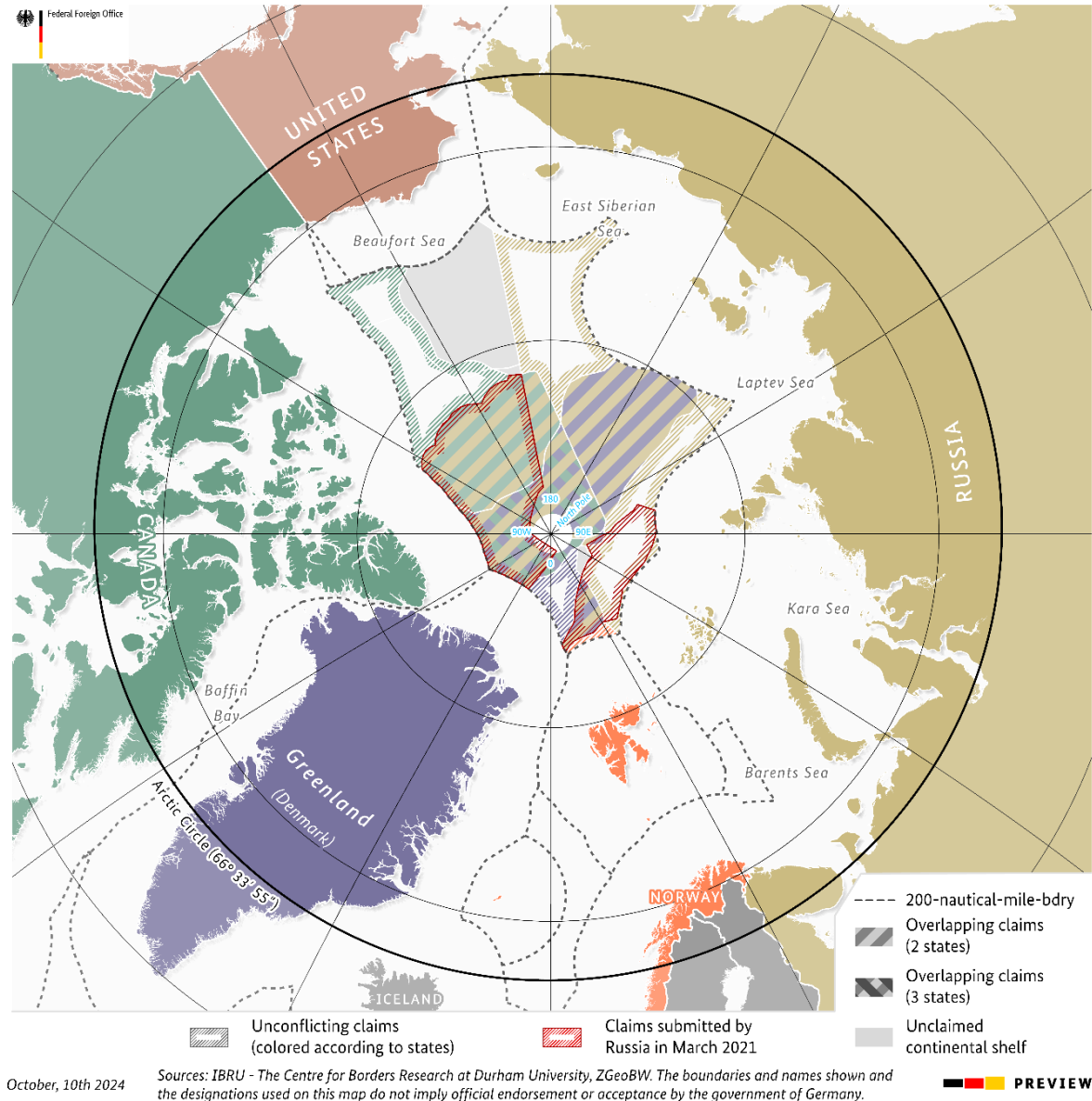


Fig. 1: Overlapping Claims on the North Pole’s Seabed. Referring to Article 76 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), three Arctic coastal States (Canada, Kingdom of Denmark and Russia) have made overlapping extended continental shelf claims on the seabed beneath the North Pole. *Source: Federal Foreign Office, Arctic Policy Guidelines, Germany.*

As mentioned earlier, if multilateral diplomacy in the Arctic has long been based on scientific cooperation, when a giant Arctic nation like Russia is missing from the table, science diplomacy is no longer operational nor effective. Germany continues to promote open data sharing and international scientific cooperation and will sustain its long-term investment in

key Arctic research institutions, such as the AWI. The Indigenous and local population will be integrated into the research process at an early stage.

The third part “Safeguarding sustainable development” states that Germany supports the application of the “precautionary principle” and the “polluter-pays principle” in all economic activities in the Arctic. It underlines that development in the region must not endanger fragile ecosystems or compromise societal and human security. The Guidelines therefore support inclusive business models to provide tangible benefits to local populations while protecting Arctic biodiversity and environment.

Germany also promotes sustainable practices in tourism and raw material supply chains and supports the transfer of green technologies to Arctic communities. The Guidelines call for strict international regulations for deep-sea mining, requiring strong environmental protection measures and scientific assessments before any commercial activity is implemented.

An important theme of the 2024 Guidelines is social justice, with a strong emphasis on the rights and well-being of Arctic Indigenous Peoples. Germany recognises that Indigenous communities are not only stakeholders but rights-holders and that all activities in the Arctic must take into consideration their interests and protect their rights. In the guidelines, the German Government commits to supporting Indigenous participation in decision-making bodies, such as the Arctic Council. Access to health care, cultural preservation and self-determination and funding collaborative initiatives that integrate Indigenous knowledge and governance systems are mentioned as priorities.

In brief, Germany’s updated Arctic Policy Guidelines represent a shift toward a more strategically engaged and globally responsible Arctic presence. The Guidelines do not describe the Arctic purely as a zone of confrontation but identify both risks and responsibilities in a region vulnerable to climate change and geopolitical instability. Responding to a new configuration seen as a “*Zeitenwende*”, Germany seeks to defend the international rule-based order, forming the basis for security and stability in the region. Even a non-Arctic State Germany has legitimate interests in a stable, sustainable and accessible Arctic. A warming Arctic affects global sea level, climate feedback loops and biodiversity, all of which have direct implications for Germany and the EU, and, as a matter of fact, for mankind as a whole. At the same time, Germany’s economic and scientific interests in the Arctic, including polar research, maritime transport and technological cooperation, justify its long-term engagement. Research is however a certain mainstay.

As emphasised in a Policy Brief on the Reception of Germany’s new Arctic Policy Guidelines⁵, Germany calls for a future-oriented Arctic governance model that is inclusive, science-informed and respectful of Indigenous rights. In this model, multilateral institutions, in particular the Arctic Council, play a central role. Even if in light of current geopolitical tensions full cooperation is not possible, the German Arctic policy supports pragmatic continuity through scientific cooperation and EU-led initiatives. By supporting high environmental standards, transparent monitoring of shipping and emissions and precautionary measures particularly with regards to deep-sea mining, Germany aims to support future-proof Arctic governance. Germany’s Arctic policy links regional engagement to global priorities, such as climate neutrality, sustainable development and peaceful coexistence. This integrated perspective acknowledges that Arctic change is not isolated but a global signal, requiring a coherent and responsible international response.

Ultimately, while Germany’s Arctic policy was updated in reaction to the “*Zeitenwende*”, Berlin remains committed to continuing to encourage the development of the Arctic as a region of peace, cooperation and sustainability. Germany intends to be a reliable partner in defending the global commons. It is essential that policy be informed by science and that the voices of Indigenous communities be respected in any decision. As two of the EU’s most active non-Arctic States, Germany and France would probably benefit from coordinating their Arctic policies to align efforts and increase their collective influence. This would also support a coherent and effective EU Arctic policy, strengthening the EU’s voice in Arctic governance.

Volker RACHOLD⁶ for POLAR WATCH⁷

⁵ Bäsell, L. (2025) Reception of Germany’s new Arctic Policy Guidelines (2024).

⁶ Senior scientist, expert in Science for Arctic Policy and Diplomacy, Germany.

⁷ The views expressed in this article are those of the author. They do not reflect the official policy or position of any entities of which the author is or was a member.

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