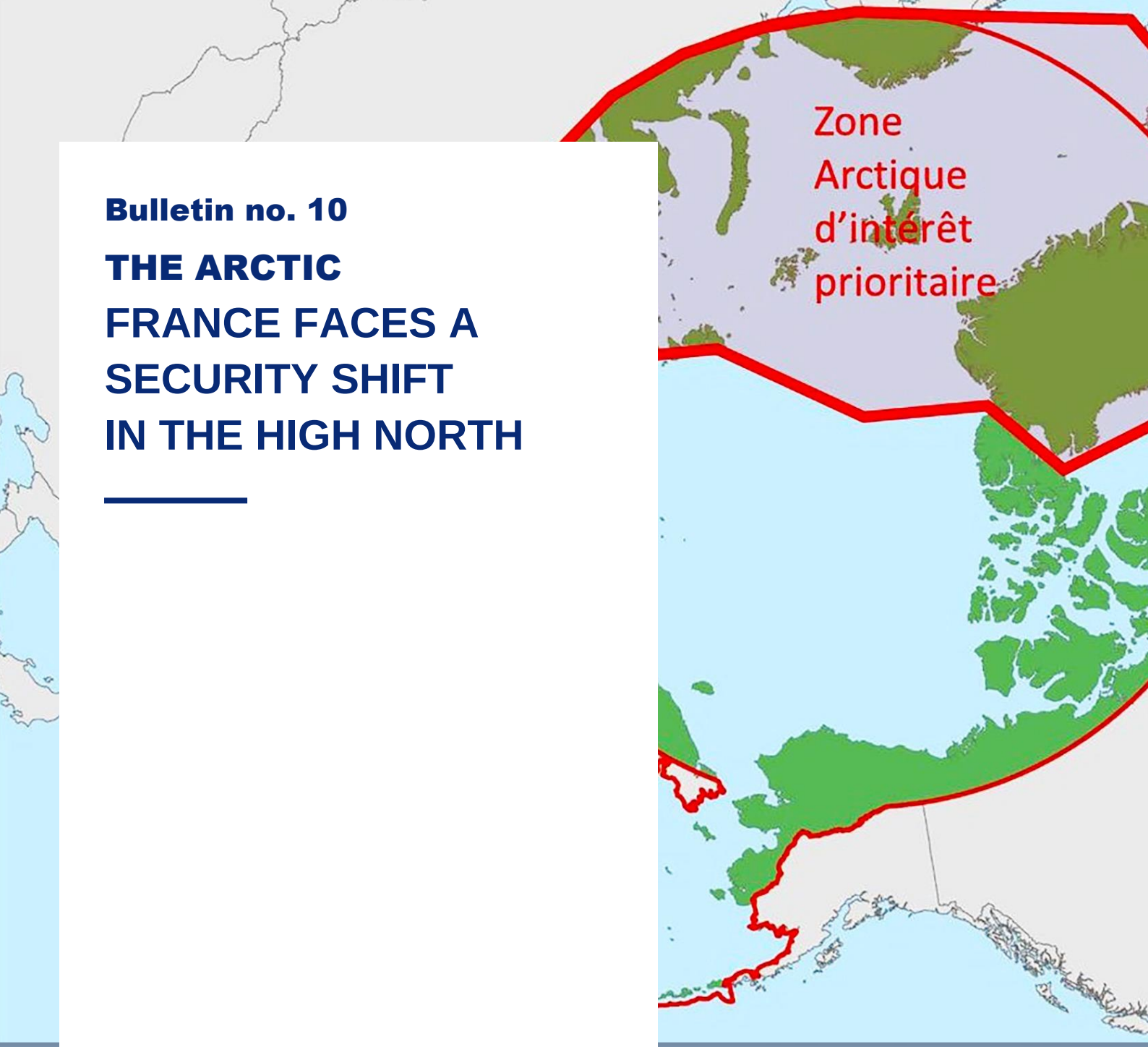

Bulletin no. 10

THE ARCTIC
FRANCE FACES A SECURITY SHIFT IN THE HIGH NORTH

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Polar Regions Monitoring and Forecasting

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France Faces Strategic Reconfiguration of the High North

Faced with a strategic reconfiguration of the Arctic, France is adopting a pragmatic and non-escalatory approach aimed at regional stability, freedom of action and capacity adaptation in extreme environments.

France is concerned with the Arctic region because of strategic interests and international responsibilities, as well as a long tradition of scientific research on polar environments. After the end of the Cold War, the circumpolar Arctic experienced a period of regional cooperation focusing on economic development and environmental issues. This region, and more specifically the part of the Arctic located on the periphery of Europe (Fig. 1), is now undergoing rapid security reconfiguration: Russian remilitarization focused on sanctuarisation of the Arctic *bastion* ('strong point of a line of defense') and China's growing *dual-use* presence ('both civilian and military use').

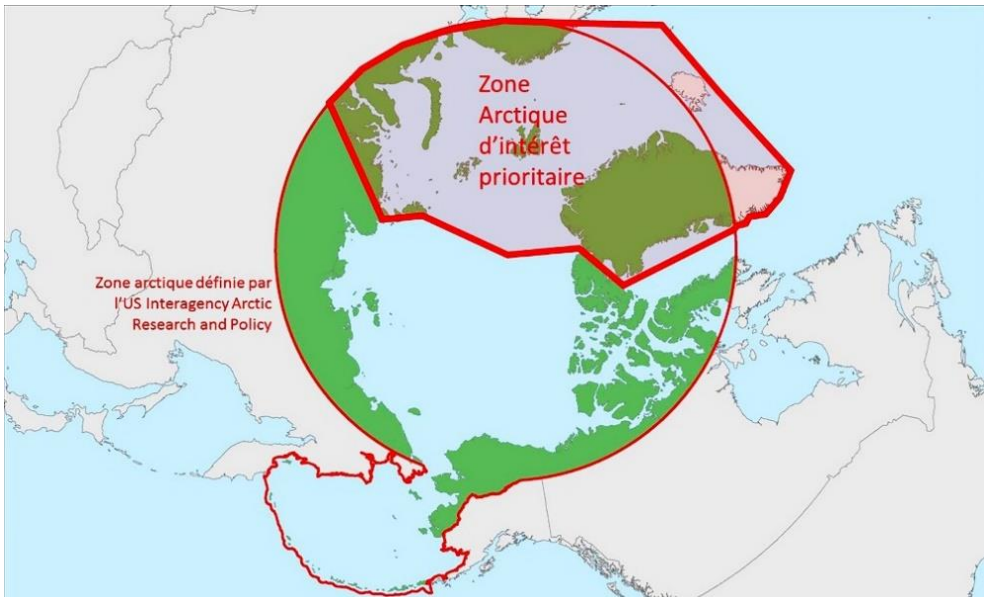

Figure 1: France's Priority Area of Interest in the Arctic (in bold red) is the part of the Arctic located on the periphery of Europe where France aims to preserve its influence and freedom of action. This is an area of high interest to France's European allies and NATO. It is nearly comparable to the Norwegian concept of *High North*. *Source: Stratégie de défense pour l'Arctique, Ministère des Armées, Juillet 2025/US Arctic Research Commission.*

'At the operational level, France favors a targeted and credible presence in the High North rather than a permanent one'

The strategic reconfiguration of the Arctic is marked by a return to power politics and the end of *Arctic exceptionalism* —'North Pole, pole of peace,' as President Gorbachev put it in his 1987 Murmansk speech. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the strengthening of its military capabilities, and China's growing presence in the High North are encouraging France and Europe to strengthen their security.

Firstly, there is Russia's ambition to secure the Arctic bastion. This traces back to World War II, from the summer of 1941 to May 1945, when the USSR was supplied by allied convoys in Murmansk. After Germany's surrender, the USSR imposed communism on Eastern European countries and recovered submarines from German shipyards. In response to these advances, the West created NATO in 1949. With the Baltic and Black seas under NATO control, the main Soviet naval forces moved to the Arctic and the Pacific coast. During this period, American and Soviet submarines patrolled the Arctic, *keeping tabs on each other* ('showing the enemy that they are being watched'). At the end of the USSR, Murmansk owned 48 ships and 220 submarines. The end of the Cold War changed the strategic situation. In 1987, Gorbachev called for the creation of a zone of peace, cooperation, and disarmament, a dynamic that resulted in the cessation of nuclear testing, the signing of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, and the creation in 1996 of the Arctic Council, a *high-level forum* focused on 'sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic' (Art. 1.a, Ottawa Declaration, 1996). However, this phase of relative demilitarization never called into question the strategic importance of the Russian Arctic for Moscow.

Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 2000 was part of a strategy to restore Russian power. From the early 2000s onwards, Russia strengthened its defense capabilities in the Arctic, reactivating numerous military bases, modernizing its fleet of nuclear submarines, and developing access denial systems designed to protect Arctic shipping lanes. At the same time, Moscow made legal claims to extend its continental shelf, particularly over the Lomonosov and Mendeleev ridges, reflecting a comprehensive strategy combining law, economics, and military power. On February 10, 2007, in Munich, Vladimir Putin delivered a discordant speech that some listeners may have considered a threat: 'It is obvious, I think, that NATO's enlargement has nothing to do with the modernization of the alliance or with security in Europe. On the contrary, it is a factor that represents a serious provocation and lowers the level of mutual trust. We are legitimately entitled to ask openly against whom this enlargement is being carried out.'

An Arctic strategy was published in 2008 (Fundamentals of the Russian Federation's Arctic Policy for 2020 and Beyond), supplemented in 2013 with the Strategy for the

Development of the Arctic Region of the Russian Federation and Ensuring National Security for the Period up to 2020. Priorities ranged from economic development to military security and border protection. Global warming made it possible to increase the navigable period and export liquefied natural gas by sea. Russia strengthened its fleet of submarines, frigates, and destroyers to control traffic and secure its Arctic zone, which accounts for 53% of the circumpolar Arctic coastline. Successive crises with the West, beginning with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, accelerated this dynamic. Russia then intensified its military maneuvers in the Barents Sea and stepped up the remilitarization of its Arctic bases, causing serious concern among coastal states, particularly Norway.

The publication of *Russia's Arctic Strategy up to 2035* in 2020, followed by the *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* signed by President Putin on July 31, 2022, confirmed this orientation: the Arctic is presented as a key area for Russian national security, while the United States and NATO are designated as major threats. The attack on Ukraine in 2022 took place while Russia was chairing the Arctic Council. The seven other nations of the Arctic Council announced that they were suspending their participation in Council meetings, and Finland and Sweden decided to join NATO.

Secondly, China has become a polar power. It initially focused on Antarctica, but its presence in the Arctic has accelerated in recent years, driven by global warming and melting ice. Scientific research was China's first gateway to the Arctic. Its presence took shape in the early 2010s with the signing of a cooperation agreement with Russia in 2010 on the transport of hydrocarbons, marking Beijing's entry into the energy and logistics dynamics of the High North. Obtaining observer status on the Arctic Council in 2013 was a decisive step, allowing China to legitimise its diplomatic and scientific presence in the region. China then unveiled its objectives in a White Paper on the Arctic, published in 2018: to understand, protect, develop, and participate in governance. Beijing stated its intention to participate in the region's economic and social development and included the Arctic in the Polar Silk Roads. For China, the Arctic is part of the ‘common good of humanity.’ As such, China expected to be recognized as one of the actors by applying the following principles: respect, cooperation, shared interest, win-win results, and sustainability.

China's foothold in the Arctic is based primarily on a strategy of gradual influence combining economic investment, scientific cooperation, and the development of critical infrastructure. Beijing has invested in several Russian port infrastructures and has gradually established a presence in other Arctic countries (Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Finland) with a view to securing supply chains, diversifying trade routes, and collecting

strategic data. This growing presence has sparked persistent mistrust on the part of Russia, which is keen to preserve its influence and control over the Arctic region. However, the war in Ukraine has forced Russia to deepen its cooperation with China, making Beijing an indispensable partner, albeit a structurally ambiguous one.

Figure 2: The GIUK Gap (Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom) is an area of the North Atlantic Ocean that is a crucial passage for ships traveling between the Atlantic Ocean and the Arctic, as well as between North America and Europe. Control of this strategic transit route allows NATO to monitor and regulate maritime traffic, ensuring that key shipping lanes remain open and secure, and to detect and deter potential underwater and underground threats, including increasingly frequent Russian hybrid threats. In the event of conflict, this passage would facilitate the rapid deployment of NATO forces across the Atlantic. *Source: European Parliament Research Service, PE 769.527, March 2025.*

Sino-Russian cooperation also extends to science and space. In Svalbard, Russia has set up an international research center in partnership with the Chinese polar institute, which will bring together researchers from BRICS countries. The two countries have also decided to strengthen their cooperation in all space activities, particularly in observation, communication, and navigation, which are essential for operations in high latitudes. These activities, which are officially civilian, have a dual use intended to support military capabilities, particularly for surveillance, under-ice navigation, and knowledge of the seabed. While China's military presence in the Arctic remains limited, the capabilities acquired call for increased vigilance on the part of European and Euro-Atlantic states.

The rapid deterioration of the security environment in the Arctic is accompanied by a climate of mistrust between the major powers. Russia perceives NATO countries' defensive buildup as a direct threat, while Moscow's hybrid actions against European states—sabotage, jamming, information pressure— are seen by the allies as a provocation requiring a collective and coordinated response. In this regard, several allied military officials believe that Russia would refocus a significant part of its strategic efforts on the High North once the conflict in Ukraine is over. The gradual strengthening of Russia's naval nuclear component and the intensification of submarine activities in the North Atlantic have led several allied states to reinvest in surveillance and anti-submarine warfare. The United Kingdom and Norway have thus begun cooperating to deploy a network of hydrophones and strengthen submarine detection and tracking capabilities in the area between Great Britain, Iceland, and Greenland, reactivating the strategic centrality of the GIUK gap (Fig. 2).

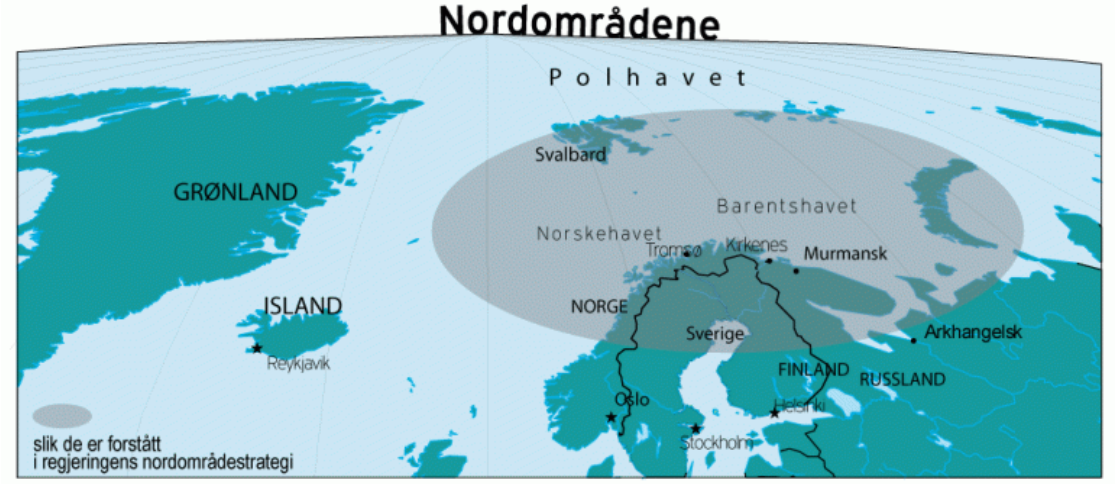

Figure 3: The High North Area (*Nordområdene*, in Bokmål) as defined in the Norwegian government's *Strategy for the High North* (*Nordområdepolitikk*) delineates Norway's priority area of interest and influence in the Arctic, extending beyond the jurisdiction of this coastal state. *Source: Regjeringen.no*

In response to these developments, NATO has taken on a more assertive role in the Arctic in order to strengthen the defense of Arctic countries that are members of the Atlantic Alliance and to contain Russian deployments. Long cautious, the Alliance clarified its position in the fall of 2024, when the chairman of its military committee explicitly stated that NATO would defend the interests of its members in the region. This shift has resulted in increased surveillance, the adaptation of exercises to Arctic conditions, and the launch of structural projects such as NORTHLINK, designed to improve the resilience and throughput of satellite communications in high latitudes. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has changed the strategic geography of the High North. At the Hague Summit in June 2025, France announced its participation in the Forward Land Force deployed in Finland, alongside five other countries, under Swedish command. This

contribution is part of a strategy of allied solidarity and credible deterrence, while preserving freedom of judgment and national action.

At the same time, the European Union has been faced with the need to reassess its Arctic policy. The strategy published in 2021, which focuses primarily on environmental issues, public health, and the well-being of the populations of the High North, was based on a logic of cooperation involving Russia, Norway, and Iceland. While this approach made it possible to structure civil protection and disaster preparedness—notably with the support of Copernicus and Galileo—it proved inadequate in the face of threats and Russia's accelerated militarization. This realization was reflected in the report adopted by the European Parliament in November 2025 entitled *EU Strategy and Cooperation in the Arctic*. The report emphasizes that the Arctic is now a theater of geopolitical and military competition, affected both by Russia's strengthening capabilities and by China's growing economic and technological influence through the Polar Silk Roads. The Parliament stresses the urgency of a robust, security-focused European strategy to protect critical infrastructure—particularly undersea cables and pipelines—and enhanced coordination with Member States and NATO allies, while remaining anchored in international law and sustainable development. Parliament also highlights the changing political dynamics towards greater European integration in the Arctic. Iceland, Norway, and Greenland have expressed their willingness to join the EU.

Faced with this geopolitical and military competition in the Arctic, what action can France take? In 1963, France became the first nation to establish a research base in Svalbard, which it has since shared with Germany in the village of Ny-Ålesund. French polar research is recognized for its excellence in several fields, and former French Prime Minister Michel Rocard, ambassador for the poles from 2009 to 2016, helped make France's voice heard within the Arctic Council. France's presence was justified, in the event of a crisis in the Arctic, by its membership of NATO, the EU, and the UN Security Council, and as a nuclear power. In 2016, the *National Roadmap for the Arctic*, France's first polar strategy document, noted that "at this stage, the main challenges of the Arctic region for France are primarily economic, security, and environmental in nature, rather than military and defense-related', and that it was necessary 'to develop and maintain the ability of French forces to operate in the Arctic region." The 2017 edition of the *Revue nationale stratégique* already identified the Arctic as an area likely to become a theater of confrontation. The war in Ukraine and the accelerated remilitarization of the Arctic have confirmed this analysis, resulting in Finland and Sweden joining NATO and the presence of European forces in the Baltic states. In response to these tensions, on July

10, 2025, France published a defense strategy for the High North that takes a pragmatic and non-escalatory approach. The *2025 Arctic Defense Strategy* is based on three key objectives: contributing to regional stability in close cooperation with allies and partners; preserving French and European freedom of action, both militarily and commercially; and developing capabilities adapted to extreme conditions in order to be able to operate, and if necessary fight, toward, in, and from the Arctic. The central issue remains the preservation of strategic freedom of maneuver, which is essential to the credibility of deterrence, the protection of maritime flows, and the operational readiness of forces. Its implementation is based on seven areas of focus: active participation in Arctic forums, developing interministerial coordination, deepening knowledge of the environment, information exchange and logistical support with partners, strengthening NATO interoperability, developing equipment adapted to extreme conditions, and investing in the Arctic space sector.

Operationally, France favors a targeted and credible presence rather than a permanent presence. The Army relies on the 27th Mountain Infantry Brigade, whose expertise in challenging environments is regularly tested during exercises in the Arctic. The French Navy maintains an intermittent presence in the North Atlantic and the European Arctic, in close coordination with its allies, in order to contribute to maritime monitoring and surveillance of underwater activities, taking into account the technical constraints associated with extreme conditions. With its Airbus A400M transport aircraft, the Air and Space Force has projection capabilities adapted to extreme cold, although these depend on the security of landing zones and allied support. Beyond land, sea, and air environments, high latitudes impose specific constraints on space capabilities. Satellite coverage remains partially degraded beyond the Arctic Circle for observation, telecommunications, and navigation, which reinforces the importance of NATO and European cooperation and the development of appropriate polar orbit solutions. In this regard, detailed knowledge of the Arctic environment (ice, meteorology, seabed, and critical infrastructure) is an essential force multiplier, enabling the detection of *sub-threshold activities* (‘hybrid actions aimed at destabilizing the adversary without directly using force’) and the protection of cables, pipelines, and strategic shipping lanes.

Finally, France's defense strategy in the High North is part of a comprehensive approach that incorporates issues that are not strictly military in nature. The gradual opening of polar sea routes and the increased exploitation of strategic mineral resources pose major challenges in terms of security of supply and protection of European trade flows. The protection of the environment, French and European property and people is a key

responsibility: in the event of a maritime accident, major pollution or humanitarian crisis in the Arctic, only the armed forces have the necessary projection capabilities to intervene effectively. This posture is conditioned by capacity and budgetary constraints. *The French polar strategy for 2030*, presented in April 2022 by the ambassador for the poles and maritime affairs, Olivier Poivre d'Arvor, set out ambitious goals in terms of research and resources, but this strategy has failed to generate the interministerial momentum required to address polar issues. Given France's current public deficit, the implementation of this strategy remains uncertain. Knowledge of polar environments is essential, with the CNRS playing a key role in structuring research. Another challenge is maintaining and renewing French polar infrastructure in support of scientific research.

France fully assumes its international responsibilities as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, a member of NATO and the European Union, and a partner in solidarity with seven of the eight members of the Arctic Council[1]. This solidarity may extend to the implementation of collective or mutual defense, in accordance with Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union, while maintaining a measured approach aimed at avoiding any uncontrolled escalation. In this new balance, France's Arctic defense strategy aims to strike a credible, allied but non-escalatory posture based on freedom of action, knowledge of the environment, interoperability, and capability adaptation. However, overall consistency depends on some key conditions: securing support points and operational cooperation, addressing vulnerabilities specific to high latitudes, particularly in the space and information domains, and ensuring, over the long term, the means for scientific knowledge and operational preparedness. In short, France's credibility in the High North[2] will depend less on a permanent presence than on a sustainable capacity to understand, anticipate, and act, by coordinating defense, research, and partnerships in the service of regional stability and Euro-Atlantic security.

Patrick HÉBRARD[3] pour POLAR WATCH[4]

[1] France's Arctic defense strategy does not take into account the tensions between President Trump and the Danish authorities relating to the threats to annex Greenland, even though these tensions are undermining the balance between the United States and another NATO member state, member of the Arctic Council and member of the EU.

[2] France's *Arctic Defense Strategy* uses the terms *High North* and *Arctic* (circumpolar) as synonyms, while France's *priority area of interest* in the Arctic is similar to the Norwegian concept of *High North*, as mentioned above.

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[4] The opinions expressed in this article are the responsibility of the author.

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