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# ARCTIC DEFENCE STRATEGY

# CONTENTS

<b>FOREWORD FROM THE MINISTER FOR THE ARMED FORCES</b>	3
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	4
<b>1. STRATEGIC CONTEXT OF THE ARCTIC REGION</b>	5
<b>2. STRATEGIC DEFENCE CHALLENGES AND AREA OF PRIORITY INTEREST</b>	6
<b>3. STRATEGIC DEFENCE OBJECTIVES</b>	8
<b>4. STRATEGIC DEFENCE STRANDS</b>	9
<b>POSITIONING</b>	9
<b>STRAND 1: ENHANCING FRANCE'S LEGITIMACY IN THE ARCTIC REGION</b>	9
<b>STRAND 2: DEVELOPING A GLOBAL COHERENCE AT NATIONAL LEVEL</b>	9
<b>STRAND 3: MASTERING THE ARCTIC THEATRE AND ENVIRONMENT</b>	9
<b>COOPERATION</b>	10
<b>STRAND 4: DEVELOPING BILATERAL PARTNERSHIPS</b>	10
<b>STRAND 5: NATO AS AN ARCTIC INTEROPERABILITY STANDARD CAPABILITY CHALLENGES</b>	10
<b>CAPABILITY CHALLENGES</b>	11
<b>STRAND 6: DEVELOPING EQUIPMENT ADAPTABLE TO OPERATIONS IN A POLAR AREA</b>	11
<b>STRAND 7: INVESTING THE ARCTIC SPACE DOMAIN</b>	11





## FOREWORD FROM THE MINISTER FOR THE ARMED FORCES

France's interest in the Arctic is far from new. As early as 1963, France becomes the first nation to establish a research base on Svalbard. This founding choice makes our country part of a tradition of excellence in terms of polar research, in the wake of emblematic figures such as Paul-Émile Victor or Jean-Baptiste Charcot.

But the Arctic is no longer a scientific laboratory. It is today reflecting the major geopolitical upheavals and a place of expression of our strategic responsibilities. The 2017 Strategic Review of the Ministry for the Armed Forces had already sensed it, evoking a potential 'area of confrontation'.

The war in Ukraine confirmed this feeling: by reviving rivalries between great powers, it put an end to the 'Arctic exception', which prevailed up to now, and upset regional balances. Seven out of the eight riparian states are now NATO members. China is expressing its

ambitions for the far North ever more clearly. Russia, for its part, maintains an active, or even strengthened, military posture.

In this context, France cannot just look on. It has a special voice to make heard in this strategic region. As a permanent member of the Security Council, a global maritime power and an actor committed to multilateralism, France has the duty to actively contribute to the stability of the Arctic together with its allies and partners, preserve its freedom of action and acquire the military capabilities that are adapted to this challenging environment.

The Arctic Defence Strategy I am presenting today meets this triple requirement. Realistic, graduated and having a clear ambition, it is aimed at enabling France to act towards, in and from the Arctic in the service of peace, collective security and our national interests. Structured around three pillars – positioning, cooperation, capabilities – and broken down in seven strands of efforts, this strategy articulates with clear-sightedness our means, our commitments and our vision by 2030.

It is a follow-up to our National Strategic Review: making France a power that is loyal to its allies, deeply European and able to take on its responsibilities in an ever more uncertain world.

Sébastien Lecornu,

Minister for the Armed Forces

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The Arctic region is a space of growing strategic interest**, at the crossroads of climate, economic and geopolitical challenges. Climate change effects are opening up new shipping routes and opportunities for exploiting natural resources, while increasing environmental and security fragilities. Strategic competition is also intensifying in there: Russia's invasion of Ukraine has upset regional balances, marking a major strategic shift with now seven out of the eight riparian states being NATO members. **If the Arctic is becoming a place of growing rivalry between great powers, its polarisation will have tangible and direct effects on the stability of the Euro-Atlantic space.** The Arctic also constitutes an area of operational interest for the Armed Forces, as it offers footholds in the maritime, land and space domains, a forward position for strategic surveillance of our competitors, and a unique training environment in extreme conditions.

In this context, the French Defence strategy in the Arctic is structured around three main objectives: **I) actively contribute to the stability of the region, in conjunction with our Allies and partners; II) preserve the French and European, commercial and military, Freedom of action in the common spaces of this area and III) develop military capabilities adapted to Arctic conditions to operate and fight to, in and from the Arctic.**

To meet these objectives, the French strategy is structured around three complementary pillars: **strategic positioning**, with strengthened French presence in the Arctic governance bodies and the political-military dialogues; **cooperation** through the development of bilateral and multilateral partnerships with the Arctic countries, especially within NATO and the EU; and, last but not least, the **capability** strand that aims to strengthen the capacity of the French Armed Forces to be aware of, monitor and act in this area. The French strategy also follows a logic of tangible support for the sovereignty of Arctic states, offering them defence capabilities and operational partnerships, thereby contributing to the stability and resilience of the region. Building on these three pillars, the French strategy is broken down into seven strategic Defence strands:

- **enhancing France's visibility and legitimacy in this region** through active participation in the Arctic fora and highlighting of actions carried out by the French Armed Forces in the area;
- **developing a global coherence at national level** through strengthened intergovernmental coordination, guaranteeing a multiplier effect for French actions;
- **mastering the Arctic theatre and environment** through in-depth knowledge of the area, by continuing targeted deployments to the area to strengthen operational experience, interoperability and the ability to act;
- **developing bilateral partnerships** with the main stakeholders in the region, as well as the French private operators present on the ground in order to foster the exchange of information, logistical support and experience sharing;
- **strengthening interoperability through NATO** by relying on the Alliance's mechanisms and tools (joint exercises, capability and operational synergies, etc.), and by supporting NATO's ambitions in the Arctic and the far North.
- **developing equipment adapted to extreme conditions** right from the design stage or by adapting existing systems (reinforcement, protection, specific sensors), while ensuring cost-effectiveness;
- **investing the Arctic space domain**, both in the space (satellites adapted to high latitudes) and terrestrial (relay stations) segments, while ensuring strategic monitoring on sensitive foreign facilities and strengthening cooperation with the European countries that are active in this domain.

The aim is therefore, for France, **to maintain its freedom of manoeuvre and clout** in this area, with a **sustainable, necessary and reasoned investment**, against a constrained budgetary and material backdrop. This strategy follows **a logic of gradual, reasonable and realistic ramp-up, consistent with the current budgetary and industrial constraints.**



## 1. STRATEGIC CONTEXT OF THE ARCTIC REGION

The Arctic is a rapidly changing area, mainly as a result of climate change. It reveals its potential in natural, now exploitable resources, reshuffles geopolitical cards and constitutes a renewed ground for international competition and strategies of access. The Arctic is also becoming a strategic foothold and an advanced observation post on some of France's competitors, while offering the French Armed Forces a unique environment for operational preparation and training under extreme and demanding conditions. These developments confer unprecedented strategic importance on the region.

Climate changes appear twice faster in the Arctic than in the rest of the world. The melting of the permafrost risks to further accelerate global warming, the volume of CO<sub>2</sub> trapped in the latter being equivalent to twice the CO<sub>2</sub> already present in the atmosphere. **Additionally, the Arctic region would contain 13 % of oil and 30 % of natural gas resources** that have not been yet discovered in the world, as well as a potential of **127 million tonnes of rare earth and critical metals**, in second position after China (161 million tonnes). This concentration of strategic resources gives the Arctic a key role in Europe's energy, industrial and technological autonomy. In this context, the Arctic seabed is the focus of growing interest and competition, as illustrated by overlapping claims for the extension of continental shelves submitted by several Arctic coastal states.

**New shipping routes are now practicable due to the retreat of the ice sheet, especially in the summer.** The 'North-East Passage', also called the Northern Sea Route, makes it possible to link Europe to China along Russia's northern and eastern coasts. If it is of strategic interest for the exports of Russia's liquefied natural gas, it remains marginal for commercial shipping. Nevertheless, it could reduce the travel time between Europe and Asia by nearly 40 %, resulting in substantial savings in transport costs. In fact, the Chinese ship owner COSCO would envisage to open up a regular route of container ships, and the Chinese 'Belt and Road Initiative' foresees a shipping route through the Arctic. **However, the scope of this economic potential is still uncertain, as serious doubts persist as to the schedule and concrete feasibility of its effective exploitation.**

Even before the conflict in Ukraine, the Arctic exercised a growing power of attraction, as evidenced by the rising interest in the observer status on the Arctic Council. Created by the Ottawa Declaration in 1996, this intergovernmental cooperation forum gathers the eight riparian states of the region. Through the Ilulissat Declaration of 28 May 2008, **the riparian countries made the choice of a governance based on cooperation, outside any legally binding framework.** In 2013, several Asian (China, India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea) and European (France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, the United Kingdom) states gained observer status, with Switzerland having joined the group in 2017.

The Arctic is also a place, where the power tools of France's main strategic competitors are being deployed, with a twofold objective: on the one hand, leveraging the strategic advantages of the region such as access to oceans and reduced flight times for the long-range aviation; on the other hand, protecting oneself against the vulnerabilities brought about by the changing geopolitical context by securing resources and lines of communication. In this context, the Arctic serves both as a strategic buffer against Russian and Chinese ambitions to project power into the North Atlantic, and as a zone of stability on Europe's northern flank. This evolving security role, amplified by the war in Ukraine, has heightened concerns among regional partners, who are strengthening their defence postures and intensifying their cooperation efforts — both within NATO and through bilateral partnerships.

## 2. STRATEGIC DEFENCE CHALLENGES AND PRIORITY AREA OF INTEREST

Designated as an area ‘that may become one day an area of confrontation’, the Arctic presents for France global interests. The Arctic is not only part of France’s strategic depth, but constitutes also a pool of activities, which directly interests France and its Allies, whether they be natural resources, transport or strategic research. It also offers operational opportunities across the maritime, land, air, and space domains, with potential footholds that facilitate power projection, surveillance, and force preparation in extreme conditions. Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has deeply weakened the tacit polar exception, which until then had ensured stability in the region, and it is now essential to integrate from now on this area in our strategic thinking in order to anticipate future dynamics and hence preserve French interests.

The first strategic challenge lies in France’s international responsibility. The status of permanent member of the United Nations Security Council requires France to assume its status in all the contested areas. In the Euro-Atlantic area, its place within NATO and the EU involves an obvious strategic solidarity with seven out of the eight members to the Arctic Council, which can go so far as to implement the collective or mutual defence through Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty or Article 42.7 of the Treaty of the European Union. France may thus be brought to support an allied state or contribute to maintaining stability in the area, including by deploying its military forces. Moreover, the accession of Sweden and Finland further strengthens NATO’s representation in the Arctic, which now stands as a critical strategic flank of the Euro-Atlantic area.

The second strategic challenge lies in the access to the Arctic area by French Armed Forces in the face of growing contestation by competitors and the risk of a spill-over of power in the North Atlantic. Geographic developments affecting the Arctic lead to a growing closeness between two major regions in the global competition: Europe and the Pacific. These developments will have a significant impact on the French Armed Forces, which must maintain their ability to operate in the Arctic, a region where the military posture of certain competitors is evolving rapidly, particularly through the modernisation of capabilities and the expansion of dual-use infrastructure. This dynamic calls for the strengthening of France’s freedom of action, notably through the identification of operational footholds and the enhancement of our situational awareness and understanding of the theatre.

The third strategic challenge concerns the security of supply chains for France and the European Union, particularly in the energy and mining sectors — both in terms of extraction chains and transport routes. The region’s considerable reserves of strategic minerals, including rare earth elements, nickel, cobalt, and graphite, are of growing importance for Europe’s strategic autonomy. As the ice continues to melt, new maritime trade routes will open regularly, offering significant opportunities for both the French and European economies — particularly for shipping companies, whose activities will require appropriate protection. In parallel, new polar air routes are also becoming accessible, thanks to progress in circumpolar navigation, offering increased connectivity prospects.

Finally, the last challenge concerns the protection of goods and people, French or European ones. In this remote region, the Ministry for the Armed Forces is nowadays the only state actor that have the technical capacities to deploy to the Arctic. The French Armed Forces could then be called out to support the civil sector within the framework of a public service extended to this area. This would include in particular research and rescue actions, as well as actions of prevention and response to environmental incidents such as the fight against an accidental pollution. In this context, France can also play a stabilising and structuring role for coastal states, by offering a political, operational, and capability-based contribution to the strengthening of their sovereignty and resilience.

Thus, in this very wide area— that is six times larger than the surface of the Mediterranean Sea, the area located at Europe’s immediate periphery constitutes for France a natural area of priority interest, within which it must preserve its influence and freedom of action. From Greenland to Svalbard, this region focusses the interests of France’s European Allies and those of NATO.



*Arctic area of priority interest*

*Arctic area defined by the US Interagency Arctic Research and Policy*

### 3. STRATEGIC DEFENCE OBJECTIVES

*"By 2030, I want France to have consolidated its role as a balancing, united, globally influential power, a driving force for European autonomy, and a power that assumes its responsibilities by contributing, as a reliable and supportive partner, to the preservation of multilateral mechanisms based on international law."*

Emmanuel Macron – 2022 National Strategic Review

**The Arctic is an area of growing strategic interest.** The perception of the challenges specific to this area has shifted from a prospective approach, focussed on the economic opportunities that the consequences of climate change were opening up, to a vision mainly focussed on the strategic challenges of the area. Moreover, France reiterates in its latest 2022 National Strategic Review that it 'is fully present and active in **preserving its freedom of action and defending its interests** in common spaces', with a particular attention to the Arctic.

**By 2030, the Arctic's strategic role is likely to further intensify.** As a result of current dynamics, the trends that are today emerging should become clearer, prompting the various stakeholders to adjust their policies and means. This development will lastingly shape the regional strategic environment.

In this perspective, in order to play a role in the Arctic, France will have to consider **the coming decade as a transition and latency phase requiring a sufficient capability and organisational preparation (budgets, infrastructure, military assets)**. This is only by so doing that it will be able, in the longer term, to bolster its position and defend its interests.

France's strategic objectives in the Arctic are therefore:

- France's active contribution, in conjunction with its Allies and partners, to maintaining stability in the Arctic area;
- preserving France's and Europe's commercial and military freedom of action in the common spaces of the area;
- developing the French military capabilities to operate and fight to, in and from the Arctic.

The aim for France is to **maintain its freedom of manoeuvre and clout in its Arctic area of priority interest** in order to maintain in there a security environment that is lastingly **conducive to its strategic posture and its national activities** — in particular those related to nuclear deterrence, the protection of maritime flows, and operational preparedness in extreme conditions.



## 4. TRATEGIC DEFENCE STRANDS

In order to meet the three strategic Defence objectives in the Arctic, address current and future challenges and play its role towards its partners, France must **structure its commitment around three complementary strands: positioning, cooperation and operational capabilities.**

### POSITIONING

#### STRAND 1: ENHANCING FRANCE'S LEGITIMACY IN THE ARCTIC REGION

France must fully assert its status as a legitimate stakeholder in the Arctic. This requires greater involvement

*"Deterioration in the international environment, the risk of opportunistic strategies as our interests become more stretched, and the diversity of areas of action highlight the immense difficulty for France to respond alone to all the challenges it faces."*

Emmanuel Macron – 2022 National Strategic Review

and a level of representation commensurate with the stakes in the various institutions, organisations, forums, and seminars dealing with Arctic affairs. Such an active presence will enable France to influence strategic orientations related to the region, support the strengthening of multilateral mechanisms, and contribute to regional stability and the security of global commons.

#### STRAND 2: DEVELOPPING A GLOBAL COHERENCE AT NATIONAL LEVEL

A credible Arctic strategy relies on strong interministerial coordination, which is essential to ensuring the consistency of French positions and to creating synergies both in relations with partners and in actions conducted on the ground. This integrated approach will also help maximise the impact of investments in dual-use domains, both civilian and military. The Ministry for the Armed Forces must therefore take an **active part in these discussions**, in order to contribute its expertise and help enrich national strategic thinking.

From an operational perspective, the French Joint Staff must **ensure the ability** of joint forces to operate in a permissive Arctic environment, including in full autonomy, to protect French interests in the region. It must also be able to contribute effectively to protection and rescue operations for people and assets in the area. In this context, the identification of joint and logistical support points in areas of priority interest should also be explored, in order to enhance deployment endurance and improve responsiveness in the event of a crisis.

#### STRAND 3: MASTERING THE ARCTIC THEATRE AND ENVIRONMENT

On the ground, France must maintain an **approach that is realistic** (consonant with its means and position), **balanced** (respecting the law, its commitments and interests) and **credible**. To this end, **in-depth knowledge and practice of the area must be continued and maintained.**

In particular, it is necessary to **intensify the collection of environmental and intelligence data** according to a **multi-domain approach** to the use of sensors. Environmental data are essential to mastering the interactions of its forces with the domains, in which they operate. This is particularly the case with the oceanic component of the French deterrent. Intelligence contributes, for its part, to mastering the interactions of the French Armed Forces with the other actors operating in these domains. It should in particular allow to gain an increased knowledge of civil traffic, both air and sea ones, and of military activities in the Arctic.

The Ministry for the Armed Forces must also **continue to deploy national means** to the Arctic area, and in particular to the area of priority interest for France, whether they are ordered within an operational framework or as part of combined (ideally joint) exercises. In addition to the collection of data and the strengthening of military alliances, the aim is to harness lessons learned.

They are needed to have a better knowledge of forces, limits, margins of progress and ways of optimising French means, always in a multi-domain approach, be it in terms of command structures, equipment, intelligence, training or specific abilities. The Ministry for the Armed Forces must also build on these deployments to **fuel the dialogue with the riparian countries.**

## COOPERATION

### STRAND 4: DEVELOPING BILATERAL PARTNERSHIPS

Preserving stability in the Arctic, a challenge shared with several Allies and partners, requires an in-depth knowledge of regional dynamics to better assess the objectives and games of the various actors and **determine the scopes of possible convergences**. An analysis of the degree of alignment between France's priorities and those of regional actors will help identify the most relevant partnerships, based on a logic of mutual benefit. The attitude of Arctic coastal nations towards France, as well as the state of France's national capabilities, will ultimately determine the effectiveness and sustainability of its access to the region.

The concrete implementation of the orientations defined in the first three strands of the strategy will help consolidate this presence. These bilateral partnerships may also facilitate shared access to critical resources — particularly in the mining sector — and pave the way for long-term industrial, scientific, and technological cooperation.

### STRAND 5: STRENGTHENING INTEROPERABILITY THROUGH NATO

It is paramount for France to develop its knowledge and experience of **local organisations and modes of action of the Arctic actors**, but also to share its own knowledge in order to be able to easily and effectively interact. Interoperability constitutes in this regard a key lever for the cooperation that needs to be structured in the area. The NATO framework, to which seven of the eight members of the Arctic Council now belong, is proving to be the most relevant vehicle. Strengthening interoperability in this area will contribute to consolidating the regional posture (particularly through the integration of Finland and Sweden), to raising the level of ambition of multilateral exercises, and to developing capabilities suited to Arctic constraints, thereby enabling to deliver a message of regional stability. Additionally, France will also have to seek out synergies within the **European Union**, whose 2021 Arctic Strategy is significantly aligned with French Defence priorities in this area. This document advocates in particular to strengthen the surveillance and knowledge of the area and would help **increase a dynamic of interoperability , notably with the EU's regional actors** that are members to the Arctic Council, as well as with Norway. Certain programmes, which could **strengthen the Europeans' own capacities of action in the Arctic area**, could also be developed within this framework.

## CAPABILITY CHALLENGES

An heterogeneous domain, characterised by its remoteness, the Arctic imposes discontinuities in operations. It therefore requires **adapted means beyond the intrinsic robustness of military equipment, which must also help develop the knowledge of the environment and intelligence** (Strand 3). In both these cases, the space domain plays an important role.

### STRAND 6: DEVELOPING EQUIPMENT ADAPTABLE TO OPERATIONS IN A POLAR AREA

France **will develop national capabilities that are compatible with operations in the Arctic**. They will be complemented, if needed, by capabilities from partner countries, 'off-the-shelf' purchases or purchases of private services. The definition of this requirement must be articulated with France's ability to operate more broadly in a polar environment and the taking into account of the regulatory constraints specific to the Arctic.

The design of equipment adaptable to interventions or to a lasting presence in the Arctic regions **imposes respect for architectural rules or particular specifications**. Both equipment and French units still need to adapt to the specificities of the polar environment. These aspects need to be taken into account right from the stage of design of the future equipment of the Ministry for the Armed Forces, while ensuring that they are not excessively constrained. In parallel, the enhancement of existing capabilities — through the integration of sensors, protective systems, or specific modules, whether permanent or reconfigurable — should be assessed on a case-by-case basis, according to the operational scenarios considered. The Arctic environment may also serve as a testing ground for future equipment.

### STRAND 7: INVESTING THE ARCTIC SPACE DOMAIN

For France, the ambitions of partners engaged in a process of developing a niche in dual and defence space are real **opportunities for complementing its capabilities** for high latitudes, particularly in maritime surveillance, high-speed telecommunications and the exploitation of low-Earth and elliptical orbits.

Moreover, the Arctic presents very attractive geographic advantages in terms of volume of transfer and times of delivery of information gathered by moving satellites on so-called 'polar' orbits, especially imagery and eavesdropping, so much so that **other cooperation must be envisaged on ground segments**, like the one with the Kiruna station in Sweden.

The challenge of space surveillance, a priority field of action for France, may be, moreover, mutually beneficial, for France and its partners, by providing additional observation of the space environment from high latitudes, in particular for monitoring low-Earth orbits.



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