

Master in Advanced European and International Studies

European Integration and Global Studies

***China's Arctic Ambitions: How are
European Actors Responding, and What
Factors Shape the Capacity for UK-EU
Cooperation after Brexit?***

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China's Arctic Ambitions:

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Introduction

There are two kinds of Arctic problems: the imaginary and the real. Of the two, the imaginary are the most real.

– Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *The Arctic in Fact and Fable*.

For most of documented history, polar regions have been *terrae incognitae* – places at the ‘margins of the world’, beyond the borders of civilisation on the Eurasian continent. The Arctic is no exception. This vast region, characterised by pure white landscapes, frozen seas, and great white bears inspired many ancient explorers to record the wonders of its natural environment. Among them was Greek mariner Pytheas of Massalia, whose voyage in the year 330 BCE is the first recorded Arctic expedition. Perhaps this is why the modern word ‘arctic’ derives from the Greek ‘arktikos’: it means ‘near the bear’ [Marshall, 2015, 199-200]. Today, the Arctic region is inhabited by over four million people [Paet, 2025, 4], and comprises eight sovereign nation states: Canada, the US, Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Russia.

The Arctic region is strategically significant for several reasons. Firstly, it sustains the global environment in several critical ways: through solar reflection its ice bounces sunlight back into space, preventing the planet from overheating; through circulating the world’s ocean currents, it distributes heat and ensures globally stable weather systems; and through its role as a carbon reservoir, it sinks and stores vast amounts of carbon [World Wildlife Fund, 2026]. Secondly, it is a strategically important shipping route: positioned between Europe and Asia, the Arctic offers opportunities for maritime trade – the single most important mode of transport in world trade – in an increasingly interconnected and globalised world [Bjarnason, 2007, 7]. And finally, the Arctic is home to an assumed vast quantity of natural resources. The US Geological Survey estimated in 2009 that 1,669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids, and 90 billion barrels of oil are in the Arctic [Marshall, 2015, 204]. The region is consequently attracting growing interest due to its emergence as a critical area for energy security.

Historically, tensions and conflicts originating in other regions have occasionally spread to the circumpolar north, such as during World War II. During the war, the Arctic witnessed dozens of operations, particularly in northern Norway (controlled by Germany) and Greenland, which was administered by the USA on behalf of Nazi-occupied Denmark [Morrison and Bennett, 2024, 2]. After the war, the Cold War period saw the establishment and construction of US and Russian military bases, radar facilities and nuclear weapons capacities, militarising the Arctic for the first time in order to achieve a balance of global nuclear deterrence [Heininen, Everett et al, 2020, 19].

Just as war had spilled over into the Arctic, so did détente in the post-Cold War period, and friendlier western-Russian relations were accompanied with the dismantlement of Arctic military bases and weapons systems. This was complemented by the emergence of multilateral structures, such as the Arctic Council [Morrison and Bennett, 2024, 1]. Established in 1996, this is the preeminent intergovernmental forum for the Arctic region [Heininen, Everett et al, 2020, 18]. Furthermore, constructive cooperation “based on mutual trust and transparency” [Ilulissat Declaration 2008] led to high geopolitical stability in the post-Cold War Arctic and the emerging idea of “Arctic exceptionalism”. Mikhail Gorbachev’s 1987 speech is sometimes regarded as the genesis for this idea – that the region might be largely exempt or immune from geopolitical competition occurring elsewhere in the world [Morrison and Bennett, 2024, 3]. It was so unique that the Arctic was declared “a territory of dialogue” [Brańka, 2022, 373]. This is no longer the case.

1.1 Context of the research

The Arctic is undergoing a contemporary transformation. It is no longer a remote peripheral region, but an increasingly important, continually evolving geopolitical arena. Three megatrends fuel this Arctic transformation: climate change, globalisation, and power shifts [Kappia, 2022]. Firstly, rising concentrations of anthropogenic greenhouse gases in the atmosphere (from human activity) are causing the planet to heat, shrinking and thinning Arctic sea ice [Quillérou et al., 2017, 52]. The loss of polar ice decreases the efficacy of solar radiation, meaning that temperatures in the Arctic are rising four times faster than the global average [Morrison and

Bennett, 2024, 2-3]. For this reason, the Arctic is seen as the ‘canary in the mine’ – an early warning sentinel of climate change impacts [Quillérou et al., 2017, 52].

Secondly, longer ice-free seasons in the Arctic are opening up access to Arctic ocean-floor resources, increasing the accessibility of oil, gas, minerals, and fish stocks [Evans, 2021].

Melting sea ice is also creating new trade routes, offering opportunities for regional economic development which could significantly alter global trade patterns and trends [Quillérou et al., 2017, 52]. Finally, since national growth is intrinsically linked to natural resources and transport routes – both of which the Arctic represents – the Arctic is becoming an increasingly prevalent area of interstate competition [Evans, 2021].

“If we lose the Arctic, we lose the world”, Sauli Niinistö uttered at an Arctic Forum panel discussion in the Russian city of Arkhangelsk in 2017. The former Finnish President declared the Arctic “a matter of global significance”, warning about the devastating consequences a warming Arctic will have on the world [Office of the President of the Republic of Finland 2025]. Less than a decade later, a similar scenario of multilateral cooperation among Arctic states would be impossible: the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has fundamentally altered the context of Arctic diplomacy. Growing Russian militarisation of the region, coupled with increasing Arctic attention from NATO and other non-Arctic actors has added to the geopolitical complexity of this fast-moving region [Coates and Holroyd, 2020, 6]. In this way, the Forum at which Niinistö spoke also serves to highlight the transformation of state actorness in Arctic affairs over the last decade: whilst originating in scientific and climate diplomacy, an international context of Great Power Competition (GPC) has accelerated the evolution of the Arctic to become a significant region of state security and defence policy.

1.2 Research Question and Structure

Great Power Competition, essential to understanding modern Arctic affairs, has fundamentally been driven by China’s rise. China is no stranger to Arctic affairs, having consistently engaged in Arctic scientific research since well before the turn of the twenty-first century. However, its astounding economic rise and authoritarian political order has latterly been viewed as a challenge

to the United States-centred, unipolar world order which has characterised the international system since 1990. China's rising power has also translated into increased interest in Arctic affairs, and China has been pursuing an increasingly ambitious and international agenda.

On 26th January 2018, China's first Arctic White Paper was released by the Chinese State Council Information Office. Defining itself as a "near-Arctic state", China would construct a Polar Silk Road and incorporate the Arctic into the Belt and Road Initiative, its ambitious interconnectivity network. In the document China vows "not to overstep" (不超位) its role as a non-Arctic state, and insists on "not being absent" (不缺位), suggesting a strong desire to participate constructively in Arctic affairs [Woon, 2019]. The first chapter of this thesis is dedicated to understanding how China has sought to expand its influence in the Arctic.

This ambitious agenda has caused concern among western actors, linked to competing interest in strategic resources and great power competition. The most salient European actors are the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK). The EU counts three Arctic states among its Member States. It published its first Arctic Policy in 2008 and has increasingly linked Arctic security to broader economic security debates: since the 2010s, the EU has been pursuing a policy of "strategic autonomy", growing its resilience and capacity to act autonomously in key policy areas. This includes defence, energy, digital infrastructure, and supply chains. Crucially, it is tied to the idea of reducing its dependence on China – "derisking". The Arctic's vast sum of resources are essential to achieving this goal through which critical infrastructures can emerge, develop, and securitise the EU's future.

The UK also engages deeply in Arctic affairs but has been institutionally separated from the EU following Brexit which fundamentally altered UK-EU relations. A historically respected actor in Arctic scientific research, the UK is not an Arctic state, though it claims to be the "Arctic's nearest neighbour". Pursuing a new identity-driven "Global Britain" foreign policy, the UK is a major security power, boasting a diverse network of bilateral defence relations with Arctic states. This is its policy instrument of choice when responding to growing Chinese engagement in the Arctic. Despite institutional, as well as strategic and identity-based constraints to cooperation, the UK and EU do share interests in Arctic security. Ultimately, an ambitious Chinese agenda,

growing Russian aggression, increasingly accessible critical materials and climate change consequences affect both actors and have rendered the Arctic the primary area for joint climate-security action [Paet, 2025, 5]. Accordingly, the second and third chapters of the thesis will analyse how the UK and the EU exercise actorness in responding to China's growing Arctic engagement.

Finally, what factors shape the capacity for UK-EU cooperation post-Brexit? The final chapter of the thesis will focus on the nature of the UK-EU relationship, evaluating overall policy coherence and distinctness, identifying potential areas of deepened cooperation, and measuring the extent to which institutional, strategic, and identity-based constraints hinder UK-EU cooperation.

1.3 Literature

Existing Arctic literature can be categorised into three 'waves', according to the context in which it was published. The first wave of Arctic literature came during the late 1980s and 1990s and traced the geopolitical transformation of the Arctic from a Cold War theatre to emerging circumpolar cooperation. The second wave of literature focuses instead on the paradigm shift in the early 21st century that shifts away from pure Arctic exceptionalism and toward state-centric approaches. Finally, the third wave pays more attention to non-Arctic state actors such as China and increasing Arctic competition. It is this final wave of literature which was the most useful for the research of this thesis.

The book *"Arctic Policies and Strategies – Analysis, Synthesis, and Trends"* by Heininen, L., Everett, K., et al (2020) provided an extremely useful overview of the existing Arctic strategies and policies of the 8 Arctic states (Member States) and the 13 Observer States to the Arctic Council, using qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis, based on the coding of the text of 56 policy documents (1996-2019). This book was particularly helpful to understand Denmark, Finland, Sweden, the UK, and China's Arctic engagement, but its exclusive focus on individual state actors excluded any discussion of the EU.

Therefore, for research on the EU's Arctic Policy I turned to "*The European Union and the Arctic*" by Liu, Kirk and Henriksen (2017). This literature complemented an array of EU policy documents, the most interesting being "*The EU's diplomatic strategy and geopolitical cooperation in the Arctic*", a European Parliament report dated 12th November 2025. This provided the most up-to-date account – important in a rapidly evolving region – of the EU's Arctic Policy. It shed light on structural rivalries and pressures that have arisen in the Arctic post-2022, and for this reason was more relevant than the EU's Joint Communication on Arctic Policy from 2021 ("*A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic*").

For research on the UK, the single most useful document was the 2025 *Strategic Defence Review*. This document was particularly useful for identifying UK strategic priorities and partners from quantitative data: for example, the phrase "Indo-Pacific" was mentioned 17 times, whereas "Arctic" was mentioned only twice [SDR, 2025]. The lack of importance awarded to the Arctic – despite its growing geopolitical importance – influenced my decision to choose the Arctic as the central theme of the thesis over the Indo-Pacific.

1.4 Rationale of the Research

The decision to research the Arctic over the Indo-Pacific was also influenced by the substantially smaller quantity of available literature dedicated to this topic. The vast quantity of existing Arctic literature focuses solely on Arctic states. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the role of non-Arctic actors in shaping Arctic governance, and even less attention is paid to comparative works that examine how two or more actors respond to emerging geopolitical challenges in the Arctic.

China's publication of a White Paper Arctic Policy in 2018 has served as an impetus for more research on the country's Arctic ambitions to emerge. However, less attention has been devoted to studying how other actors respond to China's growing presence, and very little systematically compares the actorness of two or more actors. The thesis therefore distinguishes itself from past studies.

Passing time and the constantly evolving geopolitical situation in the Arctic means that it is necessary to constantly update the study of this region. For this reason, I have tried to use the most recently published literature because articles and government policy papers written less than a decade ago are no longer relevant.

The Arctic is rapidly changing, due to both global warming and shifting structural pressures as powerful actors vie to exert influence in the region. The Arctic is a huge geopolitical chess piece that will no doubt occupy the attention of more and more political actors as well as scholars in the future. This study opens the door for further research.

1.5 Methodology

The research question “Chinese Arctic ambitions: How are European actors responding, and what factors shape the capacity for closer EU-UK cooperation?” needs to be answered through qualitative research. The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis describes this methodology as “the classification and interpretation of linguistic material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning-making” [Flick, 2013, 5]. In short, it is about comprehending social phenomena [Ugwu and Eze, 2023]. A variety of systems of inquiry can be used in order to do this, including case study, which this thesis has embedded on the topic of Greenland.

Additionally, it will employ a theory-guided actorness framework, informed through neorealist perspectives. Neorealism offers a broader theoretical lens through which engagement and responses can be interpreted. It analyses and predicts the behaviour of nation-states and actors based on their pursuit of self-interest in an anarchic global system [Waltz, 1979], and is therefore the most appropriate perspective to use for interpreting great power competition. This is because it assumes that power is unevenly distributed among states, and that this ultimately influences their interactions and decisions.

The actorness framework, in turn, provides the main analytical tool for evaluating the capacity of European actors to respond to China's Arctic activity. According to EU scholar Gunnar Sjöstedts, "actorness" is defined as the "capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system" [Sjöstedts, 1977]. This conceptual lens is a useful analytical framework for guiding the interpretations of the two European actors. In order to evaluate actorness, scholars Jupille and Caporaso have further highlighted four components of actor capacity in global politics: recognition, authority, autonomy and cohesion [Jupille and Caporaso, 1998, 286]. If an actor fulfils these four criteria, to what extent can it be considered an international actor? Using this interpretation of actorness, this thesis will seek to answer these questions.

1. China: The “Near-Arctic State”

China has had minimal direct engagement with the Arctic throughout most of its history. The earliest reference to the existence of an Arctic region in ancient Chinese writings dates back to the second century BC. *Zhou Bi Suan Jing*, an astronomical work, observed the movements of a bright star calculated to be in the true north position, stating that “nothing can grow under the pole” due to unmelted ice around the north pole in the summer. Later writings by scholars in the seventh century AD also confirm knowledge about the existence of an Arctic Ocean, and its lengthy period of winter darkness. These assumptions describe the modern geographical characteristics of the Arctic [Li, 1999, 219].

The later Yuan and Qing dynasties expanded Chinese territory into parts of modern-day Siberia, bordering the Arctic, but never ventured into the region; even the famous voyages of Chinese Admiral Zheng He in the fifteenth century didn’t explore polar waters. At its furthest north, the Qing dynasty’s Manchurian border was recognised as reaching 56° (the cartographical boundary of the Arctic Circle is 66°). These territorial gains were formally ceded to the Russian Empire in the 1858 Treaty of Aigun and the 1860 Treaty of Peking [Zellen, 2019]. As such, medieval and post-modern knowledge of the Arctic in China was largely theoretical and relied heavily upon cosmology: an interest in and knowledge of this northernmost region translated neither into Arctic exploration nor maritime navigation [Patel, 2025, 4].

Chinese Arctic engagement in the twentieth century continued to be marginal until the end of the century. In 1925, China acceded the Spitsbergen (now Svalbard) Treaty, facilitating their access to mining rights on the Svalbard archipelago [Buchanan, 2024]. More than fifty years later in 1981, the Chinese Arctic and Antarctica Administration (CAA) was founded, and in 1989 China’s official Arctic research program formally began with the founding of the Polar Research Institute of China [Ufimtseva and Prior, 2021, 2]. China launched its first five-year research program in the Arctic Ocean in 1992 – in cooperation with German universities – and by 2004 had established the Yellow River Arctic research station on Svalbard, Norway. To conduct these missions, it purchased a Russian-made icebreaker from Ukraine – baptised Xue Long (雪龙, Snow Dragon), which has conducted Arctic missions since 1999. In this respect, scientific

research has long been the core element of Chinese Arctic diplomacy [Bislev and Zeuthen, 2018, 46].

China's capacity to expand its Arctic footprint is directly linked to its economy. Since then-President Deng Xiaoping announced the U-turn "Reform and Opening Up" economic policy in 1978, China's economy transitioned into a socialist, market-oriented economy and has been on an upwards trajectory. The reforms focused on export-orientated manufacturing – carried out by China's abundant demographic workforce – which initiated high productivity growth and has rapidly transformed modern China [Hu and Khan, 1997]. Domestic GDP skyrocketed, averaging growth of over 9% a year since the initial reforms [World Bank, 2025].

China's growing economic power correlates directly to its global influence. In 2013 "after years of insistence" China was admitted as a permanent observer country to the Arctic Council (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2023). This represents a significant diplomatic milestone for Beijing for two key reasons. Firstly, it provides a platform for an increasingly powerful China to engage deeper in multilateral cooperation with other international actors and intergovernmental institutions. This gives credibility to China's expanding role as a constructive (and not only economic) actor. Being a permanent observer country to the Arctic Council allows Beijing to defend its interests in the Arctic Circle and establish itself as a legitimate stakeholder in polar governance.

Secondly, it marks a shift in Chinese Arctic diplomacy from scientific engagement to more decisive strategic ambition. China's admittance to the Arctic Council club runs in conjunction with its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by President Xi Jinping in the same year. Historically, the Ancient Silk Road was a transcontinental "superhighway of connectivity" and cultural exchange [Ahmed and Lambert, 2022, 1]. This new, infrastructure-based development project – the BRI – aims to create an enormous interstate connectivity network, logistically interconnecting Eurasia and Africa [Ahmed and Lambert, 2022, 42]. China's Arctic Policy White Paper, the "Polar Silk Road", has formalised the Arctic in the wider BRI initiative [Bislev and Zeuthen, 2018, 47]. Launched in 2018, this document is significant in that China declares itself to be a "near-Arctic state", generating legitimacy for China's Arctic presence and

cementing China's desire to pursue Arctic diplomacy. It leaves no doubt about Beijing's intentions to carve a more dominant role for itself in the Arctic affairs.

1.1 Legal and Institutional Constraints

There is no single comprehensive treaty for all Arctic affairs. Instead, the Arctic is governed by a patchwork of international, regional, and national laws. We cannot talk about the Arctic without bearing in mind this legal framework within which (non)-Arctic stakeholders operate.

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is the primary framework of Arctic governance. It was adopted in 1982, entering into force in 1994, and is commonly agreed to be part of applicable international law in the Arctic [Spohr, 2020, 299], establishing “a legal order for the seas and oceans which will facilitate international communication” [United Nations, UNCLOS, 25]. In addition to UNCLOS, each of the eight Arctic states apply their own national laws to their respective territories and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs).

Arctic governance is coordinated in a multilateral forum by the Arctic Council. As an Observer State at the Arctic Council, China has access to information and can make its voice heard on Arctic affairs but has limited influence and no voting rights [Ufimtseva and Prior, 2021, 267]. As a state “from outside the Arctic region”, it has no territorial sovereignty in the Arctic, something it admits in its Arctic Policy, along with a pledge to respect the territorial sovereignty of the eight Arctic states. However, as a signatory to both UNCLOS and the Spitsbergen Treaty, China does have the legal right of free access and entry to areas of the Arctic. Pursuant to UNCLOS and general international law, this legal right extends to scientific research, fishing, laying of pipelines, and rights to resource exploration and exploitation in the area [Ahmed and Lambert, 2022, 125].

Despite Chinese adherence to Arctic law, there is a broad agreement in the West that China represents a major challenge to the existing rules-based order, taking a “might is right” approach to its own policy priorities. The author Spohr has observed that the meaning of the term “rules-based international order” can be defined in different ways, depending on how and in what

context it is being talked about [Spohr, 2020, 298]. For example, China considers its sovereign territory to be the geographical centre of the world – ‘China’ (“zhōng guó” 中国), literally translates to “Middle Kingdom”. Hence, it is all a matter of interpretation. In his book *World Order*, Henry Kissinger describes “order” as “The concept held by a region or civilization about the nature of just arrangements and the distribution of power thought to be applicable to the entire world” [Spohr, 2020, 297]. According to this definition, power is crucial to determining international order (which will eventually be legitimised by international law). There is no concrete evidence that any Chinese activity in the Arctic is in violation of international law. However, China’s increased presence in Arctic diplomacy – based on what it interprets as its legal rights – is undeniably a rising force for change in the relationship between power, order, and international law in the region in the eyes of the West.

1.2 Arctic Ambitions: China’s Polar Silk Road

In 2018, China launched its official Arctic Policy with the Polar Silk Road initiative, declaring itself a “near-Arctic state”. Historically, there have only been “Arctic” and “non-Arctic” states. Beijing’s claim of “near-Arctic” statehood therefore creates a new category in Arctic taxonomy [Ineza Travalay, 2019]. This self-declaration has not been met without denial: the US Navy publicly rejected this fact, stating “[The Chinese] refer to themselves as a near-Arctic state, but they are not ... they’re 900 nautical miles from the Arctic Circle” [Ong, 2021]. Ironically, Beijing, already located in the country’s north, lies closer to the Equator than to the North Pole, making China geographically closer to a “near-Equatorial” state than a “near-Arctic” state [Ineza Travalay, 2019].

Alongside its claim, Beijing has become the first non-circumpolar country to unveil a full-fledged Arctic Policy [Ahmed and Lambert, 2022, 124], presenting a roadmap for China’s engagements in potential infrastructural projects in the polar region, and its plan for strategic engagements thereof [Ahmed and Lambert, 2022, 124-5]. It argues that changing Arctic conditions driven by environmental changes in the Anthropocene will have global implications, creating the need for non-Arctic states to play a constructive role : “The Arctic situation now goes beyond its original inter-Arctic States or regional nature, having a vital bearing on the

interests of States outside the region and the interests of the international community as a whole, as well as on the survival, the development, and the shared future for mankind” [People’s Republic of China, PSR]. China’s Arctic strategy therefore relies on “internationalising” the Arctic: by presenting the Arctic as a region of interest for the international community, Beijing can legitimise its engagement, advance its national interests and use the Arctic for its own strategic benefit.

Pursuing a goal of Arctic internationalisation, China’s ambitions can be narrowed down into three coherent and intertwined objectives. Firstly, whilst the Polar Silk Road contains no mention of a political-military dimension, it allows China to normalise the presence of armed forces in the North Atlantic. Secondly, it can gain access to rare earth minerals; and thirdly, it can influence Arctic governance and scientific standards [Wu, cited by Smith, 2025].

As per NASA, the Arctic Sea ice is now declining at a rate of 13.2% per decade as global temperatures increase [Ahmed and Lambert, 2022, 125]. This will develop more cost- and time-effective sea routes and passages [Ahmed and Lambert, 2022, 126] such as the Northern Sea Route (NSR). The NSR would cut down transport time between East Asia and Western Europe from 37 days (through the Suez Canal) to 23 days. This feat was first achieved in 2013, when a Chinese merchant ship became the first of its nation to transit the NSR [Mills et al, 2026, 27]. Furthermore, it is estimated that by 2030 the NSR will likely be free of ice during the summers, thus could host several transit routes [Ahmed and Lambert, 2022, 130]. This could create economic opportunities and a geoeconomic advantage for the export-orientated Chinese economy.

1.3 Sino-Russian Arctic Partnership

Beijing’s 2018 White Paper sets out the terms on which its Arctic policy will be achieved: through the principles of “respect, cooperation, win-win result and sustainability” [PRC White Paper]. Since the launch of its Arctic Policy, China has engaged in deeper cooperation and partnership with Arctic stakeholders, particularly Russia, who is central to China’s Arctic ambitions [Mills et al, 2026, 27]. Publicly, Russia and China maintain they have a

“comprehensive strategic partnership”, which extends to Arctic issues [Dagaev, 2025]. This partnership is composed of two levels of cooperation: economic and military. Although not a formal alliance, this relationship is becoming an important element of Arctic diplomacy [Gomart et al, 2025, 119]. It is constantly expanding, both in scope and depth, and merits a deeper analysis.

China and Russia have maintained a strategic relationship since 1992, with bilateral relations between the two countries built on the Treaty for Good Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation. This pact, signed in 2002, includes a focus on energy and raw material trade. Their partnership has deepened as Beijing has increasingly turned to the Russian Arctic, the presumed home of a vast amount of fossil fuels, with Chinese FDI stock in the Russian oil and gas sector expanding from \$430 million USD in 2008 to \$3.38 billion USD in 2014 [Ufimtseva and Prior, 2021, 268]. Russian hydrocarbons are essential to support Beijing’s political ambitions and to sustain its economic model which is dependent on foreign fossil fuels. Simultaneously, political and economic pressures on Russia due to developments in Crimea and Ukraine have accelerated the shift of its energy cooperation eastward [Ufimtseva and Prior, 2021, 264].

Economic Cooperation

Economic factors are a key driver of Sino-Russian cooperation. **Fiscal cooperation** is essential to China’s Arctic strategy as its interest in the Arctic is driven by two motives: resources and transportation [Mills et al, 2026, 27]. China’s gas demand is increasing, expecting to peak between 2035 and 2040 at 600-620 billion cubic metres [Tan, 2025]; hence, the Russian Arctic is of interest, as 80% of Russia’s exports consist of commodities like hydrocarbons, petrochemicals, and minerals [Gomart et al, 2025, 29]. Bilateral cooperation gives China access to natural resources and creates possibilities for joint hydrocarbon exploration.

The signing of a legally binding memorandum on a new LNG pipeline, Power of Siberia 2 (PoS2) in September 2025 marked a milestone in the Sino-Russian partnership. This will complement the PoS1 pipeline, active since 2019, and which already delivers 44 billion cubic metres of Russian gas to China via Mongolia every year. PoS2 is estimated to deliver an

additional 50 billion cubic metres to this amount [Tan, 2025], which could in turn help to advance many internal Chinese developments and support the shift from manufacturing to innovation- and knowledge-based industries [Kauppila and Kopra, 2021, 153]. In this way, China's external Arctic partnership with Russia cannot be viewed as distinct from its domestic economic policies and reforms.

From its partner's perspective, Russia relies heavily on Chinese demand for Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG). China has acquired particular significance for Moscow since the start of the war in Ukraine [Gomart et al, 2025, 120], which has experienced a 91% decline in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in its country since 2021. Naturally, China is an indispensable and logical partner. Russia imposes strict legislation on ownership of sovereign energy deposits, although it does allow China to hold a 29.9% and 20% stake respectively in its two key LNG projects on the Arctic Yamal Peninsula [Gomart et al, 2025, 29].

Military Cooperation

Military cooperation between China and Russia is also on the rise. Russia is the uncontested trailblazer when it comes to Arctic infrastructure, and its domestic geography has played a role in shaping the development of its Arctic capacities – through military technologies and experience. Indeed, Russia's direct combat experience and knowledge of Western equipment are of immense interest to Beijing [Gomart et al, 2025, 118].

Russia is the leader in Arctic military equipment and possesses the largest number of nuclear icebreakers out of any state. It also intends to reopen some abandoned Soviet-era military installations, placing new facilities and airfields in its northern territory, and establish a string of seaports along its northern coastline [Ahmed and Lambert, 2022, 127]. A Sino-Russian partnership guarantees China access to advanced military technologies, indispensable for competing with the US on the global stage [Ahmed and Lambert, 2022, 129]. In light of the US-China trade war, self-sufficiency in producing advanced technologies such as nuclear icebreakers is desirable for China [Kauppila and Kopra, 2021, 153].

Cooperation in military technologies has born dividends and in 2018, China – potentially with Russian collaboration – developed the second-generation icebreaker, Xuelong 2 (Snow Dragon 2). This is a significant feat of advanced engineering. Able to operate in temperatures as low as -30°C, Xuelong 2 is the world's only polar research vessel that can break ice through both forward and backward movements [Ahmed and Lambert, 2022, 127]. It returned to Shanghai in September 2025 marking the completion of China's hitherto largest Arctic scientific expedition (its fifteenth) to date [Zhao, 2025]. This technological breakthrough increases China's accessibility and connectivity across the Arctic. It also reinforces relations between China and Russia through collaborative points of interest, knowledge, and expertise.

China has not conducted military activity alone in the Arctic, but as of 2025 has taken part in over 100 joint military exercises with Russia, including in July 2024 near Alaska [Havrén, cited by Smith, 2025]. Chinese soldiers also took part – alongside their Russian counterparts – in a parade in Moscow's Red Square in May 2025, attended by President Xi. Similarly, President Putin's presence was noted at a military parade in Beijing several months later in September [Gomart et al, 2025, 118]. Military cooperation in the Arctic is still a long way from effective interoperability, perhaps due to mistrust linked to accusations by Moscow of Chinese espionage. However, the partnership of both authoritarian nations in military affairs does suggest an ideologically close and united front that is delivering a significant structural change to the established **libertarian world order**.

Arctic Ambitions: A Comparison

When assessing the manner of the Sino-Russian partnership, it is important to consider the factors that drive the two countries together: market access, resources, technology, and transport routes. The vast connectivity network that China is pursuing through the PSR, and more broadly the BRI, implies that Beijing has global ambitions. Economic resources and transportation are key for China to achieve this, and Russia has both to offer. China's grounding principle is "win-win cooperation" – a vision that promotes cooperation underpinned by shared interests [Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016]. To what extent does this characterise the Sino-Russian partnership?

For Russia, the Arctic zone is a core national interest and a resource base for economic security [President of the Russian Federation, 2009]. Russia's State Policy underlines the active extraction of natural resources as a top priority in the Arctic, aiming to unlock the region's economic potential through commercialisation such as oil and gas exploration, transportation, and militarisation. It welcomes Sino-Russian cooperation because China's BRI is a major driver of economic growth that is reliable and sustainable for Moscow. Fundamentally, after its rupture with the EU, Asia is the only realistic destination for its stranded resources [Tan, 2025]. Thanks to this partnership, Russia is forecast to remain in the top 10 economic countries by 2030 [Ahmed and Lambert, 2022, 129]. In short, economic security allows Russia to continue pursuing a foreign policy of aggression in Ukraine.

The partnership is however plagued by several disputes. Moscow is highly defensive of territorial sovereignty and initially opposed China's campaign to become an Observer State of the Arctic Council [Legarda, 2025, 16]. Fundamentally, the two partners disagree over the future of the Northern Sea Route. Moscow considers the NSR a domestic transport route; Beijing, in contrast, wants to internationalise it. To defend what it considers domestic territory, Russia has assigned at least 81% of its nuclear weaponry to northern fleets, hoping to (re)gain Arctic dominance [Evans, 2021]. Despite these disputes, Chinese imports of Russian LNG continue to flow and remain vital for Russia. Moscow is therefore balancing a reliance on the Chinese economy with the defence of its domestic Arctic territory, dominance and military expertise.

The Sino-Russian partnership is limited in its depth. China needs access to LNG for its own economic development and benefits from military cooperation to acquire a higher level of technical knowhow to compete with the US. However, it is unlikely that the relationship will develop beyond this commercial one. Fearing the risk of secondary sanctions and both political and economic uncertainty in Russia, China's annual investment in Russia has actually fallen by two-thirds since the start of the war in Ukraine [Gomart et al, 2025, 117]. Russia only accounted for 5% of Chinese imports and 3% of their exports in 2024 [Gomart et al, 2025, 116]. Beijing, however, is Russia's largest trading partner – no other country can simultaneously provide it with a huge market and such convenient border logistics.

Projections for channelling LNG to China together through the PoS1 and PoS2 pipelines remains promising, but this would represent just one third of what it sold to the EU annually before 2022. Whilst PoS2 represents opportunity for China, it also encapsulates the risk of too much dependence on one energy supplier [Tan, 2025]. It is because of this risk, in the context of an increasingly volatile geopolitical environment, that China is seeking to diversify its energy supply through other partners, including Arctic states. It has a longstanding agreement for bilateral cooperation on Arctic issues with Iceland, and has launched commercial, investment and soft-power ventures in Norway, Canada, Iceland, and Denmark (through Greenland). Additionally, China has launched a high-level trilateral Arctic dialogue together with Korea and Japan [Kauppila and Kopra, 2022, 151].

1.4 Conclusion

China is increasingly presenting itself as an Arctic power and engages in Arctic affairs. It became an Observer State of the Arctic Council in 2013, establishing a sense of legitimacy in polar governance, and published its White Paper Arctic Policy in 2018. Crucial to its Arctic policy is its economic and military partnership with Russia. This cooperation, governed by pragmatism and highly asymmetrical and transactional in nature, will continue to be predictable to a large extent [Bergmann, 2026, 12]. This is because it is mutually beneficial, based on a “win-win” approach [Ahmed and Lambert, 2022, 127] and “commercial realpolitik” [Bergmann, 2026, 12]. Russia offers plentiful natural resources to satiate China’s thirst, who in turn extends a reliable economic lifeline to Russia. This is the reality that drives China and Russia together in the Arctic, and which ties the two countries further together geoeconomically.

It is not, however, without its vulnerabilities. The greatest cause for rupture is the divergence in vision that both states have for the future of the Arctic: *how* it will be developed, and *who* will control it. Russia views everything through a national lens, prioritising its own economic security and territorial defence. In contrast, China has a global vision: it wishes to internationalise the NSR and has undertaken a multilateral venture with its ambitious PSR initiative [Dagaev, 2025].

Economic opportunities will be accentuated by melting sea ice and climate change, providing stakeholders with more room for commercial activities.

Furthermore, the Sino-Russian partnership is interpreted as a direct challenge to the existing western, liberal, democratic world order. China's expanding Arctic presence is correspondingly indicative of a structural shift in the evolving global order: the launch of the BRI has "propelled China forward" as a major player in modern-day Great Power Competition [Farhadi, 2024, 13], acting as a driving vehicle in the transition of a shifting global order [Ahmed and Lambert, 2022, 42]. The equilibrium of the world is shifting back to Asia, favouring a multipolar world that in turn favours China. In this evolving order, an increasingly powerful China has not only the economic muscle but also the confidence, legitimacy, and institutional capacity to act.

2. The UK: the Arctic’s “closest neighbour”

How do European actors interpret and respond to China in the Arctic? This question provides the baseline for the research carried out in the following two chapters on the United Kingdom and the European Union. The decision to address them separately arises from the fundamental changes that Brexit has made to institutional positioning and strategic autonomy. The following two chapters will explore how both actors exercise actorness in responding to China’s Arctic ambitions. This will be followed by a short case study of Greenland before a cross-analysis of UK and EU actorness and foreign policy coherence in the final fourth chapter.

2.1 UK Arctic Policy

The UK is not an Arctic state but considers itself “the nearest neighbour to the Arctic region” [SDR, 2025]. As early as 2009, largely due to climate change, British security policymakers expressed renewed interest in and the need for a coherent Arctic policy [Cepinskyte, 2019, 3]; the first Arctic Policy Frameworks were released by the Foreign Commonwealth Office (FCO) in 2013 and 2018. Titled ‘Adapting to Change’ and ‘Beyond the Ice,’ they describe the Arctic foremost as a place for collaboration, research, and environmental protection, rather than as a region for militaristic competition. This reflects the UK’s traditional ‘High North, Low Tension’ paradigm [Murphy, 2026, 2]. The two Policy Frameworks were followed by the UK’s first Arctic Defence Strategy in 2019, which labelled the Arctic as “central” to UK security [Depledge, 2019, 1].

Britain’s approach to the Arctic region changed significantly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Pre-invasion, the UK had considered Russia a scientific and governance partner first, and a geostrategic threat second [Murphy, 2026, 2]. However, post-2022, UK Arctic policy shifted from environmental engagement towards strategic and hard security positioning. In this way, the priorities of UK Arctic policy papers published after 2022 are markedly different to their predecessors. This reflects the UK’s recognition of the growing Russian threat. Arguably the most important policy paper published in the post-2022 period is the 2025 Strategic Defence Review, which provides a comprehensive review of the UK’s armed forces. This reflects the

UK's evolving tilt towards securitisation and strategic interests, framed by a shift in policy language that increasingly refers to the 'High North', rather than the 'Arctic'.

Arctic policy is not the country's only change in the last decade. In 2016, Britons voted to leave the European Union, which finally took place on 31st January 2020. The enormity of the decision to leave was reflected in the UK's 2018 Arctic Policy Framework: "perhaps the biggest change to the UK's Arctic position since 2013 was the decision by the people of the UK to leave the European Union" [Depledge et al., 2019, 6].

The post-Brexit era therefore marks the start of a new independent foreign policy identity for the UK, centred around the idea of a "Global Britain". This term was introduced in Boris Johnson's first speech as Prime Minister in 2019, in which he alluded to the country's need to recover its "natural and historic role as an enterprising, outward-looking and truly global Britain" [Johnson, 2019]. Thus, "Global Britain" is the overall rationale of the UK's increased engagement in Arctic affairs – labelling the Arctic as "within the UK's wider neighbourhood" [SDR, 2025] justifies its engagement whilst defending its own global relevance in a newly carved role.

In addition to security rhetoric, concrete strategic interests also shape the UK's interest in pursuing a deeper role in the Arctic. The UK has economic interests in the Arctic, particularly in the energy sector. As recently as 2024, Norway represented the 2nd biggest supplier of oil and LNG to Britain, with the latter dependent on Norway for energy supplies [Depledge et al., 2019, 2]. Emerging Arctic shipping lanes, plus an abundance of hydrocarbons and critical minerals offer growing opportunities for maritime trade and could securitise the UK's energy sector.

Aside from resource extraction, Britain is also interested in new technological opportunities for Arctic scientific research and monitoring: improving safety of navigation, mapping of the region (only 15% of the Arctic Ocean has been mapped), and surveillance of ecosystems, pollution, and suspected illicit activity [Depledge et al., 2019, 3]. Britain's Arctic engagement is rooted in exploration and scientific research, spanning several centuries of polar voyages and expeditions. The discovery in 2016 of HMS Terror, the polar explorer John Franklin's ship which was lost in 1848, exemplifies this polar exploration legacy [Stevens, 2016]. This is further reflected in the

FCO's 2013 Arctic policy paper, the bulk of which promoted Britain's leadership in science and tackling climate change [Cepinskyte, 2019, 3-4]. This rhetoric is also present in the "Global Britain" policy, which British political leaders have championed as an aspiration for the UK to take the lead in scientific research and environmental protection in the Arctic [ibid., 5]. By making genuine commitments to the region, this discourse builds legitimacy as a non-Arctic state actor, painting the UK as a responsible stakeholder in Arctic governance.

2.2: Legal and Institutional Constraints

The UK is a non-Arctic state but is globally recognised as the Arctic's nearest neighbour. Its geographical proximity is unparalleled: the northernmost tip of UK sovereign territory lies only 320 nautical miles south of the Arctic Circle [Stevens, 2016], with Lerwick in the Shetland Islands closer to the Arctic than it is to London [Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2018]. However, whilst undisputed globally, these distances have been the source of domestic disputes; Scotland is increasingly pushing and defining its own Arctic credentials, creating a distinct "Scottish Arctic-ness" identity narrative prior to the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum [Depledge et al., 2019, 6]. Scotland's 2019 Arctic Policy emphasises its significance as the world's "northernmost non-Arctic nation" and stresses the common features and challenges of Scotland and the Arctic [Scottish Government, 2026]. With the establishment of an Arctic Unit within the Scottish Government [Depledge et al., 2019, 6], Scotland's intentions to forge its own path in Arctic diplomacy is indisputable. Westminster must be wary of this: a second referendum on Scottish independence would undermine the coherence and claims of the UK Government and fundamentally thwart Britain's Arctic defence capabilities, given the basing of key UK military assets in Scotland [ibid].

The UK is a signatory to both UNCLOS and the IMO, and has held Observer status at the Arctic Council since 1998. Holding Observer status gives the UK a level of institutional legitimacy as a stakeholder in Arctic diplomacy, and for almost thirty years, the UK has carefully balanced its participation in working groups and scientific contribution to assist and influence the Council. Some in the UK government wish to expand this influence: polar advocate MP James Gray has criticised the UK of being too timid. He Britain to take "full advantage" of its access to

alternative diplomatic routes and capitalise on its position as an Observer State through robust engagement [Gray, 2018]. Through a multilateral forum, this would be very difficult, since the Council has very clear parameters for the extent of Observers' involvement – they can participate but have no decision-making authority. This therefore limits the UK's role in governance and regulation, meaning any desire to “beef up” British Arctic policy [ibid.] would merely translate into more direct, assertive language. Other UK politicians consider this unnecessary, the “cleverness of [the UK's] engagement being that it is not overly bossy or didactic”. This helps to explain why the UK is a “highly respected participant” in the Arctic Council [Duncan, 2018]. So, whilst its presence in institutional Arctic frameworks is accepted by Arctic states, any further influence on governance or regulation is structurally limited until its status is upgraded to an Arctic State. This is geographically impossible unless the Council changes the territorial prerequisites for achieving Member State status.

The very same Council's institutional capacity has been paralysed since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, eroding means for governance and fundamentally undermining the peaceful collaboration that had characterised Arctic diplomacy since its inception. The UK strongly backed the decision of the seven other Arctic States to pause their engagement with the Russian Chairmanship of the Arctic Council in March 2022 [HM Government, 2023], noting the decline of depoliticized Arctic cooperation and the end of the era of “Arctic exceptionalism” [Ministry of Defence, 2022, 5].

In 2026, the war is still ongoing, governance norms have broken down, and the Council remains institutional paralysed. This is unlikely to change – the other Arctic states, as well as the UK, “expect Russia to comply with international law” [HM Government, 2023]. Faced with this context, the UK is trying to take a leading role by actively funding research programs to support non-Russian scientific working groups. This demonstrates its determination to continue contributing – it has already contributed “extensively” – to Arctic research. Under pre-2022 Council functioning conditions, the UK had no choice but to play a secondary role in Arctic governance. However, unprecedented geopolitical developments have confronted the Council with institutional constraint. Within this context a vacuum has emerged, providing a space for the UK, resting on its historical legacy in scientific diplomacy, to assume something of a leadership

position. This further supports its role as a “committed and active Observer to the Arctic Council” [Arctic Office, 2025].

2.3: Security and Geopolitics

In 2018, *Beyond the Ice* noted that China’s growing international stature had “major implications” for British values and interests. Its authoritarian governance was listed as a key difference, in addition to possible threats to sensitive technology that a closer UK-China relationship may entail [FCO, 2018, 64-65]. Since then, geopolitical tensions in the Arctic have been rising steadily, and the UK has yet to draw a clear policy line on China. In 2026, it is performing a balancing act, deftly attempting to protect its economic relationship with China whilst under extraordinary pressure from President Trump to align with anti-Chinese US policy. The result is choosing both, and neither: being “strategically ambiguous”. In this way, the UK government views China as a systemic challenge, rather than an outright threat. Policymakers are split on the issue: some, like Chancellor Rachel Reeves – who visited Beijing in January 2025 – insist that the UK must engage confidently with China [Wang, 2026]. Even Prime Minister Keir Starmer has admitted that the UK’s China policy cannot continue to blow ‘hot and cold’ and must forge clearer policy lines [Macaskill, 2025].

Despite this rhetoric, Britain continues to navigate a delicate relationship with China. In late 2025, Britain’s Crown Procedural System (CPS) dropped the case of two British men that were arrested upon alleged spy charges for China [Wang, 2026]. The sudden collapse of the case reportedly stemmed not from lack of evidence but from the further government assurance the CPS thought it needed that China was indeed an enemy, insofar as it posed “a current threat to national security” [Sabbagh, 2025]. Acting hesitantly and unwilling to take sides, Britain is trying to manage its own vulnerability from both sides. It is a middle power balancing between two giants, for whom China represents a conundrum for its own political and economic interests [Leoni, 2023].

In contrast to its ambiguous attitude towards China, the UK has firmly identified Russia as the UK’s primary security threat. The Russia ‘question’ re-emerged in the wake of the 2014 Crimean

crisis, and as early as one year prior to its invasion of Ukraine, Russia had been labelled as “the most acute threat to [Britain’s] security” [Cabinet Office, 2021]. It is a threat that arguably touches all aspects of UK defence and security policy, including in the High North [Depledge et al., 2019, 2]. This has led to the development of a UK deterrence posture, with greater attention being paid to the traditionally neglected Arctic regional area. Nowhere is this more prevalent than at sea.

Continuous at sea-deterrence is the “bedrock” of the UK’s defence” [RUSI, 2025, 4], and the UK’s role in securing the GIUK gap and NATO’s northern flank is becoming increasingly significant [Murphy, 2026, 3]. As well as being a crucial gateway for NATO operations, the GIUK gap represents a strategic corridor that enables the control of maritime traffic and the detection of hybrid threats [Paet, 2025, 5]. Russian hybrid warfare tactics against the UK’s partners, such as consistent GPS jamming in northern Scandinavia during NATO’s 2018 *Trident Juncture* exercise, have further increased the UK’s anxiety [O’Dwyer, 2018]. Furthermore, the modernisation of Russia’s submarine force, particularly the ice-breaking ability of the Yasen-class submarines, constitutes a threat to critical infrastructure in the European High North [Murphy, 2026, 2-3]. Indeed, six Yasen-class guided missile submarines are estimated to be in use by the end of the decade [RUSI 2025, 5].

Faced with the ever-persistent threats from Russian – and by association, China – the UK is playing its own role in anti-submarine warfare [Ålander, cited by Smith, 2025]. The 2025 SDR signalled major UK investments in anti-submarine warfare (ASW) to contain the growing Russian threat [Murphy, 2026, 3], and the crown jewel of this is the *Atlantic Bastion*, the Royal Navy’s plan for securing the North Atlantic. The plan employs acoustic sensors, autonomous underwater vehicles, and maritime asserts to secure the GIUK gap and protect subsea infrastructure. A large sum of £40 million has been committed to this plan to defend subsea cables [ibid., 5]. Maritime missions are complemented by airborne operations, including the new Boeing P-8A Poseidon Maritime Patrol Aircraft that has patrolled the North Atlantic since 2020. Based in Scotland’s RAF Lossiemouth base, the MoD confirmed that it will use the aircraft to monitor Russian submarine activity in the High North [Depledge et al., 2019, 5].

UK armed forces frequently operate at sea within the NATO alliance, particularly US forces. The importance of the UK-US alliance was underlined by Defence Secretary John Healey MP: in his view, the US represents “the UK’s closest defence and security partner”. Furthermore, Healey identified the security of the North Atlantic as “critical” to both homelands [MoD, 2026]. At present, rapidly evolving geopolitics means that one of the UK’s priorities is “detering, disrupting and degrading” Russian shadow fleet activities alongside its allies [McKenzie, 2026]. The UK-US alliance structure has been successful in doing this, and in early 2026, RAF surveillance aircraft and Royal Navy tanker *RFA Tideforce* provided operational support to US military assets in interdicting the nefarious Russian vessel *Bella I* off the south coast of Iceland [MoD, 2026].

To date, the UK has imposed sanctions on 520 Russian shadow fleet vessels [ibid.]. The depth of this relationship and the Allies’ material capacities has the potential to strengthen further with the AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) alliance, a defence and security partnership announced in September 2021 to enhance technological and defence capabilities of anti-submarine warfare, relevant to Arctic security [Hansard, 5th August 2025]. This demonstrates the UK’s commitment to international law and its material capacity to contribute to national and regional maritime security. Moreover, it proves the depth and interoperability of the UK-US and NATO defence relationship as something that the UK would be largely unwilling to jeopardise [Murphy, 2026, 1].

The UK has a “long and committed bond” through bilateral partnerships with all its allies in the Arctic Circle, out of whom Norway is undoubtedly the UK’s closest strategic partner. Britain prides itself on this relationship, with FCDO Secretary of State Yvette Cooper applauding the UK’s “world class Royal Marine Commandos” who have trained with Nordic partners in the Norwegian Arctic for more than 50 years [Hansard, 2026].

Anglo-Norwegian relations have recently been reshaped by the landmark Lunna House defence agreement [Murphy, 2026, 4]. Signed in December 2025, this £10 billion deal foresees enhanced cooperation in joint naval operations and investment in Type 26 frigates (fast warships designed for ASW) [Murphy, 2026, 5], increasing the UK’s interoperability and its capacity to contain the

maritime threats. In addition to maritime security, ground defence has risen, with the number of British troops deployed to Øverbygd ‘Camp Viking’ in Norway anticipated to double over the next 3 years and establish a permanent, year-round presence. Troops trained there will operate as a quick reaction force (QRF) and receive Arctic warfare-focused training [Royal Navy, 2026]. A closer Anglo-Norwegian strategic partnership enhances opportunities for Arctic training, maritime patrols, defence infrastructure and intelligence sharing. Amidst uncertainty of Trump’s geopolitical intentions, it also provides vital operational access for the UK through its geographical Arctic proximity.

In addition to Norway, the UK also maintains relations with other Arctic states such as Iceland, Finland, Sweden, and Canada. Agreements to intensify intelligence sharing and joint military training were made with Sweden and Finland in 2022 [Prime Minister’s Office, 2022], and further cooperation in the future should be expected in light of Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO in 2024, [Murphy, 2026, 8]. Similarly, there are British-Canadian opportunities for interoperability and potential industrial collaboration between British Type-26 Frigates and Canadian River-Class Destroyers, which would coordinate defence of the region from the Russian northern fleet [Murphy, 2026, 1]. This would contribute to a situation of wider security in Europe and the North Atlantic.

Finally, joint regional security is becoming a reality under the Joint Expeditionary Force, a UK-led coalition of 10 northern European countries that carries out in-depth military training and plays an increasingly important role in deterring Russian hybrid attacks. 1,700 British personnel were involved in last year’s Operation Tarassis [Mills et al., 2026, 41] and September 2026’s ‘Lion Protector’ exercise will see air, land and naval forces deploy across the High North, specifically to counter “rising Russian threats” [MoD press release, 11th Feb 2026]. The JEF alliance highlights Britain’s devotion to international law through upholding the principles of the United Nations charter of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the inviolability of borders [Murphy, 2026, 7].

Whilst the UK Foreign Secretary recently announced that “Britain is stepping up on Arctic security” [FCDO, 2026], a March 2026 report named the UK’s current military commitments in

the region to be “modest and ad hoc” [Tidey, 2026]. The MOD does not in fact possess capabilities or units that are specifically dedicated to the defence of the High North. Instead, assets across the armed forces are utilised as required to project force in the Arctic [Hansard, 2nd March 2026]. The UK’s material capabilities are thus limited as its defence resources are strategically overstretched due to other commitments, notably in the Indo-Pacific.

Years of underinvestment in the Royal Navy and broader defence spending gaps have equally damaged Britain’s credibility among allies [Tidey, 2026]. Currently, the UK is estimated to face a €32.4 billion defence budget shortfall until 2030 [Tidey, 2026]. The government has committed to increasing defence spending up to 2.6% from April 2027 – with an ambition of 3% in the next parliament [FCDO, 2026] – but there is real possibility that its Arctic military presence could be reduced in the future in response to either domestic budgetary pressures or more urgent geopolitical scenarios in other areas of British foreign policy.

3.4: Conclusion

Since leaving the EU in 2016, the UK has been faced with many challenges, such as forging a new foreign and security policy identity. Whilst earlier engagement with the Arctic was focused on climate change and scientific diplomacy, followed by the prospect of economic opportunities, there is more emphasis on security and defence. This growing strategic engagement is within the context of an increasingly assertive and militarised Russia. In this context, the UK remains wary of other powers whose interests also extend to the Arctic, or cooperate closely with Russia, such as China.

Post-Brexit, the UK has recognised the need for European partners. Its attempt to strengthen bilateral relations with non-EU states like Norway could, therefore, be a compensatory move to compensate for a change in relations with the EU [Depledge et al., 2019, 7]. Furthermore, the success of the Lunna House Agreement may suggest that the UK will seek further bilateral agreements with other allied, NATO, and CANZUK nations in order to increase capability [Murphy, 2026, 7]. This is likely: it is through partnerships and alliances that the UK can best strengthen its shared security [FCDO, 2026].

Does the UK therefore qualify as an Arctic actor? Britain depends heavily on alliance networks, NATO security architecture and longstanding scientific credibility as the prime sources of its Arctic actorness. The UK's engagement in Arctic research particularly distinguishes its engagement from other purely geopolitical actors, giving the UK a legitimacy that pure military presence cannot. Yet, military power is especially important in today's world to provide security and defence in an increasingly competitive geopolitical region. From a defence perspective, UK Arctic influence is almost wholly derivative, dependent on bilateral and regional networks, and ultimately resulting in limited independent regional authority.

Furthermore, insofar as its status doesn't change, the UK will always remain constrained by its non-Arctic status. It is present, recognised and diplomatically visible; however, its lack of Arctic sovereign territory reduces it to a limited, non-authoritative role as an Observer State of the Arctic Council. This directly affects its institutional authority and leadership in Arctic affairs, limiting its actorness. Post-2022, the collapse of Arctic exceptionalism has changed the environment in which the UK is working, leading to weakened cooperative governance in the Council in which context the UK is flexing to undertake a leadership position. Given the rapidly evolving nature of Arctic geopolitics, more proactive policymaking and alliance networking with European allies is needed and could strengthen the UK's leadership and actorness. Moreover, the ambivalent nature of Trump's diplomacy has awakened the UK to the fact unreliability of the American security umbrella. Whilst the UK still fears a security landscape without the support of the US, it is making efforts to strike new European focused partnerships. This shows that efforts are being made to plan for a less US-reliant future [Murphy, 2026, 8].

In 2026, the UK government is no longer downplaying the defence dimension of its Arctic Policy [Depledge, 2019, 1-2]. The country has gone from emphasising 'nearest neighbour' diplomacy and environmental protection to focusing on hard security and war fighting in less than a decade [Murphy, 2026, 3].

3. The EU: “inextricably linked” to the Arctic

Following the structure of the previous chapter, this third chapter will assess how the European Union exercises actorness in the Arctic. How does the EU frame China, and how does it respond to China’s growing Arctic ambitions?

3.1 EU Arctic Policy

A unique combination of history, geography, economics, and scientific achievements means that the EU is inextricably linked to the Arctic region [Liu, Kirk et al, 2017, 2]. The EU counts three Arctic countries among its 27 Member States: Denmark (through Greenland), Sweden, and Finland. These Arctic regions serve as the gateway to the EU’s engagement and presence in the wider Arctic [Paet, 2025, 8]. The first Arctic state to accede to the EU was Denmark in 1973, followed by Swedish and Finnish accession in 1995. The EU also maintains close relations with Iceland and Norway through the European Economic Area [ibid., 5]. A close relationship to or membership in the EU therefore totals five out of eight Arctic states. Of the three remaining Arctic states –Russia, Canada, and the US – the latter two are also strategic partners of the EU. On this basis, the EU can be considered entangled in Arctic affairs.

Finland was the first EU Member State to issue an Arctic policy. This was published in 2010, a response to Norway’s 2005 Arctic policy, and was followed by Sweden and Denmark in 2011. Both Finland and Sweden’s policies reflect strong commitments to social well-being, infrastructure, environmental concerns and continued multilateral cooperation. In essence, they are “non-controversial and predictable” [Coates and Holroyd, 2020, 295]. Denmark’s policy is more aggressive, flaunting Greenland’s central Arctic location and the “vigorous and important” actorness that the country plays. It additionally notes the emerging “vast economic potential” that is drawing attention, warning that new opportunities and challenges faced in the Arctic must be met with “appropriate” cooperation. It is unclear whether this simply denotes a desire for respectful cooperation or should be read as a cautionary notice to non-Arctic states not to interfere [Kingdom of Denmark Strategy for the Arctic 2011-2020, 2011, 7].

The European Union began developing its own integrated and comprehensive Arctic policy in 2008 through a series of communications from the European Commission, endorsed by the Council and the European Parliament [Liu, Kirk et al, 2017, 2]. This took place shortly after the planting of a Russian flag by two Russian Arctic explorers on the seabed 4,200 metres below the North Pole in 2007, prompting an international media narrative focused on a “scramble” for the Arctic [Bentzen and Hall, 2017, 2]. The following period 2010-13 saw the publication of Arctic policies from Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Canada, and the United States. Prior to this, only Norway had one, launched in 2005. In this sense, the EU position has been and will likely continue to be shaped primarily by global concerns and balancing with developing States’ interests [Liu, Kirk et al, 2017, 34].

The latest Joint Communication from the EU on Arctic policy was issued in October 2021. The EU asserts that Arctic states have the primary responsibility for tackling challenges and opportunities within their territories. However, much like China, it acknowledges the transnational boundaries that many modern challenges in the Arctic represent, justifying its Arctic engagement for three reasons: firstly, to serve its strategic interests as a geopolitical power; secondly, to ensure the region remains safe, peaceful, and prosperous; and thirdly, to share the responsibility for global sustainable development [EU Arctic Policy, 2021, 1]. These aims are useful for understanding how the EU interprets its own Arctic role: as an economic power; as a security actor; and as a normative power.

In 2019, Finnish President Antti Rinne stated that “There should be more EU in the Arctic and more Arctic in the EU” [Rinne, 2019]. Undeniably, the EU has a strong political will to enhance Arctic governance, and a strong strategic interest in the Arctic region. Its capacity to undertake a constructive role in Arctic diplomacy is however limited: the pre-eminent forum for circumpolar cooperation is the Arctic Council, of which the EU is not a member [Cinciripini, 2023, 1]. After lengthy preparations, the EU applied for Observer Status in the Arctic Council in 2009, pointing out its geography and long-term commitment to Arctic projects. As of writing, no decision has been made on their application. Since 2013, however, it started to “observe the work of the Council” without any formalisation of its role [Kirgizov-Barskiy, 2021, 65]. As an ad hoc Observer, the EU cannot vote, and is forced to rely heavily on its three Member States. However,

its committed presence in observing the Council highlights its desire and what it considers its right to play a part in polar governance.

3.2 Legal and Institutional Constraints

Legally, the EU does not have an Arctic coastline, but does have a terrestrial presence in the region, owing that parts of the territory of Finland and Sweden lie north of the Arctic Circle. Since three Arctic States are full Union Members and two more are partners in the EEA, the EU's *acquis communautaire* unquestionably covers an extensive geographical area of the European Arctic.

The legal position of what the EU considers its third Arctic Member State, Denmark (through Greenland), is more complicated. A Danish colony for over two hundred years, Greenland's colonial status was removed in 1953 and the island integrated as an equal county into the Kingdom of Denmark. Therefore, upon Denmark's accession to the EU (then Economic Community, or EC) in 1973, Greenland – which at the time did not have a home rule arrangement – was obliged to accede as an integral part of Denmark due to an interpretation made by the Danish government [Eklund, 2025, 99]. With home rule established in Greenland six years later, a referendum followed on Union membership in which a small anti-EC majority emerged, leading to Greenland's exit from the EC on 1st February 1985 [ibid, 307]. As such, Greenland now has Overseas Countries and Territories (OCT) status. This term refers to territories that are located outside the EU but that are linked historically, socially, culturally and/or politically to a Member State of the EU. They are not sovereign states with an international legal personality, nor are they Member States or third countries; as such Greenland is legally situated in a grey area [ibid, 11]. In this sense, whether Denmark is legally an Arctic state or not remains ambiguous.

There is no one single treaty, but rather a multi-layered approach that guides the EU's legal framework in the Arctic. All 27 EU Member States are individually party to both UNCLOS and the IMO, with the EU also a signatory to the former. These treaties, in the EU's view, are essential to preserving safety and stability in the Arctic [Paet, 2025, 4]. Whilst the EU

consistently highlights the importance of respect for territorial integrity and international law, it noted in a 2025 security report that international law is potentially being undermined by Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic [ibid, 11]. A Russian law from 2022, for example, restricts the passage of foreign warships in the NSR and requires them to gain permission from the Russian government before transit. The illegality of this case is the subject of vigorous debate among international lawyers. Russia maintains that coastal states possess certain rights to regulate shipping in their EEZs for environmental purposes (Article 236), whereas the EU argues that warships enjoy immunity from any environmental provisions of UNCLOS (Article 236) [Todorov, 2023]. Additionally, the EU firmly upholds Articles 112 and 115 of UNCLOS which concern the right to lay and safeguard undersea cables, respectively. It believes that upholding these laws are essential to safeguarding Arctic security as well as protecting Europe's digital and energy interconnectivity from geopolitical disruption.

3.3 Security and Geopolitics

The EU's historical background in the Arctic is primarily scientific, but it is increasingly exercising its actorness in the region as a response to changing global systemic pressures in the world order linked to China's rise. Power competition, as well as vulnerability concerns, have led the EU to increasingly frame China as a strategic competitor. The EU's Arctic approach has consequently been transformed from environmental governance toward geopolitical risk management in order to ensure its own security.

In contrast to Beijing, the EU does not agree that China is a 'near-Arctic state'. According to the EU, this declaration is a misleading self-designation with no legal foundation, privileges, or justification for a military presence in the High North [Paet, 2025, 7]. China's declared ambition to become a 'polar great power' and its expansion through research missions, strategic infrastructure investments and dual-use partnerships are viewed by the EU as extending political and strategic influence in the Arctic. The EU argues that the PSR challenges established governance principles and, together with growing Sino-Russian cooperation, risks undermining regional stability and European access to strategic resources [Grieger, 2021, 2].

In response to a rapidly changing geopolitical environment since the 2010s, the EU's security and defence narrative has evolved, developing a policy of "strategic autonomy". Defined, this is the EU's capacity to act autonomously in key policy areas such as defence, energy, digital infrastructure, and supply chains. Strategic autonomy does not imply isolation, but rather seeks to strengthen the EU's capacity to act while maintaining cooperation with partners such as NATO and the US.

Despite Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO in 2023, strengthening the Alliance's Arctic presence, [Paet, 2025, 5], growing uncertainty surrounding Trump's unilateral approach to foreign policy has raised EU concerns about the long-term reliability of US security guarantees – "The EU cannot just assume it can rely on the US as it once did" [ibid, 4]. Long-standing alliances have been undermined and the trust that once underpinned NATO and wider transatlantic cooperation has been eroded [Wunderlich, 2025]. The world order made up of laws and norms premised on US power is fading, meaning that the only certainty is uncertainty. This makes European strategic autonomy necessary to deal with whatever challenges a future age of multipolarity or renewed bipolarity may bring [ibid, 3].

Since autonomous does not mean alone, the key to achieving overall security for the EU is to be surrounded by a network of reliable energy partners and supplies [Paet, 2025, 9], and is exploring securing access to materials from "reliable, like-minded partners" [ibid, 13]. Simultaneously, it is striving to decrease its dependence on China – who mines and processes on average 80% of the world's rare earth minerals – as well as "other unreliable partners" [ibid, 13]. In the context of energy security, we can infer that the "other" may refer to Russia, whose LNG imports the EU relied heavily upon prior to 2022. Since this date, Russia has additionally been under EU sanctions. Furthermore, its cooperation with China has been identified by the EU as a threat [ibid, 10].

With Russian LNG no longer an option, the EU has pushed investments in floating storage and regasification units (FSRUs), particularly in Norway's Barents Sea. This is reducing Europe's dependence on the Russian supply, diversifying European supply sources, and widening the EU's range of potential suppliers and market opportunities [CEER, 2024, 26]. The EU's

regasification and LNG storage capacity are projected to increase 65% and 41% respectively between 2022-27 [CEER, 2024, 27], and this is just the start: the EU is also exploring renewable energy exports and green hydrogen potential in Iceland and Greenland. As a source of diverse energy resources, the Arctic is an incredibly significant region for the EU that could offer critical raw materials crucial for its green and digital transitions. Equally, a strong, reliable flow of geographically proximate fuel ensures a sound EU supply chain and secure energy sector, whilst bolstering the EU's industrial competitiveness and defence capabilities [Paet, 2025, 8]. It also helps to reduce a situation of increased dependence on China should the NATO alliance weaken or relationship with the United States deteriorate.

In recent years, the EU has taken an increasingly protective stance in the Arctic over its military and critical infrastructures. China, along with Russia, was identified in a 2025 EU security report as a 'malign actor' [Paet, 2025, 9]: consistent with this stance, attempted Chinese acquisitions of sensitive Arctic infrastructure have been blocked by several European countries in recent years. This includes Denmark's decision in 2016 to block the purchase of the Grønnedal naval base in Greenland, Finland's 2018 decision to block the purchase of Kemijärvi Airport near a military zone, and Norway's decision in 2024 to halt the sale of Søre Fagerfjord to Chinese buyers [ibid, 7]. These decisions were taken on national security grounds, cautious of encroaching Chinese presence in critical Arctic infrastructures. Additional commitment has been made by the EU to holding cross-Arctic military exercises, such as the Arctic Challenge 2023 (hosted by Sweden, Finland, and Norway) and the Arctic Light 2025 (a Danish-led military exercise). Furthermore, it has recognised Finland's expertise in the development and production of icebreakers, identifying these vessels as paramount for the safety of the Arctic [Paet, 2025, 9-11]. This reveals a high level of protection and investment in critical infrastructures, as well as great ambition for future EU actorness in Arctic defence and security.

The EU's protective behaviour extends into its approach to Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI). Growing Chinese investments in Europe in the 2010s have made the EU cautious, perceiving China as an economic threat and labelling it a "strategic competitor". As it stands, the EU's economic relationship with China is still characterised by a structural deficit for the EU, widening to €359.3 billion in 2025, a 20% increase from the previous year [Gavin and

Martuscelli, 2026]. This has provided a political imperative and recognition for an EU Investment Screening Framework. Adopted in April 2019, the regulatory innovation protects against undesirable investments that seem “harmful”, “opportunistic” or “predatory” [Peragovic and Szunomár, 2025, 480]. As of May 2026, additional sectors have been identified for “safeguard investigations,” with the aim of “pushing forward EU competitiveness and strategic autonomy in the challenging geoeconomic context” [Gavin and Martuscelli, 2026]. This reveals a pragmatic approach to EU-China economic relations.

Likewise, the EU has been keen to develop a “derisking” strategy from China. In 2023, it invested €5 billion in European 5G infrastructure, an initiative which has reduced Chinese giant Huawei’s EU digital presence by 30% [Gomart et al, 2025, 124]. EU initiatives Polar Connect and ‘Vision 2030’ anticipate resilient trans-Arctic submarine cable routes to link Greenland and Iceland with continental Europe, as well as with Japan and South Korea. EU-funded Horizon Europe partnerships and Copernicus satellite services complement these initiatives, providing essential data for Arctic security and stewardship. Collectively, these present additional opportunities to strengthen the EU’s digital sovereignty whilst enhancing connectivity and security in the High North [ibid, 9]. Further EU investments in European digital infrastructure, along with a diversified supply chain of critical raw materials, could continue to strengthen not only the EU’s digital security but also its resilience in the Arctic. This is fundamental to ensure the EU possesses a sound platform for future actorness in the region.

3.4: Conclusion

The Arctic is quickly becoming a geopolitical epicentre. Historically treated as a peripheral issue, EU engagement in Arctic affairs has evolved from early environmental engagement to Arctic policy institutionalisation after 2008. Since then, Arctic interest has evolved considerably; the EU’s 2021 Arctic policy paper notes “the EU’s full engagement in Arctic matters is [now] a geopolitical necessity” [European Commission, 2021]. Post-2022, Russia is the largest and most important security threat to the EU. That the European Arctic is “a region caught between competing visions of international order” (Bergmann, 2026, 1) means that the Arctic has become even more crucial for the EU: it is a region in which territorial sovereignty must be defended and

international law respected. Furthermore, growing Sino-Russian cooperation, combined with greater Chinese Arctic ambitions and pressure from aggressive anti-Chinese US policymakers have led the EU to become wary and pragmatic in their relationship with China. The EU is deftly walking a tightrope between bowing to US pressure and welcoming much-needed Chinese investments into the EU economy. In short, the EU is a victim to the antagonism of other great powers. Moving forwards, it must choose one of three options: pick a side; emerge as an alternative pole; or do neither and stay trapped in limbo, decaying and losing relevance in Arctic and other affairs.

Whilst the EU as an institutional body is not considered an Arctic entity, three of its Member States are. It is through Denmark, Sweden, and Finland therefore that the EU maintains Arctic presence, relevance and market power. The EU's ambition of Arctic governance is increasing but remains limited through its Observer status at the Arctic Council. The Council's paralysis after 2022 has created further complexities, Russian aggression, and climate change are reshaping governance opportunities and opening up space for EU involvement. The EU is weak in hard security, but has a strong economic, environmental, regulatory and normative footprint. This is one of the main sources of its credibility as an actor in the Arctic – meaning the possibility for continued EU leadership in this area is strong.

Increasing militarisation, environmental changes, resource lust and power play in the High North have cemented the Arctic as a region of EU strategic interest. Within this context, the EU has the opportunity to redefine its traditional normative power identity to that of a global strategic power. It must preserve its normative commitments and carve a new path in a fragmented world shaped by power competition and strategic rivalry. However, the EU is constrained by hard security authority and relies heavily on its Member States for defence: under Article 4(2) of the Treaty of the European Union, national security remains the sole responsibility of individual countries [TEU, 4:2]. Therefore, in addition to securing energy, digital infrastructure, and supply chains, the EU must prioritise its defence capacities. If the shared interests of individual Member States do not align neatly with institutional membership, the EU must endeavour to build political consensus at home whilst forging new alliances and bolstering existing regional defence partnerships. This will support Arctic resilience and in turn builds its profile as a security actor in

a divided world. This is an ambitious but feasible goal: the EU's economic clout, combined with high-level coordination resting on strong institutional foundations offers the space for such an objective to materialise.

Case Study: The Greenland Crisis

The EU derives an enormous amount of its Arctic legitimacy from its association status with Greenland through Denmark (although as previously discussed, whether or the EU should include Greenland in their Arctic state count from a legal perspective is complex and ambiguous). However, legality alone does not create security. The following case study will discuss recent developments in Greenland.

The start of 2026 was marred by the ‘Greenland crisis’ following rhetoric from US President Donald Trump about annexing the vast ice-covered island. Traditionally, Western energy and attention in the Arctic has been focused on threats towards the East with Russia, and increasingly from China. A threat from within the alliance had not been anticipated [Murphy, 2026, 1]. This crisis revealed a different challenge – signs of the splintering of the NATO alliance. Greenland has become an enormous geopolitical chess piece, demonstrating how new tensions and disagreements among allies over sovereignty and security characterise contemporary Arctic geopolitics. In short, competition is no longer limited to rival powers.

Covering a total area of more than 2.1 million square km, Greenland is the world’s largest island, so vast that its coastline is longer than the distance around the Earth at the equator [Gjerstad and Rogers, 2021]. Roughly 81% of the island is under ice, and it is home to a small population of just over fifty thousand people [European Parliament, 2025, 2]. Located astride the GIUK Gap, it boasts extreme strategic importance due to its geographical proximity to emerging Arctic shipping routes, strategic location in relation to security and defence activities, and its vast untapped natural resources [ibid]. This includes mineral reserves, the ‘vitamins of modern industry’, considered essential for producing advanced consumer, military and green technologies [Andersson and Zeuthen, 2024, 175]. Competing interest for the above reasons has transformed the island into a proxy for an emerging international order [Bergmann, 2026, 2].

Many actors are interested in Greenland, including the EU, who deems Greenland an “integral part” of EU Arctic Policy [EEAS, 2026]. Arctic scholar Niklas Eklund has noted the vagueness

the EU has attributed to Finland and Sweden's Arctic importance, noting that the EU's interest in the Eurarctic is mainly directed towards Greenland [Eklund, 2025, 290]. The Amitsoq graphite project was named as a Strategic Project for the EU under its Critical Raw Materials Act, [Schwartz and Baskaran, 2026, 6], and an EU-Greenland partnership has invested renewable energy and biodiversity conservation [Paet, 2025, 288]. Denmark has also invested \$125 million since 2021 in military surveillance drones for intelligence gathering purposes off Greenland's coast in a contribution to "de-escalation" and legitimate enforcement of territorial integrity [Gjerstand and Rogers, 2021]. These responses underline Greenland's importance to EU economic security, environmental regulation and territorial sovereignty.

In its 2020 annual report, the Chinese company Shenghe Resources referred to Greenland's rare earth functional minerals as 'strategic minerals' – minerals identified as crucial for ensuring economic security, defense security and the development of emerging high-tech industries in China [Andersson and Zeuthen, 2024, 182]. The same company now has access to one eighth of Greenland's mineral resources [Lay, 2025, 3]. This makes China Greenland's biggest investor, accounting for roughly 12% of Greenlandic GDP [ibid].

China has also attempted to invest in infrastructure projects in Greenland, with limited success. A 2018 Chinese proposal to assist with Greenland's airport development was blocked by Copenhagen (under pressure from the US) for "national security reasons" [Andersson, 2025]. This reflects the increasing association of Chinese investments with potential security risks. These risks are accompanied by the close strategic relationship of China and Russia. This is heightened by the paralysis of Arctic governance and cooperation since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has further amplified tensions in the Arctic region. Furthermore, it demonstrates how western planning has assumed that challenges in the Arctic region would come from these two external actors.

Greenland is also the subject of bold interest from the USA. The US's 2021 Arctic Strategy referred to the Arctic as a "a platform for global power projection", noting its strategic position for military access and abundant natural resources [Evans, 2021]. This includes Thule air base. Lying 750 miles inside the Arctic Circle, it is the US's northernmost outpost and plays an

important part of America's global defence system [Henley, 2019]. Greenland also hosts the Pituffik Space Base, established through a defence agreement with the US dating back to 1951 [European Parliament, 6]. It was this facility that US Vice-President JD Vance visited in 2025 without invitation, scolding Denmark for being negligent towards Greenlanders' security and reinforcing Trump's vow to take control of the island [Debusmann, 2025].

The US has attempted to purchase the Greenland on three separate occasions. The first attempt dates to the 19th century. Following the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867, US policymakers began eyeing Greenland and Iceland as potential American territories [Friedman, 2025]. A second offer of \$100 million was made in 1946 owing to Greenland's strategic importance during the Second World War and the emerging Cold War. The third attempt was made in August 2019. Denmark rejected all three offers, reiterating again to Trump that the island is "not for sale" [Henley, 2019].

The Greenland crisis erupted in early 2026 after hints from Trump about acquiring the Arctic island. In addition to Denmark, Canada was also the target of verbal threats about the possibility of its future status as the 51st US state. These direct threats from the most powerful NATO member state against two other member states completely threatened the fabric of the western alliance, as well as calling into question NATO's founding principle of collective defence [Murphy, 2026, 4]. Furthermore, its fragmentation has weakened the credibility of the alliance in the eyes of external actors like China and Russia, the very actors from whom NATO expected its main challenges would arise.

The European response to this crisis was incoherent and somewhat scrambled. A 'tripwire force' of troops was hastily assembled and deployed to Greenland as part of 'Operation Arctic Endurance.' The extent of Member States' participation in the operation varied: whilst Denmark boosted its military presence by a "substantial contribution" of 58 soldiers [Power, 2026], France provided only fifteen, Germany thirteen, and Norway just two [Barrot, 2026]. The UK deployed a single military officer, a token presence of UK participation, to assist with observation and planning. This meek response shows the unwillingness of Europe – in particular the UK – to

jeopardise its relationship with the US [Murphy, 2026, 4]. The inconsistent contributions of Member States further underlines the disjointed nature of the EU as a security actor.

This crisis has highlighted the internal fractures within the NATO alliance, exposing the European dilemma: maintain alliance unity, or defend Danish-Greenlandic sovereignty. Europe is attempting to do both. Greenland's Foreign Minister has consistently specified that Greenland is "open for business, not for sale" [Henley, 2019], a position supported by the EU, who condemned "regrettable [US] statements" involving Greenland [Paet, 2025, 7]. Following Trump's remarks, Denmark is making new investments in Arctic defense capabilities and increasing Greenlandic representation in Denmark's foreign policy [Bergmann, 2026, 7]. EU backing for Greenland and Denmark is also accompanied by EU support for multilateralism, the rules-based international order and upholding of NATO defence commitments [European Parliament, 2026]. This position has been largely mirrored by the UK, with UK Prime Minister Starmer reiterating in January 2026 that he "will not yield" to pressure from Donald Trump over the future of Greenland [Wheeler, 2026].

Europe, once again, finds itself in a balancing act: standing firm on Greenland's territorial integrity whilst managing internal disagreements among allies. The highly salient nature of Greenland in Europe has made this more difficult as European public opinion is staunchly anti-Trump. According to a public opinion poll, just 13% of British and French respondents, 10% of German respondents and 3% of Danish respondents hold a favourable view of Trump, rendering him a near-universally disliked figure in Europe [Murphy, 2026, 4]. European policymakers are in the unenviable position of defending their own sovereignty, resolving alliance disputes, and managing external competitors in a geopolitically charged, governance-paralysed Arctic context, all whilst balancing public opinion.

Greenland, strategically positioned within the Arctic Circle, has become the heart of broader geopolitical competition. The crisis that emerged in January 2026 following American threats to Greenlandic sovereignty underlines the internally fragmented nature of the western NATO alliance: traditionally focusing on external actors like China and Russia in the Arctic, a challenge from within the alliance had not been anticipated. Greenland therefore represents an emerging

international order and provides a unique opportunity to observe real-time negotiations of power, alliances and sovereignty in the 21st century.

4. UK-EU Cooperation: Enabled or Constrained?

The Greenland crisis has exposed the cracks among European and American allies. What about the relationship between European allies? This final chapter will bring together the UK and the EU. It will start with a systematic comparison of actorness exercised (that the previous two chapters aimed to expound). Next, it will identify potential areas for cooperation that could realistically transpire, defining complementarities in key strategic areas of both actors' foreign policies. It will then discuss the constraints of UK-EU cooperation using three parameters: institutional, strategic, and identity-based factors, before closing the chapter with a final evaluation of policy coherence and cooperation.

4.1: Comparing UK and EU Arctic Actorness

As stated in Chapter 2, actorness is defined as the “capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system” [Sjöstedt, 1977] and is contingent on four criteria: autonomy, authority, recognition and cohesion [Jupille and Caporaso, 1999]. The last two chapters have outlined the UK and the EU's Arctic engagement, demonstrating that whilst they both strive for greater influence in the region, their overall actorness (measured against the aforementioned criteria) is very distinct.

Neither the UK nor the EU is a sovereign Arctic state. The EU relies on Finland, Sweden and Denmark to justify its Arctic engagement. Launching its first Arctic Policy in 2008, the EU frames itself as a stakeholder in governance, environmental protection, and economic regulation, and as such its legitimacy is derived from these areas. This is in sharp contrast to the UK, who is a recognised and longstanding Arctic stakeholder through geographic proximity, solid NATO membership, and a sprawling network of defence partnerships with other northern allies. Like the EU, the UK is not a formal Arctic state; however, it possesses some authority in Arctic affairs as an Observer State to the Arctic Council – the EU's 2008 Observer application has still not been formally approved. Moreover, its historic legacy of scientific engagement further serves to highlight its established Arctic identity, in contrast to the EU's emerging one.

The UK and EU are also distinct when it comes to their use of policy instruments. The EU particularly stands out for its economic attractiveness [Gomart et al, 2025, 124]. As a market power with enormous regulatory capacity: the EU acts as a global rule-maker ('Brussels Effect') by setting standards that multinational companies voluntarily follow in order to ensure EU market access [Damen, 2026, 2]. Moreover, in the last ten years, the EU has started to use its economic instruments to promote and defend national interests, with the aim of producing beneficial geopolitical results [ibid.]. This includes enforcing economic sanctions regimes and investment screening, both of which it has practised against Russia and China, respectively. Thus, economic appeal and a shift toward geoeconomic trends are used in addition to the EU's fundamental stake in strategic contributions to positive security, socio-economic and environmental outcomes, notably through multilateral cooperation [Paet, 2025, 4].

In contrast, the UK is a leading security power, remarkable in its defence diplomacy, military cooperation and the leading role it plays in the NATO alliance. Already being reshaped by Russia's war against Ukraine, Starmer has pledged to raise defence spending up to 3% of GDP in the next parliament – a record high since the Cold War [Young, 2026]. This vision is equally cemented in the UK's 2025 SDR, which places industry at the centre of UK national security [Clapp, 2026, 1]. The UK boasts a strong network of bilateral defence partnerships, including the Anglo-Norwegian Lunna House agreement, and a prized 'special relationship' with the US. This sound security and defence diplomacy is the most visible aspect of the UK's Arctic actorness, lending it a significant amount of legitimacy and authority in the region, through which it has the capacity to act.

These bilateral defence partnerships characterise the UK's security approach to China in the Arctic. China's growing Arctic ambitions have increased British concerns about intelligence risks, critical infrastructures and growing Chinese military muscle, leading to the increasing securitisation of any Chinese Arctic activity. This is evident through the UK's investments in ASW, its *Atlantic Bastion* project, and deterrence of Russian shadow fleets (China's strategic partner). The EU has also perceived that there are risks involved with China's Arctic engagement, considering China an important economic competitor and partner for cooperation, and simultaneously a systematic rival [EEAS, 2023]. This tripartite perspective represents a

language shift in EU policy documents that mirrors broader EU-China relations. Hence, the risks associated with Chinese engagement have indeed been perceived by both the UK and the EU; however, they have been framed and responded to differently depending on the strength of respective policy instruments.

Another point of differentiation is the extent to which European policymakers have securitised their approaches to China. In this regard, the UK presents a substantially more securitised actor than the EU, citing China fifteen times in its 2025 SDR. More than half of these mentions – eight times, precisely – was used in juxtaposition to China’s relationship with Russia [SDR, 2025]. Contrastingly, whilst China was mentioned 10 times in the EU’s 2025 White Paper on defence, none of these references were in relation to Russia [EU White Paper, 2025]. Interestingly, this figure paled in comparison to the number of references to Ukraine: eighty-two, which was only mentioned almost half as many times in the UK’s document (forty-four times) [SDR, 2025]. This reflects the broader foreign policy priorities and geopolitical disparities of the two actors, in addition to the contrast in policy approaches towards China: heightened securitisation (UK) versus cautious balancing (EU).

Finally, the UK and EU boast different relationships with other Arctic states. The EU consistently emphasises multilateral cooperation, warning against intensifying global rivalries and Russian Arctic militarisation which serve to obstruct this. Its 2016 Joint Communication identified “science and investment” as valuable areas of cooperation, aimed at enhancing the Union’s bilateral and multilateral relations with Arctic stakeholders, in addition to sustainable development. This has evolved into “the EU’s idealised goal for its multidimensional relationship with the Arctic” [Chuffart et al., 2021, 285]. Whilst the EU does not directly legislate for most of the circumpolar Arctic, as a global multi-level force and a major promoter of sustainable development it can use its extensive environmental regulatory and policy action toolkit to influence the development of global environmental standards applicable in and for the Arctic [ibid.].

On the other hand, the UK’s relationship with Arctic states is characterised by bilateral defence relationships. It heavily prioritises the NATO alliance and a US relationship that “underpins [the

UK's] security" [FCDO, 2018, 62]. This traditional partnership is threatened by the current unpredictability of UK-US relations that stems from the Trump administration's confrontational approach towards its allies. Whilst a deterioration of the 'special relationship' could theoretically increase pressure on London to strengthen ties with EU partners [Cinciripini, 2026], it is unlikely; still viewed as "the UK's most important strategic ally and partner" [FCDO, 2018, 62], the UK government is unlikely to jeopardise their relationship with the US or shift to a more explicitly pro-European stance. Furthermore, steadfast support to US partners amid greater pressure to adhere to Trump's every bequest is likely to cause great domestic conflict, owing to the unpopularity of the American President among the British public.

4.2: Areas of Potential Cooperation

European Arctic actorness is therefore characterised by overlapping perceptions of Chinese risks, but differing through perceptions of individual Arctic identity, policy instruments, extent of securitisation, and relationship with other Arctic states. The following sub-section will focus on the complementary factors which embody UK-EU actorness, exploring areas of potential cooperation between the two actors. This includes maritime security, critical infrastructure protection, research security, investment screening, supply chains and critical minerals, and development of a common situational Arctic position.

European cooperation has been fundamentally reshaped by the 2025 EU-UK Strategic Partnership. This is grounded in a Common Understanding and the Defence and Security Partnership. The latter has the potential to strengthen UK-EU cooperation in maritime security, hybrid threats, and critical infrastructure resilience. Prior to this, following Britain's exit from the European Union, the UK was the only EU European neighbouring state (excluding hostile neighbours Russia and Belarus) not to have a functioning agreement with the EU for cooperation on foreign, security or defence issues [Whitman, 2022]. Despite this policy gap – formed in the wake of Brexit – it is precisely because the UK and the EU "clearly see eye-to-eye on so many levels" [EEAS, 2025] that this partnership was reached. Whilst the 11-page document only explicitly mentions the Arctic once in a vague reference to potential exchanges on regional

security issues [UK-EU SDP, 2025, 4], the following recommendations for cooperation should be understood within this new context of UK-EU collaboration.

The first area that would benefit from enhanced European cooperation is maritime security. Both actors deeply respect UNCLOS, promote a free maritime security environment, and share concerns for Arctic sea lanes (existing and emerging) and the security of critical infrastructures like underwater cables [UK-EU SDP, 2025, 5]. The UK has a historic maritime tradition and a strong defence industry that plays a leading role in military technologies, making it a key contributor of military capabilities. Conversely, the EU is best at contributing regulatory coordination and economic resilience measures. This is in addition to CISE (Common Information Sharing Environment), the EU's vast information-sharing network for maritime surveillance. As such, far from increasing competition, further cooperation from both actors would be extremely complementary, boosting European authority and cohesion in maritime security. This point was echoed in the UK's latest SDR, which recognised the increasing significance of the EU as a defence and security actor whose "unique regulatory and financial levers can complement NATO's role as the primary guarantor of European security" [SDR, 2025, 75]. Therefore, deepened EU collaboration with the UK would be twofold in its results: it would complement the UK's NATO First approach and enhance cooperation between NATO and the EU [ibid.].

A more collaborative approach to maritime security could equally strengthen protection of European critical infrastructures. This could be achieved by increased EU participation in broader regional projects such as the North Seal platform. Launched in January 2025, this facilitates information exchange and coordinated responses among Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Norway, the UK and Denmark [Defence Matters, 2025] aimed at increasing the protection of underwater cables. Furthermore, the new UK-EU SDP may open the possibility for the UK to participate in specific EU defence initiatives [EEAS, 2025]. This would further integrate European defence cooperation. However, whilst the SDP contains a vague commitment to enhance maritime security coordination, information-sharing, and dialogue between the two actors [UK-EU SDP, 2025, 5], it is a short and ambiguous statement, lacking specific detail and an action plan for how this cooperation will be carried out. Furthermore, it makes no explicit

reference to the Arctic region. Therefore, cooperation in this area – whilst promising – is limited; a more detailed, overt strategy is essential if more coherent cooperation is to be attained.

Research security is another area for deepened European cooperation, as this is where Chinese Arctic engagement often occurs. The UK and the EU are both highly attractive destinations for investment and research, a crucial element of European competitiveness and resilience. Of the two actors, the EU is the most open to research collaboration, stating its desire to partner with the broadest possible range of countries who share similar concerns or interests on economic security [ESS, 2023, 2]. The UK's approach to research is more self-centred; its 2023 Integrated Refresh Review boasts the UK's status as a "top five nation" in innovation, artificial intelligence and cyber, committing to an annual RI target of £20 billion [IRR, 2023, 4] and relying on foreign investment through the creation of a sound business environment and attracting talent to the UK [ibid, 58]. Hence, whilst the EU focuses more on multilateral cooperation, the UK intends to leverage its own national strengths to support research and innovation. This also supports its post-Brexit "Global Britain" identity. Whilst some research cooperation is set to transpire through the 2025 UK-EU Security and Defence Partnership [SDP, 2025, 7], it would also be useful for the UK to recognise the benefit of greater cooperation among value-sharing allies and stop considering innovation merely as a factor for state competition [IRR, 2023, 7].

There is also scope to strengthen cooperation in European investment screening, as no formal UK-EU joint mechanism exists. In response to growing Chinese engagement in the Arctic and across European energy, technology, digital and infrastructure sectors, both the UK and the EU have increased their dialogue on economic security. This could include investment screening in strategic and critical sectors. Currently, a Joint Statement on Bilateral Cooperation between the United Kingdom and Belgium exists, which explores mutual alignment on FDI screening in strategic sectors [Prime Minister's Office, 2025]. There is no reason why this could not be expanded into a Europe-wide investment screening framework to fortify European economic security and demarcate a common European position on (un)desirable investments.

Close UK-EU cooperation on critical minerals and supply chains is essential for ensuring European energy security amid the competition for resources that is likely to intensify on a

progressive scale as global warming continues to melt more Arctic ice. Active efforts have already been made: the EU was listed as a priority partner in the UK's Critical Minerals Strategy (CMS), along with the US and Canada [CMS, 2023, 28]; likewise, the EU's 2024 Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) underlines the necessity of diversifying its raw materials supply chain, in addition to giving "special consideration" to countries like the UK with whom the Union has established a strategic partnership [CRMA, 2024, 4]. Moreover, enhanced cooperation between the two will simultaneously decrease dependence on Chinese downstream processing chains, whilst strengthening resource stability of trusted partners. Ultimately, it will augment European resilience of not only critical but also strategic raw materials, imperative for both economies' development of green, digital and defence technologies [CMS, 2023, 40].

These six areas constitute a roadmap for more enhanced, coherent UK-EU cooperation within a context of growing Chinese Arctic engagement. Combined within a broader international context blemished with uncertain transatlantic relations to the West and increasing Russian aggression to the East this has accelerated the case for closer European integration, particularly in the defence and security field. Extensive coordination on Russian sanctions regimes and export controls have already created mechanisms for cooperation and set a precedent for UK-EU cooperation. This could adapt to the rapidly evolving regional environment and extend to Arctic issues.

Furthermore, these external pressures are highly conducive to creating a closer alignment between both actors, acting as a window for opportunity for UK-EU relations [Cinciripini, 2026]. Of course, this is dependent on whether both actors are willing to do seize the opportunity. Correspondingly, the following chapter will discuss the constraints to closer UK-EU cooperation.

4.3: Constraints for Cooperation

Despite recognition of the challenge China's growing Arctic engagement poses to European security, a high degree of alignment on strategic interests and a multitude of opportunities for deepening their relationship, UK-EU cooperation remains constrained due to three main factors: institutional, strategic, and identity-based constraints. This sub-section aims to understand the extent to which these three factors hinder closer UK-EU cooperation and policy coherence.

Institutional Constraints

The most significant obstacle in the UK-EU relationship is the institutional separation created by the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement, finalised on 31st January 2020. The UK's EU relationship was 'recast' with the 2021 Trade and Cooperation Agreement, which has since governed the two actors' economic and political relationship. This is, however, limited to cooperation on transport, energy, climate, and internal security, fundamentally excluding broader foreign policy, external security, and military and defense cooperation. In short, the UK no longer participates in EU foreign policy decision-making. Lack of regular participation in bodies where strategic priorities are discussed, policies are formulated, and decisions coordinated, therefore creates structural barriers to cooperation.

There are some existing mechanisms of formal coordination. This includes the UK Foreign Affairs Committee, which examines the policies of the FCDO, conducting targeted inquiries of the UK-EU relationship which it seeks to deepen. There is also an annual EU-UK Summit, held for the first time in London in May 2025, which aimed to set the path for further rapprochement. The Summit paved the way for a biannual system of structured foreign policy dialogue and consultation mechanisms – facilitating the exchange of information and cooperation – through the agreement of the Security and Defence Partnership [Szczepański, 2025, 1].

The Partnership also committed to regular high-level meetings. Despite this pledge, 'regular' means every six months [Szczepański, 2025, 4]. Brexit has created a knowledge gap, as British policymakers are not physically present in EU foreign policy discussions [ibid, 7]. Political dialogue, structured meetings and formal consultation mechanisms occurring regularly – not biannual, but monthly, bi-monthly, or even more frequently – at Head of Government level, Minister level and official level are necessary to plug the gap British on EU foreign and defence policy. This could include the UK being able to attend EU high-level meetings, and more visibility of European planning at UK and EU level [ibid, 27].

Added to this is a lack of institutional innovation after Brexit, with both sides slow to establish new structures. University of Kent Professor Richard Whitman has alluded to the pivotal need to create a closer European security architecture, suggesting the idea of a European security council that brings together all European actors beyond the EU [Szczepański, 2025, 3-5].

Whether or not institutional frameworks would create genuinely deeper cooperation is questionable. Whitman's idea would certainly provide a consistent mechanism for dialogue; however, too vast and complex a structure would risk creating a new giant, bureaucratic and slow-moving endeavour. Indeed, in a defence context, the flexibility of bilateral and minilateral cooperation is actually preferable to having a large structure or number of actors. For this reason, some UK policymakers argue for maintaining flexibility to be able to meet the challenges and realities it faces as "Europe's primary security actor" [ibid, 4]. This extends to Arctic issues, understood within the broader context of Chinese competition, Russian aggression, and the fragmentation of Arctic governance.

Strategic Constraints

Strategically, closer UK-EU cooperation is constrained by their prioritisation of different policy instruments. The EU, for example, prioritises regulation, governance, and economy security. The UK, in turn, prioritises deterrence and military presence, in addition to alliance management. These preferences are accompanied by a cautious, pragmatic approach to UK-EU relations following the drawn-out Brexit process, which has killed genuine political ambition for creating a closer security relationship [Szczepański, 2025, 2]. This much was admitted by the Foreign Affairs Committee in a House of Commons meeting last year, which also recognised the need for a well-functioning British-European Union relationship: this is "the central foundation of a well-functioning European region, certainly in security, defence and foreign policy terms" [ibid.].

In addition to divergent political priorities following Brexit, there has also been a preference for major political agreements over incremental cooperation. The annual UK-EU Summit is one such example, with most aspects of the UK-EU security and defence policy relationship loaded onto the agenda of this all-encompassing, once-a-year conference. A good working relationship

with formal structures for cooperation to work through different agendas as and when they become important has not yet been reached [Szczepański, 2025, 13].

Challenges for strategic alignment also come from regional threats, such as Russia. The EU's White Paper on Defence, for example, made 82 references to 'Ukraine', the EU's top strategic priority; in comparison, the 'UK' was mentioned just once [EU White Paper, 2025]. Similar findings can be observed in the UK's SDR: the phrase 'Euro-Atlantic' was mentioned 45 times, and 'NATO' a colossal 187 times. This underlines the 'NATO First' approach and prioritisation of UK-US relations for the UK government, and the reduced importance of UK-EU relations: the EU was cited just five times in the 120-page document [SDR, 2025]. This highlights the differences in threat perceptions and regional strategic priorities for both actors which act as a barrier to deepened cooperation.

Identity-based Constraints

Finally, identity-based factors play a significant role in obstructing further UK-EU cooperation. At its core, Brexit was an identity crisis, and the decision to leave the EU is the most obvious indicator of the rooting of a British identity that is distinct to the rest of the EU. The Brexit debate was extensively centred upon the notion of control, with "vote leave, take control" being the pro-Brexit campaign's mantra [Elliott, 2016]. The Leave campaign gained much traction from the idea that the UK was increasingly governed by an unelected, unaccountable EU "elite", and that voting leave would reassert Britain's sovereignty. For this reason, Britain needed to re-establish itself as a "proud, patriotic country that has control of its borders" [ibid].

Brexit can therefore be understood as stemming from embedded issues of identity, control, and sovereignty. Post-Brexit, the idea of control is starkly visible in UK-EU negotiations. The UK has steadfastly maintained its 'red lines', refusing to rejoin the Single Market and Customs Union, nor permit the freedom of movement. This has limited the depth of integration. In December 2025, the UK pulled out of the EU SAFE (Security for Action in Europe) agreement, a new EU defence fund aimed at improving European defence capacities. Initial estimates of London's fee were upwards of €6 billion, a contribution Keir Starmer deemed to be prohibitively

expensive [Martill, 2025]. The UK wants to negotiate on its own terms, but the EU continues to resist granting it preferential treatment or allowing forms of selective participation – “cherry picking”. These differences are difficult to reconcile.

A central element of the government’s approach to defining a role for the UK post-Brexit is the idea of “Global Britain”. Former PM Theresa May has defined this as the UK being ‘the best friend and neighbour to our European partners, but a country which reaches beyond the borders of Europe too’ [Ipsos, 2019, 38]. This statement positions Britain (global) as something with wider horizons than the EU (regional) [Browning et al., 2026]. At deeper analysis, Global Britain can be understood as a national narrative of nostalgia and agency, seeking to reassert the UK’s relevance and influence on the world post-Brexit and understand its changing place in the regional and world order [Houde, 2025, 3]. Moreover, this idea aims to create a sense of security in self-identity and live up to the UK’s idealised image of itself.

Domestically, Brexit also served to create two partisan identity camps – Leavers and Remainers. According to a 2019 survey, whilst both Leave and Remain voters are most likely to identify with Great Britain (57%), Remain voters have additional supranational identities, being five times as likely as Leave voters to identify with Europe (56% versus 10%) [Ipsos, 2019, 25]. Fractured domestic identity, the triumph of the Leave campaign, and the promotion of the national Global Britain policy have ultimately encouraged differentiation rather than integration, making UK-EU cooperation possible but politically constrained by the UK’s competing narrative of leadership and autonomy.

4.4: Evaluating Collective Actorness

Is further cooperation possible between the EU and the UK? This chapter has sought to compare UK-EU Arctic Actorness, assess the areas where cooperation could be deepened, and analyse the factors that hinder the development of a closer relationship. Fundamentally, both possess different forms of Arctic actorness, which can be evaluated using the following parameters: recognition, autonomy, authority, and cohesion.

Firstly, UK and the EU are visibly present in Arctic affairs. A combination of geographical proximity to the Arctic, historic contributions to Arctic scientific research, economic regulatory influence, bilateral, regional, and transatlantic security partnerships and varying degrees of influence in Arctic governance make both the UK and the EU legitimate and recognised stakeholders in polar governance.

Secondly, growing Chinese Arctic ambitions represent a common external challenge for both actors. This is augmented by China's strategic partnership with Russia, whose aggression in Ukraine has cemented its position as the most "immediate and pressing threat" to Europe [SDR, 2025, 28]. UK-EU strategic interests remain highly aligned, and both actors have the autonomy to act, providing an opportunity to combine capabilities into a more coherent and comprehensive response to Chinese influence. This precedent of enhanced UK-EU cooperation has already been set by unified responses to Russian aggressions.

Thirdly, the EU and the UK have the authority to cooperate effectively. Whilst they both possess very distinct capabilities – the EU in regulation and economic instruments, and the UK in defence and security partnerships – these distinct capabilities are highly complementary. The question is the extent to which both sides are willing to cooperate, given constraints such as the UK's 'red lines', the EU's 'no cherry-picking' stance, and potential for alignment of different security sectors. This is bearing in mind the speed slow that characterises complex bureaucracy, and emergence of structured mechanisms for formal, regular cooperation. Suggested frameworks for future cooperation have been suggested in the 2025 Security and Defence Partnership, but the impact this has had on UK-EU cooperation is too early to predict.

Cooperation is most importantly constrained through a lack of cohesion, the fourth parameter used to measure actorness. Brexit has created institutional fragmentation and arises from an identity crisis – a search for a sense of security and relevant position in a changing world, embodied through "Global Britain". Moreover, institutional separation, differing strategic cultures and distinct political identities have charged the UK-EU relationship with competing leadership narratives which hinder constructive and deepened cooperation.

Conclusion

The European Arctic is becoming “a region caught between competing visions of international order” [Bergmann, 2026, 1] due to vast quantities of untapped energy resources. This includes up to 13% of the world's oil reserves and 30% of undiscovered natural gas [Kozera and Klaczyński, 2025]. Climate change impacts also contribute to growing interest in the region – melting Arctic sea ice will create new East-West energy transport corridors, making the Arctic a key region in the global economy of the near-future [Bjarnason, 2007, 7]. Once defined by isolation, the Arctic is transforming into “the greatest international zone of all” [Coates and Holroyd, 2020, 532].

Within this context of growing Arctic accessibility, mounting interest from a range of non-Arctic state actors is leading the region to become a testing ground for power projection [Heron, cited by Smith, 2025]. One such actor is China. Whilst China has a substantial history of scientific research in the Arctic, its regional engagement has drawn increasing amounts of global attention following the publication of its White Paper Arctic Policy in 2018. It has big Arctic ambitions: attracted by a need for economic resources to fuel its own domestic economy and new emerging maritime routes that could support its export markets, it seeks to internationalise the Arctic in order to legitimise its own engagement. This is at loggerheads to its strategic partner, Russia, who views the vast expanse of the Arctic as domestic sovereign territory. The Sino-Russian strategic partnership is one of the most notable geopolitical alliances in the region. Despite some visionary differences, it is advancing forward pragmatically due to the mutually beneficial “win-win” outcomes that it produces.

European actors have not been blind to this partnership, nor to China’s growing Arctic footprint. Both the EU’s Arctic policy and the UK’s SDR identify Russia as the primary security threat in the Arctic, a position it occupied even before launching its war of aggression in Ukraine in 2022. Since then, Russia has vastly accelerated the militarisation of the Arctic [Paet, 2025, 4], shattering constructive cooperation in the Arctic Council and any notion of Arctic exceptionalism that had characterised the region since 1990. Furthermore, Chinese collaboration on military dimensions with Russia have increased perceived threats to European critical

infrastructures and maritime security; similarly, its lust for Arctic resources is in direct competition with European powers, particularly the EU, who views the Arctic “vitamins of modern industry” as essential for its own energy security and producing advanced consumer, military and green technologies [Andersson and Zeuthen, 2024, 175].

It is for these reasons, and its association with Russia, that actors such as the UK and the EU have started to view Chinese Arctic engagement with varying levels of concern. European responses to China’s Arctic ambitions differ twofold in their framing of China and in their use of policy instruments to respond to this challenge. However, they are similar in that they both recognise the increasing Arctic security challenges and the need for a European response.

The EU’s Arctic presence has been emerging since the publication of its Arctic policy in 2008 – a direct response to growing Russian assertiveness. It is constrained by its reliance on three Member States for Arctic legitimacy, and by the inconclusive answer of its application for Observer State of the Arctic Council. However, as a global-level market and normative power, the EU can and does respond to China’s Arctic engagement on two levels: using economic regulations to limit its influence on the European market; and through normative dialogue that supports multilateralism and international law. Recent policy shifts mean that while the EU continues to view China as an important economic competitor and partner for cooperation, it simultaneously views it as a systematic rival. The EU’s overarching approach to China is therefore to push its own policy of strategic autonomy, engaging cautiously with China but actively attempting to decrease its dependence on Beijing to ensure the securitisation its energy, defence, digital and critical infrastructures. This includes investment screening, blocking Chinese acquisitions of critical infrastructures, diversifying its energy sources, and investing in its own digital infrastructures.

In contrast, the UK’s has a long-established Arctic presence, grounded in a legacy of scientific research, geographical proximity to the Arctic, and formal role as an Observer State to the Arctic Council. The UK’s strength lies in its strong defence industry and role as a security actor, which is how it has responded to growing Chinese Arctic ambitions. The UK boasts a vast network of bilateral and regional defence partnerships, including its Lunna House agreement with Norway

and leading role in the JEF alliance. Furthermore, it has a staunchly ‘NATO First’ approach and prioritises its historic ‘special relationship’ with the US. It engages actively in maritime security, investing in ASW defending critical infrastructures and deterring Russian shadow fleets in the GIUK Gap and North Atlantic. As such, a chain of military cooperation is emerging, stretching from North America to the Baltic, and encompassing not just the High North but the Wider North [Depledge et al., 2019, 5].

Regarding its approach to China, the UK has chosen strategic ambiguity, balancing between its own economic interests and heavy US pressure to take an anti-Chinese stance. UK-US relations, whilst still heavily prioritised by London, have become unreliable due to the unilateral approach of Donald Trump, meaning that European powers are no longer rely on the American security umbrella. This has been compounded by bellicose statements made by Trump at the start of 2026 to annex Greenland, highlighting the competing interest for and strategic importance of the island, and transforming it into a proxy for an emerging international order [Bergmann, 2026, 2].

Consequently, the EU and the UK are both trying to navigate more complicated security futures but without the ability to map where they could cooperate to mutual benefit [Whitman, 2022]. They are both actively trying to limit strategic vulnerabilities associated with China’s Arctic engagement, displaying largely complementary forms of actorness in their response. The largest constraints to deeper EU-UK cooperation are institution-, strategic- and identity-based factors, which ultimately limit the emergence of a fully coherent collective actor and coordinated Arctic strategy.

Post-Brexit, the deepest constraint to UK-EU cooperation is identity-based factors – Brexit was essentially an identity crisis. Boris Johnson famously quoted that Britain is “A nation that refuses to be defined by this [Brexit] decision” [Johnson, 2016]; however, UK-EU relations will continue to be defined by this decision. Visions of a Global Britain and decisions made on the UK’s terms further divide the two actors. Therefore, cooperation is likely to remain limited and focused on specific sectoral areas as a more substantial shift would require a softening of the UK’s red lines [Cinciripini, 2026]. Moreover, tensions accumulated over the past decade and a

lack of mutual trust mean that the process of UK-EU rapprochement remains complex and long-term [ibid].

The 2025 Security and Defence Partnership is a step forward that promises some degree of enhanced cooperation and a basic framework for foreign policy dialogue. However, this must be developed into more frequent, flexible and formal exchanges of dialogue in order to fill the policy gap caused by the absence of UK policymakers in EU foreign policy discussions. This must be additionally accompanied by a genuine will and vision from both sides to move past the institutional scars of the Brexit decision and acknowledge the strength that would be achieved by cooperating more deeply and coherently. Fundamentally, Europe must develop a new vision of what the North means for the continent. (Bergmann, 2026, 4). This, in turn, would securitise the common European neighbourhood from perceived joint challenges such as posed by China's increasing Arctic ambitions.

A 'globalised Arctic' must be interpreted as a new geopolitical context [Heininen, Everett et al, 2020, 21]. However, what defines a major power is its ability to shape the strategic environment in its favour [Johnson, cited by Coxon, 2024]. Conclusively, the UK and the EU stand a better chance of achieving this through deepened, more aligned cooperation.

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