



FROM THE NORTH ATLANTIC TO THE INDO-PACIFIC VIA THE ARCTIC: ROLES FOR CANADA, FRANCE, PORTUGAL, AND VIETNAM IN AN EVOLVING MARITIME AND COMMERCIAL ORDER¹

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The Arctic is increasingly a centre of strategic competition. The interplay among Canada, France, Portugal, and Vietnam is fundamental to understanding the evolving maritime order across the Arctic, North Atlantic, and Indo-Pacific. States will need to invest in strengthening partnerships to advance Arctic dialogue, and counterbalance rising Russian and Chinese influence across the region.

Accelerated climate change is opening greater access to the Arctic, turning it into a centre of strategic competition drawing increased interest from non-Arctic actors seeking a role in its governance. In the North Atlantic, growing concerns over undersea cables, maritime traffic, and the expanding presence of Russia and China are driving a need for closer collaboration with non-Arctic partners. As North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) members with global interests and extensive overseas territories, France and Canada have strong incentives to reinforce cooperation within the Alliance, including with countries such as Portugal, and in the wider Indo-Pacific, particularly with partners like Vietnam. In this context, how can Canada and France, working with partners such as Portugal and Vietnam, contribute to shaping a stable, rules-based maritime order as the Arctic, North Atlantic, and Indo-Pacific become increasingly interconnected?

Climate change, the Arctic and maritime routes

Climate change is broadly recognised as a “threat multiplier” that heightens political, economic, and societal vulnerabilities and a global security challenge requiring coordinated international responses (CNA, 2007; Rodrigues, 2025a, 2025b). This framing is especially relevant in the Arctic, which is warming nearly four times faster than the global mean (Hendricks, 2018; Favier, 2019; Rodrigues, 2025a). The Arctic, defined geographically as the area above 66°33' N, includes eight states (Canada, Russia, the United States via Alaska, Norway, Denmark via Green-

land, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland) and approximately four million inhabitants, many of whom are Indigenous. It contains an estimated 13% of undiscovered oil and 30% of untapped natural gas reserves. Warming has already reduced summer sea ice by more than 40% since 1979 (IPCC, 2021), accelerated methane release from thawing permafrost (NOAA, 2023), and intensified risks to ecosystems, infrastructure, and Indigenous livelihoods, all while opening new maritime routes (Rantanen et al., 2022).

China has become an essential partner for Russia across Arctic research, energy development, port construction, and infrastructure investment, including in shipping lanes and resource extraction.

As a result, the Arctic Ocean, formally recognised in 1921 (Sörlin, 2017), is gaining strategic significance as diminishing ice cover is enabling new shipping routes and expanding access to natural resources, while simultaneously raising security concerns for regional and global actors. The Northwest Passage (NWP) shortens Atlantic-Pacific transit but remains hazardous and politically sensitive (Royal Canadian Navy, 2023). “Atlantification” is reducing the region’s historical isolation and increasing its geopolitical relevance (Sörlin, 2017; Rodrigues, 2025b). The Northern Sea Route (NSR) along Rus-

sia’s coast can reduce Europe-Asia travel times by up to 40%, but is heavily regulated (Russian Arctic Strategy, 2020). Looking ahead, a Transpolar Sea Route (TSR) may emerge by mid-century, raising significant governance, safety, and environmental concerns (Bennett et al., 2020).

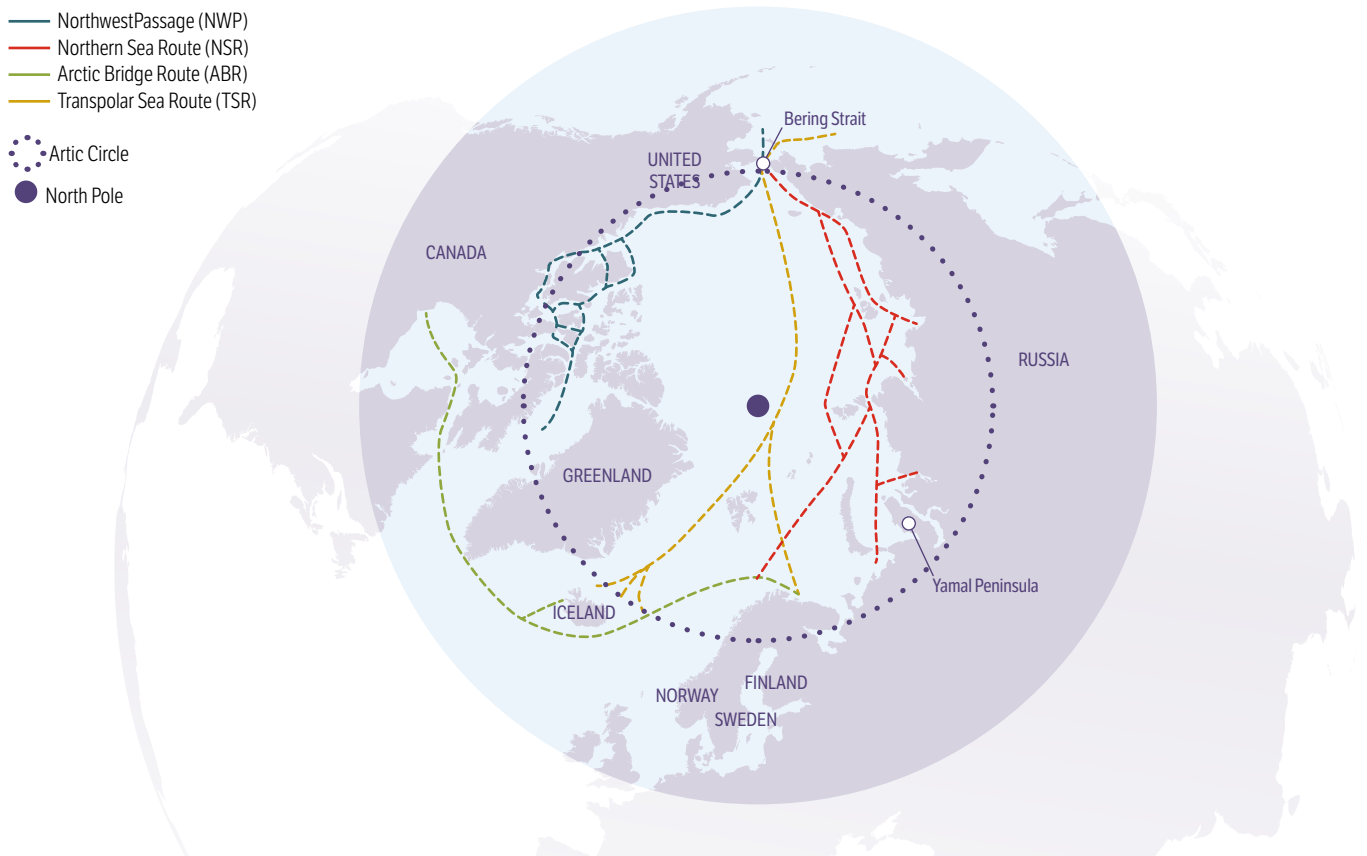
Strategic competition in the Arctic, North Atlantic, and North Pacific

The Arctic Ocean is increasingly interpreted through a security-focused lens as melting sea ice opens access to maritime transit routes such as the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage. These changes carry substantial implications for global shipping patterns, resource extraction, sovereignty, and legal claims. Meanwhile, the historically significant Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap, a Cold War chokepoint, has re-emerged as a priority area for NATO surveillance and anti-submarine operations (Childs, 2022). In December 2022, Canada submitted an addendum to its extended continental shelf claim in response to Russia’s 2021 filing, which had significantly expanded Russian claims and tripled the area of overlap with Canada’s submission (Royal Canadian Navy, 2023). Canada’s counter-submission adjusted this overlap and underscored Ottawa’s continued commitment to resolving continental shelf disputes peacefully and in accordance with international law.

Russia remains the primary source of geopolitical tension in the Arctic. Holding jurisdiction over roughly half the region (Royal Canadian Navy, 2023), Moscow has intensified both its military posture and economic ambitions. Its 2020 announcement of a USD 300 billion investment in regional development, including

FIGURE 1. MAJOR TRANSATLANTIC MARITIME ROUTES OPENING UP BY ARTIC ICE MELTING

Source: Asia Briefing, Statista research. <https://www.statista.com/chart/30201/major-maritime-routes-opening-up-in-the-arctic/>



port construction, industrial facilities, and expanded oil and gas projects, was accompanied by a parallel effort to strengthen its Arctic military presence through the modernisation of the Northern Fleet, the expansion of Arctic bases, and the deployment of both conventional and nuclear assets.

Western sanctions have increased Russia's economic and strategic dependence on China, which declared itself a "near-Arctic state" in 2018 despite being geographically far closer to the Equator than the North Pole (Zellen, 2019). China has become an essential partner for Russia across Arctic research, energy development, port construction, and infrastructure investment, including in shipping lanes and resource extraction (Byers, 2013). Their cooperation now extends to military activities, such as joint exercises in the Russian High North, following a 2022 pledge to deepen Arctic cooperation.

Russia and China have also increased their operational activities near North America. Joint naval patrols near the Aleutian Islands, coordinated coast guard operations in the Bering Sea, and military aircraft flights into Alaska's Air Defence Identification Zone in July 2024 were inter-

cepted by the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD), highlighting growing military cooperation between the two states. The increasingly close Sino-Russian partnership introduces new risks for Arctic governance, navigation rights, and regional stability, underscoring the growing strategic relevance of non-Arctic partners such as Portugal and Vietnam within the broader Arctic-Atlantic-Indo-Pacific security network.

Looking ahead, states will need to invest in strengthening existing partnerships and cultivating new ones to support Arctic resilience, advance Arctic dialogue and cooperation, and counterbalance rising Russian and Chinese influence across the region.

Canada's Arctic priorities

Canada is one of eight circumpolar nations, with the Arctic comprising roughly 40% of its landmass and more than 70% of its coastline (Government of Canada, 2025d). The Arctic is central to Canada's national identity, domestic and continental security, and long-term economic development. As a founding member of the Arctic Council, Canada plays a consistent leadership role in shaping the region's governance.

Canada's contemporary Arctic agenda is guided by the 2019 Arctic and Northern Policy Framework and the 2024 Arctic Foreign Policy, which emphasise sovereignty, partnership with Indigenous Peoples, scientific excellence, and practical diplomacy.

Aligned with the 2022 NORAD modernisation plan, Canada is enhancing its defence posture in the Arctic. This includes strengthening the Canadian Rangers – essential to sovereignty and situational awareness – expanding Canadian Armed Forces activities, and increasing defence spending, which is projected to nearly triple by 2030 in response to mounting geopolitical pressures. Canada continues to advance its extended continental shelf claims through the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) processes, and remains an active supporter of the Arctic Council and International Maritime Organisation.

France's Polar and Indo-Pacific engagement

Although not an Arctic coastal state, France has a long-standing polar tradition and a comprehensive Arctic policy. It considers itself a polar nation, maintaining a research base in Svalbard since 1963



– now jointly operated with Germany in Ny Ålesund – and the Jean Corbel station dedicated to atmospheric and glaciological research. As an Arctic Council Observer since 2000, France has used the forum to expand its science diplomacy. The creation of the Arctic Scientific Observatory in 2010, coordinating roughly 400 researchers across disciplines, reflects its sustained investment in polar research, supported operationally by the French Polar Institute Paul Émile Victor.

France's maritime presence spans the Atlantic and Indo Pacific, anchored by territories such as Saint Pierre et Miquelon and a wide network of Indo Pacific possessions – Mayotte, La Réunion, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia – home to 1.6 million citizens. These territories underpin France's position as the world's second largest holder of exclusive economic zones (11 million km²). The Indo Pacific is economically significant, accounting for over one third of French exports to non EU markets and EUR 320 billion in investment in 2018. Nearly 60% of France's overseas military forces are stationed there, supporting naval presence, freedom of navigation, sustainable fisheries, and the protection of strategic trade routes.

In the Atlantic and Arctic, France's 2025 Arctic Security Strategy highlights the strategic link between the North Atlantic and the Arctic and reaffirms its commitment to maritime security and cooperation. The 2030 Polar Strategy – France's first integrated polar roadmap – launched in April 2022, aims to triple Arctic research funding, build a new research station in Greenland, deploy a new polar oceanographic vessel, strengthen France's role in Arctic governance, establish a polar foundation, and develop Saint Pierre et Miquelon as a scientific hub. The proposed polar programming law and the 2023 One Polar Summit mark major steps toward these goals.

Portugal's Atlantic gateway role

Portugal occupies a strategically important position in the North Atlantic, connecting Europe to the Americas, Africa, and to the Indo-Pacific (East Timor). Its geographic footprint, spanning the mainland, the Azores, and Madeira, places Portugal along vital maritime routes, air corridors, and undersea cable systems essential to global commerce, communi-

cation, and military mobility. While not an Arctic state nor an Arctic Council member, Portugal provides the southern Atlantic anchor to the Arctic-North Atlantic security system (Rodrigues, 2026), complementing Canada's Arctic sovereignty and France's global naval presence.

These complementary roles highlight that influence in Arctic affairs is no longer determined solely by geography. Instead, connectivity, legal alignment, and coalition-building shape how states engage with Arctic governance.

With a long maritime heritage, Portugal retains strong naval capabilities, port infrastructure, and ocean governance expertise. As a founding NATO member and EU member since 1986, Portugal contributes to Alliance activities in maritime surveillance, anti-submarine warfare, and the protection of sea lines of communication in the North Atlantic. The Azores function as a critical logistical and monitoring node, supporting NATO's capacity to reinforce Europe and manage transatlantic movements, an increasingly vital task as Arctic dynamics influence High North security (Rodrigues, 2025b; 2025c; 2025d). Portugal also acts as a gateway for emerging Arctic maritime routes. As climate change reshapes global navigation, any increased traffic along Arctic routes, whether via the NSR or a future Transpolar Sea Route, will converge into North Atlantic systems. Portuguese ports and maritime services are thus positioned to play a role in supporting and securing Arctic-linked commercial flows. This extends to safeguarding undersea infrastructure, including data cables and energy pipelines, now recognised as central vulnerabilities in both Atlantic and Arctic contexts.

Within the EU, Portugal contributes to ocean governance, maritime security initiatives, and research programmes that indirectly shape European Arctic engagement. While Portugal does not yet have a national Arctic strategy, it has shown increasing involvement in ocean science,

polar research, and climate governance aligned with broader EU priorities (Rodrigues, 2025e).

Vietnam's Indo-Pacific and emerging Arctic relevance

Vietnam occupies a central position along the South China Sea near the conceptual terminus of the Northern Sea Route. Its long coastline supports major shipping lanes that connect the Indo-Pacific to global markets, making Vietnam essential to regional maritime commerce and economic stability. As the NSR becomes increasingly viable due to Arctic ice melt, it offers an alternative to traditional routes that traverse high-risk chokepoints such as the Suez Canal and the Strait of Malacca. This development presents opportunities for Vietnamese ports to expand their logistical relevance, particularly in energy shipments and container traffic.

Vietnam's rapid economic growth and deep integration into global production networks amplify the importance of secure and reliable maritime shipping. Canada's trade with Vietnam – its largest ASEAN trading partner – totalled CAD 14.1 billion in 2023, with Vietnam exporting CAD 13.3 billion to Canada and Canada exporting CAD 775.1 million to Vietnam (Government of Canada, 2025e). Vietnam's role within ASEAN further positions it as a key diplomatic and economic intermediary between Southeast Asia and external partners, including Canada and France.

Vietnam continues to face acute maritime security pressures in the South China Sea, particularly from China's expansive territorial claims, militarised outposts, and coercive patrols. These dynamics have prompted Vietnam – and other Southeast Asian states such as the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia – to strengthen naval modernisation and maritime governance capabilities. At the same time, Chinese activity in the Arctic has become a growing concern for Western states, linking Indo-Pacific maritime security with broader Arctic stability.

As a result, enhanced partnerships with Vietnam and other Indo-Pacific states are essential for reinforcing UNCLOS principles, countering destabilising behaviours, and promoting a stable maritime order that extends from the Arctic to the South China Sea.

Conclusion and recommendations

While emerging Arctic routes shorten global shipping distances, they also introduce challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, environmental risks, and unresolved sovereignty issues. The Arctic maritime environment remains governed by a robust international legal system, most prominently UNCLOS, which establishes the rights and responsibilities of states over navigation, resource management, environmental protection, and marine scientific research. The Russia–Vietnam joint venture exemplifies how Arctic and non-arctic states collaborate on research and exploration activities.

The strategic interplay among Canada, France, Portugal, and Vietnam is fundamental to understanding the evolving maritime order across the Arctic, North Atlantic, and Indo-Pacific. Canada anchors the Arctic dimension through its sovereignty, governance responsibilities, and scientific leadership. France provides connective tissue across the Arctic-Atlantic-Indo-Pacific continuum through its overseas territories, naval deployments, and scientific diplomacy. Portugal delivers critical Atlantic infrastructure, NATO integration, and undersea cable protection, functioning as a southern gateway to the Arctic. Vietnam, though geographically distant, emerges as a key Indo-Pacific actor whose maritime vulnerabilities, economic dynamism, and potential linkage to Arctic routes make it increasingly relevant to Arctic governance and global ocean law.

These complementary roles highlight that influence in Arctic affairs is no longer determined solely by geography. Instead, connectivity, legal alignment, and coalition-building shape how states engage with Arctic governance. The engagement of non-Arctic powers, when rooted in multilateralism and international law, is both legitimate and necessary. Together, the four countries can form a cross-regional maritime coalition that bolsters multilateral institutions: Arctic Council, NATO, EU, ASEAN, IMO, and UN bodies, by linking agendas across ocean basins.

Key recommendations

- Establish a Multilateral Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) Network spanning the Arctic-Atlantic-Indo-Pacific.
- Strengthen climate-ocean security cooperation through dedicated working groups.

- Advance inclusive governance models incorporating Indigenous knowledge and community leadership.
- Leverage ASEAN, EU, NATO, and UN mechanisms to build inter-regional maritime governance frameworks.

Ultimately, the future of the Arctic will be shaped not only by polar geography but by cross-regional networks. Canada, France, Portugal, and Vietnam provide a compelling model for how small and medium states can collaboratively support a stable, rules-based maritime order amid climate-driven change and mounting geopolitical pressures. ●

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Note

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