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PORTUGAL AND ROVANIEMI: SECURITY ACROSS THE ARCTIC-ATLANTIC CONTINUUM

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The article examines Portugal's position within Arctic-Atlantic security, highlighting how political recognition and functional relevance coexist with neither Arctic territoriality nor participation in the Joint Statement of the European Arctic Summit.

The Arctic is undergoing a transformation whose implications increasingly extend beyond the territorial boundaries of the region itself. Climate change, growing maritime accessibility, the increasing value attached to strategic resources, the protection of critical infrastructure, and changes in the European security environment have strengthened interdependencies between the Arctic, the High North and the North Atlantic. This does not imply that these spaces constitute a single political, legal or security region. Security dynamics display differentiated sub-regional configurations and must be analysed according to the scales at which they manifest themselves (Østhagen, 2021).

The Atlantic dimension of this transformation is particularly significant. Pincus (2020) demonstrates that the GIUK-N spaceⁱ, traditionally interpreted from a transatlantic perspective, acquires an additional dimension as the strategic importance and accessibility of the Arctic

Ocean increase, functioning as a nexus between the Arctic Ocean and the North Atlantic; the strategic significance of the GIUK as a chokepoint connecting the Arctic basin with the North Atlantic is also emphasised by Marques Guedes and Morais Pereira (2023).

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The European Arctic Summitⁱⁱ, held in Rovaniemi, Finland, on 13–14 September 2026, made the growing association between the Arctic and European security particularly explicit. According to the Finnish Government, the participating leaders emphasised the region's growing strategic importance to the security of Europe as a whole and called for a stronger role for the European Union (EU) in the northern regions. The approach advanced was multidimensional, encompassing not only military security but also economic security, critical minerals, energy, infrastructure and logistics, trade routes, security of supply, climate change and sustainable development (Prime Minister's Office, 2026b).

BOX. METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The article adopts a qualitative methodology based on documentary analysis and geostrategic interpretation. The primary corpus comprises the Joint Statement of the European Arctic Summit and official Finnish Government documentation relating to the Summit, the position endorsed by Portugal on Greenland in January 2026, NATO documentation concerning Portugal's Atlantic position, and Portuguese Navy sources on Operations *Brilliant Shield* and *Arctic 2024*. These sources are complemented by scholarly literature on the strategic geography and security of the Arctic and North Atlantic, particularly Pincus (2020), Østhagen (2021), and Marques Guedes and Morais Pereira (2023).

The analytical framework distinguishes four dimensions. Arctic territoriality derives from the existence of territory, population, jurisdiction or sovereign rights directly connected with the region. Political recognition refers to the documented expression of positions or priorities concerning the Arctic. Political-institutional participation denotes a state's participation in institutions, declarations, strategies or initiatives specifically related to the region. Functional relevance derives from capabilities, activities or geographical positions materially connected with particular governance or security functions, even in the absence of Arctic territory.

These dimensions do not necessarily coincide. In particular, political recognition of a given European priority does not, in itself, amount to strategic alignment of national policy with the European Arctic agenda. Similarly, functional relevance does not presuppose territoriality or participation in every political-institutional initiative relating to the region.

The concept of an Arctic-Atlantic functional continuum is used to identify interdependencies between the Arctic, the High North, the GIUK Gap, the North Atlantic and the North-East Atlantic. It does not presuppose a single political, legal or security region, but rather an articulation between distinct spaces through functions such as surveillance, maritime situational awareness, the protection of lines of communication, mobility, logistics and transatlantic connectivity (Pincus, 2020; Østhagen, 2021).

The analysis is limited to publicly available documentary evidence and does not seek to reconstruct the Portuguese decision-making process concerning the Joint Statement. The documentation establishes Portugal's absence from among the signatories but does not establish the reasons for that absence.

FIGURE 1. THE GIUK GAP

Source: Reproduced from Vázquez Orbaiceta (2023, p. 4); original source: CIA (1983).



Portugal is not among the EU Member States that signed the Joint Statement resulting from the Summit. This is analytically significant when considered alongside other dimensions of Portugal's relationship with the Arctic. On 6 January 2026, Portugal endorsed a European statement on Greenland in which it recognised Arctic security as a fundamental priority for Europe and as a crucial dimension of international and transatlantic security, advocating its collective pursuit in coordination with NATO Allies (Governo de Portugal, 2026).

This political recognition does not, however, mean that Portugal has an integrated Arctic policy, nor does it, in itself, allow the conclusion that national policy is strategically aligned with the European agenda for the region. As demonstrated by previous research, Portugal still lacks a strategic instrument specifically dedicated to the Arctic, resulting in a mismatch between the operational relevance of its participation and its corresponding political-strategic framework (Cardoso, 2026). The question raised by Rovaniemi is

therefore not why Portugal did not sign the Joint Statement of the European Arctic Summit, since such a formulation would presuppose the existence of an opportunity or decision that the available documentation does not establish. Rather, the question is how Portugal's absence from among the signatories should be interpreted in a context in which the country had previously recognised the European and transatlantic importance of Arctic security and possesses functional relevance within the Arctic–Atlantic system, while continuing to lack a national strategic framework specifically addressing the region.

The analysis proceeds from the hypothesis that territoriality, political recognition, political-institutional participation and functional relevance constitute analytically distinct dimensions. The Portuguese case provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between them: Portugal has no Arctic territoriality and is absent from the group of signatories to the Joint Statement, yet it has politically recognised the European and transatlantic im-

portance of Arctic security and maintains geographical and operational connections with specific security dimensions of the North Atlantic and the Arctic.

Rovaniemi and the growing security dimension of the European Arctic agenda

The Rovaniemi Summit took place against a backdrop of growing European attention to the strategic implications of Arctic transformations. The meeting did not constitute an institutional formation of the European Union, nor was it a process necessarily involving all 27 Member States. Prior to the Summit, the Finnish Government announced that Prime Minister Petteri Orpo had invited a group of EU leaders with the aim of strengthening the Union's common strategic approach to the Arctic (Prime Minister's Office, 2026a).

This distinction matters when interpreting the group of signatories. The absence of a particular state cannot automatically be equated with the rejection of a formal European Union position.



The Joint Statement is nevertheless politically significant (Joint Statement, 2026). The participating leaders linked the Arctic's growing strategic importance to the security of Europe as a whole and called for stronger EU engagement in the northern regions. The approach advanced was not confined to military security, but also encompassed the economy, critical minerals, energy, infrastructure and logistics, trade routes, security of supply, climate change and sustainable development (Prime Minister's Office, 2026b).

This development does not displace the environmental, social and development dimensions of the European Arctic agenda. Rather, it reflects a functional reweighting in which these dimensions coexist more explicitly with concerns relating to security, resilience, mobility and strategic capacity.

This distinction is relevant to Portugal. Portuguese recognition of the importance of Arctic security does not establish the existence of national strategic alignment with the European agenda for the region. Conversely, Portugal's absence from among the signatories to the Joint Statement does not establish the existence of Portuguese opposition to or divergence from the priorities expressed in the Joint Statement.

The GIUK Gap and the Arctic–Atlantic functional continuum

The Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom Gap constitutes a strategic maritime link between the northern regions and the North Atlantic. Its importance has historical antecedents, particularly in the surveillance of maritime connections between the northern seas and the Atlantic, while contemporary Arctic transformations have added new dimensions to its relevance (International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2019; Marques Guedes & Morais Pereira, 2023).

Pincus (2020) observes that the GIUK–N has traditionally been interpreted from a transatlantic perspective, but that the increasing accessibility of the Arctic Ocean adds a transpolar dimension to its strategic importance. The area thus functions as a nexus between the Arctic and the North Atlantic.

This articulation does not imply the existence of a homogeneous security region. Østhagen (2021) demonstrates that security interests and interactions

vary according to the scales and sub-regions under consideration. The GIUK is therefore conceptualised in this article as a geostrategic and functional hinge: it connects distinct geographies without constituting either a legal boundary of the Arctic or the delimitation of a single integrated security region.

In this sense, the Arctic–High North–GIUK–North Atlantic–North-East Atlantic functional continuum denotes a sequence of spatial interdependencies. Maritime surveillance, submarine tracking, military mobility, transatlantic reinforcement, the protection of critical infrastructure and the security of lines of communication are not confined to the territorial boundaries of the Arctic (IISS, 2019; Pincus, 2020).

Portugal is not among the signatories to the Joint Statement, despite having previously recognised the European and transatlantic importance of Arctic security.

This interpretation makes it possible to distinguish between two geographies that partially overlap without coinciding: the territorial geography of the Arctic, associated with sovereignty, jurisdiction, population and direct responsibilities; and a functional geography, determined by the networks, capabilities and spaces required for the operation of specific security dimensions.

Portugal in the Atlantic space: geographical position and functional relevance

Portugal is located on the Atlantic seaboard of the Iberian Peninsula and in the North-East Atlantic, comprising its European mainland territory and the Atlantic archipelagos of the Azores and Madeira. This configuration projects Portuguese territory into the oceanic space between Europe and North America and gives it a position distinct from that of both Arctic states and states directly forming part of the GIUK Gap.

Portugal's Atlantic dimension has histor-

ically been reflected in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. NATO characterises Portugal as an Atlantic country and identifies the mainland, the Azores and Madeira as a strategic triangle. The organisation particularly highlights the position of the Azores between Europe and North America and their historical importance to transatlantic air links and the defence of maritime routes (NATO, n.d.).

This importance also acquired institutional expression through the Iberian Atlantic Command (IBERLANT), a subordinate command of Allied Command Atlantic established in Portugal. According to NATO, IBERLANT was responsible for a critical area linking Europe and North America, situated at the intersection of major maritime routes and Atlantic lines of communication (NATO, n.d.).

These historical sources nevertheless require caution. They demonstrate the importance attributed to Portugal's geographical position within NATO's Atlantic architecture in earlier periods; taken alone, they do not constitute evidence of equivalent strategic weight in the contemporary context.

Portugal's geographical position should likewise not be conflated with that of the GIUK Gap. Portugal neither forms part of nor controls that corridor. The GIUK directly connects the approaches between the northern regions and the North Atlantic, whereas Portugal lies further south, in the North-East Atlantic, within the connections between Europe and North America.

Geographical position therefore constitutes a condition of potential relevance, rather than sufficient evidence of contemporary functional participation. The latter requires evidence of capabilities that have actually been deployed.

***NRP Arpão*: from geographical position to operational capability**

The 2024 mission of the *NRP Arpão* provides empirical evidence of such capability.

As part of Operation *Brilliant Shield*, the Portuguese submarine participated in a North Atlantic mission within the NATO framework. Following a 22-day patrol, it reached Nuuk, becoming the first Portuguese Navy submarine to operate so far north and to call at a Greenlandic port (Marinha Portuguesa, 2024a, 2024b). This was followed by Operation *Arctic*

2024, during which the submarine crossed the Arctic Circle and conducted under-ice navigation after the vessel and its crew had undergone specific preparation for operations at high latitudes (Marinha Portuguesa, 2024c).

The mission adds evidence of Portuguese operational capability to the country's geographical position within the space connecting the North Atlantic and the Arctic. Without altering Portugal's status as a non-Arctic state or equating its responsibilities with those of states possessing territory, population and jurisdiction in the region, it demonstrates the possibility of functional participation by a non-Arctic state in specific dimensions of the Arctic–Atlantic security system.

This capability does not, in itself, demonstrate the existence of an integrated Portuguese Arctic policy. Like the activity of Portuguese-flagged vessels analysed by Cardoso (2026), it instead provides evidence that functional participation can coexist with limited political-strategic institutionalisation.

Portuguese political recognition and absence from among the Joint Statement signatories

Portuguese operational capability is accompanied by a relevant political antecedent. On 6 January 2026, Portugal endorsed a European statement on Greenland that characterised Arctic security as a fundamental priority for Europe and as a crucial dimension of international and transatlantic security. The statement also affirmed that Arctic security should be pursued collectively, in coordination with NATO Allies and with respect for the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and the inviolability of borders (Governo de Portugal, 2026).

This position preceded Rovaniemi by approximately eight months. Although the two documents differ in authorship, context, subject matter and content, both establish a relationship between Arctic security, European security and the transatlantic dimension.

The January statement constitutes evidence of political recognition. It does not, however, demonstrate that Portugal has adopted an integrated Arctic policy, nor does it eliminate the previously identified mismatch between functional participation and the national strategic framework (Cardoso, 2026).

In September 2026, Portugal was not among the signatories to the Joint Statement. The public documentation establishes this fact but not the reasons for Portugal's absence. The process through which the Summit was convened itself warrants caution: the Finnish Government had previously announced that the invitation had been extended to a group of EU leaders rather than to all 27 Member States (Prime Minister's Office, 2026a). The public sources analysed provide insufficient evidence to establish whether Portugal was invited, whether it participated in preparatory contacts, whether it was subsequently given the opportunity to endorse the Joint Statement, or whether it took a decision concerning the document. It is therefore not methodologically sustainable to interpret Portugal's absence from among the signatories as refusal, opposition, divergence or disinterest.

Portuguese maritime presence in the region constitutes an objective indicator of functional participation while coexisting with the absence of a national strategic instrument specifically dedicated to the Arctic.

The empirically established finding is more limited: Portugal is not among the signatories to the Joint Statement, despite having previously recognised the European and transatlantic importance of Arctic security. These two facts should not be given a causal relationship unsupported by the available sources.

The significance of possible future Portuguese participation

Any subsequent Portuguese endorsement of the Joint Statement would neither create Portugal's functional relevance nor constitute its first political recognition of the importance of Arctic security. Nor would such endorsement, in isolation, amount to comprehensive strategic alignment of national policy with the European agenda for the region.

Its significance would be more circumscribed: it would constitute an act of political-institutional participation in an initiative specifically aimed at strengthening European engagement in the Arctic.

At the political level, such participation would be materially consistent with Portugal's recognition, expressed in January 2026, of the European and transatlantic importance of Arctic security (Governo de Portugal, 2026). At the functional level, it would coexist with an Atlantic position and already documented operational capabilities (Marinha Portuguesa, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c; NATO, n.d.).

Any subsequent endorsement would therefore alter one of the dimensions examined – political-institutional participation in a specific initiative – without automatically eliminating the broader mismatch between functional relevance and national strategic institutionalisation identified by Cardoso (2026). For integrated strategic alignment to be established, a coherent national policy framework specifically addressing the region would be required.

Conclusion

The Portuguese case reveals an asymmetric configuration across territoriality, political recognition, political-institutional participation and functional relevance. Portugal has no Arctic territoriality, and this distinction remains fundamental: states with territory, population and jurisdiction in the region have responsibilities, rights and direct exposure to Arctic transformations that are not comparable to those of a geographically external state.

The absence of territoriality does not, however, preclude other forms of connection. Portugal has politically recognised the European and transatlantic importance of Arctic security (Governo de Portugal, 2026), occupies a position in the North-East Atlantic embedded within the connections between Europe and North America (NATO, n.d.), and has demonstrated operational capability in the North Atlantic and the Arctic, particularly through the 2024 mission of the NRP Arpão (Marinha Portuguesa, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c).

These dimensions do not, however, establish national strategic alignment with the European Arctic agenda. Cardoso (2026) demonstrated that Portuguese maritime presence in the region consti-



tutes an objective indicator of functional participation while coexisting with the absence of a national strategic instrument specifically dedicated to the Arctic. The present article shows that this distinction remains pertinent when the analysis shifts from maritime governance to the security dimension: geographical and operational relevance may exist without corresponding political-strategic institutionalisation.

Portugal's absence from among the signatories to the Joint Statement of the European Arctic Summit adds a further component to this configuration. The available documentation establishes this absence but does not establish its reasons. It therefore neither permits an inference regarding Portugal's position on the Joint Statement nor supports interpretations based on refusal, opposition, divergence or disinterest. Equally, it does not alter the evidence concerning Portugal's prior political recognition of the European and transatlantic importance of Arctic security or its documented functional relevance.

The analysis consequently identifies two opposing interpretative risks. The first would be to treat Portugal's absence from among the signatories to the Joint Statement as an indicator of irrelevance to security dimensions associated with the Arctic. The country's Atlantic position and the available operational evidence do not support such an interpretation. The second would be to convert Portugal's functional relevance or political recognition into evidence of strategic alignment with the European Arctic agenda. The absence of a national strategic framework specifically dedicated to the Arctic likewise does not support such a conclusion (Cardoso, 2026).

The contribution of the Portuguese case lies precisely in this lack of necessary coincidence. The growing articulation between the Arctic, the High North and the North Atlantic produces a functional geography that extends beyond Arctic territoriality without erasing the distinction between these spaces. The GIUK Gap constitutes a geostrategic and functional hinge within this articulation (IISS, 2019; Marques Guedes & Morais Pereira, 2023; Pincus, 2020), while Portugal occupies a distinct position in the North-East Atlantic that is nevertheless connected through specific Euro-Atlantic functions.

The list of signatories to the Joint Statement does not, therefore, constitute an exhaustive map of European states that are functionally relevant to security dimensions associated with the Arctic. Conversely, the existence of such functional relevance does not mean that all such states have integrated the Arctic into their national policies in a coherent and institutionalised manner. The Portuguese case demonstrates this distinction particularly clearly: political recognition and functional relevance coexist with the absence of Arctic territoriality, absence from among the signatories to the Joint Statement, and the absence of an integrated national strategic framework specifically addressing the region.

Any subsequent Portuguese endorsement of the Joint Statement would alter the political-institutional dimension of this configuration, but would neither create Portugal's functional relevance nor constitute its first political recognition of the importance of Arctic security. Nor would such endorsement, in itself, demonstrate integrated strategic alignment with the European Arctic agenda. Its significance would be more circumscribed: it would bring participation in this specific European initiative closer to the political recognition already expressed by Portugal and to the functional capabilities already demonstrated.

As particular security functions increasingly connect the Arctic, the High North and the North Atlantic, the relevance of non-Arctic states cannot be inferred exclusively from territoriality or participation in a specific political initiative. The Portuguese case shows that such relevance may also derive from Atlantic geographical position, integration into Euro-Atlantic networks and effectively deployed capabilities, while preserving the fundamental distinctions between Arctic territoriality, political recognition, political-institutional participation, functional relevance and strategic alignment. ●

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Notes

ⁱThe GIUK-N space (or GIUK Gap, occasionally expanded to include Norway) refers to an area in the northern Atlantic Ocean that forms a naval choke point, a strategically critical maritime transit corridor in the naval defense of the North Atlantic.

The acronym stands for Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom, with the "N" representing Norway.

ⁱⁱThe European Arctic Summit was a high-level political meeting held in Rovaniemi (capital city of Lapland, the northernmost region of Finland) on September 13–14, 2026, to shape a unified strategic approach to the Arctic.

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