

Germany's Arctic policy guidelines: greater focus on security

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In September this year, the German Foreign Ministry published a document titled *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines: Germany and the Arctic in the Context of the Climate Crisis and the Zeitenwende*. In this document, the ministry outlined three key objectives for Berlin's Arctic policy. The first objective is to foster security and stability in the Arctic and to enhance Germany's active role within NATO and the EU. The second is to uphold the principles of the international order in the Arctic region. The third objective is to protect the Arctic's natural environment while promoting sustainable development, expanding scientific cooperation, and safeguarding the rights of indigenous people.

This is another strategic document in a series published by Germany as part of its foreign policy revision since February 2022. However, it does not outline specific tools for achieving the stated objectives. This, coupled with geographic and military limitations, makes it more of an extended statement of Berlin's position on the Arctic than a feasible action plan.

Commentary

- **The guidelines update the principles outlined in Germany's Arctic strategy adopted in April 2019. At that time, Germany prioritised the protection of the Arctic's natural resources and environment. However, security interests have since taken precedence,** with the document explicitly citing Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine and increased Russian military activity in the Arctic as factors compelling Germany to change its regional approach. Additional key factors behind this shift include China's growing interest in the Arctic, its increasing economic and research activities, the development of its power projection capabilities (such as its icebreaker construction programme), and its cooperation with the Kremlin. The rivalry between China and Russia on one side, and NATO (particularly the US, Canada, Denmark, and Norway) on the other, is driven by the shrinking ice cap around the North Pole, which is opening access to new maritime shipping routes and access to natural resources (see [NATO's polar quartet. The US, Canada, Denmark and Norway in the Arctic](#)). Furthermore, Germany views the Arctic as a key region where the principle of freedom of navigation must be upheld. Germany's economy is heavily dependent on maritime trade: from January to June this year, 62.8% of the country's export volume to non-EU countries was transported by sea, while 63.6% of imports from those regions arrived via maritime routes.
- **The recognition of a fundamental shift in the international situation and its impact on Arctic security and stability has not led to any changes in the means designed to achieve Germany's strategic objectives.** This is largely due to Germany's location

outside the region and its limited military capabilities, which constrain any significant increase in involvement. Consequently, Germany's response to the rising risk of instability in the Arctic relies on three key objectives outlined in its National Security Strategy adopted in June 2023: strengthening defence preparedness, boosting resilience to threats, and ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources (see '[Germany's first national security strategy: the minimal consensus](#)'). In practical terms, Berlin intends to increase the frequency and scale of military exercises with regional partners. In March this year, 1,500 German soldiers participated in Nordic Response 2024 exercises in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. The Luftwaffe is also expected to make occasional appearances in NATO's air surveillance mission over Iceland. Additionally, Germany aims to influence security policy in the region by leveraging its membership in forums such as the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable and participating in meetings of Nordic defence chiefs.

- **Germany intends to continue asserting its influence in the Arctic through non-military means**, with diplomacy serving as a key instrument centred on three main elements. The first involves leveraging Germany's observer status in the Arctic Council by engaging national experts in working groups and co-financing research projects. The second involves shaping regional policies by co-developing the EU's Arctic policy, which could counterbalance the actions of Arctic coastal states and China, whose activities may conflict with Germany's interests. The third focuses on lobbying for the enforcement of international agreements that ensure freedom of navigation, the peaceful division of the Arctic Ocean's continental shelf, biodiversity protection, and the reduction of greenhouse gases. However, growing competition in the Arctic will make it increasingly difficult for Germany to rely solely on non-military methods, and its failure to boost investments in the Bundeswehr and increase its presence in the region will limit its capacity to exert influence.