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THE EUROPEAN LAND FORCE
COMMANDERS ORGANISATION

APRIL 2026

Beyond Icebreakers: Europe's Arctic Strategy Through Middle-Power Alignment

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RESEARCH REPORT

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RESEARCH REPORT

Introduction

The accelerated effects of global warming are transforming the Arctic into a theater of competition among great powers in which the European Union is trying to carefully position itself. Aside from grappling with Russian and Chinese ambitions to dominate the region's commercial routes and resources, Europe is facing growing U.S. pressure to gain control over Greenland (Schwartz & Baskaran, 2026, pp. 1-3).

While the current EU Arctic strategy, which focuses on scientific cooperation and sustainable development, is outdated, its northernmost members hold valuable strategic assets in the Arctic (Danneel & Coninsx, 2025). Besides offering a favorable geographic position to project power in the region, they have consolidated Arctic military experience and advanced maritime industrial capabilities, particularly in icebreaker construction, as noted by EU Commission President von der Leyen at the World Economic Forum of 2026 (Von der Leyen, 2026).

In the pages that follow, this paper will explore the impact of the Arctic's increasing geopolitical relevance on Europe. To do so, it provides an overview of the region's resources and strategic advantages, Russian Arctic economic stakes and increased military presence, as well as China's growing cooperation with Moscow and extensive involvement in Greenland's rare earths extraction. As shown below, these developments are essential for understanding the United States' growing ambitions to assert itself as an Arctic power, expand its ice-breaking capabilities, and pursue the acquisition of Greenland.

This paper argues that, as Europe seeks to establish itself firmly in such a delicate international environment through a new Arctic strategy, Finland's centrality in transatlantic icebreaker construction collaboration cannot, in itself, constitute a form of strategic leverage against pressure from the current U.S. administration. Rather, it may be part of a relationship of mutual interdependence that the EU could activate through a collective Arctic strategy, including closer alignment with other mid-level powers such as Canada, an Arctic state and signatory of the Icebreaker Collaboration Effort (ICE) Pact.

1. The Strategic Value of the Arctic

As melting ice makes rich hydrocarbons, mineral deposits and new commercial routes potentially accessible, the Arctic region is acquiring increasing geopolitical significance (Kozera & Kłaczyński, 2025, p. 714). Ruled by the consensus-based Arctic Council and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the Arctic is also bound by the national policies of Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States (Debanck, 2025).

Generally speaking, terrain, sea ice and distance from major economic and demographic centers make it a structurally hostile environment for large-scale military operations, hindering state incentives to maintain advanced military infrastructure in the region (Coates & Holroyd, 2020, p. 475). In terms of natural resources, the region is rich in mineral deposits of gold, platinum, diamonds and rare earth metals for advanced technologies such as lithium, cobalt, graphite and niobium, while the presence of biological resources makes it attractive for the creation of new fishing grounds (Kozera & Kłaczyński, 2025, pp. 712-713; Shapiro, 2025). Moreover, Arctic territories are estimated to hold approximately 13% of global oil and 30% of undiscovered natural gas (Kozera & Kłaczyński, 2025, p. 710).

The increased accessibility of Arctic transportation corridors, such as the Northwest Passage on the North American side and the Northern Sea Route (NSR), resulting from global warming, could decrease transport costs between Europe and Asia by up to 40%. This has implications for distances traveled by relevant strategic enablers such as cargo ships, aircraft, undersea cables and intercontinental ballistic missiles (Kozera & Kłaczyński, 2025, p. 712; Coates & Holroyd, 2020, p. 310; Conley, 2025, pp. 182-183).

2. Russia's Arctic Advantage

In this context, European Arctic states have to contend with Russia's significant advantage and determination to emerge as the preeminent power in the Arctic (Johnson, 2024). Besides being a rich source of energy and mineral resources for Moscow, the region plays a geostrategic role, allowing Russia to expand its influence in the NSR (Ditrych, 2025, pp. 2-3). The achievement of its objective is more tangible as it possesses a powerful icebreaker fleet, including numerous nuclear-powered vessels (Johnson, 2024).

Russian territory accounts for more than half of the Arctic coastline, and nearly half of the Arctic population consists of Russian citizens (Kluge & Paul, 2020, p. 2; Arctic Council, n.d.). Of the vast resources the region offers, only around 20% of Russia's total oil reserves can be exploited. Yet, these account for 17% of national oil and about 80% of gas output; overall, activities carried out in the High North are responsible for generating almost 20% of Russia's GDP revenues (Ditrych, 2025, p. 2; Boulègue, 2022, pp. 5-6).

Global warming and melting ice are creating new external borders for Russia, increasing the possibility of greater human presence in the region and reinforcing the sense of urgency to strengthen the AZRF (Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation) (Boulègue, 2022, pp. 5-6). Over the past decade, Russia has developed

dozens of Arctic military sites extending from the Kola Peninsula to the New Siberian Islands and Chukotka (Ditrych, 2025, p. 5). Aside from constructing multilayered defensive bastions and modernizing regional military infrastructure, Moscow deployed a variety of forces, including conventional military units as well as the FSB (Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation) and the National Guard (Boulègue, 2022, pp. 5-6).

The Northern Fleet, based in Severomorsk, protects the Kola Peninsula and enables the monitoring of activity along the NSR, extending from the Bering Strait in the east to the Kara Gate in the West (Conley & Melino, 2020). By projecting power into the Arctic Ocean, the North Atlantic, and the strategically significant GIUK-N crossing, which runs through Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom-Norway border, the Northern Fleet could, in the event of conflict, significantly disrupt NATO's vital sea lines of communication between North America and Europe (Conley, 2025, p. 180).

3. China's Arctic Presene: Strategy and Stakes

The Arctic is increasingly viewed by China as an emerging landscape for international military cooperation, as Chinese scholars predict an escalation of military tensions between the United States and Russia in the region. Beijing's strategy will focus on extending its Arctic presence in the economic, scientific, and military spheres: China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) positions itself as a "Near-Arctic State" and refers to pragmatic cooperation in the Arctic to build the "Polar Silk Road" (Puranen & Kopra, 2023, pp. 244; 248).

To advance its interests in the region, within the past decade, China has significantly deepened its cooperation with Russia in the Arctic, developing a wide range of scientific and technological capabilities, including ice-breaking technology and investments. About $10 billion were allocated to critical energy projects such as the Yamal LNG pipeline and Arctic LNG 2 export terminal (Manini, 2025). Following the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the NSR route has been used mainly for the exports of crude oil and LNG from Russia to China (Zaccagnini & Cavalluzzi, 2025). However, some Western analysts argue that China's Arctic facilities aren't purely commercial, but rather, dual-use. The port infrastructure, for example, could allow for nuclear submarines to patrol beneath the polar ice cap (Puranen & Kopra, 2023, p. 240). In 2023, following the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding, the two countries established joint naval exercises in the Bering Sea, conducted air patrols near the coast of Alaska, and carried out NSR traffic supervision (Edstrøm et al., 2025, p. 7). Signalling an increasing presence in Arctic waters, China has participated in the large-scale Russian exercise Arctic Patrol 2023 in the Barents Sea as observer (Puranen & Kopra, 2023, p. 247).

Beijing's long-term foreign policy objectives centre on developing new Arctic shipping routes connecting it to Europe (Bego, 2025), hence the priority placed on maintaining strong commercial relations with Western partners despite its cooperation with Russia (Zaccagnini & Cavalluzzi, 2025). As its efforts to increase its scientific involvement, infrastructure investment, and natural resource acquisitions have been consistently resisted by most Arctic states, China's ability to impact the Arctic has remained limited (Schwartz & Baskaran, 2026). Several attempts to acquire strategic assets such as land in Finland, Greenland, Norway, and Sweden have ultimately been blocked (Paul, 2025, pp. 1-2).

Nonetheless, due to Greenland's semi autonomous government status, the island has been subject to external influence. This is the result of its restrained budgetary sovereignty and the vast influence of autonomy-seeking political parties (Shapiro, 2025). Particularly, China's aims have found fertile ground in Greenland's export market, where its exports account for nearly 25% of the total (Maitra & Søndergaard, 2026). This is of particular concern for Europe, as the island's resources hold vital importance for advancing European green, digital transitions and energy security (Debanck, 2025; Zaccagnini & Cavalluzzi, 2025).

4. Washington's Arctic Ambitions and Europe's Response

Meanwhile, the U.S. President Donald Trump has repeatedly expressed concern about Chinese influence on the Greenlandic economy, particularly given that the island holds 39 of the 50 critical minerals in the U.S. list, while China dominates up to 90 % of global mineral processing capacity (Heggelund et al., 2026; Cinciripini & Raimondi, 2025, p. 8; Maitra & Søndergaard, 2026). But while the U.S., thanks to a 1951 agreement, holds considerable military operational freedom in Greenland, Trump has aimed at acquiring the island, conceiving the move as "a big real estate deal", necessary to further expand U.S. projection of power in the Arctic and restrain Russian and Chinese influence, aside from offering oil and gas and the above mentioned rare-earths (Agrawal, 2026; Shapiro, 2025).

Despite the consolidation of the great powers' Arctic strategies, the EU lacks a coordinated Arctic security policy and an autonomous military capacity necessary to protect its interests in the region (Zaccagnini & Cavalluzzi, 2025). The 2021 EU Arctic Policy, which solely focuses on peaceful cooperation, climate change and supporting the sustainable development of Arctic communities, seems no longer adequate in light of Russia's military buildup and China's efforts to expand its economic influence in the region. In response, in November 2025, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling for a strengthened strategy (Danneel & Coninsx, 2025; Zaccagnini & Cavalluzzi, 2025). At Davos in January 2026, European Commission President von der Leyen announced an Arctic security package centred on a "massive European investment surge" in Greenland's economy, infrastructure, and support for its sovereignty, alongside further strengthening European equipment in the High North (Von der Leyen, 2026).

Voicing such aims coincided with Trump's threats to impose further tariffs on trade, which materialized on February 24, 2026: invoking Section 122 of the Trade Act following the Supreme Court's ruling that his tariff authority was unconstitutional, Trump imposed a 15% import surcharge that effectively breached the terms of the August 2025 Turnberry Agreement (García Bercero, 2026). Trump also threatened to enforce a 25% tariff on several European countries starting in June 2026, unless they supported the U.S. proposal to "purchase" Greenland, a statement he made on his Truth Social account in mid-January (Martina & Lange, 2026). For Brussels, such remarks call for further reflection on independent sources of strategic leverage while maintaining the highest levels of cooperation with its transatlantic allies.

5. Finnish Icebreaking Capabilities as a Geostrategic Leverage?

Von der Leyen's speech at the World Economic Forum (2026) highlights how the strength of Nordic ice capabilities could serve as a useful geostrategic asset, positioning the EU as a crucial partner in competing for Arctic access (Von der Leyen, 2026). In particular, Finland enjoys a considerable competitive advantage over major powers in icebreaking shipbuilding: the country has constructed more than 240 icebreakers (about 60 percent of the world's fleet) and designed half of the remainder (Moyer & Lindholm, 2024). Thanks to a highly efficient marine industrial ecosystem, as of 2024, the average cost of a Finnish-built icebreaker amounted to roughly 20% of a U.S.-produced one, with delivery times of approximately 2 years. This advantage has led scholars such as Alberto Rizzi of the European Council on Foreign Relations to echo the conviction that withholding icebreaker cooperation from the United States could constitute a meaningful pushback against Washington's coercive posture on tariffs and Greenland (Hughes & McNeil, 2026).

Such positioning ought to be put into context: the United States' investments in Arctic infrastructure, sensors, equipment, training and icebreakers have long been insufficient (Conley, 2025, p. 182, p. 184). While capable of building other advanced ships such as nuclear aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines, the United States has not mastered icebreaker shipbuilding, which requires decades of research to develop appropriate hull-strength, engines, and all-weather systems (Johnson, 2024, p. 4). That is why, as of today, the U.S. Coast Guard only counts a heavy icebreaker commissioned in 1976 (Coast Guard Cutter Polar Star), a medium icebreaker commissioned in 2000 (Coast Guard Cutter Healy), and the cutter "Storis" acquired in August 2025 (U.S. Coast Guard, 2025; U.S. Coast Guard, n.d.).

In light of these shortcomings, both the Trump and Biden administrations have pursued multilateral cooperation to expand the U.S. icebreaker fleet, culminating in a Memorandum of Understanding signed between Canada, Finland, and the United States in November 2024, also known as the "ICE Pact". According to the agreement, the three nations establish pooled research and development, scientific investments for Arctic maritime operations, advanced ice navigation technologies, remote sensing, and

environmental monitoring (Hughes & McNeil 2026; Government of Canada et al., 2024; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2025). The consolidation of the deal enabled the allocation of $8 million to fund opportunities for U.S. workers in Finnish shipyards and for Canadian Davie Shipbuilding to invest $1 billion in acquiring and modernizing U.S. shipyards in Texas. More recently (in February 2026), the U.S. Coast Guard announced that 11 Arctic Security Cutters will be built by two corporate consortia with Finnish designs (Hughes & McNeil, 2026; U.S. Coast Guard, 2026).

Sweden and Finland are undeniably instrumental in upgrading NATO's strategic positioning in the High North: both countries are spending more than 2.5% of their GDP in defence and are committed to exceeding the 3% target by 2030 (Taylor et al., 2025). After their accession to the alliance, the U.S. Marines took part in Exercise Nordic Response 24 alongside Swedish, Norwegian, and Finnish soldiers, restoring the Arctic combat confidence they had lost after the end of the Cold War (Zaccagnini & Cavalluzzi, 2025). Furthermore, in recent months, NATO's new Nordic members enabled the alliance's ships to patrol the depths of the Barents Sea, not far from the Russian Northern Fleet base and its important nuclear submarine base (Bego, 2025). Joint exercises such as Dynamic Mongoose, conducted in the GIUK-N Gap in spring 2024 have allowed for "NATO's largest and most intensive annual anti-submarine warfare exercise in Northern European waters" (NATO Allied Maritime Command, 2025).

6. Toward an EU Arctic Strategy

Although the EU holds competences in many existing Arctic-related policies, national foreign and security policies remain in the hands of member states. Arctic issues have so far been addressed as "soft policies", outside of treaties and lacking a dedicated common budget (Raspotnik & Stępień 2025, p. 662). Thus, the argument based on leveraging Finnish strategic capabilities clashes with one rooted in Helsinki's own threat calculus. Given its long history of tension with Moscow and their 1,300km shared border (Osborn & Cordell, 2023), Finland might conclude that continued icebreaking cooperation with the United States is more indispensable to its sovereign interests than leveraging icebreaking capabilities to advance EU Arctic strategy. This is particularly relevant since, after the eruption of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2022, the cut of economic ties with Russia has led its shipbuilding industry to seek a new export market (Moyer & Lindholm, 2024). The challenge the Russian strategic assets pose to NATO enhances the need for the United States' financial and industrial involvement in Finnish ice-breaking building: aside from its Northern Fleet's nuclear submarine capabilities and Northern Sea Route control, Moscow alone holds almost 60 icebreakers, more than all allies combined (Klein & Peltsch, 2026; Ditrych, 2025, p. 3).

This represents a conundrum for the EU's Arctic strategy. Despite EU members' Arctic military expertise and Finland's marine industrial strengths, its capabilities complement the U.S. financial and large-scale industrial backing. Nordic European states are still highly dependent on the U.S. for key military enablers such as air-to-air refueling, joint ISR, command and control, and communications and information systems (Bergman et al., 2025, p. 12). But while Washington is investing in expanding its icebreaker fleet, it counts on its allies' ability to hinder the profitability of Russian activities in the Arctic: the European Union's fourteenth sanction package, for example, heavily targeted Russian Arctic LNG exports, redirecting Russia's primary shipping lanes toward Asian markets (Johnson, 2024, pp. 4-6).

In this context, Finnish icebreaker design and Nordic operational experience strengthen the transatlantic Arctic strategy rather than being an independent source of geopolitical leverage.
The EU's strategic objective should therefore be to ensure that its contributions to Arctic governance, industrial capacity, and regional security remain indispensable to both NATO and the United States.

Recent developments have demonstrated a willingness of Arctic countries to do so. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's speech at Davos this year urged middle powers to work together to counterbalance great-power pressure, explicitly opposing tariffs on Greenland, and declaring Canada to fully support Denmark and Greenland's unique right to determine the island's future (World Economic Forum, 2026). As a result, in March 2026, Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre met with the Canadian Prime Minister, along with the prime ministers of Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland at the Nordic-Canadian Summit in Oslo. In the meantime, the federal government of Canada announced the allocation of $35 billion to safeguard territorial sovereignty in the Arctic (Waldie, 2026).

The Arctic allies demonstrated a commitment to strengthening cooperation on defense and security, resilience, and sustainable economic growth (Norwegian Office of the Prime Minister, 2026). Major emphasis will be given to strengthening economic security and job creation. Particularly, in light of the United States' moves to ease sanctions on Russian oil sales and the war in Iran, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen emphasized the importance of forming a "Nordic plus Canada" bloc (Waldie, 2026).

Conclusion

Due to climate change's effects on the Arctic's hostile morphological environment, great powers intensified the competition to access the resources and strategic advantages offered by the region. The EU, nonetheless, is currently not structurally positioned to use its industrial and strategic assets as effective leverage against the United States' pressures to acquire Greenland, as its Arctic security policy has remained a matter that member states have largely addressed on the national level (Raspotnik & Stępień, 2025, p. 662). Finland's own threat assessment facing proximity to Russia makes the weaponization of icebreaker cooperation unlikely for the transatlantic alliance's interests: the ICE Pact is already being implemented, demonstrating that the United States has been able to benefit from EU members' capacities on favorable terms without the EU extracting considerable strategic concessions in return.

An uncoordinated response to increased Chinese and Russian cooperation in the Arctic, coupled with skyrocketing tariffs imposed by our closest overseas ally, could result in European marginalization in the High North. However, the alignment of the Nordic countries and Canada has signalled the creation of a new Arctic bloc of middle powers, which, coordinated politically and strategically, has the potential to translate into greater European influence in the so-called "Arctic Great Game". This development could also, in the event of exacerbations of tensions over Greenland's sovereignty, lead Canada and Finland, signatories to the ICE Pact, to exert greater pressure on the U.S. ice-breaking fleet's targets. The upcoming EU Arctic Strategy offers a concrete opportunity for its member states to gain relevancy: adopting a more assertive, or "hard policy" approach to the Arctic, coupled with a sustainable strengthening of Greenland's infrastructure, given the high stakes involved, will enable Europe to project military power in the High North more independently (Wieslander, 2024, p. 9).

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