

The need for a Maritime Security Strategy for Portugal: North Atlantic and Arctic

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Abstract

The Arctic is emerging as a region of growing strategic, economic, and environmental importance. Accelerating climate change is reducing sea ice and opening new maritime routes, with global implications extending into the Atlantic. For Portugal and the Azores, these developments are not geographically remote but are directly linked to national and allied maritime interests. This article examines why the Arctic matters for Portugal's maritime security, analyses lessons from Spain and France, reviews Portugal's national policy context, and proposes a framework for an Arctic-inclusive maritime security strategy. It argues that the Arctic–Atlantic continuum constitutes a single operational and governance space in which Portugal must engage to protect its interests, strengthen alliances, and enhance strategic resilience.

Keywords: Arctic, Atlantic, Maritime Security Strategy, Portugal

Introduction

Global climate change is transforming the Arctic from a frozen frontier into a region of dynamic strategic competition. The retreat of Arctic Sea ice is enabling navigation through routes such as the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and Northwest Passage (NWP), redefining maritime mobility, global trade, and access to natural resources.

For non-Arctic states such as Portugal, the implications are profound. Despite its distance from the Arctic Circle, Portugal's vast maritime jurisdiction and its mid-Atlantic territories, particularly the Azores, place it at the nexus of North Atlantic security.

This aspect reinforces Portugal's need to monitor northern developments, as subsea infrastructure, fisheries, and oceanic patterns connect directly to the Azores and mainland Portugal.

This article situates Arctic transformation within Portugal's

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maritime security landscape, explores lessons from Spain and France, and demonstrates why an Arctic-inclusive approach is vital for national security, economic interests, and alliance coherence.

Searching for Portugal's Maritime Security Strategy

Despite its maritime heritage, Portugal currently lacks a formal Maritime Security Strategy. However, institutional initiatives in recent years reveal growing recognition of the need for one.

Dispatch nº 6633/2023, published on 21st June 2023, established a committee to develop strategic guidelines for national maritime security until 2030. The Dispatch was signed by the Prime Minister and eleven other ministers and secretaries of state, demonstrating inter-ministerial commitment.

It referred to the “National Ocean Strategy 2021–2030” (NOS 2021–2030), that: *identifies maritime security as a key area of intervention within the global maritime domain* (2021, letter C, p. 31), and aligns Portugal with the EU and NATO's maritime visions by:

reaffirming maritime security as essential for deterring and defending against all threats in the maritime sector, safeguarding freedom of navigation,

protecting maritime trade routes, and securing key lines of communication (idem, letter H, p. 31).

According to clause number 9, the commission was due to submit a proposal by 30th November 2023, after which it would terminate its mandate. However, due to the 2023 legislative elections, the document was never delivered, and the commission did not continue under the next government.

Although the NOS 2021–2030 articulates maritime security as a strategic priority, Portugal still lacks an integrated framework for implementation. The strategy defines maritime security as

a strategic priority aimed at safeguarding the sea as a strategic asset for environmental sustainability, economic growth, job creation, citizens' well-being, and the international recognition of Portugal as a maritime nation (2021, Letter A, p. 31).

As the Arctic undergoes profound change and Atlantic geopolitics intensify, Portugal's expanded maritime jurisdiction demands a coherent, climate-aware framework that unites environmental stewardship, economic policy, and defence preparedness.

Furthermore, the Azores' central location in the Atlantic grants Portugal an inherent responsibility over the Atlantic basin. The

development of new Arctic shipping routes will have implications for Atlantic maritime operations, undersea infrastructure, and environmental security. The Azores has the potential to function as a logistical centre for NATO and EU missions, thereby bolstering Portugal's strategic importance.

Faroleiro (2017) emphasises that the sea remains a matter of national importance requiring protection and deterrence mechanisms. In her view, maritime security involves not only safeguarding existing resources but also developing cooperative frameworks for defence and governance. Similarly, Lopes (2009) argues that with the extension of the continental shelf, Portugal must clearly identify what needs protection to ensure sustainable exploitation and national defence.

These analyses converge on the notion that maritime security should be considered a pillar of national security, requiring the integration of military, economic, environmental, and private actors towards shared goals (Faroleiro, 2017).

Both of Portugal's main political coalitions, the Democratic Alliance (AD) (which includes two political parties: PSD and CDS-PP), and the Socialist Party (PS), placed significant emphasis on maritime

security in their programmes for the 2025 legislative elections.

In its 2025 electoral programme, the Democratic Alliance pledged to strengthen the guarantees ensuring that maritime activities are conducted safely within areas under national sovereignty, jurisdiction, or responsibility. The coalition further committed to upholding international and European obligations, implementing a comprehensive Maritime Security Strategy, combating illegal maritime activities, and fostering international cooperation (Democratic Alliance, 2025).

Similarly, the Socialist Party's 2025 platform highlighted maritime security as a strategic priority in two principal areas. First, *Blue Economy*, the PS proposed to enhance collaboration with the Autonomous Regions of the Azores and Madeira in research and development, defence and maritime security, tourism, fisheries, and renewable energy. Second, the party advocated for *International Leadership* with the approval of a National Maritime Security Strategy aimed at strengthening coordination between industry and public institutions to advance maritime surveillance and monitoring capabilities (Socialist Party, 2025).

These proposals underscore cross-party consensus regarding the importance

of maritime security, even if a concrete strategy remains absent.

The Portuguese Navy's mission in the Arctic, conducted under NATO's initiative in 2024, should emphasize the critical need for a Maritime security strategy.

As a participant in NATO and the EU maritime framework, Portugal's alignment with both Arctic and Atlantic strategies contributes to enhanced collective security. Investing in surveillance, logistics, and platforms capable of operating in Arctic conditions will not only fortify national defence but also aid in monitoring environmental and hybrid threats throughout the Atlantic-Arctic region.

Spain and France

France and Spain offer illustrative examples of how Arctic awareness can be integrated into a broader maritime security framework, reflecting a shared recognition of the strategic interconnection between the North Atlantic and the Arctic regions. Although neither country holds Arctic state status, both have been Observers in the Arctic Council: France since 2000 and Spain since 2006, which demonstrates their long-standing engagement with Arctic governance.

Spain's "National Strategy for Maritime Security" (2024) identifies maritime security as a cornerstone of economic vitality, environmental sustainability, and national stability. The strategy underscores the importance of proactively defending national maritime interests, integrating the blue economy into security planning, and advancing multilateral cooperation through NATO and the European Union. Notably, Spain also highlights the growing significance of the northern maritime domain as an area warranting increased strategic attention. Similarly, France's "Arctic Defence Strategy" (2025) outlines three principal objectives: ensuring regional stability in cooperation with allies, safeguarding freedom of navigation, and developing military capabilities suited to Arctic conditions. These aims are structured around three foundational pillars: presence, cooperation, and capability development, reflecting France's intent to maintain a credible and adaptive posture in the High North.

Both France and Spain, therefore, explicitly acknowledge the strategic relevance of the circumpolar region and the geographic and security linkage between the North Atlantic and Arctic basins, framing these as interconnected zones of interest and emerging security concern.

Conclusion

The Arctic's transformation is reshaping maritime geopolitics and extending strategic frontiers southward into the Atlantic. For Portugal, this new reality demands an Arctic-inclusive maritime security strategy that unites environmental sustainability, economic opportunity, and defence preparedness. Portugal's absence of a formal Maritime Security Strategy remains a critical gap, yet recent political and academic recognition demonstrates growing momentum. The integration of the Azores as a mid-Atlantic hub, coupled with alliances through NATO and the EU, can position Portugal as a proactive Atlantic-Arctic actor.

By embracing this continuum, Portugal not only safeguards its national interests but also reaffirms its historical identity.

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