

The 2022-First Polar Strategy and the current state of the French Arctic Policy

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Following the 2022 IPCC report underlying once again the rate of climate change and the ongoing war in Ukraine paralyzing state cooperation, the Arctic seems to be increasingly strategic. France has been present in the region since the second half of the XVIIth century (Henrat, 1984), and even more so from 1947 with the *French Polar Expeditions* led by Paul-Emile Victor (Rubinsky, 2016). Nonetheless, 2022 marks a renewed focus with its first official Polar strategy, following a call from the then-Prime Minister to establish "*our commitment in Antarctica and our action in the Arctic*". In this strategy for the upcoming decade, France recognizes the predominance of the Arctic states' sovereignty while advocating for a multilateral approach to face global challenges such as climate change and the development of research (Gouvernement, 2022).

This new stance on the Arctic, and more generally on the Polar regions, shows the French will to position itself as a more involved actor acknowledging the need for a coordinated policy in a region of growing interest. Compared to other European states, Arctic such as Denmark or Finland, and non-Arctic, such as Germany or Italy,

France is rather late in the establishment of an Arctic strategy (Pelaudeix & Rodon, 2013). However, even if no official policy was yet implemented, France already had eyes for the Arctic. In 2009, Michel Rocard, who played a big role in the Madrid Protocol, known as the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty, was appointed to a new ambassador's function for international negotiations in the Arctic and Antarctica. France then provided in 2016 a roadmap for the Arctic – for once, separately from Antarctica – which already advised for a more serious involvement (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 2016). Yet, the real strength of France in the region has never been political but rather scientific.

Indeed, France has used its dynamic Arctic research to establish itself as a credible actor while having no territorial possession, with the exception of the subarctic archipelago of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon used as an outpost for oceanographic expeditions. France ranks 11th in terms of publication on the Arctic and 4th in term of field-weighted citation during the period 2006-2015 (Aksnes et al., 2016). To encompass this research in the Polar

regions, France benefits from a dedicated research institute, the *Institut Polaire Emile Victor* (IPEV), which possesses two bases in Svalbard. The Jean Corbel base built in 1963 and the Charles Rabot base in 1999 both merged in the Germano-French station AWIPEV in 2003. France also hinted at an interest in the establishment of a long-term installation in Greenland and of a floating research base with the Tara Ocean Foundation, to support its ageing infrastructures (Gouvernement, 2022).

However, if research has been France's venture in the Arctic, it has been plagued by a long-term lack of funding which this new strategy – as well as several previous reports – advises to revise to stay credible on the international stage. In 2019, the IPEV has received 18 million euros for its action in the polar regions while Italy allocated 20 million euros for the same missions and Germany, 50 million euros (Assemblée nationale, 2019). The director of the IPEV himself stated that the research survival of France was a "*miracle*". Moreover, the private sector's participation in research is very limited, the opening of a foundation focused on the Arctic is proposed as an additional way to gather more funds and launch a new dynamic.

The two poles are understood as sharing similarities, they are asymmetrical and different in nature but both are territories of exception, leading to the implementation of this joint Polar strategy. Previous misconceptions and assimilations

of the two regions probably explain former claims for an Arctic that "*does not belong to anyone*", such as in 2019 with the Defense Ministry's note on the Arctic (Ministère des Armées, 2019). However, this new strategy – as did already the 2016-roadmap – recognizes the differences that exist especially in the region's structure – the Arctic being an ocean surrounded by states while Antarctica, a continent surrounded by an ocean. The name of the strategy, "*Balancing the extremes*", reflects this idea of differences and similarities.

While France made a territorial claim over a portion of Antarctica (Adélie Land), several islands located in the Southern Ocean form integral part of France's territory. Those possessions made France an active actor in research but also politics with its involvement in the Antarctic Treaty System. This position in Antarctica is an asset as it allows the country to define itself as a Polar power, another way to justify its presence in the Arctic. The concept of Polar power remains quite vague and rather self-appointed. It rests on the state's history of explorers in the regions, some territorial claims or proximity (Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon in the Arctic) but mostly on the dynamism of its research on polar topics (Gaymard, 2020). This idea, though France has rejected this term, could be linked to the near-Arctic approach.

However, tackling the two poles at once, and due to France's closer link to Antarctica, led to create a disbalance

between them. Indeed, the Arctic research is suffering from a lack of interest compared to the Southern pole, posing a challenge especially when France's involvement in the Arctic is specifically based on this aspect. In 2019 and 2020, on the 92 French ongoing projects in the poles, only 30 were based on the Arctic and 90% of the public actors' funding to the poles went to the South (Gouvernement, 2022).

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Thus, the 2022 strategy calls for an increase of the projects and funding in the Arctic, without impacting the budget allocated for Antarctica. The rebalancing should be achieved by a threefold increase of the funds already allocated for the Arctic, in order not to threaten France's role in the South pole's research. There are also calls for a better collaboration between French institutions with a clear policy aiming at giving an axis for the Arctic presence to become more efficient and organized both in terms of funds attributed to research and in terms of the different administrations' strategy. This enhanced coordination in the administration is planned to take place through the creation of an inter-ministerial group gathering all the public actors involved in the Arctic. In research, this

would be implemented through a larger attribution of funds as well as a better repartition and organization, especially between the IPEV and the French Southern and Antarctic Lands that both coordinate scientific operations in Antarctica, sometimes overlapping.

In the international context of climate change and since the 2009 Grenelle Environment Forum, France's position in the Arctic is fundamentally built around the question of the environment. Indeed, the country recognizes the extreme rapidity of climate change and its impact on the environment as well as on the populations in the Arctic. It stresses as well the consequences those changes have on the rest of the world, and how the entire planet, and not only the Arctic states, induced those changes. Thus, France, though recognizing the primacy of the eight Arctic states due to their sovereignty, advocates for a multilateral approach in the governance of the region. To do so, France is trying to be more active politically within Arctic forums.

From the 1990's, France joined different Arctic institutions as an observer member such as the Barents-Euro-Atlantic Council in 1990, the Council of the Baltic Sea States in 1999, and the Arctic Council in 2000 (Pelaudeix & Rodon, 2013). However, to weight more in the region, France has increased its role in those organizations including the Arctic Council with a presence in the six working groups. Its

presence could nonetheless be more proactive and coordinated as promoted by the new strategy. Moreover, France supports a new vision of the observer status that would play a greater role in the Council, once again with the idea that, facing climate change, collective decisions and actions should be implemented. In parallel, France is also reinforcing its bilateral cooperation with Arctic states with a form of North Pole – South Pole reasoning, possibly embodied by a system of exchange of services with Arctic States not present in Antarctica such as Sweden or Canada. Such exchanges could allow France – the only G7 states not to possess one – to conduct research with the help of an icebreaker when operational needs are not seen worth the investment (Gouvernement, 2022).

France, as a European Union member, is also involved in the 2021-European Union joint communication for the region (Gadal, 2016). This dual role is not seen as a paradox but rather as an opportunity to be more visible and present. Thus, France, in parallel to the call for more involvement on the national level, calls for more participation on the supranational one with an increased role of the EU in the Arctic and an increased role of France within the EU policy. The EU has mainly a role of provider of funds for the Arctic research and projects, on which France could rest for an increase of its research budget, especially through the Horizon Europe program. On a more political note, France supports the

EU's admission as an observer in the Arctic Council, which has been delayed after its 2008 communication concerning the ban of seal products' imports (European Commission, 2008). Interestingly, on the question of governance, the 2019-note appears similar to this EU publication than to the French 2016-roadmap. Furthermore, the EU is a space to find partners, such as the deep cooperation built through the AWIPEV base with Germany. Moreover, the French presidency of the Council of the EU appears to be the chance for France to take a renewed role in the European Arctic policy, which notably promotes numerous actions to take against climate change and the degradation of the Arctic environment (European Commission et al., 2021). France reaffirmed its support towards those different measures such as the ban on the exploitation of fossil resources or the creation of Marine Protected Areas in the Arctic.

However, the protection of the environment always competes with economic interests, if this new strategy remains quite vague about those interests, the 2016-roadmap had underlined that the French interests – though existing – were in truth quite limited due to the difficulty and cost of Arctic activities. In term of economy, France is particularly concerned with fisheries, advocating for a moratorium especially when resources gradually move towards the North. A French tourism company also recently acquired an ice-breaker to expand its activity in the North.

However, CMA-CGM, the third container transportation company in the world, has announced it will not use the Arctic maritime routes for now nor in the future. Finally, France, which calls for responsible natural resources' exploitation in the region, has key interests when it comes to heavy fuel oils extraction with ENGIE in Norway, CGG doing seismic surveys of the region or Total's gas extraction in the Russian Federation – the company nonetheless announced in 2012 giving up oil extraction in the region due to the high risk of oil spill.

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France's involvement in the extraction natural resources, through its companies or banks such as BNP Paribas or Crédit Agricole, respectively the 7th and 13th most involved commercial banks in Arctic expansionism (Ileri et al., 2021), underlines the difficulty to successfully combine economic prospect and climate change. Moreover, it highlights the ambiguity of the environmental discourse with the banks having an Arctic policy for instance.

The French government discourse can be questioned as well. Indeed, in 2021, Total became part of a large-scale gas project in the Russian Arctic called Arctic LNG2, a project that the French government announced it would fund up to 700 million euros through public aids, despite its numerous claims to protect the Arctic and its resources. Following an important public mobilization, the government backed out and all French banks also announced they would not support the project (Alvarez, 2021). Despite Total founding financing elsewhere, this event shows the public opinion's involvement in the protection of the Arctic as well as the lack of political influence in the field when opposed to economic prospect.

This LNG2 project like the cooperation in the Arctic is now in jeopardy due to the war in Ukraine and the exclusion, or retreat of Russia from the diverse institutions of the region. Additionally, it led to the suspension of an international Arctic conference, the 4th ministerial meeting on the Arctic Sciences, supposed to be held in France in the beginning of 2023 following an agreement with Russia. In order not to lose this opportunity of international recognition, the organization of another international conference on the poles in 2023 that would gather public and private actors is in discussion, but would need political support. The exchanges and cooperation with Russia are seen fundamental within the regional organizations as well as on a bilateral level,

but its continuation is dependent of the future of the war. This new instability threatens the collaboration in various domains, including research. Thus, France claimed being open for any complementary, alternative or new forms of cooperation to preserve this Arctic exceptionalism.

The war increased the tensions within the Arctic region, until then rather stable, and France as an EU, NATO, and UNSC member as well as a maritime power believes it has a role to play. In 2013, for the first time, the Arctic was mentioned in the French White Paper on Defense and National Security as a potential area of tensions, and again in 2017 with its Strategic Review (Ministère de la Défense, 2013; Ministère des Armées, 2017). To be ready for the escalation of tensions, more likely since February, the French Army, especially the Marine, has been exercising in the region, through international actions such as the Trident Juncture with NATO in 2017, or through bilateral action with Canada notably (Vullierme, 2018). Moreover, France, though advocating for a peaceful use of the region, supports the military development of some of the actors such as Denmark – the French company Nexter furnished 15 Caesar 8x8 artillery system to the country in 2021 and will provide an additional four in 2023 (Nexter, 2019). Through the military preparation of its forces and its collaboration with other actors, France is putting forwards that it is

a country that still matters in international politics.

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2022 marks a new turn in the French approach of the Arctic as it offers the first strategy applied to the region, though it covers Antarctica as well. France aims at expanding its influence in the region through its research capacity and its fight against climate change. Nevertheless, France still has steps ahead in order to appear as a major actor on the Arctic stage. Despite the limited support to research in the Arctic and the controversial one to economic projects in the Arctic, France is nonetheless gradually increasing its presence in different forms in the Arctic to remain part of the discussion. The new strategy is a way to reorient and give a new breath to France’s position in the region but, as many of its points such as the urgent need for funds were already demands of the 2016-roadmap, the translation of this strategy into real action remains to be witnessed.

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