

### **Non-Arctic European States and the Arctic**

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The European Arctic is shared by six states: Denmark (through Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia and Sweden. Yet the connections between Europe at large and the Arctic are not limited to these six states, and countries like Austria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom have longstanding historical and economic ties with the Arctic.

From the fifteenth century onwards, European explorers started discovering the northern parts of the continent with a clear purpose and strategic interest. Although the list of explorers is too long to quote, we can mention Willem Barentsz, a Dutch navigator who explored Arctic waters in the sixteenth century, after whom the Barents Sea is named. Barentsz also discovered (and named) the Spitzbergen archipelago (today rebaptized as Svalbard, although the main island retains the Dutch name). A less known example is the Austro-Hungarian nineteenth century expedition, led by Karl Weyprecht and Julius Payer, who discovered and named the Franz Josef Land archipelago, in honor of their Emperor. European explorers also ventured into the North American Arctic. A famous expedition was that of Sir John Franklin, a British Navy officer who in 1845 attempted to cross, unsuccessfully, the Northwest Passage with the ships *Terror* and *Erebus*. These expeditions often followed the footsteps of anonymous traders, fishermen or whalers, who had been visiting the region for centuries. In some cases, these visits dismayed local populations, who disliked the competition on sea and occasionally rowdy behavior of the vessels' crew. A remnant of these times is a curious Icelandic law, passed in 1615 and only abolished in 2015, which allowed locals to kill Basque people on sight – a now gone relict of a time when European whalers roamed Icelandic waters and, sometimes, also settlements.

The interest of European non-Arctic states did not end with geographic explorations or trade. The pursuit of scientific knowledge and collaboration in the Arctic was formalized through the (First) International Polar Year, which took place between 1882 and 1883. Initially promoted by Austrian and German scientists and explorers, the International Polar Year encouraged Arctic and

Antarctic scientific collaboration between the Arctic states as well as Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Scientific interest in the Arctic has not decreased with time, and many European non-Arctic states participated in all subsequent International Polar Years, while conducting strong Arctic scientific programs.

Europe dominated international geopolitics for centuries, and that included the Arctic as well. As an example, the 1920 Spitsbergen Treaty (today known as Svalbard Treaty), which granted Norway sovereignty over the archipelago, was signed in Paris in connection with the peace negotiations following the Great War (1914-1918). Svalbard, hence, became part of the European order that followed that war. Years later, Nazi Germany used the Norwegian Arctic as a base for submarine warfare. And during the Cold War, the Arctic became part of the larger ideological confrontation between NATO and the Soviet Union. For Western European countries, the Arctic was a possible gateway from where the Soviet Northern fleet with its nuclear submarine capacities (which was and remains stationed in Murmansk, today as part of Russia's Navy) could reach Europe.

European non-Arctic states are also actively involved in Arctic affairs and cooperation. At the Arctic Council, which was founded in 1996, 8 out of 13 non-Arctic states observers are European (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom). In fact, the first state observers in the Arctic Council, accepted in 1998, were all European (Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom). These European observers contribute to the objectives of the Arctic Council, participating in its Working Groups and projects and providing essential contributions. Additional European states, namely Ireland, Czechia and Estonia, and the European Union, have requested observer status at the Arctic Council.

Many European non-Arctic states have also published comprehensive policy or strategy documents regarding the Arctic. The breadth and complexity of each document varies from country to country, with some having published very recent policies or strategies, such as the United Kingdom (2023) or France (2022), and some with older texts, including the Netherlands (2021), Germany (2019), Italy (2016), or Spain (2016). Some of these countries, for instance

France, the Netherlands, or Spain, have polar approaches covering both the Arctic and Antarctica. The EU also has an Arctic policy, which was published in 2021 (see thematic article in this volume). These policies and strategies often pivot around scientific research, with a focus on understanding climate change and its impacts. They also cover trade and sustainable development, shipping routes and, more recently, local and Indigenous matters. Traditional security matters, that driven by the survival of the state and often linked to military matters, are also important for some European non-Arctic states, which is exemplified by the United Kingdom's 2022 Arctic defense strategy (a standalone document).

It is also worth noting that trade between European non-Arctic states and the Arctic is fluid, although most exchanges take place with the European Arctic. Here, and bearing in mind national and regional differences, European non-Arctic states are or have been major importers of Arctic products, including fish, minerals and hydrocarbons. These countries also export food products, medicines, machinery, or vehicles, just to name a few commodities. Tourists visiting Arctic areas, in particular the European Arctic, also come in great numbers from European countries. In essence, there is a great exchange of products and services between the Arctic, in particular the European Arctic, and European non-Arctic states.

European non-Arctic states have multiple interests in the Arctic, including scientific, commercial, strategic, or security. The European Arctic is, nonetheless, part of the European neighborhood, and has shaped and continues shaping European history, the same way Europe has shaped and continues shaping Arctic history.

### **For more on this, read...**

European Commission, *Overview of EU actions in the Arctic and their impact* (2021)  
<https://eprd.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/EU-Policy-Arctic-Impact-Overview-Final-Report.pdf>

Arctic Council, *Compilation of Observer Regular Reports 2019–2021* (2021)  
<https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/2567>