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BIG PICTURE OF ARCTIC GEOPOLITICS THE CASE OF FRANCE

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Directed by **Julia Tasse**, Senior Research Fellow at IRIS, the Ocean programme is a transdisciplinary research department that studies the geopolitics of the sea, ocean governance, and the security implications of changes to marine environments caused by climate change.

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France's position regarding the Arctic is significantly shaped by its historical perspective on polar regions, characterised by exploration, scientific inquiry, and discovery. This cultural association with the Far North influences its diplomatic stance, prioritising science diplomacy and environmental conservation over defence.

France's official strategies, notably the *National Roadmap for the Arctic* published in 2016¹ and France's 2030 Polar Strategy, *Equilibrium in Extremes*, issued in 2022², are worth studying in order to better understand the underlying contradictions between its environmental diplomacy and its military considerations. The 2016 Roadmap was shaped by Michel Rocard, Ambassador in charge of Polar Regions at the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, whereas the 2022 Polar Strategy has been crafted by Olivier Poivre d'Arvor, Special Envoy of the President for Polar Regions and Maritime Affairs.

The evolution of the French stance is notable when comparing the two documents. The 2016 Roadmap, particularly in its third section, emphasises the significance of defence and security issues. These topics receive less prominence in the 2022 Polar Strategy. Encompassing both polar regions, this strategy highlights a shift in French diplomatic priorities in the Arctic.

This shift can be attributed to many factors, amongst which the perimeter of the Special Envoy, as mentioned, but also the evolution of France's global diplomatic positioning. The concept of balance, mentioned several times in the 2022 Polar Strategy and in its title 'Equilibrium in Extremes', aligns with the Indo-Pacific strategy articulated by the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs in 2019³, wherein France positions itself as a "balancing power."

The concept of "balancing power", as shaped by President Emmanuel Macron, conveys the idea of France being a reliable partner in a region, working towards international stability and cooperation.

The reference to the Indo-Pacific is clearly delineated in the 2022 Polar Strategy, which evokes small island states that are vulnerable to rising sea levels⁴ as a point of comparison to the Arctic, where climate change affects livelihoods and ecosystems.

If such an evolution can be deemed contradictory when compared to France's military stance on the Arctic, which is based on the region's strategic role, it can also be perceived as

¹ French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, *The Great Challenge of the Arctic, National Roadmap for the Arctic*, 2016, available [here](#)

² French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, *Equilibrium in Extremes, France's 2030 polar strategy*, 2022, available [here](#)

³ French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy, Summary*, 2019, available [here](#)

⁴ French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, *Equilibrium in Extremes, France's 2030 polar strategy*, 2022, p. 38.

complementary. In its willingness to be a balancing power, is France advancing contradictory or complementary stances towards the Arctic? This question structures the analysis below.

POLAR TERRITORIES AS REALMS OF ADVENTURE

The historical context has profoundly shaped the French perspective on both the Arctic and Antarctic regions. French explorers and scientists—Paul-Emile Victor, Jean-Baptiste Charcot, later followed by Jean-Louis Étienne and many others—have forged a narrative of uninhabited, pristine landscapes awaiting discovery through arduous expeditions. This sentiment is articulated in the 2022 Polar Strategy, which identifies science and exploration as key connections between polar regions and France⁵. France's 'polarity' is defined by expeditions, exploration, and scientific presence. "The tales of French explorers and scientists, still ingrained in collective consciousness, also contribute to our fellow citizens' attachment to polar regions"⁶.

These French figures also contribute to explaining France's specific regard for Antarctica⁷, alongside its presence through the rotations of its only state-owned icebreaker, the *Astrolabe*⁸, and its polar scientific stations. This also influences France's perception of Arctic priorities.

The appointment of a Special Envoy for Polar and Maritime Affairs as France's representative to the Arctic underscores this stance: the Arctic is perceived not as a region but as an ocean, implying a detachment from the realities of human life within these territories. This is reinforced by its interconnection with France's Indo-Pacific strategy, which similarly emphasises environmental concerns. At the national level, France's perception of the Arctic as an ocean shapes its interministerial approach to polar affairs. Echoing the Special Envoy's Maritime and Polar affairs portfolio, polar issues are integrated within the maritime interministerial committee, rather than being addressed through a dedicated framework.

⁵ French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, *Equilibrium in Extremes, France's 2030 polar strategy*, 2022, p. 15.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 15.

⁷ If Paul-Emile Victor and Jean-Baptiste went to the Arctic and the Antarctic, French explorers were more numerous to reach Southern polar regions: Jean-Baptiste Bouvet de Lozier, Yves-Joseph de Kerguelen de Trémarec, Jules Dumont d'Urville, among others.

⁸ "The *Astrolabe*, equipped by the French Navy, is the only public French ship with icebreaking capacity (PC5 in the Polar Code) which is able to navigate in ice approximately 70 centimetres thick. It was built as part of a partnership comprising first its owner, the French Southern and Antarctic Lands (TAAF), together with the French Polar Institute Paul-Émile Victor, which has operational authority in logistics operations in the Antarctic and second, regarding equipment, the Ministry for Armed Forces (the French Navy)." French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, *Equilibrium in Extremes, France's 2030 polar strategy*, 2022, p.60.

The 2022 Strategy highlights polar regions as “uninhabited (...) in the popular imagination”⁹. This suggests difficulties in fully comprehending the livelihoods of Arctic communities. However, these communities are acknowledged, though mainly in relation to resource management. French diplomacy emphasises the need for shared resource management, advocating for the protection of a fragile environment amidst geopolitical challenges. Cooperation among Arctic nations and with the private sector is deemed essential. The vulnerability and potential exploitation of polar regions drive France's involvement in their protection, as they are perceived as “unique territories which we must pass on to the younger generations, to provide maximum protection for their environment”¹⁰. This also reflects how the role of the private sector is perceived in the Arctic: present, in order to exploit rich resources, but acting in a sustainable way. The involvement of French companies in the Arctic can be illustrated by TotalEnergies or the cruise line operator Ponant.

This French perspective on the Arctic—as an “empty” ocean and a region requiring protection—seems to be perceived by Arctic States as akin to managing a natural park¹¹. While cooperation is paramount, it is crucial not to overlook the livelihoods of Arctic inhabitants. By sidelining hard security considerations, France risks distancing itself from major strategic discussions.

SCIENCE DIPLOMACY

France's approach to environmental protection is intricately linked to its investments in science and innovation. This connection is particularly evident in polar regions, where significant research efforts are underway. French research institutes (French Polar Institute Paul-Émile Victor (IPEV), Institut français de recherche pour l'exploitation de la mer (Ifremer) and Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) amongst others) carry out extensive research on the poles; however, a major challenge arises in the transition from scientific research to political action. This gap hinders effective policymaking and engagement in the Arctic.

Another significant limitation to France's political involvement on Arctic matters is the considerable physical distance between most French territories and the Arctic. Saint Pierre et Miquelon (an island off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada, 46°57' North) is France's only

⁹ Ibidem, p. 10.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 12.

¹¹ Siri Gulliksen Tømmerbakke, Amund Trellevik, “France Compares the Arctic to the Middle East, Claims Region Belongs to No-One”, *High North News*, 2019, available here;

<https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/france-compares-arctic-middle-east-claims-region-belongs-no-one>

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potential strategic asset in the North. However, the island is often overlooked in the broader context of France's global influence. Consequently, it has a minimal impact on how France is perceived as an Arctic power from Paris, resulting in a notably limited, if not entirely absent, representation of France in many Arctic diplomatic forums. The 2022 Polar Strategy acknowledges this decline in diplomatic engagement¹².

Nevertheless, France's scientific community plays a pivotal role through its presence at Arctic events. This reliance on science diplomacy underscores a shift away from traditional diplomatic channels and official representations. The role of civil society should therefore be emphasised, from academia to non-governmental organisations such as the Tara Océan Foundation. This organisation has launched an important project, the Tara Polar Station, a floating and drifting scientific station. It will play both a scientific and a diplomatic role, establishing a tangible French presence in the Arctic. It has been funded by the France 2030 programme (with €13 million out of a total of €21 million¹³).

In summary, while France demonstrates a strong commitment to scientific research in polar regions, significant challenges remain in translating this knowledge into effective diplomatic presence during Arctic diplomatic engagements. Continuing to strengthen science diplomacy and fostering interministerial cooperation is crucial for enhancing France's representation in Arctic affairs.

FRANCE IN THE ARCTIC AS AN EU POWER

France has consistently sought recognition as an environmental steward of shared global spaces. The Arctic aligns with the country's broader objective to assert this leadership in environmental and climate-related matters on the international stage.

This political objective can primarily be pursued through active engagement in discussions at the European Union (EU) level. France is particularly committed to positioning itself as a leader within the EU. It is noteworthy when considering the intended audience of the French 2022 Polar Strategy: French citizens and other EU Member States, as evidenced by its stated objectives and wording.

Being recognised as an environmental leader also requires France to play the part at the European Union level. Indeed, EU environmental policies are remarkably ambitious compared to those of other developed states, such as the United States. France is thus actively

¹² « there has been significant disengagement from France », Ibidem, p. 18.

¹³<https://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/fr/tara-polar-station-mise-l-eau-avant-une-serie-d-expeditions-en-arctique-97553>

promoting a European Arctic agenda. As articulated in the strategy, “within the European Union, France wants to help create a shared polar conscience, ambitious programmes and concerted action with the European Commission and member States”¹⁴. The French 2022 Polar Strategy expresses support for the EU's request to gain observer status in the Arctic Council¹⁵.

The objective of environmental leadership is to be fostered by scientific diplomacy, as previously mentioned, as well as strong scientific data collection capabilities. Another key motivation for France's engagement at the European level is the shared use of scientific infrastructure and resources. European innovation and scientific programmes play a crucial role in strengthening Arctic scientific capabilities. The Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe programmes devoted significant funding to Arctic research (15 million euros for the Arctic PASSION Programme, as an example¹⁶). The 2019 communication from the Ministry of Armed Forces¹⁷ underlines that the EU spent €200 million on Arctic research between 2002 and 2019.

In addition to EU funding, some Member States also invest in Arctic research. Pooling national and European scientific resources creates a multiplier effect to Arctic research capabilities. It is thus of particular importance for France to underline the necessity of European scientific collaboration. For example, the renewal of the German icebreaker ship – *the new Polarstern* – constitutes a key asset for Arctic research. This has materialised through the bilateral cooperation between France and Germany, whose respective polar institutions (Institut Paul Emile Victor and Alfred Wegener Institute) merged their Arctic scientific stations in Svalbard to create the AWIPEW station in 2003.

It is important to stress, however, that this French support to a European Arctic positioning is met with apprehension by some Arctic states. Not all EU Member States align with France's environmentally focused approach. For instance, Germany's recent Arctic strategic guidelines (September 2024¹⁸) demonstrate a different emphasis, with key objectives regarding security concerns. Specifically, this document outlines six main goals, amongst which the first two are the preservation of security and stability in the Arctic, through enhanced security policy

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 51.

¹⁵ “France also supports the European Union's request to be granted official observer status in the Arctic Council », ibidem, p. 29.

¹⁶ <https://www.awi.de/en/about-us/service/press/single-view/eu-foerdert-arktisprojekt-mit-15-millionen-euro.html>

¹⁷ Ministry of Armed forces, *France and the new strategic challenges in the Arctic*, 2019, Available [here](https://www.archives.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/565142/9742558/file/France%20and%20the%20New%20Strategic%20Challenges%20in%20the%20Arctic%20-%20DGRIS_2019.pdf) https://www.archives.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/565142/9742558/file/France%20and%20the%20New%20Strategic%20Challenges%20in%20the%20Arctic%20-%20DGRIS_2019.pdf

¹⁸ <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/-/2673172>

engagement within NATO and the EU; and the defence of the international rules-based order in the Arctic region.

In summary, France's positioning in the Arctic, viewed through the lens of its role as an EU power, reflects its commitment to environmental stewardship, while also highlighting the complexities of navigating Arctic geopolitics within a broader European context. The strategy gap between EU Members States regarding their vision of the Arctic may limit the Union's engagement with Arctic nations.

THE STANCE OF THE FRENCH ARMED FORCES

The Arctic zone was first mentioned by French Armed Forces in the April 2013 *White Paper on National Defence and Security (Livre blanc sur la défense et la sécurité nationale)* and in a document issued by the Ministry of Armed Forces in 2019.

The French Armed Forces appear to be more aligned with the geopolitical concerns of Arctic states than with the priorities of French diplomacy. This stark contrast between France's diplomatic focus on environmental issues and its military perspective can nonetheless be understood as a critical asset, facilitating both scientific and strategic cooperation.

French Armed Forces have expressed significant interest in the geopolitical developments in the Arctic. The deployment of the second Loire-class offshore support and assistance multipurpose vessel *Rhone* in 2018 exemplifies this awareness. The Arctic holds several strategic interests for France's defence, serving not only as a critical area for deterrence but also as a valuable training ground in extreme cold conditions, thereby enhancing France's operational capabilities. In addition to deterrence, the French Navy's commitment to global maritime security and safety is a crucial factor in its engagement in the Arctic region.

It is important to note that the French 2022 Polar Strategy highlights the role of armed forces as access enablers¹⁹, with both the Navy and the Air Force frequently operating in the Arctic. While military resources are indeed a cornerstone of France's capabilities in the region, the absence of an Arctic-based icebreaker vessel is perceived by Arctic states as a significant shortcoming. Both the *Astrolabe* and the new scientific vessel with icebreaking capabilities *Michel Rocard* are to be based in the Southern Pacific Ocean. This paradox reflects the contrasting expectations held by France and Arctic nations regarding operational capabilities in polar areas.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 59

While the 2022 Polar Strategy emphasises environmental concerns, it also incorporates strategic and geopolitical aspects. The strategic significance of the Arctic is highlighted at the end of the document, addressing related issues of sovereignty, defence, and security, as well as escalating geopolitical tensions²⁰. Strategic competition is framed through the lens of resource management and the development of northern maritime routes. Furthermore, international cooperation is identified as a key pillar of action within this strategy.

Lastly, it is worth noting that the document frequently underlines the necessity for strategic foresight concerning polar regions. French diplomacy refers to strategic foresight as a critical tool to enhance understanding and prepare for upcoming geopolitical challenges in the Arctic. In this regard, it is important to note that France has established dedicated institutions and programmes, ranging from the Red Team at the Defence Innovation Agency to initiatives led by the Ministry of the Interior, as highlighted in the recent report by the Cour des Comptes²¹. Such geopolitical concerns reflect an awareness of the military significance of the region and suggest that future iterations of this strategy may, in the coming years, further align France's military and diplomatic visions for the Arctic.

In summary, the French stance on the Arctic reveals a complex interplay between environmental concerns and military preparedness, highlighting the challenges of aligning French global diplomatic priorities with the realities of Arctic geopolitics. In its 2022 Polar Strategy, France seeks to assert itself as a leader in international environmental governance while navigating global stability. The role of science diplomacy and interministerial cooperation is paramount in this context, as is the involvement of the French Armed Forces. However, the disparity between objectives and the associated means and funds, particularly the absence of an Arctic icebreaker vessel, highlights the difficulty of being an active stakeholder in global geopolitical affairs and to deploy sufficient capabilities across both polar regions. Even though France has territories across the globe, it does not have the same military and scientific reach in polar regions as it aspires to. As stated in the title of the 2022 Polar Strategy, France's commitment to being a reliable partner in most geopolitical areas is constrained by geographical realities: balancing the extreme North and the extreme South. This would require overcoming limited financial resources, which is why cooperation – with other EU Member States and European States - is seen as a key enabler of French ambitions in the Arctic region.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 68

²¹ « La fonction prospective au ministère de l'Intérieur », 2024, available in French on the Cour des Comptes website: <https://www.ccomptes.fr/fr/documents/71770>

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