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## › Italy in the Midst of a New Era of Arctic Securitisation

- › The Arctic has never been spared from competitive dynamics since the Cold War era. Amidst heightened tensions and great power competition, the region is becoming a flashpoint between adversaries and allies alike.
- › From a Western perspective, Arctic deterrence has been for decades mostly exercised by US forces, albeit with support from partners like Canada, Denmark and Norway. NATO must now play a more active role.
- › Italy is not an Arctic nation but its armed forces are frequently deployed in the region. Rome can play a role by contributing to multilateral efforts at the EU and NATO levels.

Despite its inaccessibility and extreme weather conditions, the Arctic played an outsized role throughout the Cold War as a mostly uninhabitable buffer zone between the US and USSR, with commensurate investment by both sides in terms of military presence and capabilities.<sup>1</sup> A common narrative about the Arctic since the late 1980s has seen the region primarily as a stage for cooperation rather than competition, leading to an era of so-called 'Arctic exceptionalism'.<sup>2</sup> Yet, even if meaningful cooperation has taken place, the Arctic was never spared from competitive dynamics during or after the Cold War.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the region was highly militarised until the early 1990s and has not lost its military importance due to two key characteristics: it represents the shortest path for missiles and strategic bombers launched from North America to the former USSR and *vice versa*, and its retreating ice sheets still provide an ideal hiding place for ballistic missile submarines, which are meant to guarantee a second-strike capability in case of nuclear war.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Smith, Jason, "Melting the Myth of Arctic Exceptionalism", in *Modern War Institute Articles*, 19 August 2022, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/?p=18365>.

<sup>2</sup> Kornhuber, Kai et al., "The Disruption of Arctic Exceptionalism. Managing Environmental Change in Light of Russian Aggression", in *DGAP Reports*, No. 2 (February 2023), <https://dgap.org/en/node/38319>.

<sup>3</sup> Bertelsen, Rasmus Gjedssø, "Divided Arctic in a Divided World Order", in *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 48, No. 6 (2024), p. 568-577, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2025.2453322>.

<sup>4</sup> Lopez, C. Todd, "U.S. Needs Sea-Based Nuclear Capability to Ensure Second-Strike Capability", in *DOD News*, 23 May 2024, <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/article/3786326>.



»» *From a North American perspective, early warning instruments are more effective the farther north they are deployed*

## Countering security threats in the Arctic region

From a North American perspective, therefore, early warning instruments are more effective the farther north they are deployed, making Canada, Greenland and Denmark ideal and crucial strategic partners, even though the White House has often preferred a confrontational approach in recent years. For instance, the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line, with over 60 manned radar and communication stations and their airfields, was the first example of a large-scale air defence system that spanned across Alaska, Northern Canada, the Faroe Islands and Greenland.<sup>5</sup> For the most part, the Line was a huge and expensive logistical endeavour in such remote regions, but it remedied some of the shortcomings of its predecessors when it entered service in 1957.<sup>6</sup> Dedicated to aerial threats and not extra-atmospheric ones (that is, ballistic missiles), the DEW Line reached obsolescence by the mid-80s when the US and Canada agreed to replace it with the North Warning System (NWS), which is still operational today and constitutes a significant layer of early warning radars at the disposal of the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD).<sup>7</sup>

Air threats have evolved considerably since the later stages of the Cold War, and while ballistic missiles remain central to nuclear arsenals, the proliferation of cruise missiles and the advent of hypersonic weapons can help adversaries exploit a gap in North American layered air defence and early warning systems that focus solely on medium- and high-altitude threats.<sup>8</sup> Crucially, this gap exposes a glaring deficiency in current deterrence in North America, namely that while nuclear attacks are mainly deterred by the threat of nuclear retaliation, non-nuclear attacks – such as through the use of conventionally armed cruise and hypersonic missiles – are not subject to the same expectation. In this case, deterrence is best exercised through denial rather than retaliation, and this in turn requires missile and air defence systems that cover all layers.<sup>9</sup> Though little is known publicly about the programme, the Golden Dome for America, announced in early 2025 by President Trump, is an attempt to fill existing gaps and integrate systems and technologies, including sensors and interceptors, in order to protect the most sensitive targets on the US mainland from missile threats.<sup>10</sup> The Golden Dome initiative represents a highly significant shift in the US approach to homeland defence, in that it stems from the recognition that – unlike in the Cold War – strategic, non-nuclear weapons can reach the US mainland, including from or through the Arctic region.<sup>11</sup> At a time of aggressive

<sup>5</sup> Ferrari, Enrico Maria, “DEW Line, il sistema radar artico della Guerra Fredda”, in *Report Difesa*, 27 April 2017, <https://www.reportdifesa.it/?p=2551>.

<sup>6</sup> Ray, Thomas W., “A History of the DEW Line 1946-1964”, in *ADC Historical Studies*, No. 31 (June 1965), <https://www.northcom.mil/Portals/28/Paper%20No%20No%2031%20A%20History%20of%20the%20Dew%20Line,%201946-1964%20Full%20Release.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Caggiano, Mike, “Homeland Defense from the Arctic: ACC AMIC Det 1 and the North Warning System”, in *Air Combat Command Articles*, 14 August 2025, <https://www.acc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/4275132>.

<sup>8</sup> Karako, Tom, *North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) Modernization*, Statement before the Canadian House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence, 9 October 2025, <https://www.csis.org/node/118788>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, “Golden Dome”, in *Factsheets on Missile Defense*, June 2025, <https://armscontrolcenter.org/?p=17991>.

<sup>11</sup> Bingen, Kari A., “Why Golden Dome for America: The Case the Administration Should Make”, in *CSIS Commentaries*, 30 January 2026, <https://www.csis.org/node/120538>.



**>> From a NATO perspective, Greenland has traditionally been highly strategic as the northern end of the so-called Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap**

and erratic rhetoric from the White House, Canada and Greenland are in an awkward position vis-à-vis Washington and could be perceived and treated as potential obstacles to US security rather than the valuable and cooperative partners they have proven to be until the present day.<sup>12</sup>

The space domain and Arctic security are deeply intertwined. Firstly, satellites are a crucial element in US missile defence, with the US Space-based Infrared System (SBIRS) constellation providing key early missile warning capabilities.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, the remoteness of the high Arctic means that satellite communications and imaging are key enablers of both military and scientific activities there.<sup>14</sup> Thirdly, polar orbits allow satellites to observe every point on Earth twice a day, making them the best possible option for earth observation purposes. Furthermore, ground stations located near the North Pole allow operators to communicate with their satellites as many as twelve times a day, as is the case for Pituffik Space Base in Greenland, making the ability to build such facilities in the Arctic region highly strategic for any military power.

From a NATO perspective, Greenland has traditionally been highly strategic due to the aforementioned reasons, but also as the northern end of the so-called Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap. During the Cold War, the GIUK Gap became a critical transit route for military and cargo shipping between North America and Western Europe. At the same time, it constituted a sort of funnel for Soviet surface and submerged forces wishing to transit south from the North Atlantic. Current tensions are making the GIUK Gap newly relevant to both NATO and Russia, though investment has been insufficient by the most geographically relevant NATO allies, especially with regard to emerging technologies such as uncrewed systems.<sup>15</sup> What role Greenland will take in the defence of the GIUK Gap going forward remains unclear, yet the island's current military infrastructure cannot sustain large-scale military operations.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, an absence of harbours or military facilities along Greenland's east coast means that NATO ships have limited persistence there, contributing to the island being somewhat of a strategic blind spot for the alliance.<sup>17</sup>

The newly-established Arctic Sentry multi-domain initiative is NATO's response to President Trump's claims that US allies were not doing enough to contribute to Arctic security in the face of Russian and Chinese investments. Rather than a standalone military operation, it is better described as a coordination and visibility activity in order to help NATO planners have a better view of allies' activities in the region.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Maimann, Kevin, "Donald Trump Says Golden Dome Would Cost Canada \$61 billion US", in *CBC News*, 27 May 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/golden-dome-61-billion-1.7545414>; Brewster, Murray, "Canada Urges NATO to Make Arctic Sentry Initiative Permanent", in *CBC News*, 12 February 2026, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/nato-arctic-defence-anand-greenland-trump-9.7085632>.

<sup>13</sup> Missile Defense Project, "Space-based Infrared System (SBIRS)", in *Missile Threat*, last modified 26 July 2021, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/defsys/sbirs>.

<sup>14</sup> Marsh, David, "Ever Forward: The Unique Relationship between the Arctic and Space", in *Polar Points*, 1 November 2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/node/124946>.

<sup>15</sup> Ward, Shane, "The GIUK Gap: A New Age of A2/AD in Contested Strategic Maritime Spaces", in *CSIS Nuclear Network*, 12 September 2024, <https://nuclearnetwork.csis.org/?p=13730>.

<sup>16</sup> Brady, Aaron, "Greenland's Military Possibilities for the United States", in *War on the Rocks*, 4 April 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/?p=34049>.

<sup>17</sup> Budginaite-Froehly, Justina, "Greenland Is Europe's Strategic Blind Spot—and Its Responsibility", in *Atlantic Council Dispatches*, 5 January 2026, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=896988>.

<sup>18</sup> NATO, *Arctic Security*, 16 February 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/arctic-security>.



On land and in the air, the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO has added more Arctic and Sub-Arctic European territories to integrate into the alliance's posture in a region where hitherto only Norway was present, and rather isolated in terms of its northern border with Russia. NATO can now count on two more Nordic countries that boast advanced militaries used to challenges of cold-climate combat operations at a time when the US, despite an updated Arctic strategy, has not made substantial new investments in the required capabilities.<sup>19</sup>

## Multilateral first: Italy's approach to Arctic security

Italy's updated Arctic Strategy, published in January 2026, recognises the invalidity of the 'Arctic exceptionalism' narrative today.<sup>20</sup> In this context, Rome's Arctic policy, as explained in the document, is firmly rooted in the country's contribution to NATO's collective defence and the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). In view of this, Italy does not pursue autonomous or permanent military deployments in the Arctic, but rather seeks to contribute to multilateral missions and operations where possible.<sup>21</sup> Such an approach is perfectly aligned with the country's traditional defence and security policy which, while having widened significantly in scope in the last decade, still considers the "wider Mediterranean" as its main strategic focus – though the strategy highlights an interconnectedness between NATO's northern and southern flanks. In fact, Italy's armed forces are currently overstretched at a time when it continues to honour its commitments to EU and UN conflict management and peacekeeping operations while also being one of the leading European contributors to NATO's enhanced forward presence and air policing missions. Rome also maintains a sizeable military presence in Niger and has been making frequent naval deployments to the Indo-Pacific. Arctic deployments, most likely under the NATO flag rather than the EU, will therefore have to compete with a great number of other longstanding commitments that are costly in terms of financial and human resources.

Nevertheless, Italy has already made meaningful contributions to Arctic security in recent years, for instance, through its participation in NATO's Nordic Response 2024 exercise, which involved an Italian aircraft carrier (ITS *Garibaldi*) and an amphibious operations ship (ITS *San Giorgio*) carrying the San Marco Marine Brigade.<sup>22</sup> In 2019 (and then again in 2022), the Italian Air Force dispatched F-35 5th generation fighters to Keflavik Air Base in Iceland<sup>23</sup> – the

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<sup>19</sup> Wieslander, Anna, "How Sweden and Finland's Membership in NATO Affects the High North", in *Atlantic Council Issue Briefs*, October 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=804032>.

<sup>20</sup> Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs et al., *Italy Arctic Policy. Italy and the Arctic: The Values of Cooperation in a Rapidly Changing Region*, January 2026, [https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/WEB\\_strategia-artica-italiana\\_ENG\\_16012026.pdf](https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/WEB_strategia-artica-italiana_ENG_16012026.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Italian Embassy to Norway, *The "Garibaldi" Aircraft Carrier and the "San Giorgio" Ship Are Engaged in the Nordic Response 2024 exercise in Norway*, 27 February 2024, <https://amboslo.esteri.it/en/?p=3149>.

<sup>23</sup> NATO Allied Air Command, *Iceland: NATO Mission Accomplished for Italy's F-35s*, 25 October 2019, <https://ac.nato.int/archive/2019/iceland-nato-mission-accomplished-for-italys-f35s>; and *Italy's F-35 Detachment in Iceland, "500 Hours Protecting Airspace in High North"*, 5 July 2022, [https://ac.nato.int/archive/2022/ITA\\_ASICIPPN\\_end](https://ac.nato.int/archive/2022/ITA_ASICIPPN_end).



first time a NATO ally deployed these aircraft to a NATO Air Policing mission. The Italian Army also frequently trains in high-elevation winter environments in order to simulate operations in extreme cold conditions in preparation not only for mountain combat scenarios but also deployments to the Arctic circle.<sup>24</sup>

In view of the existing activities, the Defence General Staff has instituted a joint-force steering committee on the Arctic, Sub-Arctic and Antarctic. The steering committee aims to coordinate all initiatives in the Polar regions and convey them toward the Ministry of Defence's (MoD) guidelines.<sup>25</sup>

Italy's space capabilities contribute to making it a relevant player in the Arctic, for instance thanks to the Italian earth observation satellite constellation COSMO-SkyMed, a joint MoD-Italian Space Agency programme. The COSMO-SkyMed satellites are in a polar orbit and equipped with synthetic aperture radars enabling to capture detailed imaging of the earth's surface through clouds and in the dark – an essential asset in the harsh climatic conditions of the Arctic and Sub-Arctic regions.<sup>26</sup>

The international crisis sparked by the US Administration's aggressive rhetoric on Greenland has served as a stark reminder that the island and the whole Arctic region are increasingly at the centre of strategic competition involving the world's powers. President Trump's ambitions regarding a takeover of Greenland reflect the US' longstanding interest in the island. Over thirty years since the end of the Cold War, heightening tensions between the US, Russia and China are once again highlighting the Arctic's strategic significance from a military point of view. In such a context, the EU still lacks the political and institutional tools to play a more significant role in regional security. A recent EU-led naval deployment such as EUNAVFOR Aspides, which operates in the Red Sea to protect commercial shipping from indiscriminate Houthi attacks, demonstrates the difficulty in getting sustained commitment in terms of military assets even against a clear and immediate threat.<sup>27</sup> Unsurprisingly, in late 2025, the European Parliament passed by an overwhelming majority a resolution calling for a revised EU Arctic Policy with a more robust focus on hard security,<sup>28</sup> which was hitherto a secondary concern compared to climate change, sustainable development and international cooperation.<sup>29</sup>

Leaving aside budgetary, personnel and operational constraints, a more hard-security-driven EU Arctic policy may eventually require some form of Italian involvement, especially if it leads to a permanent naval presence. The Italian Navy is among the EU's few blue water navies capable of global deployments at short notice. Combined with Rome's traditional support for multilateral

**»» A more hard-security-driven EU Arctic policy may eventually require some form of Italian involvement**

<sup>24</sup> Gioventù, Emilio, "Militari italiani già pronti per la Groenlandia. Quelle esercitazioni al gelo e in condizioni estreme", in *Italiaoggi*, 20 January 2025, <https://www.italiaoggi.it/economia-e-politica/militari-italiani-gia-pronti-per-la-groenlandia-quelle-esercitazioni-al-gelo-e-in-condizioni-estreme-uvvgs6zs>.

<sup>25</sup> Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs et al., *Italy Arctic Policy*, cit., p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> Italian Space Agency website: *COSMO-SkyMed*, <https://www.asi.it/en/?p=17660>.

<sup>27</sup> Calcagno, Elio et al., "Deterrence and Diplomacy in the Red Sea: Recommendations for Italy", in *IAI Papers*, No. 25 | 19 (July 2025), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/20420>.

<sup>28</sup> Danneel, Gilles and Marie-Anne Coninx, "The European Parliament Compels the EU to Address Arctic Security", in *Egmont Commentaries*, 5 December 2025, <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/?p=52986>.

<sup>29</sup> Stepień, Adam and Andreas Raspotnik, "Continuity with Great Confidence. The European Union's 2021 Arctic Policy Update", in *Arctic Institute Reports*, October 2021, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/?p=22120>.



**>> Italy's approach to the Arctic from a defence standpoint is pragmatic and commensurate to its distance from the region**

missions and operations, this propensity may indeed lead to an even more active role in the Arctic in future years.

### Looking ahead

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While the US has played a leading role in Arctic deterrence – especially in North America and Greenland – for decades, NATO allies are now under pressure to do more in this region. The Arctic is a highly significant region for deterrence vis-à-vis Russia and, increasingly, a flashpoint not just between NATO and Russia, but also within the alliance itself. In a rapidly shifting context, Italy's approach to the Arctic from a defence standpoint is pragmatic and commensurate to its distance from the region, its capabilities and its numerous commitments around the "wider Mediterranean". As Rome has repeatedly proven, Italy has significant military capabilities it can offer to NATO and, if ever required in the Arctic context, the EU's CSDP. Italy may be a leading player on NATO's so-called Southern Flank, yet the country's size, military capabilities and commitment to European security writ large demand that the country be actively involved in regional security, as it has been – successfully – until now.

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