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# From Nuuk to Reykjavik: The High North's geopolitical scramble and the consequences for the EU and its enlargement policy

*Ioannis Alexandris & Dimitra Koutouzi*

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### Authors

**Ioannis ALEXANDRIS**
*Research Fellow, Wider Europe Programme, ELIAMEP*
*Researcher, think nea - New Narratives of EU Integration*

**Dimitra KOUTOUZI**
*Defence Policy Analyst*

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## Introduction

The security situation in the Arctic is increasingly shaped by rising strategic competition. Climate change, threats and challenges coming from Russia and China, as well as transatlantic tensions, are positioning the Arctic at a unique crossroads of geopolitical tensions. Faster ice melt is creating new and shorter maritime trade routes and easier access to natural resources, including rare earths. Consequently, there is a growing strategic and economic interest for the region.

This brief begins by discussing the current geopolitical situation in the Arctic and the political turmoil around Greenland, following President Trump's assertive push for US control of the Danish territory, which is for now stymied, but has left lasting uncertainty within the transatlantic alliance. It also analyses how the European Union (EU) is being pushed to adjust to the new transatlantic security architecture by preserving the principles of multilateralism, balancing the Member States' 27 diverse political agendas, and at the same time pursuing its strategic autonomy.

Tensions do not remain static in Greenland; Iceland is witnessing growing unease in light of this heightened geopolitical uncertainty and has started re-examining the possibility of reopening EU accession talks. Hence, the brief endeavours to also analyse the prospects of an enhanced EU-Iceland partnership, including the possibility of reviving its EU accession prospects but without undermining the integration process of the current candidate states.

Building on this analysis, the brief also outlines policy options and future challenges for the EU's next steps in the Arctic, including the utilisation of its defence initiatives and the deepening of ties with Iceland, while taking stock of the broader dilemmas and implications this may entail for transatlantic relations as well as the EU's enlargement policy.

### Greenland at the Crossroads of Transatlantic Security: fostering European unity in the face of diverse national stances

The Arctic represents a region of global competition, primarily involving China, Russia, the US, Canada, and Europe's Nordic states, but today its security also concerns the EU as a whole. In particular, China is increasingly focusing on developing shipping routes through the Arctic, and securing access to resources, often in cooperation with Russia. Russia is expanding its military presence in the area, given that its Northern fleet has not been negatively affected by the war in Ukraine.

Since assuming the Presidency in January 2025, President Trump has been making statements regarding acquiring Greenland because, as he supports, it has become imperative to protect the island from a Chinese or a Russian attack, with his administration consistently alleging that Denmark is unable to efficiently protect the area.[1] Hence, various debates have risen around US' commitment to transatlantic unity, the purpose and future of NATO, as well as the EU's role in the Arctic region. The situation worsened in recent months, as President Trump openly questioned Denmark's sovereignty over the island and threatened several European countries with the imposition of tariffs from the 1st of February after sending troops to Greenland for training and reconnaissance missions.

European states actively rallied behind Denmark, with several allies like Sweden, France and Germany, stepping up their Arctic posture through joint exercises and enhanced presence. Denmark also announced that it would increase its military presence on the island.[2] London and Oslo have also floated an 'Arctic Sentry' NATO mission with the aim of increased military cooperation able to counter Russian threats, framing multilateral reinforcement as an alternative to unilateral US escalation.[3]

The situation with the US remains unstable. Although at the Davos World Economic Forum, Trump signalled de-escalation, the episode has further reinforced broader concerns in Europe about the reliability of the US as a security partner, especially given that Washington could have expanded its Greenland footprint within the existing 1951 defence framework without provoking a crisis around its sovereignty. Despite the fact that European states broadly rallied in support of Denmark, we continue to observe three broad approaches to defence and security within the EU.

Firstly, taking as an example France – a main advocate for European strategic autonomy – with a strong defence industry, which not only underpins its domestic security capabilities but also drives its advocacy for the "buy European" principle. Hence, the first approach to European security and defence focuses on ensuring that defence initiatives reinforce industrial sovereignty, technological leadership, and long-term strategic self-reliance across the bloc.

The second group follows a more cautious, "wait-and-see" approach. For instance, the Netherlands support EU initiatives but often prefers incremental steps and close coordination with NATO, while also taking into account upcoming US midterm elections and concerns over potential overaction from Washington. Member States opting for such an approach risk hindering European defence integration, while maintaining their flexibility and mitigating risks.

In contrast, Poland and the Baltic states remain strongly reliant on the US and NATO as their primary security guarantors. Given the immediate Russian threat, these countries have over the years developed a deep dependence on the US as a security provider, prioritising transatlantic guarantees over independent European capabilities. Such approach has provided strong, immediate deterrence against the Russian threat, but given the current uncertainty that governs the EU-US relations, it risks leaving these states vulnerable if US commitments become less predictable.

Understanding such diverse perspectives is essential for framing EU defence initiatives in a way that balances ambition with political feasibility. Following the Greenland incident, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, signalled a stronger stance when it comes to Europe's autonomous role.[4] However, this rhetoric does not automatically translate into a coherent, common strategy. Rather, it reflects the Commission's efforts to navigate the multiple and sometimes conflicting political agendas of the 27 Member States while managing broader geopolitical uncertainty. This cautious approach highlights the challenges the EU faces in projecting an independent EU security posture, balancing assertiveness with the need to maintain transatlantic cohesion.

Similar divisions are evident beyond defence policy, extending into the EU's economic and trade responses to US pressure. For example, the renewed tariff threats from President Trump, led France to request the activation of the EU anti-coercion mechanism, but no consensus was met. Ultimately, as these threats did not materialise, there was no need to continue this politically difficult debate.

All the above, point out that the Greenland episode was symptomatic of a broader question that the EU is facing: whether the US' growing unpredictability should be treated as a temporary disruption to be managed or a broader structural shift that would require a costlier adjustment. It also illustrated that crises do not automatically generate a unified strategic response among Member States. But, their responses have become sharper and more Europe-oriented than would have been expected given prior experiences and traditional transatlantic alignments.

It is within this fragmented strategic environment and prompted by the Greenland episode, that the use of EU-level policy instruments and partnerships in the High North gain renewed prominence as pathways to reduce reliance on external security providers and shape options for a more autonomous EU role in the region. In addition, as it will be further explained, it is also within this context that the renewed debate around Iceland's role and potential EU trajectory has resurfaced.

**Safeguarding Stability in the High North: The EU's Defence Mechanisms**

Against this backdrop, the question is not whether the EU can play a significant role in safeguarding stability in the region, but under what conditions and which means (e.g., regulatory, financial tools and policy mechanisms). For instance, the Commission announced its plan to review its Arctic policy in the coming months to better reflect today's challenges.[5] Considering that Europe is reviving its Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB), maintaining a technological edge means accelerating Europe's strategic autonomy in critical capabilities, and in an Arctic environment military needs differ significantly from those of other regions. For instance, space-based assets are critical: enhancing the use of the EU's Galileo satellite system for navigation, surveillance, and secure communications in the Arctic would significantly improve Europe's situational awareness and resilience in the High North, while working in complementarity with NATO and notably contributing to burden sharing, but at the same time reducing external dependencies.

By taking greater responsibility for its own security and defence, as also explicitly called for in the US National Strategy and National Defence Strategy, Europe can more effectively contribute to burden-sharing within NATO, gradually shift responsibilities, and strengthen its pillar in the alliance, all in full complementarity with NATO.[6] In other words, increasing EU's strategic autonomy means having the necessary capabilities to deter threats and challenges autonomously but also working with like-minded partners. Building such autonomy requires various elements, one of which is access to rare earths and other essential minerals necessary for clean energy and dual-use technologies. Hence, boosting cooperation with the Arctic states, such as Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, will enhance such capabilities through investments in critical raw materials and critical infrastructures. This has reinforced calls within the EU institutions to include the Arctic region more explicitly in the "defence readiness" agenda.

But, in an extreme scenario where tensions between the US and European countries resurface, for example over Greenland, the risk of NATO becoming paralysed similarly to the United Nations Security Council is multiplied. Such a scenario has refuelled discussions around the EU's article 42.7 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), the so-called "mutual assistance clause".[7] According to the article, Member States are committed to provide aid and assistance "with all means in their power" if another Member State faces armed aggression on its territory. In response, Ursula von der Leyen has announced that the Commission is working on a European Security Strategy, to be published later this year.[8] The Strategy - among other objectives - will aim to clarify article's 42.7 scope and means of use under multiple and diverse scenarios. Overall, the mutual assistance clause represents an important potential tool for Europe's security and defence capabilities but its role remains contested and unevenly understood across Member States, largely reflecting these broader divergences in threat perception and defence cultures.

It is precisely this climate of uncertainty and strategic ambiguity caused by the Greenland incident that is creating a spillover effect to other states, such as Iceland, which is now reassessing their security and defence architecture. Located on the same strategic corridor as Greenland, Iceland sits astride the GIUK gap (Greenland-Iceland-UK), a critical North Atlantic corridor long central to submarine detection, maritime surveillance, and the protection of transatlantic reinforcement routes between North America and Europe.

In recent months, discussions between the EU and Iceland on forming a security and defence partnership are intensifying, while Iceland is planning to hold a referendum on 29 August regarding the potential reopening of EU accession negotiations.

## From Greenland to Iceland: Arctic Tensions as a window of opportunity for deeper EU engagement

The renewed US focus on Greenland has accelerated the securitisation of Iceland's foreign policy debate, exposing structural vulnerabilities in Reykjavik's long-standing reliance on bilateral security guarantees with Washington.[9] Unlike Greenland, Iceland is an independent sovereign state. However, while Iceland has been a founding NATO member, it does not have a standing army and is dependent on a 1951 bilateral defence agreement with the US. President Trump's assertive rhetoric on Greenland, coupled with a more transactional US approach to alliances and trade, has politicised that dependence, exposing the limits of the security-through-bilateralism policy of small states.

With the opening of new northern sea lanes due the melting of ice leading to an expected increase in military and commercial traffic, control and monitoring of the GIUK gap corridor will gain further prominence, elevating the strategic importance of states located along it, including Iceland.[10]

In this context, Iceland's relationship with the EU is increasingly debated not primarily in economic terms, but as a question of long-term security and geopolitical alignment. The domestic debate on whether to join the EU is not new but has resurfaced in recent months following a decade-long halt: Reykjavik applied for EU membership in 2009 and made significant progress between 2010 and 2013, opening the majority of the 33 accession chapters and provisionally closing 11.[11] However, the process was halted in 2015 after a change in government, when the Eurosceptic Independence Party came in power leading a coalition with the Progressive Party. Given the progress already made in the 2010-2013 period, it is important to note that the application was never formally withdrawn.

Recent developments, however, have reignited the debate. In her visit to Poland on 25 February, Prime Minister Kristrun Frostadottir announced plans to hold a referendum "in the coming months". Thus, the following month, the government confirmed the launch of a referendum on 29 August 2026.[12] Importantly, such a vote would not be on EU membership itself, but on whether to revive accession negotiations. This distinction does not only grant domestic political parties some extra political space but also reopens a window of opportunity for the EU to exercise greater agency.

For months, public opinion in Iceland remained broadly favourable towards the launch of a referendum, and recent polls indicate a slim majority in support of a "Yes" to the reopening of the accession process (45%) versus 35% that oppose such a move, leaving 20% of undecided ones.[13] Given Iceland's small population, even modest shifts in sentiment can have outsized political effects, which is indicative of the implications of such a referendum. As illustrated by Moldova's 2024 referendum on EU membership such political processes are also potentially vulnerable to hybrid threats and foreign interference. This is a risk the EU should be mindful of, albeit without overstating parallels, given the vast political, economic, institutional and geographic differences between the two countries.

From an EU institutional and economic perspective, Iceland presents a relatively "low-friction" case. The country is already deeply integrated into the EU's internal market through the European Economic Area and participates in Schengen, similar to Norway.

This has also been reflected in the optimism expressed by Iceland's Foreign Minister Þorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir, who recently claimed that the country could conclude accession talks within "a year and a half". Further to that, she went as far as to suggest that Iceland could beat the current most advanced candidate for EU membership, Montenegro, in becoming the 28$^{th}$ Member States.[14] A revived accession process therefore would not start from scratch but will build on an extensive regulatory alignment. At the same time, issues of political sensitivity in Iceland, most notably pertaining to fisheries, would remain central and could require generous compromises on behalf of the EU to sustain domestic support and generate further momentum.[15]

In terms of the bigger picture, Iceland could serve as another test case for the EU's evolving thinking on gradual and staged accession. Even in the absence of a full membership status, the Union has a clear strategic interest in ensuring that Iceland is more deeply and structurally embedded in its security, space, and cyber resilience frameworks, which would also help reduce the country's exposure to unilateral pressure from external powers. Beyond security, deeper integration with Iceland would also yield important energy and economic benefits for the bloc given the country's extensive expertise in renewable energy generation, particularly geothermal and hydroelectric power. Closer institutional alignment would therefore support the EU's broader decarbonisation objectives while strengthening energy security at a critical geopolitical juncture.

More broadly, closer integration of the North Atlantic space would enhance the EU's maritime reach, access to critical infrastructure, as well as the resilience of supply chains linked to the emerging routes across the Arctic Ocean.

**Limitations, risks and constraints within the broader enlargement framework**

In strategic terms, even a limited northern enlargement could reinforce the EU's credibility as a geopolitical actor, at a time when its relevance in shaping world affairs effectively is being openly questioned by external powers and domestic critics alike. This should not imply a reordering of the EU's current enlargement priorities in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe; instead, the case of Iceland could demonstrate how different accession tracks may serve distinct strategic functions within an increasingly differentiated enlargement landscape.

This gains particular relevance in the context of the ongoing debate around Ukraine's potential fast-track accession, which is not merely seen as an institutional or technical process but as a political anchor for foreseen European security guarantees as part of a post-war security arrangement. The growing prominence of fast-track or phased accession models has reinforced the notion that enlargement can serve differentiated strategic purposes, depending on geopolitical urgency and security considerations. This logic could increasingly shape how other cases, including Iceland, are assessed.

However, the renewed window of opportunity surrounding Iceland and its potential revival of its EU accession bid, along with the case of comparatively advanced candidates such the current frontrunner Montenegro also entails risks: certainly, progress with "low-friction" cases could provide tangible deliverables for the EU's enlargement agenda. Yet, at the same time, it may also be instrumentalised by enlargement-sceptic Member States as a "fig leaf", substituting other more politically difficult aspects of the enlargement process, such as the need for an EU institutional reform, a precondition for a larger union of 30+ states.

In other words, selective accelerated progress risks reinforcing a success story narrative for EU enlargement without fully addressing long-standing impasses elsewhere.

It could come at the expense of other – politically more challenging - enlargement tracks in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, potentially further deepening frustration among candidates that have remained in the waiting room for more than a decade. Despite the short-term gains, in the long run this could undermine the credibility of the enlargement process itself, weakening reform incentives and contributing to a new wave of inertia across other accession fronts.

Statements from Reykjavik suggesting that Iceland could advance faster than some of the most advanced candidates, such as Montenegro and Albania, risk amplifying frustrations among current candidate states. From a geopolitical viewpoint, the next enlargement wave would need to strike a balance between strategic considerations and merit, by simultaneously advancing progress with existing frontrunners – particularly Montenegro – while also accommodating well-prepared potential new candidates like Iceland.

Importantly, the unfolding case of Greenland also raises wider questions about the future credibility of collective defence arrangements. In an environment where the US stance towards allies and NATO commitments appears increasingly unpredictable, debates about the long-term reliability of NATO's Article 5 have gained traction.

At the same time, the renewed attention to Article 42.7 also exposes the limits and dilemmas of relying more heavily on EU-level security safeguards. Despite the legally binding commitment constituted by the clause, in practice it remains largely untested as a collective defence instrument, lacking the operational depth as well as the force posture associated with NATO. As already explained, divergent threat perceptions and defence capabilities among Member States set further limitations to its practical applicability.

Meanwhile, the evolving international economic setting, shaped by transactionalism, geo-economic competition and an ongoing shift towards protectionism, has further highlighted the disadvantages faced by smaller states negotiating independently with major powers such as the US or China. For a small, open economy such as Iceland's, membership of a large economic bloc like the EU would significantly strengthen its bargaining position in an increasingly fragmented and competitive global trade environment.

Against this backdrop, the EU is facing a dilemma: either remain a secondary actor in the Arctic region - largely reactive to a volatile US foreign policy and broader NATO dynamics - or step up to capitalise on this window of opportunity to (pro)actively co-shape the political and security architecture of the North Atlantic.

## Making sense of diverse dynamics

Overall, the EU is now walking on a tightrope in its relationship with Washington amid an already hostile geopolitical environment marked by Russia's aggression and its ongoing war in Ukraine. Questions about NATO's role are also putting the unity of Member States under strain, where their diverse perspectives are driving their policy preferences. Meanwhile, the European Commission is providing tools to incentivise Member States in building greater strategic independence, while also strengthening the European pillar in NATO to efficiently contribute to burden shifting.

Under these circumstances, and following the Greenland episode early in 2026, the Arctic and the North Atlantic can no longer be treated as peripheral to EU security thinking, but as another key front pertaining to Europe's strategic autonomy. This urgency is further reinforced by Russia's and China's expanding strategic, economic, and military footprint across the broader region, which elevates the Arctic from a secondary concern to a strategic priority.

In this context, recent EU defence and industrial initiatives, including the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) and the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), illustrate how Arctic security concerns are increasingly intersecting with capability development and industrial resilience. The Arctic dimension is also linked to the EU's efforts to secure access to critical raw materials, which are essential for defence production and the resilience of the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB). In this sense, the High North is gradually being integrated into the EU's broader strategic autonomy framework.

In this setting, Iceland is transforming into a strategically consequential partner in the High North. Exploring further options for cooperation is gaining political salience among EU policymakers, especially given growing momentum in Reykjavik for re-considering its halted EU accession bid.

At the same time, any revival of an Iceland track would unfold within a politically sensitive enlargement landscape. For all its strategic merit and its political palatability as a "low-friction" case generating momentum and visibility, the potential reopening of accession talks carries the risk of overshadowing the existing enlargement processes and cooperation with the Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova, at least when it comes to the most politically challenging candidates. The Iceland case therefore functions not only as a North Atlantic opportunity, but also as a lens into how the EU manages differentiated accession logic without eroding perceived coherence across enlargement priorities.

Regardless of accession outcomes, the EU has significant potential to strengthen Iceland's integration into its security and defence framework. Options range from expanded participation in EU security and space initiatives, targeted collaboration on Arctic surveillance and maritime safety, and improved access to EU funding and research programmes. Such steps would signal credibility and partnership, respect domestic political sensitivities, avoid perceptions of external pressure, and simultaneously enhance the EU's international security and defence posture.

## Looking ahead: strategic implications and open questions

Building on these dynamics, the EU now faces a set of structural challenges, shaped less by purely economic consideration, and more by geopolitical pressures, including a shifting security calculus in a more uncertain transatlantic environment, externally, and various degrees of political will among Member States, internally. The renewed debate on European defence mechanisms and the reassessment of enlargement options, including Iceland, reflect different responses to the same underlying strategic uncertainty.

As illustrated by the Greenland case, the growing unpredictability of US policy has intensified debates around the operational relevance of Article 42.7 TEU as a complementary security instrument. The practical implementation of the article remains widely underdefined. For now, clarity on aspects such as coordination mechanisms, the role of EU institutions when assistance is requested, and the forms of collective response, remains limited. It remains to be seen whether and if so, how, these issues will be addressed at the forthcoming European Security Strategy, expected in the first half of 2026.

In this setting, enlargement is increasingly understood as a mechanism of geopolitical stabilisation and risk mitigation and is poised to continue dominating inter-institutional debates. Hence, a central challenge lying ahead for the EU is the following: how to balance the current geopolitical urgency with the need to preserve the credibility and coherence of enlargement as a merit-based and institutionally sound long-term policy, while at the same time navigating potentially differentiated accession and integration pathways across the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, and potentially Nordic countries like Iceland.

As illustrated above, Iceland represents a low-cost but potentially high-impact opportunity for the EU to translate strategic rhetoric into concrete geopolitical relevance, while complementing rather than duplicating NATO.

Ultimately, enlargement is no longer just about who enters and when. It is also about what sort of security and geopolitical role the EU wants to play in a world that is becoming more fragmented and less predictable.

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