

The (In)existence of a Portuguese Foreign Policy for the Arctic

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It is unacceptable how a response from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has made it impossible to create a national action framework for the Arctic, under the terms of Assembly of the Republic Resolution 76/2023 of 29 June.

The Arctic is today of such global importance — in terms of security, given the interests of various States in exploiting the region's natural resources, and in terms of the environment and climate at a planetary scale — that it demands the mobilisation of the international community as a whole (Azam & Iqbal, 2023).

Domestic political reflection on the Arctic in Portugal was largely triggered by advances in international science. The IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate (2019) highlighted the rapid retreat of the cryosphere, the loss of glacier mass, the decline in snow cover, the reduction of sea ice, and the warming of permafrost. Taken together, these developments confirm the process of Arctic amplification, whereby surface temperatures in the Arctic have increased at more than twice the rate of the global average, with particularly significant effects in the North-East Atlantic (IPCC, 2019). Building on this scientific and technical foundation, a series of parliamentary initiatives emerged from 2021 onwards, aiming to establish a political framework for Portugal's position on the Arctic.

The first milestone was Draft Resolution No. 919/XIV/2, tabled on 29 January 2021, which proposed the development of a national framework for action on the Arctic. The text recognised the region's growing geopolitical and economic relevance, highlighting the opening of new maritime routes resulting from ice melt, intensifying competition for energy and mineral resources, and increased military activity by Arctic States. It also emphasised the role of the Arctic Council, created in 1996 and expanded in 2013 with the admission of several Asian countries as Observers, signalling the region's broad strategic scope.

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For Portugal, the geostrategic position of the Azores reinforced the need to monitor these dynamics closely, both to ensure a safe and demilitarised Arctic and to anticipate potential changes in the relative importance of national ports. The 2021 draft centred on three guiding lines: the creation of a national framework for action on the Arctic; the strengthening of participation in the European Union's integrated policy for the Arctic; and consideration of a Portuguese application for Observer status in the Arctic Council.

With this initial political groundwork laid, the debate advanced two years later. On 5 May 2023, Draft Resolution No. 675/XV resumed and expanded this trajectory. Maintaining the same scientific and geopolitical basis, the document placed greater emphasis on the security dimension, elevating it to the same level as environmental, economic, and social concerns. It also noted that several non-Arctic European States — including Spain, Italy, and France — had, in the meantime, developed their own Arctic strategies, underlining the need for Portugal not to fall behind. In parallel, the draft drew attention to the scientific and technological potential of the region, referring to the Research and Innovation Agenda for Polar Science and Technology and to national interests in infrastructures dedicated to ocean and space research. Despite these updates, the three orientations defined in 2021 remained intact: the creation of a national framework for action; articulation with the EU integrated policy for the Arctic; and consideration of an application for Observer status in the Arctic Council.

The consolidation of this evolution occurred shortly afterwards. The process culminated in the approval of Assembly of the Republic Resolution No. 76/2023 on 7 June 2023, published on 29 June of the same year. This resolution formalised the position of the Portuguese Parliament and officially recommended that the Government define a national framework for action on the Arctic. The text explicitly integrated environmental, economic, social, and security dimensions, stressing the need to guide the national fleet, reinforce the fight against climate change, promote environmental protection, strengthen scientific research, and develop strategic infrastructures. It further reaffirmed the relevance of Portugal's participation in the European Union's integrated Arctic policy and the importance of assessing a potential application for Observer status in the Arctic Council, thereby completing a political cycle initiated in 2021 and updated in 2023.

Taken together, these initiatives reveal a coherent evolution in Portugal's strategic vision regarding the Arctic, grounded in robust scientific evidence and oriented towards European integration, maritime security, sustainable development, and the strengthening of the country's international presence. However, this legislative trajectory has collided with the position of the MFA, which blocked implementation of the Resolution. In its response to the Assembly of the Republic, the MFA stated:

Within the framework of the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic (OSPAR), Portugal has been defending and working on initiatives aimed at protecting the Arctic marine environment, including through collaboration with other relevant organisations, namely the Arctic Council and the International Maritime Organization (CPCP, 2024, p. 147).

Firstly, it should be noted that the MFA's argument is based on point 20 of the Cascais Ministerial Declaration:

We recognise the unique biodiversity of the Arctic, part of the OSPAR maritime area, and commit to protect the Arctic marine environment, including through collaboration with other relevant organisations, such as the Arctic Council and the International Maritime Organisation (2021, p. 4).

Secondly, the MFA reduces Portuguese action to the environmental dimension, downplaying the security, social, and economic dimensions that the Assembly of the Republic had explicitly incorporated into the Resolution. Thirdly, it suggests that Portugal collaborates directly with the Arctic Council, when in reality the country is not an Observer and participates only indirectly through OSPAR and the IMO — organisations with specific mandates that cannot substitute for a national foreign policy or dedicated diplomatic engagement within the Arctic Council.

By adopting this logic, the MFA confuses participation in multilateral organisations with the assertion of a national strategy. To claim that membership of OSPAR is sufficient and makes other steps unnecessary is to accept that third parties represent Portuguese interests in a rapidly changing region. This lack of strategic foresight becomes even clearer when compared with the approach of other non-Arctic States.

In a context in which the Arctic has become a central theme on the international agenda, such a stance results in a loss of political, economic, and scientific opportunities. Portugal's participation in bodies such as OSPAR and the IMO should, in fact, reinforce the legitimacy of a national Arctic strategy, not serve as an argument for inaction.

The experience of other non-Arctic States clearly illustrates this difference. Several European countries — including Italy and Switzerland, the latter a landlocked State — have secured Observer status in the Arctic Council, recognising that the region is relevant not only in environmental terms but also in economic, technological, and geopolitical ones. France, Germany, and Spain have invested in polar research and diplomatic presence, securing a more visible role in international debate on the Arctic's future (Arctic Council, n.d.; Westgaard, 2025).

Despite this lack of political ambition, Portugal possesses resources that would allow it to adopt a far more assertive position. In research, “Portugal has a long history of research in the Arctic, through research centres distributed across the country and in scientific areas ranging from the social sciences to the cryospheric sciences. [...] Since 2017, Portugal has, for the first time, led an international project implemented across the Arctic — T-MOSAiC, Terrestrial Multidisciplinary Distributed Observatories for the Study of Arctic Connections” (FCT, 2021a, p. 2).

The FCT Polar Programme, created in 2011 and reorganised in 2016, coordinates and supports Portuguese scientific research in the Arctic and Antarctic, promotes annual campaigns, strengthens national and international collaboration, and ensures compliance with obligations arising from treaties and scientific bodies such as SCAR, IASC, and the European Polar Board (FCT, 2025).

This recognition is further reflected in international events and appointments. In 2021, Portugal hosted the Arctic Science Summit Week (ASSW 2021), under the theme “The Arctic: Regional Changes, Global Impacts” (ASSW, 2021; FCT, 2021b).

In 2022, Professor João Canário, of Instituto Superior Técnico, was elected Vice-President of the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC), representing an important recognition of Portuguese polar science, particularly in the Arctic domain (Técnico Lisboa, 2022; FCT, 2023).

These elements demonstrate that Portugal has the scientific critical mass necessary to sustain a more ambitious Arctic foreign policy.

Beyond research, Portugal has demonstrated leadership in international environmental processes. Notably, the country played a decisive role in creating the Emission Control Area for sulphur oxides (SO_x) and nitrogen oxides (NO_x) (ECA) in the North-East Atlantic (AtIECA). The process began at an IMO meeting in 2022, convened by Portugal, to discuss establishing AtlECA to connect the ECAs of the Baltic Sea, North Sea, and English Channel with the new SO_x ECA in the Mediterranean. Studies underpinning the submission were prepared by the International Council on Clean Transportation (ICCT) and the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Porto (FEUP). Under Portugal's coordination, the process involved Spain, France, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Denmark–Greenland–Faroe Islands, and Iceland. The proposal was submitted to the IMO in 2024 (IMO, 2024) and approved in April 2025 (IMO, 2025, p. 59).

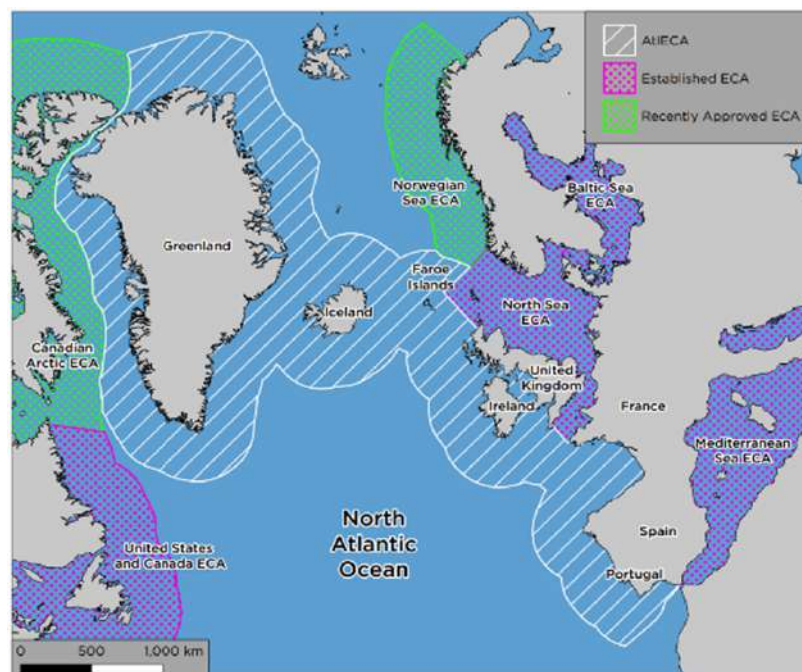


Figure 1. North-East Atlantic Emission Control Area alongside the other established ECAs. Source: IMO, 2024

According to Part XII of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), “States have the obligation to protect and preserve the marine environment” (United Nations, 1982, p. 100). Consequently, the Portuguese State has a duty to contribute to the protection and preservation of the Arctic Ocean.

Considering the presence of Portuguese-flagged vessels operating in Arctic waters, and bearing in mind international obligations to protect this particularly vulnerable ecosystem, Portugal should develop a Strategy for Portuguese-Flagged Vessels in the Arctic Ocean — a strategy specifically designed for such operations.

According to Cardoso (2025), “this strategy must apply to all ship types and to the entire geographic region of the Arctic — and not only to the restricted definition of Arctic waters used by the IMO — and must include at least:

- The immediate prohibition of the use and carriage for use of heavy fuel oil (HFO);

- The immediate prohibition of exhaust gas cleaning systems (scrubbers);
- The prevention of the operation in Arctic waters of ships that are 20 or more years old;
- The obligation for any company or ship to inform the Portuguese maritime administration directly, prior to departure from the port of origin and with documentary evidence, that it complies with these prohibitions;
- The non-granting of exemptions based on the fuel tank design rules laid down in Regulation 12A of Annex I of MARPOL or in the Polar Code;
- The removal from the Portuguese registers of ships that fail to comply with the prohibitions when such non-compliance is identified in Port State Control (PSC) or flag State inspections.”

These requirements further reinforce the relevance of the 2023 Resolution, demonstrating that Portuguese action could — and should — have a broader and more coherent scope.

Nothing presented here prevents the implementation of the content of the 2023 Resolution; on the contrary, it renders it even more pertinent. As a country with a vast maritime area in the Atlantic, Portugal has a direct interest in monitoring the evolution of Arctic maritime routes.

What only a few years ago seemed a remote possibility — the viability of alternative routes to the Suez Canal — is now accelerating, as illustrated by the growing number of vessels operating in the region (Westgaard, 2025).

In this context, it is legitimate to ask to what extent national port authorities have already considered the economic and social consequences that may arise from a possible partial shift of maritime traffic to Arctic routes.

The Jean Monnet OCEANID+ Centre of Excellence on “Sustainable Blue Europe” organised, in January 2025, the workshop “European Non-Arctic States Observers of the Arctic Council: Why?”, gathering experts and representatives from six non-Arctic States precisely to discuss the role of Observers in the Arctic Council and the need to better understand regional dynamics and their global relevance. Initiatives such as this reinforce the impression that other countries are seeking to secure a place in shaping the Arctic’s future, while Portugal risks falling behind in matters of Arctic governance.

The international context heightens this urgency. The new Donald Trump administration in the United States has insisted that European allies assume greater responsibility for their own security and international action, reducing their dependence on Washington (Martin & Sinkkonen, 2025). Simultaneously, statements by European leaders such as Emmanuel Macron have stressed that both Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the United States’ strategic reorientation require Europe to strengthen its autonomy and strategic independence (Rose & Melander, 2024). In this context, European States are under pressure to reinforce their political, diplomatic, and security presence in the North, while also ensuring environmental protection, conservation of the Arctic, and the safeguarding of their maritime jurisdiction and sovereignty (Westgaard, 2025).

In summary, Assembly of the Republic Resolution No. 76/2023 proposes the creation of a framework for action that extends far beyond the mere protection of the Arctic marine environment. Its multidimensional approach would allow Portugal to assert itself in geopolitical,

environmental, social, and economic terms, in line with its Atlantic interests and the evolution of European policy towards the North.

The MFA's response, by failing to implement the parliamentary recommendations, neutralised the effects of this legislative initiative and left the country on the sidelines of decision-making processes that may directly affect its maritime and economic interests.

In March 2025, the tabling of a new parliamentary initiative — Draft Resolution No. 727/XVI/1 — on the Arctic shows that the issue remains unresolved and that the perception of a strategic gap in Portuguese foreign policy persists. It argues that Portugal has direct interests in following developments in the region — from fisheries and the implications for commercial routes to the protection of its Exclusive Economic Zone and the geostrategic significance of the North Atlantic and the Azores. It advocates a more active role for Portugal and proposes that the country put forward an application to the Arctic Council. The outcome of this process remains pending.

The absence of a national foreign policy for the Arctic represents a serious failure in environmental, security, economic, and social terms.

Portugal cannot remain indifferent to Arctic issues, nor to their repercussions for the Atlantic and for its own area of responsibility.

Portugal must explicitly define its obligations and strategic vision for the Arctic — because what happens in the Arctic does not remain in the Arctic.

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