

Report of the Special Representative for the Arctic and High North
Rt. Hon. Mark Pritchard
2025 - 2026

The Arctic and High North: A Region of Growing Strategic Importance

Introduction

Over the past decade, the Arctic and High North have moved from the margins of international politics to the centre of discussions on security, climate change, economic resilience, and strategic competition. Developments that were once viewed primarily through an environmental lens now have clear geopolitical, economic, and societal dimensions. Recent assessments from governments, international organisations, and policy institutes increasingly describe the Arctic as a region where climate change and strategic competition are reinforcing one another, creating both new opportunities and new risks.¹

This transformation is being driven by several interconnected trends. Climate change is reshaping the physical environment of the Arctic at an unprecedented pace. Russia's war against Ukraine has altered the security landscape across Northern Europe. Growing interest in Arctic shipping routes, critical minerals, and strategic infrastructure has attracted increased attention from both Arctic and non-Arctic actors. Meanwhile, Arctic communities continue to face significant challenges related to infrastructure, connectivity, economic development, and adaptation to environmental change.

The Arctic should therefore not be viewed solely as a security theatre, nor solely as an environmental concern. Rather, it is a region where security, sustainability, and human development have become increasingly intertwined. This perspective is reflected in the Kingdom of Denmark's Arctic Council Chairship Programme for 2025–2027, which places equal emphasis on climate change, Indigenous communities, sustainable development, and biodiversity.²

¹ [Kingdom of Denmark Chairship program](#); [The Geopolitics of a Changing Arctic](#); [How Does the Climate Crisis Threaten the Arctic?](#)

² [Kingdom of Denmark Chairship program](#).

Activities of the Special Representative in the Reporting Period (July 2025 - July 2026)

Engagements in Sweden and Denmark

During the reporting period, I continued my engagement with key Arctic stakeholders through visits to Sweden and Denmark. These discussions provided valuable opportunities to exchange views with policymakers, researchers, and security experts on the rapidly evolving challenges facing the Arctic and High North, including climate change, geopolitical competition, regional security, and the resilience of Arctic and Indigenous communities.

In Sweden, during a visit to Stockholm in October 2025, I met with representatives of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, members of the Riksdag, the Swedish Delegation to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, and leading research institutions.³ Discussions focused on the impacts of climate change on Arctic societies, environmental, economic and security challenges in the region, and Sweden's growing role in Arctic research and governance, including its forthcoming Chairmanship of the Arctic Council for 2027–2029. Particular emphasis was placed on ensuring that Arctic issues are effectively integrated into policymaking and international co-operation.

In April 2026, I visited Copenhagen for meetings with senior leadership and researchers from the Royal Danish Defence College and the Danish Institute for International Studies.⁴ Discussions focused on Arctic security developments, NATO's role in the region, and the strategic importance of Greenland within the broader Arctic context. Participants highlighted the importance of maintaining situational awareness, strengthening co-operation among allies, and responding to emerging challenges in a balanced and responsible manner. We also discussed the implications of rapid environmental change in the Arctic, including the effects on sea ice, coastal communities, infrastructure, and Indigenous populations. These exchanges reinforced the importance of ensuring that Arctic considerations are fully reflected in wider security, environmental, and policy discussions.

³

<https://www.oscepa.org/en/news-a-media/press-releases/2025/in-sweden-osce-pa-special-representative-pritchard-explores-challenges-facing-arctic-and-high-north>.

⁴

<https://www.oscepa.org/en/news-a-media/news-from-copenhagen/2026/5509-news-from-copenhagen-1051/file>.

A Changing Security Environment

The most significant geopolitical development affecting the Arctic remains the deterioration of relations between Russia and Western countries following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Although the Arctic has largely remained insulated from direct confrontation, it can no longer be separated from wider geopolitical dynamics. Russia continues to maintain substantial military capabilities across its Arctic territories, including assets associated with its nuclear deterrent and strategic maritime operations. It also continues to regard the Arctic as central to its long-term economic and security interests.⁵

The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has fundamentally changed the security architecture of Northern Europe. The Alliance now encompasses almost all of the European Arctic, creating new opportunities for cooperation, planning, and interoperability. It also underscores the growing importance of the High North in NATO's strategic thinking.

Recent assessments by NATO have highlighted the increasing importance of Arctic maritime routes, critical infrastructure, and domain awareness capabilities in the region. These developments reinforce the need for continued investment in resilience, surveillance, and cooperation among Arctic allies.⁶

At the same time, policymakers should avoid reducing the Arctic exclusively to a military issue. Preserving predictability, transparency, and stability remains essential to preventing misunderstandings and unintended escalation in a region where strategic interests increasingly overlap.

Climate Change Remains the Defining Long-Term Challenge

While security concerns have understandably attracted greater attention in recent years, climate change remains one of the most significant forces shaping the Arctic's future.

The Arctic continues to warm significantly faster than the global average. The consequences are visible throughout the region: shrinking sea ice, thawing permafrost, coastal erosion, changing ecosystems, and growing pressures on communities and infrastructure.

⁵ [Russian military thinking about the Baltic Sea and the Arctic.](#)

⁶ <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/arctic-security>.

Recent observations underscore the scale of the challenge. Recent findings indicate that Arctic sea ice reached historically low levels in recent years⁷, and the effects extend far beyond environmental concerns. Roads, airports, housing, telecommunications infrastructure, and energy systems throughout the Arctic were built for environmental conditions that are rapidly changing. As a result, climate adaptation has become a matter of economic resilience and public security as much as environmental protection.

The Arctic Council and its Working Groups continue to warn that climate impacts are accelerating and that adaptation measures must become a greater policy priority.⁸ For Parliamentarians, this means ensuring that Arctic policy remains grounded in science and that investments in resilience keep pace with the speed of environmental change.

One recurring observation in my discussions with Arctic stakeholders is that climate change is no longer viewed as a future challenge. It is already affecting livelihoods, infrastructure, and governance decisions today. The question is no longer whether Arctic communities will need to adapt, but whether governments can support adaptation quickly enough.

Greenland's Role in the Region

Recent U.S. statements regarding Greenland have renewed international attention on the island's strategic importance in the Arctic. While these discussions have been driven by security concerns, critical mineral resources, and the growing geopolitical significance of the Arctic, they have also prompted a strong and consistent response from Denmark, Greenland, and European partners.⁹

A central theme of these responses has been the reaffirmation of international law, territorial integrity, and the principle of self-determination. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen and Greenlandic leaders have repeatedly stressed that Greenland is not for sale and that decisions regarding its future must be made by the Greenlandic people themselves.¹⁰

⁷ <https://science.nasa.gov/earth/arctic-winter-sea-ice-2026/>.

⁸ <https://arctic-council.org/explore/topics/climate/>.

⁹

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20260113IPR32390/ep-group-leaders-unequivocally-support-greenland-and-denmark;>

[https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/Geopolitical%20Significance%20of%20Greenland%20Explainer.pdf;](https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/Geopolitical%20Significance%20of%20Greenland%20Explainer.pdf)

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/denmark-greenland-face-vance-high-stakes-meeting-2026-01-14/>.

¹⁰

[https://www.politico.eu/article/greenland-not-for-sale-danish-pm-mette-frederiksen-us-donald-trump-jr/;](https://www.politico.eu/article/greenland-not-for-sale-danish-pm-mette-frederiksen-us-donald-trump-jr/)
<https://www.euronews.com/2026/01/05/greenland-prime-minister-says-enough-after-latest-trump-threat>.

Debates concerning Greenland have highlighted the importance of respecting international law and the principle of self-determination. As Greenland's strategic significance grows, it is essential that discussions about the island's future remain grounded in the established legal framework governing the Kingdom of Denmark and Greenland's autonomous status. Any decision regarding Greenland's constitutional future must be made by the Greenlandic people themselves and in accordance with democratic processes and international law.

At a time of increasing geopolitical competition, Arctic states and partners should continue to reaffirm that strategic interests, economic opportunities, and security concerns must be pursued in a manner consistent with international law, including the principles of self-determination, peaceful cooperation, and respect for existing legal arrangements.

Given Greenland's growing importance in discussion on Arctic governance and security, I intend to undertake a visit to Nuuk in the autumn of 2026.

The purpose of the visit will be to engage directly with a broad range of Arctic interlocutors, including representatives of the Government of Greenland, Members of Parliament, Indigenous representatives, researchers, civil society organisations, and other relevant stakeholders. Particular attention will be devoted to understanding local perspectives on current geopolitical developments, economic opportunities, climate change, and the future governance of the Arctic. One parliamentary representative from each Arctic state will be invited to join this visit. I look forward to reporting back to the Assembly on the findings and observations arising from the visit.

China's Arctic Ambitions

China's growing interest in Arctic affairs is an issue that deserves continued attention.

Although China is not an Arctic state, it has consistently described itself as a "near-Arctic state" and continues to pursue scientific, economic, technological, and diplomatic engagement across the region. While some earlier investment initiatives have slowed or encountered political resistance, Chinese interests have evolved rather than disappeared.

Beijing continues to view the Arctic as strategically important for critical minerals, telecommunications infrastructure, satellite capabilities, scientific cooperation, and long-term shipping opportunities.¹¹

11

<https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/The-Arctic-Institute-China-Series-2025.pdf>.

Cooperation between China and Russia in Arctic-related sectors also remains an important factor shaping the region's future.¹²

Shipping, Infrastructure, and Connectivity

Environmental change is gradually increasing maritime activity throughout the Arctic.

While predictions of a rapid transformation of global trade routes have often been exaggerated, Arctic shipping continues to grow. Data published by the Arctic Council Working Group on the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME) showed that vessel traffic in Arctic waters reached record levels in 2025, with the number of unique ships operating in the region approximately 40 per cent higher than in 2013.¹³

Growing tourism, cruise activity, and commercial shipping are increasing demands on Arctic search and rescue systems. There is a need for enhanced international cooperation in this area, and rising maritime traffic requires corresponding investments in emergency response capabilities and infrastructure.

Search and rescue capabilities, emergency response mechanisms, navigational support, and environmental protection systems must evolve alongside growing activity. Arctic communities often remain far from major infrastructure hubs, making resilience and preparedness particularly important.

Protecting Critical Infrastructure

Recent years have also demonstrated the growing importance of critical infrastructure protection in the Arctic.

The region's geography and harsh environmental conditions make communications networks, satellite systems, ports, undersea cables, and energy infrastructure especially important. At the same time, these systems may also be vulnerable to disruption, accidents, cyber incidents, or deliberate interference.¹⁴

Protecting critical infrastructure should therefore become a central element of Arctic resilience strategies. Investment in redundancy, cybersecurity, and infrastructure modernisation will be essential in the years ahead.

Preserving Cooperation in a Period of Tension

¹² <https://www.djis.dk/en/research/china-and-russia-challenge-the-arctic-order>.

¹³ <https://arctic-council.org/news/increase-in-arctic-shipping/>.

¹⁴ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/addressing-arctic-vulnerabilities>.

Despite geopolitical tensions, one of the more encouraging developments of the past year has been the continued functioning of Arctic governance institutions.

The transfer of the Arctic Council chairship from Norway to Denmark in 2025 demonstrated a shared commitment among Arctic states and Indigenous Permanent Participants to maintain cooperation on issues of common concern. The Danish chairship programme places particular emphasis on Indigenous participation, sustainable development, and the resilience of Arctic communities.¹⁵

The Arctic Council cannot resolve geopolitical disputes. Nevertheless, it remains one of the most important forums for scientific cooperation, environmental monitoring, and policy coordination in the region.

A recurring theme in discussions across the Arctic is that cooperation remains necessary even when broader political relations are strained. Search and rescue, environmental protection, scientific research, and community resilience are issues that transcend national boundaries.

Maintaining practical cooperation where possible serves the interests of all Arctic stakeholders and contributes to long-term stability.

The Contribution of Parliamentary Diplomacy

At a time when traditional diplomatic channels face increasing constraints, parliamentary diplomacy can play a particularly valuable role.

Parliamentarians often possess greater flexibility to engage across political divides and to maintain dialogue on issues of shared concern. Parliamentary assemblies can facilitate exchanges of experience, support confidence-building, and ensure that Arctic policy remains informed by democratic oversight and public accountability.

Parliamentary diplomacy is especially important because it provides a bridge between strategic debates and the concerns of Arctic residents. It can elevate discussions on infrastructure, connectivity, education, healthcare, Indigenous participation, and community resilience alongside broader geopolitical issues.

Moreover, parliamentary networks can help sustain relationships during periods when formal diplomatic engagement becomes more difficult. They can identify emerging

¹⁵ https://arctic-council.org/site/assets/files/14961/kod_chairship_program-compressed.pdf.

challenges, encourage cooperation on practical issues, and contribute to a long-term vision of the Arctic as a region characterised by stability and responsible governance.

In my view, this is an area where parliamentary assemblies can make a distinct contribution. While they cannot replace state-to-state diplomacy, they can preserve dialogue, build trust, and ensure that Arctic issues remain on the political agenda.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Arctic and High North continue to undergo profound change. Climate change, geopolitical competition, economic development, and technological transformation are increasingly interconnected, creating both opportunities and challenges for Arctic communities and states alike.

Against this backdrop, several priorities require continued attention from governments, parliamentarians, and other Arctic stakeholders:

- Continue to support efforts aimed at preserving peace, stability, and predictability in the Arctic. While security concerns have become more prominent in recent years, maintaining channels of dialogue and reducing the risk of misunderstanding remain important objectives.
- Climate change should remain at the centre of Arctic policy discussions. Parliamentarians should support measures that strengthen climate adaptation, protect vulnerable communities, and enhance the resilience of critical infrastructure throughout the region.
- Support the meaningful participation of Indigenous communities: Indigenous Peoples have long played a central role in Arctic governance and possess invaluable knowledge and expertise regarding the region. Policymakers should continue to promote the meaningful participation of Indigenous representatives in decision making processes and ensure that Arctic policies are developed in partnership with the communities most directly affected by them.
- Continue to emphasise respect for international law, sovereignty, and the principle of self-determination in the Arctic. As international attention increasingly focuses on Greenland and other strategically important parts of the region, it is essential that all engagement remains firmly grounded in the rules-based international order and respect for democratic processes.
- Encourage continued investment in Arctic connectivity and infrastructure. Reliable transportation links, telecommunications networks, satellite services,

and emergency response capabilities are essential for economic development, public services, and regional security.

- Governments should strengthen cooperation on maritime safety and search and rescue capabilities. As shipping and tourism continue to increase, ensuring adequate preparedness and response capacity across the Arctic will become increasingly important.
- The protection of critical infrastructure should remain a priority. Particular attention should be paid to the resilience of communications networks, subsea cables, ports, and energy infrastructure, which are becoming increasingly important for both economic activity and security.
- Finally, parliamentary engagement can help sustain dialogue, strengthen cooperation, and ensure that Arctic perspectives remain part of broader international discussions.

In my capacity as Special Representative for the Arctic and High North, I intend to continue monitoring these developments closely and look forward to further engagement with Arctic stakeholders, including during the planned visit to Greenland in the autumn of 2026.

DISCLAIMER: The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly makes no claims nor warranties of any kind, expressed or implied, about the completeness and reliability of this report and the data contained in it.