

THE POLAR COMPASS: TÜRKİYE'S FOREIGN POLICY AND ARCTIC OBSERVER STATUS

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Abstract: *The Arctic region has become an increasingly significant arena in international politics due to its energy potential, emerging maritime trade routes, and environmental vulnerability. As melting ice opens new access points, both Arctic and non-Arctic states have intensified their involvement in the region, leading to a growing number of political, economic, and environmental interactions. This transformation has turned the Arctic into a strategically contested area attracting global actors seeking influence, resources, and connectivity. In this evolving context, Türkiye has gradually established a coherent Arctic policy, despite being a non-littoral state. Its accession to the Svalbard Treaty and application for observer status in the Arctic Council mark critical steps in aligning with regional legal and institutional frameworks. This article examines Türkiye's developing engagement with the Arctic and evaluates its alignment with the normative principles of Arctic governance. It argues that Türkiye's approach is shaped by a commitment to scientific contribution, environmental stewardship, and international cooperation, offering a constructive model for non-Arctic participation in the region's multilateral architecture.*

Keywords: Arctic, Türkiye's Foreign Policy, Observer Status, Science Diplomacy.

Rezumat: *Busola polară: politica externă a Turciei și statutul de observator în Arctica. Regiunea arctică a devenit o arenă din ce în ce mai importantă în politica internațională datorită potențialului său energetic, noilor rute maritime comerciale emergente și vulnerabilității de mediu. Pe măsură ce topirea gheții deschide noi puncte de acces, atât statele arctice, cât și cele non-arctice și-au intensificat implicarea în regiune, fapt ce a dus la creșterea interacțiunilor politice, economice și de mediu. Arctica s-a transformat într-o zonă*

strategică disputată, care atrage atenția actorilor globali ce caută influență, resurse și conectivitate. În acest context fluid, Turcia și-a conturat treptat o politică arctică coerentă, în ciuda faptului că nu este un stat riveran. Aderarea sa la Tratatul de la Svalbard și solicitarea statutului de observator în Consiliul Arctic marchează pași critici în alinierea la cadrele juridice și instituționale regionale. Articolul examinează implicarea în curs de dezvoltare a Turciei în Arctica și evaluează conformitatea sa cu principiile normative ale guvernantei zonei. Abordarea Turciei este modelată de un angajament față de contribuția științifică, protecția mediului și cooperarea internațională, oferind un model constructiv pentru participarea statelor non-arctice în arhitectura multilaterală a regiunii.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early twenty-first century, the Arctic region has shifted from a peripheral environmental periphery of the international system into a domain of growing political and economic salience. Accelerated glacier retreat induced by global warming has facilitated access to extensive energy reserves and emergent maritime corridors.¹ These developments have attracted the sustained attention of both Arctic littoral states and non-Arctic actors seeking to consolidate influence over the region's evolving geopolitical configuration. The Arctic, in this sense, emerges not only as a polar geography undergoing environmental transformation but also as a contested arena in which states pursue borders, sovereignty, and control over strategic resources². This transformation has also redefined the region's institutional structures. The Arctic Council, established in 1996, was designed as a multilateral forum with the stated objectives of ensuring environmental sustainability, improving the living conditions of Indigenous communities, and promoting regional coordination.³ Yet shifts in the security landscape have increasingly constrained its operational capacity. Following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, and in response to Russia's rotating chairmanship, the other seven permanent members suspended their participation in the Council's meetings, rendering the institution largely inoperative. The subsequent accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO has further reshaped the Arctic's security architecture, crystallising a dual-

¹ Oleg Aleksandrov, *Russia's Arctic Policy: Offence vs. Defense*, in "Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali", 2017, Vol. 84, No.11, p. 97.

² Leif Christian Jensen, *International Relations in the Arctic: Norway and the Struggle for Power in the New North*, London, Cambridge University Press, 2016.

³ Maria Kobzeva, *Strategic Partnership Setting For Sino-Russian Cooperation in Arctic Shipping*, in "The Polar Journal", 2020, Vol. 10, No.2, p. 336.

bloc order consisting of an Arctic-NATO alignment on one side and an Arctic-Eurasian configuration on the other.⁴ This emerging structure undermines the Council's founding principle of consensus and inclusivity, raising the critical question of whether institutionalised cooperation can endure in an environment increasingly conditioned by military alignments. The evolution of these dynamics demonstrates that state-centric geopolitical calculations are gradually displacing the cooperative ethos that historically underpinned Arctic governance.

In this context, the Arctic Council's observer status constitutes an essential institutional mechanism that enables non-coastal states to participate meaningfully and effectively, albeit with limited involvement in its governance structure.⁵ Despite the Arctic region's lack of a direct coastline, the Republic of Türkiye has initiated a series of scientific, diplomatic, and legal initiatives in recent years to obtain observer status. Following its initial application in 2015, Türkiye demonstrated its concrete commitment to addressing Arctic issues through initiatives such as the National Arctic Scientific Research Expeditions (TASE), launched under the leadership of TÜBİTAK MAM, the process of becoming a party to the Svalbard Treaty, and the establishment of the National Polar Science Program.⁶ The fundamental hypothesis of this study is that Türkiye's pursuit of observer status in the Arctic Council is not only a political goal but also a structural foreign policy strategy.⁷ Türkiye's Arctic policy appears largely compatible with the Council's institutional criteria. This situation indicates that Türkiye's request for observer status must be evaluated at both the formal and substantive levels. Türkiye's approach is predicated on a critical interrogation of the prevailing logic of intensifying power politics in the region. This alternative framework, grounded in scientific principles and institutional governance mechanisms, contrasts competitive and interest-driven policies in the area with a more inclusive, constructive, and conflict-free approach to governance.

⁴ Ezgi Şahin, Merve S. Özel Özcan, *Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi Bağlamında Artan Arktik Rekabeti ve Askeri Güvenlik* [Increasing Arctic Competition and Military Security in the Context of the Regional Security Complex], in "Paradigma: İktisadi ve İdari Araştırmalar Dergisi", Vol. 13, Special Issue, 2024, p. 103.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ TÜBİTAK, *Türkiye'nin Arktik Yol Haritası: Bilim, Diplomasi ve Güvenlik Perspektifinden Bir Değerlendirme* [TÜBİTAK, Turkey's Arctic Roadmap: An Assessment from the Perspective of Science, Diplomacy and Security], Ankara, TÜBİTAK, 2023.

⁷ 5. Ulusal Arktik Bilimsel Araştırma Seferi (TASE V) Bilgilendirme Raporu [5. National Arctic Scientific Research Expedition (TASE V) Information Report], in <https://kare.mam.tubitak.gov.tr> (Accessed on 25.07.2025).

In this context, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

- What contributions do Türkiye's diplomatic and scientific initiatives toward obtaining observer status in the Arctic Council offer in terms of its potential to acquire such status?
- How does Türkiye's application for observer status differ from the traditional great power rivalry in the Arctic region?
- Compared to other non-Arctic observer states, what typological positioning does Türkiye's Arctic approach represent?
- How does Türkiye's pursuit of observer status align with its broader foreign policy principles of multilateralism and environmental governance?

The first section of the study examines the motivations of states in developing policies toward the Arctic, focusing on strategic factors such as energy resources and maritime transport routes. The second section discusses the institutional functioning of the Arctic Council and the geopolitical structure of the Arctic states. The third section examines Türkiye's Arctic policies within the framework of science diplomacy. In this context, the authors classify the approaches of states with observer status and evaluate which groups Türkiye aligns with.

THE GEOPOLITICAL AND GEOSTRATEGIC STRUCTURE OF THE ARCTIC REGION

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Arctic has transformed an environmental periphery of the international system into a geopolitical centre of gravity.⁸ The region's distinctive spatial character results from a combination of its geographical location, resource management, and growing geostrategic importance. The absence of a binding international agreement defining the Arctic's boundaries engenders legal ambiguity regarding the region. This has led to the adoption of a geographical definition primarily based on physical characteristics and academic approaches. The region is generally accepted as the area north of the Arctic Circle, encompassing a geography that is approximately one-third land and two-thirds ocean, and largely covered by ice. As demonstrated in Map 1, its mathematical location commences at approximately 66° 33' 44" parallel.⁹

⁸ Andreas Osthagen, Andy Raspotnik, *Partners or Rivals? Norway and the European Union in the High North*, in Nengye Liu, Elizabeth A. Kirk, Tore Henriksen (eds.), *The European Union and the Arctic*, Leiden, Brill Nijhoff, 2017, p. 98.

⁹ Donald R. Rothwell, *The Arctic in International Affairs: Time for a New Regime?* "The Brown Journal of World Affairs", 2018, Vol. 15, No. 11, p. 243.

Climate change is emerging as the primary driver of this transformation, reshaping both the region's ecological foundations and its geopolitical significance.¹⁰ The retreat of glaciers and the opening of new maritime and energy corridors have significantly increased the Arctic's strategic value. The Arctic is the fastest-warming region on the planet, with temperatures rising approximately three times as fast as in other areas. Scientific projections indicate that the Arctic Ocean could become completely ice-free in summer before 2050, and that this could become a permanent condition by the end of the century.¹¹ This climatic transformation has a two-fold impact. It creates structural risks that undermine ecological stability and generates new incentives that increase strategic competition. The tension between environmental conservation and strategic exploitation is exacerbated by the simultaneous presence of these two dynamics, creating a governance dilemma that existing Arctic institutions are unable to overcome.

The Arctic's underground resource potential is not only of economic value but also forms the central axis of geopolitical competition between major powers.¹² Compared with Russia and the United States, which prioritise military presence and resource dominance, rising actors such as China view accessibility as part of long-term commercial integration through initiatives such as the "Polar Silk Road." Therefore, the Arctic's increasing accessibility has become the intersection of two different discourses: On one hand, security-based strategic calculations, and on the other, economic integration goals.¹³

Two key motivations stand out in the development of foreign policy toward the Arctic: energy resources and maritime transport routes. As global fossil fuel reserves dwindle, the retreat of Arctic ice has led to two important outcomes. First, it has facilitated transportation; second, it has enabled the discovery of new hydrocarbon deposits and various valuable minerals. Energy resources are now seen not only as an economic commodity but also as a fundamental element of global strategic competition. However, securing energy resources limits opportunities for international cooperation and creates mistrust among Arctic states.

It is estimated¹⁴ that the Arctic holds approximately 90 billion barrels of oil, 47 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, and 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids.

¹⁰ Jed O. Kaplan, Mark New, *Arctic Climate Change with a 2°C Global Warming: Timing, Climate Patterns and Vegetation Change*, in "Climatic Change", 2006, Vol. 79, p. 214.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Ilea Mihai Razvan, *The Evolution of the International System in the Context of Climatic Changes in the Arctic*, in "Strategic Impact", 2020, Vol. 75, No. 2, p. 90.

¹³ Ezgi Şahin, Merve S. Özel Özcan, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

¹⁴ Ilea Mihai Razvan, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

The region also hosts critical mineral resources, including gold, diamonds, nickel, and rare earth elements. Although it covers only 6% of the world’s surface, the Arctic’s significant hydrocarbon potential (Table 1) places it in a unique position for global energy security. Non-Arctic actors can participate in the process, albeit to a limited extent, through Observer Member status in the Arctic Council.

Table 1: Percentages of Arctic Countries’ Proven Oil and Natural Gas Reserves in the Region.

Arctic Countries	Natural Gas	Oil
Russia	%70	%41
USA (Alaska)	%14	%28
Denmark	%8	%18
Canada	%4	%8
Norway	%4	%4

Source: Authors’ calculations.

Nowadays, disputes over the ownership, allocation, and use of Arctic resources have strongly intensified. This competition highlights the tension between the principle of “common heritage of humankind,” often invoked in global environmental governance, and the sovereignty-based claims of Arctic coastal states.

A further implication of the region’s physical transformation is visible in maritime transport. Accelerated glacial melt has made Arctic Sea routes increasingly navigable. In particular, the Northwest Passage and the Northern Sea Route have emerged as key transcontinental shipping corridors.¹⁵ These routes offer substantially shorter, more cost-effective alternatives to traditional maritime passages such as the Suez and Panama Canals, thereby altering the geography of global trade.¹⁶

The Northern Sea Route is increasingly emerging as a strategic alternative to the Suez Canal, while the Northwest Passage is generally considered a potential alternative to the Panama Canal. The newly emerging Arctic corridors have been identified as a key factor in increasing the region’s geopolitical importance during the period known as the “corridor wars”.¹⁷ The ongoing instability in the Middle

¹⁵ Donald R. Rothwell, *The Arctic in International Affairs: Time for a New Regime?*, in “The Brown Journal of World Affairs”, 2008, Vol. 15, No. 11, p. 242.

¹⁶ *Arctic Portal, UNCLOS Governance*, in <https://arcticportal.org/shipping-portlet/governance/unclos> (Accessed on 08.01.2024).

¹⁷ *U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit, Arctic Development and Transport*, in

East has sparked increased interest in the Arctic as a potential route for new global trade routes and cost-effective transit alternatives. While the Trans-Arctic Passage occupies a central position in the Arctic Ocean, it remains less viable due to seasonal fluctuations and environmental constraints. Because the Arctic has significant strategic potential, its successful realisation depends on coordinated international investment, advanced logistics planning, and long-term research and development.

THE ARCTIC COUNCIL AND ITS HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Despite the common perception of the Arctic as an uninhabitable area, characterised by extreme climatic conditions, it is home to millions of people, particularly in its northern regions. The region's estimated population is between 4 and 10 million people. Eight sovereign states are recognised as Arctic states. Russia, the United States, Denmark, Norway and Canada all have direct coastlines along the Arctic Ocean and are therefore often collectively referred to in academic literature as the "Arctic Five".¹⁸ These states, which benefit from maritime access, assert various rights and national interests over the region's marine resources and shipping routes. Conversely, Sweden, Finland and Iceland do not have coastlines on the Arctic Ocean. However, due to their land holdings within the Arctic Circle, they are classified as Arctic states in international classification.¹⁹

Apart from its geographical location, the Arctic has become a region of strategic importance in international politics since the end of World War II.²⁰ The region's strategic importance persisted throughout the Cold War. In the context of the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Arctic emerged as the most suitable route for intercontinental ballistic missiles. This strategic location made the region a vital corridor for both strategic transit and offensive operations within the bipolar international order. In this context, both the Soviet Union and the United States increased their military activities in the Arctic. These developments during the Cold War heightened security concerns

<https://toolkit.climate.gov/regions/alaska-and-arctic/arctic-development-and-transport> (Accessed on 19.05.2025).

¹⁸ *Arctic Council, Member States*, in <https://arctic-council.org/about/states/> (Accessed on 08.01.2024).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Elif Önal-Kılıçbeyli, Inga Sochneva, Oleg Sochneva, *Russia's Arctic Policy: Economic Development, Regional Priorities, Territorial Sea*, in "International Journal of Politics & Security" (IJPS), Vol. 3, No. 1 (Arktik Special Issue, April 2021) p. 234.

and elevated the Arctic's geopolitical importance, making it the focal point of strategic competition.²¹

Although the security-focused perception inherited from the Cold War era continues to shape the Arctic's geopolitical framework, new governance mechanisms have emerged since the mid-1990s to ensure regional stability and institutionalise multilateral cooperation. In this context, the Arctic Council was established with the Ottawa Declaration signed in 1996 by Russia, the United States, Denmark, Canada, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.²² The Council has been established as a high-level intergovernmental forum to prevent conflict and promote cooperation in the Arctic. Its primary objectives include fostering regional cooperation, safeguarding the environment, promoting sustainable development, enhancing coordination among Arctic states, and safeguarding the cultural heritage of indigenous communities. The founding declaration clearly states that the Council has no authority over military or defence-related issues. The eight signatory states serve as permanent members of the Council.²³

Within the Arctic Council, six organisations representing indigenous peoples in the Arctic have permanent participant status. These include the Inuit Circumpolar Council, the Saami Council, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, the Aleut International Association, the Arctic Athabaskan Council, and the Gwich'in Council International. These organisations have the right to participate in decision-making processes and provide advisory services. This approach ensures that the perspectives and interests of indigenous communities are meaningfully incorporated into the Council's deliberations.²⁴ In comparison, the Arctic Council's inclusivity distinguishes it from many other regional organisations that often marginalise the voices of indigenous peoples, highlighting the Council's normative uniqueness despite its operational weaknesses.²⁵ States gain three key advantages through observer membership: Firstly, they can directly observe decision-making processes in the region and adapt their national policies accordingly. Secondly, they gain legitimacy through science diplomacy and are

²¹ Marina Fragkouli, *China's Efforts to Control the Arctic Rimland: A New Cold War*, in "HAPSc Policy Briefs Series", 2 (2) (2021), p. 143

²² *Arctic Council*, *op. cit.*, section 5.

²³ Ann J. Hund (ed.), *Antarctica and the Arctic Circle: A Geographic Encyclopedia of the Earth's Polar Regions*, Vol. 1: A–I, Santa Barbara, ABC CLIO, 2014, pp. 71–73.

²⁴ Marina Martynova, *EU, Russia and China Arctic Strategies: Comparative Analysis*, in *Economic and Social Development: Book of Proceedings*, Vol. 4, Varazdin, 2019, p. 773.

²⁵ Nina Liu, *The Geopolitical Lessons from the Arctic to Antarctica*, in "United Service", 2023, Vol. 74, No. 1, p. 12.

perceived as part of the Arctic community. Thirdly, they gain access to a platform that supports their strategic interests in critical areas such as energy security, new sea routes and environmental governance. Therefore, observer membership is both a symbolic and pragmatic tool for non-Arctic states.

The Council's long-term institutional goals have been formalised in the Strategic Plan for the period 2021–2030. The plan emphasises the promotion of peace, stability and cooperation in the Arctic region, with a view to encouraging development. The Council's working groups conduct comprehensive assessments of the region's environmental, ecological, and socio-cultural conditions. The chairmanship of the Council rotates among the eight member states every two years. However, the Council's reliance on consensus and rotating leadership can also lead to slower responses to crises. This stands in contrast to more centralised decision-making structures, such as those found in NATO or the European Union, which limit the Arctic Council's effectiveness.²⁶

In the wake of the Russia-Ukraine War, the remaining seven member states chose to suspend their involvement in the Council's activities in response to Russia's chairmanship. Although meetings gradually resumed in a virtual format as of 2025, the Council's operational capacity has been significantly weakened.²⁷ These developments highlight a crucial dilemma in Arctic governance: as securitisation rises, the effectiveness of the Arctic Council – the region's primary cooperative institution – is reduced, and its institutional capacity is brought into question.

The Arctic region has developed within a relatively stable governance framework for many years, with environmental protection, sustainable development, and the welfare of indigenous peoples taking precedence over military competition. This has largely shielded the region from broader security agendas.²⁸ However, the Russia-Ukraine War, which began in 2022, has had a significant impact on this balance, leading to a critical shift in the Arctic's security environment. The accession of Sweden and Finland to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has enabled the alliance to extend into the Arctic Circle, establishing a direct presence along the Arctic border and transforming the regional security architecture.²⁹ Following the accession of these two states, the number of Arctic

²⁶ Dale C. Walton, *The Polar Pivot: Great Power Competition in the Arctic and Antarctica*, in "Comparative Strategy", 2023, Vol. 42, No. 1, p. 171.

²⁷ Arctic Council, 2025.

²⁸ *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)*, in <https://www.unclos.org/> (Accessed on 13.05.2024).

²⁹ Wayne M. Bunker, *U.S. Arctic Policy: Climate Change, UNCLOS and Strategic Opportunity*, Carlisle, PA, U.S. Army War College, 2012.

NATO members has risen to seven. This development has resulted in a more integrated geographical and institutional counterweight to Russia. These developments have resulted in a dual security structure that could be described as an “ice curtain”: on one side, the Arctic-Eurasian bloc led by Russia; on the other, the Arctic-NATO bloc consisting of seven NATO members.³⁰ This dual structure is at odds with the Arctic Council’s ethos of cooperation and raises concerns about its future functionality as the region’s primary governance institution.

TÜRKİYE’S ARCTIC POLICY

When examining Türkiye’s Arctic policy, its most crucial aspects appear to be its balancing role and its pursuit of stability. In this context, although Türkiye is neither a neighbour nor shares a border with the region, it plays a significant role in balancing NATO and Russia. This dual orientation is indicative of Türkiye’s broader foreign policy identity. While institutionally embedded in NATO, it simultaneously sustains pragmatic cooperation with Russia, thereby playing a balancing role that few non-Arctic actors can perform. At this point, the increasing geopolitical competition in the global system, the environmental vulnerabilities in polar regions caused by climate change, and the emergence of new transportation routes have heightened the significance of the Arctic not only for coastal states but also for non-Arctic countries.³¹ In this context, the observer status defined by the Arctic Council serves as an institutional mechanism that enables non-Arctic actors to participate indirectly in decision-making processes. Article 36 of the Arctic Council’s *Rules of Procedure* explicitly outlines the eligibility criteria for obtaining observer status. According to this provision, observer status may be granted to:

- i. Non-Arctic states,
- ii. Global or regional intergovernmental and inter-parliamentary organisations,
- iii. Non-governmental organisations that are deemed capable of contributing to the work of the Council.³²

Obtaining observer status requires more than applying; it requires reaching consensus among the Arctic States. Furthermore, the applicant must demonstrate a

³⁰ Ezgi Şahin, Merve Suna Özel Özcan, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

³¹ Christer Henrik Pursiainen, Chris Alden, Rasmus Gjedssø Bertelsen, *The Arctic and Africa in China’s Foreign Policy: How Different Are They and What Does This Tell Us?*, in “Arctic Review on Law & Politics”, 2021, Vol. 12, p. 41.

³² *Arctic Council Secretariat, Rules of Procedure*, Tromsø, Arctic Council Secretariat, 2015, in https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/bitstream/handle/11374/940/2015-09-01_Rules_of_Procedure_website_version.pdf (Accessed on 12.03.2024).

profile that aligns with the Council's objectives and principles. Therefore, observer status is not a legal entitlement but rather a privilege granted based on political and institutional suitability, as assessed by the Council.³³ However, this consensus requirement introduces political considerations into the selection process, potentially influencing the evaluation of non-Arctic applications based on geopolitical dynamics among member states. As a result, observer status becomes less a technical assessment and more a reflection of power balances. In this context, the Republic of Türkiye, as a non-Arctic state, has been shaping its foreign policy toward the region through cautious yet consistent steps. Although Türkiye's interest in the Arctic is a recent development, it has pursued a systematic approach grounded in science diplomacy, climate change, multilateral governance structures, and the goal of obtaining observer status. In comparison, Türkiye's focus on science-based engagement contrasts with China's strategic branding as a "Near-Arctic State" and India's primarily symbolic involvement. This positions Türkiye closer to the European observer model, which prioritises normative alignment and research contribution.

Türkiye's engagement with the polar regions has gained steady momentum in recent years at both scientific and diplomatic levels. The initial focus of this orientation was on the Antarctic region. The pioneering work of Turkish scientists on Antarctica during the 1960s established the foundation for Türkiye's scientific presence in the area. It is important to note that the contributions of Professor Dr. Atok Karaali and Professor Dr. Ümran İnan have had a significant impact, both in the academic literature and through the naming of several geographical locations in the region after these scholars.³⁴ Similarly, Türkiye has maintained its engagement with the area and continues to collaborate with Bulgarian, Japanese, and Ukrainian scientists in researching the continent. Notable developments include TÜBİTAK's admission as an associate member of the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR) and the regular organisation of National Antarctic Expeditions.³⁵ This Antarctic experience provides Türkiye with institutional credibility and technical expertise, thereby reinforcing its position that its engagement in the Arctic is not symbolic but is firmly rooted in a well-established polar research tradition.

As a natural extension of this legacy, Türkiye's interest in the Arctic region has become increasingly pronounced in recent years, both in scientific and foreign

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Pursiainen, Alden, Bertelsen, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

³⁵ *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, Antarctic Treaty (1959, acceded 1995)*, Ankara, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022, in <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/antarktika-antlasmasi.tr.mfa> (Accessed on 07.02.2025).

policy dimensions. Climate change, environmental vulnerabilities, and intensifying geopolitical competition have brought the Arctic to greater prominence within international politics.³⁶ In this context, Türkiye aims to diversify its engagement with the region not only through research activities but also through technical and legal initiatives, such as pursuing observer status in the Arctic Council and efforts to become a party to the Svalbard Treaty. Unlike many non-Arctic actors that approach the region primarily for resource access or strategic visibility, Türkiye frames its engagement as a continuation of its Antarctic legacy, thereby integrating scientific credibility into its diplomatic posture.

Türkiye's capacity to make practical use of the rights granted under the Svalbard Treaty illustrates its long-term approach to the region. This legal accession elevates Türkiye beyond a declaratory participant to a formally recognised stakeholder, strengthening its claim that observer status would be substantive rather than symbolic.³⁷ Türkiye views its Arctic engagement as a reflection of its commitment to multilateral cooperation, environmental responsibility, and new regional partnerships. Its foreign policy focus on the Arctic began with its 2015 application for observer status in the Arctic Council, establishing Türkiye as a potential scientific and diplomatic player in polar affairs. However, the rejection of this application revealed the politicised nature of the Council's consensus-based system, where broader power dynamics often outweigh the technical merits of an applicant.

However, Türkiye has not been granted observer status since its application. This outcome should be evaluated not solely based on the application itself, but also in light of the Arctic Council's criteria for observer status. Observer status in the Arctic Council is not granted merely upon application; rather, it entails a process requiring the fulfilment of specific political, legal, and institutional criteria. According to the Council's *Rules of Procedure* (2015), applicants must explicitly endorse the objectives outlined in the Ottawa Declaration, recognise the sovereign rights and jurisdiction of the Arctic States, and adhere to relevant international legal instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).³⁸ Additionally, applicants are expected to demonstrate respect for the cultures and lifestyles of Arctic Indigenous peoples, possess the capacity to

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Onur Limon, *Arktik Konseyi ve Türkiye'nin Unutulan Arktik Konseyi Gözlemci Üyelik Başvurusu* [Arctic Council and Turkey's Forgotten Arctic Council Observer Membership Application], in "International Journal of Politics & Security (IJPS)", Vol. 3, No. 1, 2021, p. 304.

³⁸ *United Nations, United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)*, in <https://www.unclos.org/> (Accessed on 07.09.2024).

contribute to the Council's work both politically and financially, and exhibit technical expertise, knowledge, and the potential to support global-level decision-making processes concerning the Arctic (Arctic Council, 2015, Annexe 2, paragraph 6).³⁹ In light of these criteria, one may contend that at the time of its application in 2015, Türkiye had not established a comprehensive Arctic policy or the requisite institutional framework to substantiate such an application. This deficiency in a concrete policy framework likely contributed to the Council's decision to deny observer status. Compared with Asian powers such as China, which supported their applications with comprehensive strategic frameworks such as the Polar Silk Road, Türkiye lacked a parallel institutional design, thereby weakening the credibility of its request.

In 2018, Türkiye expressed its intent to have its application for observer status in the Arctic Council reconsidered, thereby elevating its aspiration to participate in multilateral polar governance to a more structured and institutionalised framework.⁴⁰ Within this framework, the National Polar Science Program for the 2018–2022 period emerged as the principal policy document guiding Türkiye's Arctic orientation. The program outlines an integrated vision for both the Antarctic and Arctic regions, aiming to ensure Türkiye's active engagement in the future of the polar realms, contribute to their environmental protection, and institutionalise participation in multilateral platforms such as the Arctic Council.⁴¹ This shift represents a transition from ad hoc scientific interest to a structured national policy, signalling a maturation of Türkiye's polar vision.

In 2019, the inaugural Arctic Scientific Expedition⁴² successfully collected comprehensive data on sea ice structure, atmospheric conditions, and various environmental observations. Such field-based studies demonstrate that Türkiye's involvement in the Arctic is not merely rhetorical but reflects a concrete, operational effort to contribute to the region. In this context, the scientific expeditions

³⁹ *Arctic Council Secretariat, Rules of Procedure (adopted at the 1st Ministerial Meeting in 1998, revised at the 8th Ministerial Meeting in Kiruna, 2013)*, Tromsø, Arctic Council Secretariat, 2015, in <https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/6e73a734-2f8b-40f6-849a-245ef9942790/content> (Accessed on 08.03.2025).

⁴⁰ Mehmet Efe Biresselioglu, Muhittin Hakan Demir, Berfu Solak, Şebnem Altıncı, Sıtkı Egeli, *Assessing Türkiye's Prospective Involvement in the Arctic Region: A Qualitative Inquiry from Energy and Environmental Perspectives*, in "Social Sciences", Vol. 11, No. 10, 2022, p. 480.

⁴¹ *The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye (TÜBİTAK)*, 2018.

⁴² Onur Limon, *op. cit.*, p. 306.

led by TÜBİTAK represent the foundational elements of Türkiye's institutional and practical engagement with the Arctic.⁴³

Türkiye's first concrete institutional initiative toward the Arctic was realised through the launch of the National Arctic Scientific Research Expeditions (TASE), led by the Polar Research Institute established under the TÜBİTAK Marmara Research Centre (MAM) in 2017. During the TASE-IV expedition in 2024, 16 scientific projects were conducted at 24 distinct locations across the Arctic Ocean. These projects focused on analysing key environmental variables, including sea ice structure, microplastic pollution, climate change, and oceanographic parameters.⁴⁴As a continuation of this process, the TASE-V expedition was conducted from July 8 to 31, 2025, with the participation of nine Turkish and three international researchers, who implemented a total of 19 scientific projects. The research team reached as far north as 82° latitude, conducting in-depth studies on atmospheric measurements, sediment sampling, and the migratory patterns of marine species. The data obtained stand as essential indicators of Türkiye's growing capacity to produce scientific contributions to the Arctic ecosystem.⁴⁵

It is important to note that Türkiye's Arctic policy is supported not only through field-based scientific research but also through strategic planning and institutional partnerships. Activities carried out under TÜBİTAK's leadership aim not only to generate scientific knowledge but also to establish Türkiye as a responsible, engaged, and stable actor within Arctic governance frameworks. In this regard, the joint research project titled "Türkiye's Arctic Roadmap" (Project No: 118K497), conducted in collaboration between TÜBİTAK and Ege University, serves as a key reference document in shaping Türkiye's vision for the region. The project systematically analyses both opportunity areas (e.g. access to hydrocarbon reserves, logistics, maritime trade routes, Arctic tourism, and engagement with Indigenous communities) and key risk factors (e.g. environmental degradation, security tensions, legal uncertainties, and ecological pollution).⁴⁶ This dual approach (highlighting both opportunities and risks) demonstrates Türkiye's

⁴³ Biresselioglu, Demir, Solak, Altıncı, Egeli, *op. cit.*, p. 481.

⁴⁴ *The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye (TÜBİTAK) Marmara Research Center (MAM), Turkey's 4th Arctic Expedition Launches with 16 Research Projects*, Daily Sabah, 1 July 2024, in <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkiye/turkiyes-4th-arctic-expedition-launches-with-16-research-projects> (Accessed on 01.11.2024).

⁴⁵ *The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye (TÜBİTAK) Marmara Research Center (MAM), 5th National Arctic Scientific Research Expedition (TASE V) Briefing Report*, 2025, in <https://kare.mam.tubitak.gov.tr> (Accessed on 24.06.2025).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

effort to build a balanced, pragmatic Arctic profile, avoiding the pitfalls of interest-only strategies that often undermine the credibility of other observer applicants.

Likewise, the most significant development in formalising Türkiye's legal presence in the Arctic was its accession to the Svalbard Treaty in 2023. This treaty grants Türkiye the right to conduct scientific research, access natural resources, and establish residence in the Svalbard Archipelago, which falls under Norwegian sovereignty.⁴⁷ Through this accession, Türkiye has not only become a data-producing actor in the field but has also acquired the status of a legally recognised non-Arctic stakeholder. Being a party to the Svalbard Treaty represents a critical milestone in Türkiye's long-term objective of obtaining observer status in the Arctic Council.

Türkiye seeks observer status based on scientific contribution, environmental responsibility, and adherence to normative principles, presenting a profile of science diplomacy that is cooperative and detached from geopolitical rivalries. The transformation of this profile into an official status within the Arctic Council, however, is not solely contingent on technical and scientific contributions; it also depends on a nuanced understanding of the structural and political dynamics of the membership process. In this context, two key challenges emerge in the process of gaining observer status in the Arctic Council.⁴⁸ Firstly, political tensions between the applicant state and the Arctic Council member countries can hinder a successful application, even if the applicant meets the required technical and institutional requirements. Secondly, when interest in the Arctic remains purely declarative, meaning that applicants seek observer status without offering scientific, economic, or environmental contributions, the credibility of the membership process may be undermined. Problematically, these two dimensions reveal that observer status operates less as an impartial mechanism of inclusion and more as a mirror of the Council's political climate, thereby disadvantaging actors like Türkiye, whose contributions are primarily scientific. In this regard, even if an applicant formally satisfies the Council's seven criteria (including commitment to the Ottawa Declaration, recognition of Arctic States' sovereignty, adherence to international legal norms such as UNCLOS, respect for the rights of Indigenous peoples, capacity to contribute to the Council's work, technical expertise, and adherence to principles of multilateral governance), the application may still be rejected at the discretion of the member states.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Norwegian Government, *Norway in the High North – Arctic Policy for a New Reality*, Oslo, Norwegian Government, 2025, in <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/norway-in-the-high-north-arctic-policy-for-a-new-reality/id3116990>.

⁴⁸ Onur Limon, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

When assessed through these two principal dimensions, Türkiye's approach to its Arctic Council observer status application is characterised by a distinctive feature: a balanced and dialogue-oriented foreign policy that transcends prevailing geopolitical polarisations. Türkiye has consistently adopted a multi-dimensional, often balanced, diplomatic approach in its relations with the Arctic Council member states. Notably, the Russia-Ukraine war that erupted in 2022 has triggered structural ruptures not only in the European security architecture but also within the institutional dynamics of the Arctic region. Following these developments, Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO has significantly reshaped the security architecture in the Arctic.⁵⁰ The current configuration has led to the emergence of a dual structure: on one side, the Eurasian axis led by Russia; on the other, a broader security framework formed by the seven NATO member states of the Arctic, namely, the Arctic-Eurasia and Arctic-NATO blocs.⁵¹ In a comparative perspective, Türkiye's ability to maintain NATO membership while sustaining channels with Russia places it in a rare category of states capable of acting as mediators in an otherwise polarised Arctic order. This hedging capacity enhances its credibility as a stabilising actor.

In recent years, Türkiye's foreign policy vision has adopted a multilateral orientation that prioritises conflict de-escalation, support for regional stability, and the promotion of diplomatic mediation initiatives.⁵² Its facilitating role in establishing the grain corridor agreement during the Russia-Ukraine war, its Stability Diplomacy engagements in the Afro-Eurasia region, and its balanced relations with multilateral organisations all demonstrate Türkiye's construction of a conciliatory profile within the international system.⁵³ Within this framework, Türkiye's orientation toward the Arctic region embodies a foreign policy vision that prioritises cooperation and science-based engagement over geopolitical rivalry. This normative orientation positions Türkiye closer to the European observer model that privileges environmental stewardship and multilateral governance, in contrast to Asian observers that foreground resource access and infrastructure investments.

From the perspective of its multi-dimensional foreign policy identity,

⁵⁰ Ezgi Şahin, Özel Özcan, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² TÜBİTAK MAM, *Turkey's 4th Arctic Expedition Launches with 16 Research Projects*, p. 12

⁵³ Merve Suna Özel Özcan, *Türk Dış Politikasında 'İstikrar Diplomasisi' Kavramı: Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı Örneği* [The Concept of 'Stability Diplomacy' in Turkish Foreign Policy: The Example of the Russia-Ukraine War], in "Kırıkkale Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi", Vol. 14, No. 2, 2024, p. 219.

Türkiye's Arctic orientation reflects a careful search for strategic balance. As a NATO member, Türkiye shares institutional affiliation with the seven Arctic states that are also NATO members, thereby sustaining an indirect yet significant connection to the region's security architecture. At the same time, Türkiye maintains cooperative relations with the Russian Federation, particularly in the areas of energy, trade and regional crisis management. This positions Türkiye not solely within the Western alliance but also as an interlocutor open to Eurasian engagement.⁵⁴ The Turk Stream natural gas pipeline and the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant are prime examples of this dual-axis engagement in energy diplomacy. Furthermore, Türkiye's facilitative role in initiatives such as the Black Sea Grain Initiative, as well as its measured stance during the Iran-Israel conflict, reveals its growing institutional capacity to mediate between diverging regional blocs. These dynamics highlight Türkiye's potential to contribute to the Arctic Council not only through scientific and environmental channels but also by fostering political dialogue and reinforcing norms of peaceful cooperation.⁵⁵ In addition, regarding the Arctic Council's second key criterion for assessing observer status applications – namely, the “capacity to contribute meaningfully” – Türkiye has taken concrete steps that visibly support its candidacy. In particular, the National Arctic Scientific Research Expeditions (TASE), conducted under the coordination of the Polar Research Institute at TÜBİTAK Marmara Research Centre, demonstrate that Türkiye's engagement with the Arctic is not limited to rhetorical expression but is grounded in a structured and multidimensional scientific framework. During the TASE-IV expedition in 2024 and the subsequent TASE-V mission in 2025, the research team reached 82°N.⁵⁶ It implemented 35 scientific projects focusing on environmental parameters, including sea ice dynamics, microplastic pollution, atmospheric measurements, and marine species migration routes. These expeditions reflect Türkiye's active and visible contribution to the global body of scientific knowledge concerning the Arctic

⁵⁴ TÜBİTAK MAM KARE, *5th National Arctic Scientific Research Expedition (TASE V) Final Report*, 3.

⁵⁵ Lassi Heininen, *Climate Change and the Great Power Rivalry in the Arctic*, in “Insight Turkey”, Vol. 24, No. 2, Spring 2022, pp. 25; Egin Şahin, Özel Özcan, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁵⁶ Anadolu Agency (AA), *5th National Arctic Scientific Research Expedition Team Reached the Sea Ice Edge at the North Pole*, Anadolu Agency, 18 July 2025, in <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/bilim-teknoloji/5-ulusal-arktik-bilimsel-arastirma-seferi-ekibi-kuzey-kutbundaki-deniz-buzu-hattina-ulasti/3634646> (Accessed on 18.07.2025).

ecosystem.⁵⁷

Moreover, the comprehensive research project titled “Türkiye’s Arctic Roadmap,” jointly conducted by TÜBİTAK and İzmir University of Economics, evaluates key opportunity areas-such as access to energy resources, polar tourism, maritime trade routes, and interaction with Indigenous communities-alongside critical challenges including environmental threats, legal uncertainties, and security risks.⁵⁸ Under the framework of this treaty, Türkiye has gained the right to conduct scientific research, acquire property and access natural resources in the Svalbard Archipelago, thereby achieving the status of a legally acknowledged non-regional stakeholder in the Arctic.

By integrating its scientific capacity with environmental responsibility, avoiding alignment with geopolitical rivalries, and fulfilling international legal obligations, Türkiye structures its application not as a formalistic gesture but as a content-driven and principled initiative. In doing so, it presents a stable and credible profile that may influence the Council’s deliberations.⁵⁹

As of today, the Arctic Council, in addition to its eight permanent members (the Arctic States), includes 13 countries with observer status.⁶⁰ Although observer status does not grant direct participation in the Council’s decision-making mechanisms, it plays a significant role in enabling scientific collaboration, contributing to environmental programs, and engaging with governance frameworks. As illustrated in Figure 2 below, countries with observer status are classified under distinct regional groupings. Türkiye’s Arctic approach can be situated within this broader classification. By analysing the regional patterns and strategic postures of current observer states, it becomes possible to assess which typological profile Türkiye most closely aligns with. From a comparative perspective, this typological analysis is crucial because it demonstrates whether Türkiye’s Arctic ambitions are exceptional or whether they reproduce existing models of non-Arctic engagement.

⁵⁷ *The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye (TÜBİTAK) Marmara Research Center (MAM) Polar Research Institute (KARE), 5th National Arctic Scientific Research Expedition (TASE V) Final Report*, Gebze, TÜBİTAK MAM Polar Research Institute, 2025.

⁵⁸ *The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye (TÜBİTAK) & İzmir University of Economics, Turkey’s Arctic Roadmap: An Evaluation from the Perspectives of Science, Diplomacy, and Security*, Ankara, TÜBİTAK, 2023.

⁵⁹ TÜBİTAK MAM KARE, *5th National Arctic Scientific Research Expedition (TASE V) Final Report*, p. 17.

⁶⁰ Arctic Council, *A People First Approach to Sustainable Development ...*, p. 4.

Table 2: Approaches and Policy Orientations of Observer Actors in the Arctic

Country Group	Approach and Policy Orientation
Western European States (<i>e.g., Germany, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom</i>)	These states prioritize scientific cooperation, environmental protection, and investment in climate monitoring initiatives. While supporting multilateral governance, they maintain a measured distance from framing Arctic affairs through hard security or NATO-centric discourses.
Asian Powers (<i>e.g., China, Japan, South Korea, India, Singapore</i>)	Their engagement is largely shaped by economic and strategic interests, including the development of Arctic shipping routes, resource access, and investment in polar research infrastructure. China, in particular, promotes its "Near-Arctic State" identity and advances its "Polar Silk Road" initiative as part of its broader Belt and Road vision.
International Organizations (<i>e.g., EU, UNEP, ICRC</i>)	These actors adopt a normative approach, focusing on promoting good governance, indigenous rights, and sustainable development. Their role is often channeled through support for policy frameworks, legal instruments, and collaborative environmental projects.

Source: Authors' classification based on data provided by the Arctic Council.

On the other hand, Asian countries approach the region with a greater emphasis on economic and strategic objectives. Key priorities for this group include developing maritime routes, securing access to natural resources, and investing in polar infrastructure. In particular, China's self-identification as a "Near-Arctic State" and its "Polar Silk Road" initiative are seen as indicators of a long-term strategic vision toward the Arctic.⁶¹ Meanwhile, international organisations tend to adopt a normative and principled stance, focusing on themes such as good governance, sustainable development, and the rights of Indigenous peoples, thereby contributing to the Council's work through policy frameworks and environmental initiatives.⁶²

Türkiye's approach to the Arctic partially aligns with the profile commonly associated with Western European observer states. Its emphasis on scientific cooperation, climate-focused research, and environmental sensitivity reflects a commitment to multilateral governance rather than security-driven competition. The scientific expeditions conducted under TÜBİTAK's leadership and Türkiye's

⁶¹State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Arctic Policy (White Paper)*, 26 January 2018, in https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm (Accessed on 21.03.2020).

⁶² Arctic Council, *A People First Approach to Sustainable Development in the Arctic*, Arctic Council, 20 March 2024, in <https://arctic-council.org/news/a-people-first-approach-to-sustainable-development-in-the-arctic/> (Accessed on 27.04.2024).

contributions to knowledge production on the Arctic ecosystem demonstrate its willingness to engage in regional processes meaningfully. In this sense, Türkiye presents a profile that is closely aligned with the science-based engagement model adopted by Western Europe (TÜBİTAK MAM KARE, 2025). However, unlike purely normative European approaches, Türkiye's Arctic orientation also contains a pragmatic dimension, visible in its interest in maritime routes and resource access. This hybrid positioning situates Türkiye at the intersection of European and Asian models, without fully converging with either. However, Türkiye's orientation is shaped not by narrow geo-economic calculations but rather by a broader commitment to multilateralism, environmental responsibility, and a balanced foreign policy framework. Thus, Türkiye's Arctic profile can be characterised as hybrid but normatively anchored, blending scientific engagement with strategic awareness while avoiding overt securitisation.

CONCLUSIONS

The Arctic has become a key region in global affairs and has become an alternative global transportation corridor, significantly reducing transit distances between Asia and Europe. At the same time, the region's estimated reserves of hydrocarbons, rare earth elements, and strategic minerals have placed it at the centre of a significant global competition for resources. This competition highlights a paradox inherent in the Arctic: while climate change creates new opportunities for economic development, it also accelerates ecological risks that jeopardise the viability of such endeavours. In this evolving landscape, the Arctic is no longer defined solely by environmental concerns but is increasingly influenced by a combination of security, legal challenges, and governance issues. This transformation has had a significant impact on the strategic outlook of coastal Arctic states, prompting external actors to develop new forms of engagement and institutional entry. The observer status mechanism of the Arctic Council, in this regard, provides non-Arctic states with a limited yet meaningful opportunity to participate in regional governance frameworks.

Türkiye's Arctic policy has been shaped by the specific institutional and geopolitical context in which it is situated. Building on its longstanding scientific presence in Antarctica, Türkiye has extended its research agenda northward, consolidating its Arctic engagement through national expeditions, increased technical capabilities, and environmentally oriented research priorities. The data collected and the collaborative projects conducted during the TASE-IV and TASE-V missions demonstrate not only a scientific commitment but also an institutional capacity to

contribute meaningfully to the region. Türkiye's engagement with the Arctic has evolved from an initial application for observer status in 2015 into a multidimensional, sustained policy orientation grounded in science diplomacy, environmental responsibility, and normative alignment with multilateral governance principles. While the country does not share a land border with the region, its growing scientific activity, legal participation through the Svalbard Treaty, and commitment to international cooperation indicate a deliberate, structured effort to position itself as a responsible non-Arctic stakeholder. In a region increasingly characterised by the emergence of Arctic-NATO and Arctic-Eurasian blocs, Türkiye maintains its NATO alignment while also maintaining diplomatic channels with Eurasian actors, notably the Russian Federation. This dual-track approach reflects Türkiye's broader foreign policy identity as a hedging actor in the international system, enabling it to leverage flexibility in contexts where rigid bloc alignment could reduce diplomatic manoeuvrability.

Türkiye's accession to the Svalbard Treaty, which grants specific rights in the region, further solidifies this commitment and establishes the country as not only a potential participant but also a legally recognised non-Arctic stakeholder committed to long-term involvement. By articulating a vision that merges scientific inquiry with legal legitimacy and diplomatic balance, Türkiye positions itself as a responsible and credible candidate for inclusion in the evolving architecture of Arctic multilateralism.

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