Briefing Note

Portugal and the Arctic, Portugal in the Arctic: Scenario Thinking (2023-2035)

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Introduction

Portugal's relationship with the Arctic is undergoing a subtle but consequential shift. Long perceived as geographically remote from northern polar affairs, Portugal is increasingly tied to Arctic transformations through climate impacts, maritime flows, and expanding responsibilities linked to its extended continental shelf. Rapid Arctic warming and projections of ice-free summers by 2030–2035 (Kim et al., 2023; Guarino et al., 2020) are altering North Atlantic dynamics, with direct implications for Portugal's climate vulnerability, maritime security, and ocean governance.

Historically, Portugal engaged with Arctic latitudes during the Age of Discoveries: João Fernandes Lavrador and the Côrte-Real family reached Greenland and Newfoundland in the 15th and 16th centuries, as confirmed by the 1502 Cantino planisphere (Brazão, 1965; Boorstin, 1985). Although Portugal did not consolidate claims in the far North, these voyages underline that the Arctic is not an entirely new frontier for the country.

Portugal still lacks a national Arctic strategy, and Arctic considerations remain absent from key strategic documents such as the National Defence Concept and the National Ocean Strategy. Scenario thinking thus provides a useful framework for examining how Portugal may respond to Arctic change between 2023 and 2035.

The Portuguese parliament´s Resolution nº 76/2023 is the clearest indication yet that national policymakers recognise these emerging linkages (Rodrigues, 2025a), while the Draft Resolution 727/2025 highlights the need to reinforce the geoposition of the Azores. It urges strengthened contributions to Arctic environmental protection, scientific cooperation, and participation in Arctic governance structures. Despite this political signal, the Arctic remains absent from Portugal´s major strategic documents, including its National Defence Concept (Rodrigues, 2022),

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National Ocean Strategy (Rodrigues, 2025a), and Climate Law (Rodrigues, 2026b). This disconnection highlights a persistent structural problem: while scientific and geopolitical ties to the Arctic are intensifying, national policy frameworks have been slow to adjust. Furthermore, preparing a proposal candidacy for the Observer status in the Artic Council as mentioned in Resolution nº 76/2023 and the Draft Resolution 727/2025 requires attention and presence from diplomats in different foras as well as the participation in meetings at the European level about the region.

A Maritime Nation Heading North

Portugal´s historical consciousness, shaped by a deep maritime identity, positions the ocean as a central element of its worldview. This identity is reinforced geopolitically by the strategic location of the Azores, functioning as a hinge between the North Atlantic and the Arctic. As Arctic maritime routes evolve and North Atlantic security concerns grow, the Azores gain increasing relevance for maritime surveillance, space-based monitoring, early-warning systems, and Search and Rescue activities. I argue that Portugal should reconceptualise the Azores as an Atlantic–Arctic interface, a platform capable of hosting scientific, diplomatic, and security functions crucial to regional stability (Rodrigues, 2024; 2025b; 2025c; 2025d; NAADSN, 2026).

Climate change magnifies these dynamics. Portugal lies within the Mediterranean climate area, making it exceptionally vulnerable to Arctic-driven climatic shifts, including altered storm patterns, drought cycles, coastal erosion, and changes to ocean circulation (REPLAN, 2025; Polyakov et al., 2023). The teleconnections between Arctic processes and Iberian climate impacts mean that Arctic environmental change is no longer a distant concern, it shapes Portugal´s domestic resilience and long-term socio-economic stability.

Despite these growing interdependencies, Portugal´s engagement with the Arctic Council remains limited and largely technocratic. Scientific contributions, particularly in oceanography, geoscience, and climate observation, internationally recognised. The analyses I present in the policy briefs published by UNU-CRIS (2025a) and NAADSN (2026a) identify two critical deficits: the absence of a national Arctic strategy and weak interministerial coordination. Without remedying these gaps, Portugal risks long-term marginalisation in Arctic affairs, despite its geographic and scientific advantages.

At the same time, Portugal´s ongoing request to extend its continental shelf to nearly 4 million km² (Abreu et al., 2012; Ribeiro et al., 2022) places new responsibilities on national institutions. As Arctic change reshapes global seabed governance and deep-sea resource pressures grow, Portugal´s expanded jurisdiction will require enhanced maritime security, environmental stewardship, and scientific capacity. The Arctic is therefore not simply a region of interest, it is directly tied to Portugal's future ocean governance obligations.

Scenario Thinking: Mapping Portugal´s Possible Futures

Given the convergence of climate change, shifting maritime routes, technological developments, and global geopolitical competition, the chapter employs scenario thinking and prospective methodologies to outline four plausible futures for Portugal between 2023 and 2035. These scenarios highlight different pathways depending on the nation's level of engagement, preparedness, and strategic awareness. Influenced by multiple global foresight reports (e.g.,

France 2025; UK 2024; Canada 2023; NATO 2020), the scenarios illuminate both risks and opportunities.

Portugal is still sailing South in its strategic mindset and must urgently sail North. The Arctic is no longer a distant or secondary region: climate change, new navigation routes, and global security dynamics are drawing it closer to the Atlantic, and thus to Portugal itself. To safeguard national interests, enhance maritime security, and contribute meaningfully to global ocean governance, Portugal must recognize the strategic importance of the Arctic and integrate it into its climate, defence, and foreign policy frameworks.

Scenario thinking and *La prospective* help policymakers deal with uncertainty by exploring multiple possible and plausible futures rather than predicting a single outcome (Wack, 1985; Godet, 2008). For Portugal, scenarios elucidate how Arctic transformations could reshape national interests.

The scenario framework draws from:

- Foresight reports (such as NATO 2030, Global Trends 2040, France´s Arctic Strategy, Maritime Futures 2035);
- Scientific climate projections on Arctic ice loss;
- European Union Arctic policies;
- Defence, security and maritime strategies from EU member states.

Scenario thinking offers a structured method to explore uncertainty and map possible pathways for Portugal´s Arctic engagement. It moves strategic planning beyond linear forecasting, allowing decision-makers to evaluate multiple plausible futures shaped by climate change, geopolitical competition, and multilateral governance shifts (Wack, 1985; Godet, 2008). For Portugal, a mid-sized maritime nation deeply affected by external dynamics, scenario analysis provides a valuable foundation for long-term policy design.

The four scenarios below present distinct pathways for Portugal between 2023 and 2035 (Rodrigues, 2024; Rodrigues, 2026b):

1) *Portugal in the Arctic:* represents a proactive, integrated approach, where Resolution 76/2023 is fully implemented, a National Arctic Strategy is adopted, and Portugal becomes a credible Atlantic–Arctic actor through scientific diplomacy and strengthened capabilities in the Azores;
2) *Alienation:* reflects minimal engagement, with Portugal´s Observer status becoming largely symbolic and its influence declining;
3) *In the Midst of Confusion:* combines rising awareness with fragmented implementation, producing reactive rather than strategic engagement;
4) *Losing Control*: highlights the risks of inaction in a context of accelerating climate change and intensifying geopolitical competition, leaving Portugal exposed to North Atlantic instability.

Across all scenarios, several themes persist such as:

- Climate change is the primary connector linking Portugal´s vulnerability to Arctic environmental transformation.

- The Atlantic–Arctic continuum is strategically real, with Portugal´s relevance shaped by interconnected oceanic and security dynamics.
- Scientific and ocean diplomacy remains Portugal´s strongest Arctic asset.
- Institutional coordination is essential for any coherent Arctic approach.
- The Azores function as the central platform for Portugal´s Arctic–Atlantic engagement.
- Strategic inaction carries real risks, including marginalisation and increased exposure to geopolitical tension.

Together, these sources highlight that Portugal´s Arctic engagement is currently hindered by two structural issues: (1) the Arctic is absent from core strategic documents, and (2) institutional coordination remains weak, limiting the country´s ability to act consistently across scientific, diplomatic, and defence domains. It demonstrates that Portugal´s Arctic future is not determined by geography but by policy choices made today.

Conclusion

Portugal stands at an inflection point. Whether it becomes an active Atlantic–Arctic contributor or remains a peripheral observer depends largely on policy choices made in the coming decade. Implementing Resolution nº 76/2023, strengthening science diplomacy, improving institutional coordination, and investing in the Azores as a strategic hub would together position Portugal to engage meaningfully in Arctic governance and address the emerging challenges of the North Atlantic.

Scenario thinking demonstrates that Portugal´s future is deeply intertwined with Arctic transformations. Climate impacts, emerging maritime routes, and shifting geopolitics are restructuring the North Atlantic and Portugal's immediate strategic environment.

Resolution nº 76/2023 acknowledges this connection, signalling a new phase of political awareness about Portugal´s Arctic responsibilities and opportunities. Meanwhile, if interested, Portugal can follow the guidance offered in the above-mentioned policy briefs and commentaries:

- develop a National Arctic Strategy;
- build interministerial coordination;
- strengthen science diplomacy, as well as ocean diplomacy in the Arctic;
- align with EU and NATO Arctic frameworks;
- reinforce the Azores as a strategic hub;
- institutionalise climate and ocean governance linkages;

  (Rodrigues, 2025a; 2025b; 2025c; 2026a)

Portugal can choose among multiple paths. It can lead through scientific diplomacy and strategic engagement (Scenario 1), remain marginal (Scenario 2), remain reactive (Scenario 3), or become vulnerable to external pressures (Scenario 4).

The next decade will determine not only Portugal´s Arctic posture but its broader role in the evolving Atlantic world. Proactive engagement, guided by political commitment, scientific

excellence, and institutional coordination, offers the strongest foundation for Portugal to contribute meaningfully to Arctic governance and to protect its national interests in a rapidly changing global environment.

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