



DECEMBER 2024

## Shifts in Arctic security

### Ripples of Russia's war against Ukraine

Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine has disrupted global security structures, reshaping geopolitical dynamics with repercussions that extend well beyond Eastern Europe. As countries shift their focus and resources in response to the conflict, regions like the Arctic – vulnerable due to rapid climate change and its strategic location – face new and intensified security challenges. These challenges encompass both traditional military concerns, such as defence posturing and territorial stability, and non-military issues such as cyber vulnerabilities, resource competition, and environmental risks.

This policy brief addresses *how the war in Ukraine and heightened NATO-Russia tensions have impacted Arctic security since 2022*. It begins by examining regional geopolitical shifts, such as the strengthening Sino-Russian partnership and Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO.

The policy brief then considers economic and energy impacts, noting disruptions to Arctic energy projects and shipping routes due to Western sanctions on Russia, complicating international investments and access to critical resources like rare earth elements.

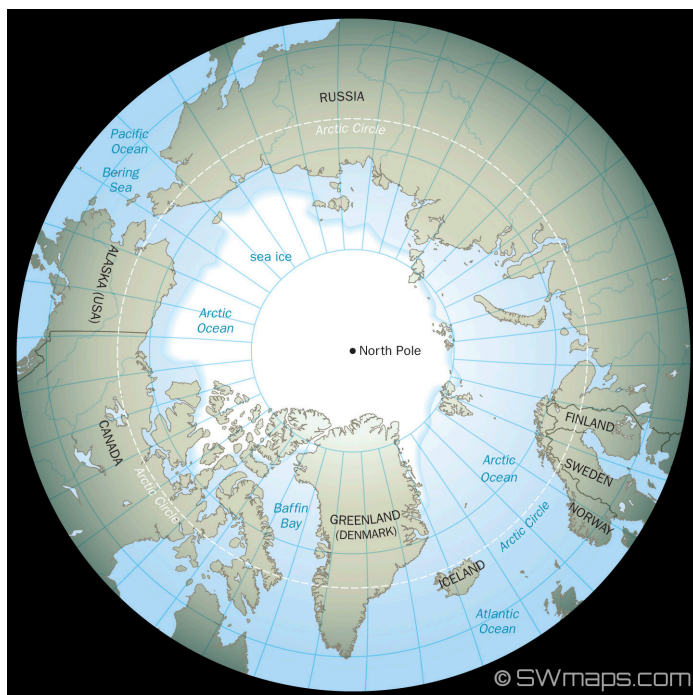
Next, the authors assess the increasing security threats, including rising militarisation and non-military hybrid challenges. Finally, the policy brief provides conclusions, and it lists several topics to be addressed by the Netherlands and partner countries. Although the Arctic Council is referred to in this policy brief, the issue of Arctic governance is not discussed in depth.

### Geopolitical shifts and strategic recalibration

Russia's war against Ukraine has accelerated geopolitical shifts with direct effects on the governance of the Arctic region and its security. The Arctic states used to refer to the region as a zone of exceptionalism, where cooperation remained possible when it was not in other parts of the world. But Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 shattered this perception as Western countries halted their direct engagement with Russia.

The Arctic Council, composed of the eight Arctic states (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the US), paused its activities in March 2022. This decision affected collaborative work across all Council projects. However, on 8 June 2022, the member states announced a partial resumption of certain non-political

Figure 1: Map of the Arctic region



Source: [SWmaps.com](https://www.swmaps.com)

activities.<sup>1</sup> This limited work focuses on technical-level initiatives, including environmental monitoring, resilience, and research projects essential to Arctic regional stability. Diplomatic and ministerial engagements, however, remain suspended.

As the Arctic Council's Western members shift their focus to regional resilience, they are investing in infrastructure and energy projects to diversify resources, reduce dependency on Russia. These countries prioritise environmental sustainability and security measures, including bolstering cooperation in research, military readiness, and economic activities to ensure strategic autonomy, such as diversifying energy sources, developing rare earth element supply chains, enhancing renewable energy projects, and investing in Arctic infrastructure to reduce

reliance on external resources and routes. Moscow is looking eastward to mitigate the impact of Western sanctions and maintain its influence in the region. Noteworthy is the evolving Sino-Russian partnership. China's self-designation as a "near-Arctic state"<sup>2</sup> and its "Polar Silk Road" project – a component of the Belt and Road Initiative – reflect China's interest in accessing the Arctic's resources, supporting scientific research, and using the Northern Sea Route (NSR) to shorten shipping routes.

Western sanctions against Russia have increased Russia's reliance on China for trade and investment, limiting its capacity to operate independently in the Arctic. Nonetheless, Russia has continued Arctic development with China, especially through joint energy projects and infrastructure along the NSR. This access strengthens China's regional presence and offers Russia a critical economic partnership.

1 The governments of Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States, "Joint Statement on Limited Resumption of Arctic Council Cooperation," United States Department of State, 8 June 2022.

2 The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "China's Arctic Policy," 26 January 2018.

While the Sino-Russian partnership appears robust, it is not without tensions. China's interests in Arctic resources and shipping sometimes conflict with Russia's control over these assets. Though Russia benefits from Chinese investments, it is cautious about conceding too much influence. China, meanwhile, is increasing its role in Arctic scientific research and infrastructure, potentially establishing a non-military presence that could support broader strategic goals.<sup>3</sup> China and Russia are also advancing their military relationship in the Arctic (see below).

Finland and Sweden's recent accession to NATO<sup>4</sup> enhances the Alliance's strategic position in the Arctic by strengthening its northern security capabilities and geographic reach.<sup>5</sup> Both countries bring well-trained, adaptable military forces familiar with Arctic and sub-Arctic conditions, including expertise in cold-weather operations, which is crucial for NATO's readiness in challenging environments. Finland's extensive land border with Russia expands NATO's northern perimeter, increasing deterrence and surveillance capabilities, while Sweden's strategic position in the Baltic Sea provides NATO better access to the Northeastern part of Allied territory in Europe. With the Finnish and Swedish membership of the alliance, the whole Nordic area that extends to the Arctic region has become a geostrategic continuum of NATO territory. Their advanced defence technologies, such as Finland's modern artillery and Sweden's naval capacities including submarines, provide NATO with additional assets that are vital for securing the area against emerging threats, particularly from Russia.

## Economic and energy considerations

Russia's war against Ukraine has significantly impacted the Arctic economy, particularly through Western sanctions on Russian energy exports and investments. As Russia controls vast Arctic resources like oil, gas, and minerals, these sanctions have forced a shift in how Arctic states manage resource access, energy exploration, and shipping.

Since Western sanctions<sup>6</sup> were imposed on Russian oil exports in 2022, Russia's crude oil exports to Europe fell sharply, with a significant share redirected to Asia. By early 2023, China and India accounted for around 70% of Russia's oil exports, up from just under 20% pre-war. European imports of Russian seaborne oil declined by about 70% by late 2022, due to an EU ban on Russian crude and a G7-led price cap that restricts global sales of Russian oil above \$ 60 per barrel.

However, Russia continues to supply liquefied natural gas (LNG) to the EU, which remains legally outside the EU sanctions on transshipping, and Russian LNG imports to Europe even rose by nearly 40% in 2023 as countries looked for alternatives to pipeline gas. This LNG trade has somewhat cushioned Russia's revenue loss from reduced oil sales to the West, although it still faces discounts and higher logistics costs to reorient exports.<sup>7</sup>

In response to these disruptions, European nations are pursuing alternative energy sources to reduce reliance on Russian resources. This is particularly evident in Europe, where countries are expanding renewable energy projects and turning to Arctic partners like Norway and the US for oil and gas supplies.

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3 Ties Dams, Louise van Schaik & Adája Stoitman, "[Presence before power. China's Arctic strategy in Iceland and Greenland](#)," June 2020.

4 Finland joined NATO in April 2023 and Sweden in March 2024.

5 Before their membership both countries already cooperated closely with the alliance as "NATO partners". However, now after joining NATO, Article 5 applies and both countries will be fully incorporated in the alliance's plans and arrangements for collective defence.

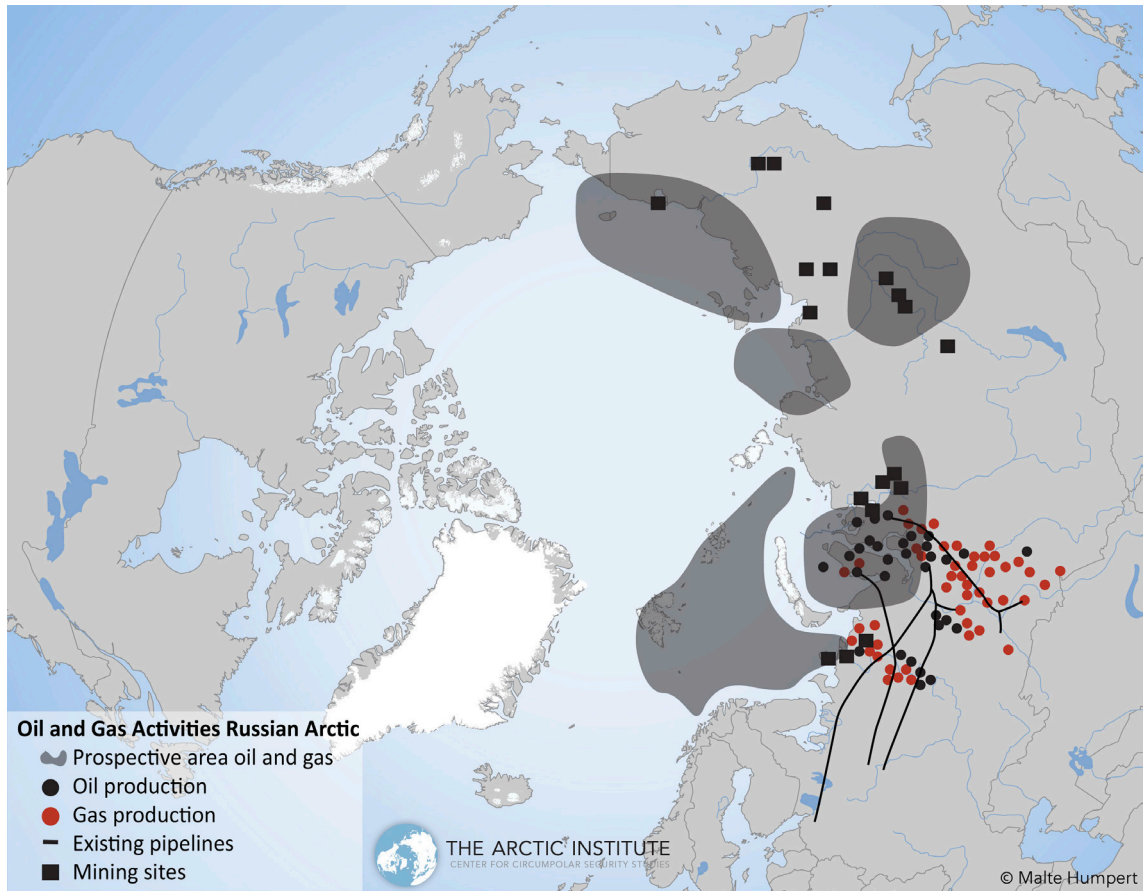
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6 European Council, "[EU sanctions against Russia explained](#)," 30 September 2024.

The White House, "[Fact Sheet United States bans imports of Russian oil, liquefied natural gas and coal](#)," White House Briefing Room, 8 March 2022.

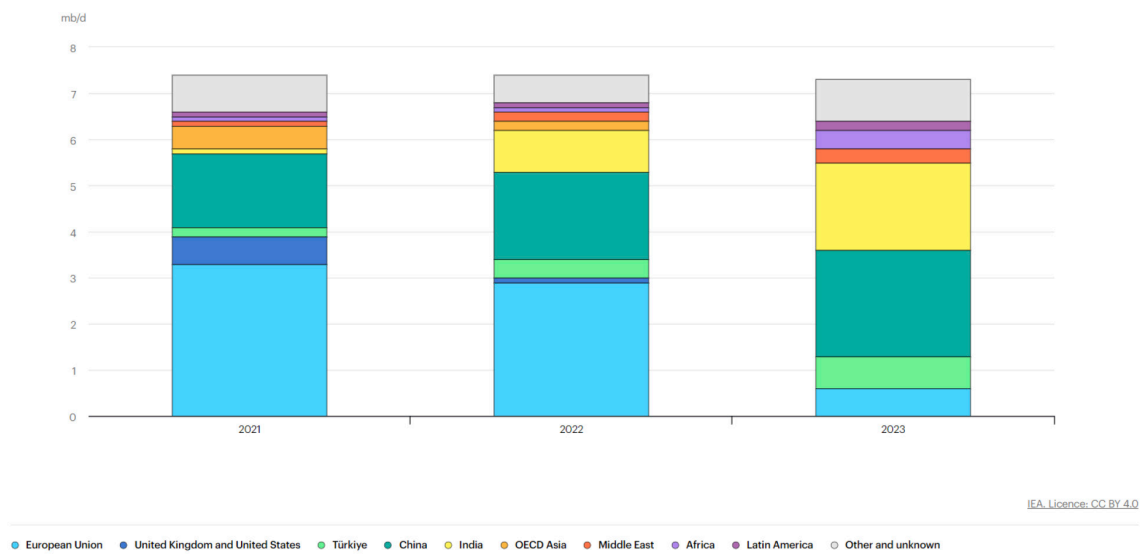
7 Ana Maria Jaller-Makarewicz. "[Russia: LNG infrastructure and trade with Europe](#)", Institute for Energy Economics, 16 September 2024.

Figure 2: Oil and gas activities in Arctic Russia



Source: The Arctic Institute, (c) Malte Humpert

Figure 3: Average Russian oil exports by country and region, 2021-2023



Source: IEA, Argus Media Group, Kpler

The Arctic region is increasingly important for securing rare earth elements (REEs) and other critical raw materials (CRMs), with approximately three-quarters of the CRMs on the EU's list originating there.<sup>8</sup> A growing interest in avoiding dependence on China, the dominant global supplier of REEs, has led the EU to establish supply-chain partnerships with Canada<sup>9</sup>, Greenland<sup>10</sup> and Norway<sup>11</sup>. These partnerships aim to secure diversified REE sources while upholding environmental standards and respecting Indigenous rights.

Since February 2022, the Northern Sea Route (NSR along Russia's Arctic coast), which is the shortest shipping route for freight transportation between Europe and countries of the Asia-Pacific region, has seen reduced shipping activity due to, among others, Western sanctions and insurance restrictions on Russian shipping. Between May 2020 and May 2021, there were 249 transits of commercial vessels of more than 5,000 deadweight tonnage through the Bering Strait, the key gateway at the Eastern end of the route. Between May 2023 and May 2024, there were 203 transits of the same criteria through the strait, despite the Red Sea crisis developing during the latter half of that period.<sup>12</sup>

In response, Russia has redirected NSR trade routes to Asia, primarily supplying energy exports to China and India. Russia's shadow fleet – reflagged tankers operating with minimal regulatory oversight – has enabled Russia to bypass some sanctions, exporting oil to Asian markets via the NSR and increasing risks of spills

and ecological damage due to relaxed safety and insurance standards.

Despite a longer ice-free season, much of the NSR is still only seasonally navigable, and operating icebreaker-assisted convoys are costly and require specialised vessels. This factor limits its attractiveness compared to more established routes like the one where ships sail through the South China Sea, pass the Horn of Africa and Yemen and the Suez Canal, even though this is evidently also mirrored with increased insecurity.

The NSR is central to Russia's Arctic economic ambitions and is heavily monitored by Russian authorities, who require permissions and charge transit fees to vessels, reinforcing Russia's control over this strategic passage. This interpretation contrasts with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)<sup>13</sup>, which generally permits innocent passage in a country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) without prior authorisation. The Russian attitude has raised significant concerns among other nations.

Considering the escalating geopolitical tensions and resource control efforts, the Arctic region faces a pivotal economic and energy transformation, as Western sanctions reshape trade routes, energy dependencies, and international collaborations, while Russia continues to increase economic activity in its Arctic zone and China seeks to expand its footprint in the region.

## Security threats and responses

Traditionally, Russia's military presence in the Arctic region has been significant, particularly in the Kola Peninsula region that provides the home bases for the Northern Fleet including nuclear ballistic missile submarines. Several Arctic ground forces units have been deployed to Ukraine. As a result "Russia's conventional land forces in the Kola Peninsula, including naval infantry and possibly special forces, are today

8 Arctic Economic Council, "[Arctic Mining report 2024](#)," 1 October 2024.

9 European Commission, "[EU and Canada set up a strategic partnership on raw materials](#)," Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, 21 June 2021.

10 European Commission, "[EU and Greenland sign strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials value chains](#)," Press Corner, 30 November 2023.

11 European Commission, "[EU and Norway sign strategic partnership on sustainable land-based raw materials and battery value chains](#)," Press Corner, 21 March 2024.

12 Joshua Minchen and Cichen Shen, "[Threat of sanctions is holding back the northern sea route](#)," Lloyd's List, 9 July 2024.

13 United Nations, "[United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea \(UNCLOS\)](#)," Montego Bay, 10 December 1982.

depleted and substantially weakened.”<sup>14</sup> Russia’s ability to rapidly capture NATO territory in the High North (that is Northern Finland, Sweden and Norway) “is in the short term even more minimal than before the war.”<sup>15</sup> Russia’s naval and air (defence) capabilities in this area have not been affected by the war in Ukraine. The importance of the nuclear submarines requires from Russia to maintain and strengthen its military potential based at the Kola Peninsula. However, east of Novaya Zemlya, there are major military gaps, particularly in the air and maritime sectors.<sup>16</sup>

Hybrid threats have increased in the last few years. Norway has been most affected by unidentified drone flights over communication infrastructure, airports, oil- and gas installations and military facilities. Svalbard has been an object of illegal photographing. The jamming of GPS signals of civilian air traffic in parts of the European Arctic is particularly worrying. Considering Russia’s limited conventional military potential in the High North, “Russian aggression toward Arctic European states may continue to lean heavily on hybrid tools.”<sup>17</sup>

China and Russia are advancing a closer military relationship in the Arctic, marked by joint naval and air exercises, along with increasing formal coordination in regional security efforts. This cooperation was further solidified when China’s Coast Guard and Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB) signed a Memorandum of Understanding<sup>18</sup>, which supports joint efforts in security operations and law enforcement activities. Such moves reflect both nations’ strategic interests in the Arctic, where shared goals encompass not only resource access

and regional influence but also countering Western presence in the area. These evolving ties underscore an important geopolitical shift, raising concerns for Arctic security among NATO allies.

Western Arctic nations are increasing their military activities in the Arctic region. One of the primary focuses in Arctic defence is the enhancement of naval and air capabilities suited to the region’s extreme conditions. Western Arctic nations are investing in ice-capable vessels and submarines to ensure control over Arctic Sea lanes, especially as Russia advances its presence in the region with a substantial icebreaker fleet and fortified naval bases. Additionally, Arctic militaries are modernising their air fleets with aircraft designed for extreme cold and equipped for extended reconnaissance missions. The US Arctic Strategy of October 2022 states that threats to the US and its allies will be deterred by enhancing American capabilities, in particular in the areas of domain awareness and icebreakers. Training in the High North and “episodic deployments” to the area, nationally or with allies, will be enhanced.<sup>19</sup>

In NATO, the High North is a sensitive area as some Arctic States – especially Canada – prefer no involvement of the alliance in the area, although this may start to change. In the past, Finland and Sweden as non-NATO countries equally showed reluctance on wider western military activity in the Arctic region and preferred bilateral or subregional military coordination efforts.<sup>20</sup> The Russian war against Ukraine and the NATO membership of Finland and Sweden could change the situation, but so far consensus in the alliance is lacking even to develop a NATO Arctic strategy. Naturally, NATO coordination plays a vital role in Northern European security, in terms of surveillance and joint exercises like Cold Response and Trident Juncture that are

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14 Colin Wall and Njord Wegge, “[The Russian Arctic Threat – Consequences of the Ukraine War](#),” CSIS Briefs, January 2023, p. 3.

15 Ibid., p. 8.

16 Onur Limon and Elif Gürdal Limon, “[The impact of the Ukrainian war on Russian military capabilities in the Arctic](#),” Polar Geography, September 2024, pp. 17-18.

17 Colin Wall and Njord Wegge, “[The Russian Arctic Threat – Consequences of the Ukraine War](#),” CSIS Briefs, January 2023, p. 10.

18 China Coast Guard, “[China Coast Guard, Russian Federal Security Service sign MoU](#),” News Release, 16 May 2023.

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19 The White House, “[National Strategy for the Arctic Region](#), the White House,” October 2022, p. 9.

20 Dick Zandee, Kimberley Kruijver, and Adája Stootman, “[The Future of Arctic Security – The Geopolitical Pressure Cooker and the Consequences for the Netherlands](#),” Clingendael Report, April 2020, pp. 22-23 and 29-30.



## Conclusions

The Arctic's shifting security landscape, shaped by geopolitical tensions, resource competition, militarisation and hybrid threats, is increasingly complex. The Arctic's importance to global powers is growing, spurred by climate change and the increasing accessibility of its waters and resources. Russia's war against Ukraine has accelerated the deteriorating security situation in the Arctic region. Although the area remains calm in military terms, the 'High North, Low Tensions' description of the past is increasingly outdated. The military activities of the Russian Federation continue to develop, except for the land forces component that has been deployed to Ukraine and substantially weakened. In the current situation of continued war fighting in Ukraine, the hybrid activities of Russia in the High North pose the biggest challenge to the western Arctic States and their partners.

On top of this, the Sino-Russian cooperation in the region is increasing, both economically and militarily. Although western sanctions in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine have had an impact on reducing the growing importance of the Northern Sea Route along Russia's Arctic coast, the melting of the ice and the availability of natural resources in the region will continue to make it an attractive area for economic exploitation and trading. From a security and defence perspective, the Finnish and Swedish NATO membership marks an important change. The new NATO northern region now encompasses the whole of Scandinavia and its adjacent sea areas, raising questions about the role and presence of the alliance in the High North.

Based on these conclusions, the following topics should be addressed by the Netherlands, together with partner countries:

- **Promoting responsible resource management and environmental protection**

As competition for Arctic resources grows, the management of these resources require more attention. Supporting international frameworks for environmentally sound resource extraction would help to reinforce Arctic environmental protection. Additionally, encouraging companies operating in the Arctic to adhere to best practices demonstrates a commitment to sustainability, aligning with values on environmental stewardship.

- **Addressing hybrid threats and enhancing resilience**

The Arctic is increasingly exposed to hybrid threats such as cyberattacks, drone espionage and other ways of Russian interference, which endangers the functioning of critical infrastructure. Given its cybersecurity expertise, the Netherlands can partner with Arctic states to build resilience against such threats. Collaborative cybersecurity initiatives, joint training exercises, and alignment with NATO and EU standards can bolster Arctic community defences against potential security risks.

- **Reconsidering military deployments**

Traditionally, the Netherlands – in close cooperation with the United Kingdom – participates in cold weather training in Northern Norway with the Marines Corps. Together with the Scandinavian countries and the Baltic States, the Netherlands also contributes to the *Joint Expeditionary Force* (JEF), led by the UK. After Finland and Sweden have joined NATO, the regional defence plan of the alliance for the collective defence of Northern Europe is a new factor that allies concerned – including the Netherlands – will have to consider.

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[www.clingendael.org](http://www.clingendael.org)  
[info@clingendael.org](mailto:info@clingendael.org)  
+31 70 324 53 84

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### About the authors

**Karen van Loon** is a Research Fellow in the Security and Defence programme within the Security Unit at the Clingendael Institute. Her research encompasses Arctic security as well as European security and defence matters.

**Dick Zandee** is leading the Security and Defence programme of the Security Unit at the Clingendael Institute. His research focuses on European security and defence issues, EU-NATO, military forces and capability development, defence industry and other security topics.

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