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by

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Introduction

The arctic used to be one of the quietest concerns of the world. For decades, it was seen as a frozen, faraway place that mattered mostly to scientists studying climate change and not to armies or diplomats. That has changed a lot in the past few years. Rising global temperatures are melting the arctic ice faster than expected, and this melting is opening up new shipping routes and revealing oil, gas, and mineral reserves that were once locked under the ice. As a result, major powers are now competing for influence in the region. Russia, which already controls the largest share of arctic coastline, has been building up military bases, ports, and the world's biggest icebreaker fleet. China despite having no arctic territory of its own, has started sending research ships through arctic waters as a part of what it calls the "Polar Silk Road", its plan to gain access to arctic resources and shipping lanes.

In response, NATO the military alliance built to defend against threats to its member states, has expanded its own presence in the region, especially after Finland and Sweden joined the alliance. This situation looks like a strong united response to growing Russian and Chinese activity in the north. But there is serious problem hiding underneath this show of strength. Even as NATO builds up its military presence to counter Russia, European countries are still buying billions of dollars' worth of Russian arctic energy every year. That money does not disappear; it goes straight into funding the same Russian state that NATO is trying to deter.

This policy brief looks closely at that contradiction. It asks a simple but important question: can NATO's arctic strategy actually succeed if Europe keeps paying for the very thing it claims to be standing against? To answer this, the brief first explains how

the arctic became a strategic battleground, then examines the core problem of military posture versus economic dependence, and finally offers realistic policy options for how NATO and Europe can build a more consistent arctic strategy.

The Arctic's Strategic Transformation

The Arctic's importance today comes down to one main cause: climate change is melting the ice faster than expected. This melting has opened new sea routes, like the Northern Sea route and the Northwest Passage, which offers shorter transit times between Asia, Europe, and North America than older routes such as Suez Canal. It has also exposed oil, gas, and mineral deposits that were previously frozen and unreachable. These changes could reduce the world's dependence on traditional shipping choke points, but they also raise a harder question: who controls these new routes, and will the region become militarized as a result?

NATO's presence in the Arctic has grown quickly. Seven of the eight arctic states are NATO members, following Finland and Sweden's accession. In February 2026, NATO launched Arctic Sentry, a multi-domain military activity that gives the alliance full visibility of allied activity across the region. In June 2026, it established Forward Land Force Command Norfolk, which secures sea line across the Atlantic, and in 2025 it opened a Combined Air Operation Centre in Norway to oversee air activity across the Nordic region, the Baltic States, and the Barents Sea. Allies regularly hold joint exercises such as cold response in Norway, bringing together tens of thousands of troops from multiple countries. Russia, for its part, has long treated the Arctic as both central to its security and its economy. It has built extensive infrastructure there, including LNG terminals, expanded air bases, deep-water ports, and the world's largest icebreaker fleet, including nuclear-powered vessels that no other country operates.

Russia treats the Northern Sea route as its own sovereign waterway rather than international waters, a claim other states dispute. The arctic is also the shortest missile route between Russia and North America, which adds to why the region carries such heavy strategic weight. Russia sees itself as fighting a low-level, sub-threshold conflict with NATO, particularly in the Barents Sea, where it tests NATO's Nordic defences using drones and fishing or spy vessels. China has become the third major actor, despite having no arctic coastline. Its status in the Arctic Council changed from mere observer in 2013 to active economic, scientific, and dual use engagement today. China

wants access to energy, critical minerals, and arctic shipping lanes, and its Polar Silk Road strategy, an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative which funds icebreakers, ports, and navigation technology in the region. In July 2026, Chinese research vessels sailed through US waters near Alaska, tracked by the US coast guard for the first time. Analysts see this as the same gradual strategy China used earlier in South China Sea: start with something that looks harmless, like research, and slowly normalize large presence. Russia and China have also deepened military cooperation, including joint naval patrols, joint bomber flights near Alaska, and shared research. This is not a normal alliance, but it produces similar effects on ground.

The Core Problem: NATO's Posture Vs. Europe's Energy Dependence:

NATO's arctic buildup looks impressive on paper. New forces, new commands, and new joint exercises suggest a unified front against Russian and Chinese activity in North. But underneath this posture lies a contradiction that undermines it.

In just the first six months of 2026, European Union paid an estimated \$6.8,2 billion for Russian arctic gas. That money funds the Russian state budget, and by extension, the ongoing war in Ukraine. The main gas transit agreement between Europe and Russia expired at the end of 2024, and Ukraine cut off transit through its territory, which hurt Russian revenue temporarily. But Russia adapted quickly, selling more of its energy to China and India instead, and continuing to sell directly to parts of Europe as well. Some European countries keep buying Russian oil because it sold at a lower price than the global market rate, which makes it attractive even amid sanctions. Turkey is now the third largest buyer of Russian energy, spending around \$90 billion in total, including \$62 billion on oil alone. Hungary has spent \$13.4 billion and Slovakia \$10 billion on Russian oil and gas, placing both among the world's top importers of Russian energy.

A full EU ban Russian LNG imports is scheduled to take effect in January 2027, but it is already under strain. Greece blocked a tougher sanctions package in order to protect a Greek shipping company that earns roughly 35 percent of its revenue from carrying Russian gas. A Danish shipyard continues servicing Russian gas tankers, something Denmark's own Prime Minister has publicly called "inconceivable". The EU also tried shifting towards Azerbaijan as an alternative gas supplier, but researchers believe Azerbaijan has simply been importing more Russian gas itself and reselling it onward to Europe, meaning Russian energy still reaches European markets indirectly, just

through a different route on paper. There is a second, related contradiction worth noting. In January 2026, the United States declared that “acquiring Greenland is a national security priority”, and President Trump reportedly considered using military force to take Greenland from Denmark, a fellow NATO member. Denmark’s Prime Minister responded that Greenland’s future will be decided by its own people, not by outside pressure. This matters because it shows NATO’s arctic strategy is being undermined not only from outside, by Europe’s continued energy purchases, but from inside the alliance itself. When one member threatens another member’s territory, it damages the trust that collective defence depends on.

This inconsistency runs deeper than energy purchases alone. Experts at Harvard’s Belfer Centre describe European Union’s overall arctic policy as “ambiguous and inconsistent”. The EU has major influence over arctic energy and environmental regulation, yet it does not treat the arctic as genuine strategic priority. Part of the reason is that EU member states do not agree with each other, some depend far more heavily on Russian energy than others, which prevents any unified position from forming. Taken together, these problems mean NATO’s military buildup exists somewhat separately from economic and political decisions being made around it, rather than as part of one coherent strategy.

Policy Options and Recommendations:

Three realistic paths forward exist, each with real trade-offs.

The first option is to fully enforce the 2027 LNG ban and close the loopholes currently weakening it, specifically the Greek shipping contracts and the Danish shipyard still servicing Russian tankers. This option directly closes the gap between what NATO says and what Europe does. Its main drawback is political difficulty: enforcing it will hurt specific domestic industries in member states, which is exactly why enforcement has been delayed once.

The second option is to invest seriously in NATO’s hard infrastructure, especially icebreakers. The United States currently operates only two aging icebreakers, compared to Russia’s much larger, nuclear-powered fleet. Without stronger capability here, NATO’s arctic pressure risks remaining symbolic rather than functional. The drawback is time and cost, icebreaker and arctic infrastructure are expensive and take years to build, so this is a long-term fix rather than an immediate one.

The third option is to preserve narrow, non-political cooperation with Russia instead of pursuing total isolation. Even through the war in Ukraine, some cooperation has survived. Norway and Russia still jointly manage fishing quotas in the Barents Sea. Some have proposed forming an “Arctic Seven” that excludes Russia entirely, but experts warn this could backfire, since meaningful arctic governance is very difficult to achieve without both Russia and the United States involved. The drawback here is nuance: cooperating on fisheries or science while still competing militarily requires a careful balance that is hard to explain publicly without looking inconsistent.

The strongest path forward combines these options rather than choosing just one. NATO and the EU should fully enforce the 2027 gas ban and close its existing loopholes, while also investing in real arctic infrastructure like icebreaker, so that the alliance's posture matches its stated goals rather than remaining symbolic. At the same, low risk cooperation channels such as fisheries management and scientific research should be preserved rather than cut off completely, since fully isolating Russia would remove tools that may be needed for future de-escalation. In short, NATO's arctic strategy will only become genuinely coherent once security policy and energy policy stop being treated as two separate issues, handled by two separate parts of government that rarely talk to each other.

Conclusion

NATO's transformation in the arctic over the past two years has been real and significant. New forces, new commands, and a level of allied coordination that did not exist a decade ago all point to genuine shift in how seriously the alliance takes the region. But the strength on paper does not automatically translate into strength in practice. As long as European countries continue funding Russian energy exports, and as long as trust within the alliance itself is strained by internal disputes like the one over Greenland, NATO's arctic posture will remain only partly effective. The choices made over the next year, particularly around fully enforcing the 2027 energy ban and closing the loopholes currently undermining it will determine whether the West's arctic strategy becomes genuinely coherent, or whether the region continues to quietly reward the very actors it claims to stand against.

Ultimately, this is not a question of whether NATO or Russia “wins” the arctic. It is a question of whether the west can act with the same discipline in its economic decisions as it does in its military planning. A military alliance is only as strong as the consistency behind it, and right now, that consistency is missing. If NATO members continue treating energy policy and security policy as two unrelated conversations, the alliance’s arctic strategy will keep sending mixed signals to Russia, to China, and to its own member states. Closing that gap will not be easy, given how deeply some European economies are tied to Russian energy, but the alternative is a strategy that looks strong in press releases and weak in practice. The arctic is warming quickly, and so is the competition surrounding it. The west does not have the luxury of waiting for its policies to catch up on their own.

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