



APRIL 2026

Cold Waters, Strategic Contestation

The Northern Sea Route in Arctic Power Politics

The Northern Sea Route (NSR) increasingly functions as a strategically significant maritime corridor at the intersection of Arctic change and great-power competition. As sea ice retreats, access to this shipping route and adjacent natural resources is expanding, while Russia is consolidating control through infrastructure, regulation and military capabilities. At the same time, growing interest from China and renewed attention from the United States and NATO are embedding the NSR within a wider geopolitical and military landscape linking the Arctic and the North Atlantic.

For the Netherlands, these developments extend beyond commercial considerations. They affect economic security, supply-chain resilience, the stability of the law of the sea and the future role of defence, particularly the Royal Netherlands Navy.

Map 1 The Arctic Region



Source: 'The Arctic Circle', Odyssey Traveller

Introduction

The Northern Sea Route is gaining prominence in strategic debates as structural changes in the Arctic accelerate. Declining sea-ice coverage is increasing seasonal accessibility, while the region is becoming more central to the policies and planning of major powers. Russia is expanding its military and regulatory presence along its Arctic coastline, China is positioning itself as a long-term stakeholder, and NATO is placing greater emphasis on its northern flank.

These developments are transforming the Arctic into a more contested strategic environment,

in which maritime access, control and security dynamics are increasingly interconnected.

This policy brief is part of a three-part series analysing the NSR in the period 2030–2040 from a Dutch strategic perspective. It examines the geopolitical and strategic context of the route, including Russian control, Chinese interests and its relation to the wider maritime security environment affecting NATO and Dutch security. The second brief assesses economic and infrastructural feasibility, while the third analyses the international legal regime governing Arctic navigation.

Why the NSR matters for the Netherlands

Although geographically distant from the Arctic, developments around the NSR could affect Dutch strategic interests in the period 2030–2040.

1. Economic implications for maritime trade

When Arctic navigation becomes more reliable by 2030–2040, the NSR could modestly alter shipping patterns between Europe and Asia. For the Netherlands, including the Port of Rotterdam, this could affect maritime logistics, energy flows and global supply chains.

2. Stability of transatlantic sea lines of communication

The Arctic maritime domain connects directly to the North Atlantic sea lanes linking North America and Europe. Russian and, to a lesser extent, Chinese activity along the Arctic coastline therefore affects the wider environment in which NATO naval forces, including the Royal Netherlands Navy, safeguard these routes. As the Arctic becomes more seasonally accessible, this activity is likely to extend over longer periods of the year, increasing the need for sustained situational awareness and presence.

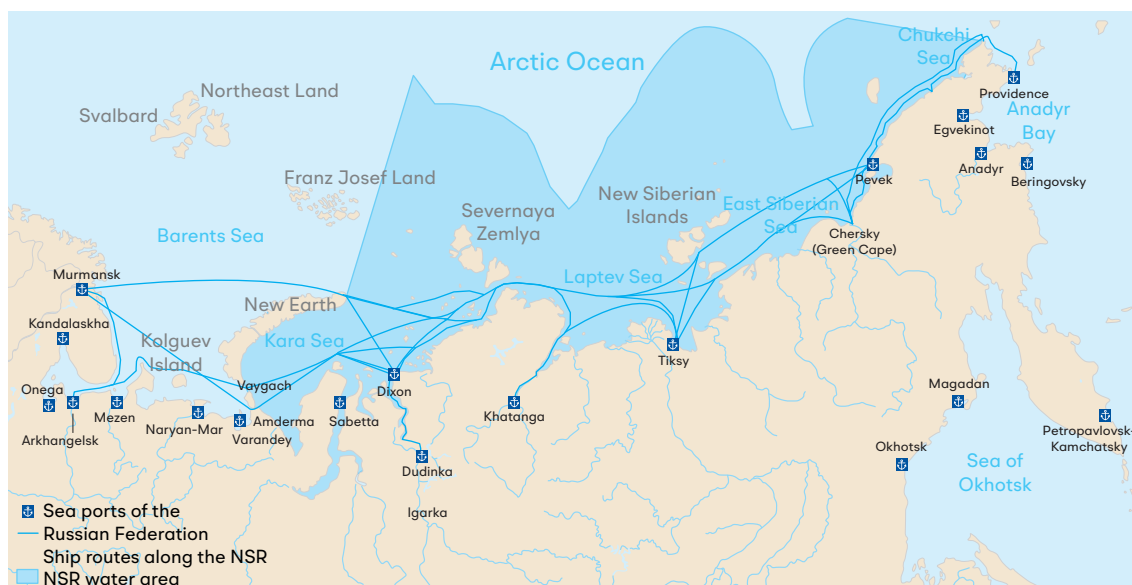
3. NATO's northern flank and implications for naval posture

As the Arctic becomes more firmly embedded in NATO's deterrence and defence posture, allied maritime activity in the High North is likely to intensify. For the Netherlands, this raises concrete questions about the role of the Royal Netherlands Navy in the northern theatre, including requirements for sustained presence, interoperability, and Arctic-relevant capabilities within a constrained force structure.

4. International legal order and freedom of navigation

The NSR is characterised by growing tension between international law and Russia's restrictive interpretation of coastal state rights. This has direct implications for freedom of navigation and the stability of the UNCLOS framework. For the Netherlands, upholding a rules-based maritime order is a core strategic interest that extends beyond the Arctic region.

Map 2 The Northern Sea Route



Source: Innoter

Geography and Strategic Significance of the NSR

The NSR runs along Russia’s Arctic coastline from the Barents Sea to the Bering Strait, connecting the North Atlantic and Pacific through the Arctic Ocean. Much of the route lies within Russia’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)¹ and, in several segments, its territorial waters. Historically, heavy sea ice limited regular navigation, but declining ice coverage has increased seasonal accessibility², particularly during late summer.

Geographically, the NSR represents the shortest maritime connection between Northern Europe and Northeast Asia. Depending on the ports

involved, voyages can reduce sailing distances by up to forty per cent.³

In practice, however, the NSR remains a challenging operating environment: ice conditions remain unpredictable, specialised vessels and icebreaker support are often required, and infrastructure along the route is limited compared with established shipping corridors.⁴

Other Arctic routes, including the Northwest Passage through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago and the potential Transpolar Route across the central Arctic Ocean, face similar operational constraints. Whereas established shipping routes depend on vulnerable chokepoints such as the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal, the constraints on the NSR lie primarily in environmental conditions and in its proximity to Russia, the dominant coastal state and a strategic competitor for many Western countries.

1 Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), a coastal state may claim an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extending up to 200 nautical miles from its baseline. Within this zone, the state has sovereign rights for the exploration, exploitation and management of natural resources, including fisheries, oil and gas, and other seabed resources. However, the EEZ is not equivalent to territorial waters: other states retain freedoms of navigation, overflight and the laying of submarine cables and pipelines, provided these activities respect the coastal state’s resource rights and relevant regulations.

2 Mohamed Rami Mahmoud, ‘Potential benefits of climate change on navigation in the northern sea route by 2050’, *Scientific Reports*: 14, February 2, 2024.

3 Xueke Li & Amanda H. Lynch, ‘New insights into projected Arctic sea road: operational risks, economic values, and policy implications’, *Climatic Change* 17(30), March 20 2023.

4 Björn Gunnarsson, ‘On the Vulnerabilities of the Northern Sea Route’s Maritime Transportation System’, *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, March 2024.

Despite these constraints, the route has acquired growing strategic relevance. For Russia, the NSR is closely linked to Arctic energy development and the economic integration of its northern territories. At the same time, the route runs adjacent to key Russian military installations and strategic assets, embedding economic activity within a highly sensitive security environment. The NSR also attracts attention from other actors. China increasingly views the Arctic as a potential component of its “Belt and Road Initiative”⁵, linking Asian markets with Europe through northern maritime routes.

For Russia, the NSR serves both economic and strategic purposes. The Arctic already accounts for a significant share of Russia’s GDP – often estimated at around 10%⁶, largely driven by hydrocarbon extraction. While precise projections for the coming decade remain uncertain, Russian policy and investment patterns indicate that the region will remain a central pillar of economic activity, albeit under growing constraints from sanctions and infrastructure limitations.⁷ Russia therefore plays a defining role in shaping the development and governance of the route. The NSR is often described as a coastal shipping corridor under Russian administration rather than a conventional international shipping lane.⁸ This characterisation, however, remains contested: while Russia treats the route as a sovereign transport corridor subject to national regulation, other actors, including Western states and China, argue that key segments thereof should be governed by international maritime law, including rights of passage and navigation.

Russia has long regarded the Arctic as both economically promising and militarily indispensable. Since the start of the war against Ukraine in 2022, however, the balance has shifted toward greater securitisation. While the economic development of the NSR remains a strategic objective, it is increasingly subordinated to deterrence and sovereign control.⁹ Infrastructure development, regulatory measures and military capabilities form part of a broader strategy to secure Russia’s northern approaches.

Russia maintains the most extensive military infrastructure in the Arctic, centred on the Kola Peninsula and the Northern Fleet. As identified in Russia’s 2022 Maritime Doctrine¹⁰, the Arctic is a region of vital military importance. The Northern Fleet forms the backbone of Russia’s sea-based nuclear deterrent, operating ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) that underpin the country’s second-strike capability. Protecting these assets is therefore a core priority of Russian military planning.

Towards this end, Russia has revived elements of the Cold War-era Bastion defence concept¹¹, which focuses on securing designated maritime areas, particularly in the Barents Sea, where its strategic submarines can operate with reduced vulnerability. Rather than seeking full maritime exclusion, this approach aims to establish a layered defensive buffer. This is supported by capabilities such as long-range air defence systems (S-400), coastal defence systems (Bastion-P), Arctic-adapted bases and airfields, as well as a significant submarine presence. Together, these systems are designed to raise the operational costs and risks for NATO forces operating in the region.

5 Tillman et al., ‘[The Polar Silk Road: China’s New Frontier of International Cooperation](#)’, *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 4(3), December 2018.

6 Elizabeth Buchanan, ‘[Russia’s Arctic strategy: Drivers, hybridity and possible future](#)’, *Hybrid CoE*, December 2021.

7 Adája Stoetman et al., ‘[Military capabilities affected by climate change. An analysis of China, Russia and the United States](#)’, *Clingendael*, January 2023.

8 Hong Nong, ‘[Russia’s Arctic Bet: Can Asia Deliver on NSR Ambitions?](#)’, *The Diplomat*, June 19, 2025

9 Megi Benia, ‘[Russia Continues to Reshape Arctic Security](#)’, *Jamestown*, 26 February 2026.

10 ‘[On Approval of the Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation](#)’, *Official Publication of Legal Acts*, July 31, 2022.

11 Karen van Loon et al., ‘[Cold Calculations: The future of Arctic Security and the role of the Netherlands](#)’, *Clingendael*, June 16, 2025; Jonas Kjellén, ‘[The Russian Northern Fleet Bastion Revisited](#)’, *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, 2025.

Map 3 Russia's bastion defence



Source: Mikkola, 2019¹²

This defensive architecture has direct implications for NATO's key sea lines of communication across the Barents Sea, Norwegian Sea and the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap, a strategic maritime chokepoint between the Nordic seas and the North Atlantic through which naval forces must pass to access the open ocean. This corridor therefore remains critical for securing transatlantic reinforcement and safeguarding sea lines of communication between North America and Europe, particularly in times of crisis¹³. From this perspective, the NSR matters less as a commercial shipping corridor than as part of the broader military geography of the Arctic-North Atlantic theatre.

While Russia's posture in the Arctic centres on deterrence and territorial defence, its approach to competition is also shaped by escalation management. Large-scale conventional conflict in the region appears unlikely in the near term. However, the Arctic remains a plausible arena for below-threshold escalation, including hybrid activities, signalling and military posturing.



In this context, Russia's ability to regulate and, if necessary, restrict access to the NSR provides an additional instrument of control, particularly in a crisis. While such measures are unlikely to disrupt global trade on a large scale, they could be used selectively to exert pressure, shape access, and reinforce Russia's position in the Arctic maritime domain.

One important factor is Russia's force commitment in Ukraine, which constrains its available capabilities in the Arctic (see Table 1) and reinforces incentives to avoid direct confrontation near its nuclear bastion.

12 Harri Mikkola, 'The Goestrategic Arctic: Hard Security in the High North,' *Finnish Institute of International Affairs*, April 2019.

13 Nick Childs, 'Gauging the Gap: The Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom Gap – A Strategic Assessment,' *IJSS*, May 3, 2022.

Table 1 Impact of Russia’s war against Ukraine on its Arctic military posture

Russian military capabilities	Operational impact of the war against Ukraine	Implications for Arctic military posture
 Naval forces	Limited direct impact on the Northern Fleet.	Core maritime deterrence posture in the Arctic remains largely intact.
 Strategic nuclear forces	SSBN operations and associated infrastructure have not been significantly degraded. ¹⁴	Protection of the nuclear deterrent remains the central organising principle of Russia’s Arctic strategy.
 Air forces	Sustained operational tempo in Ukraine has placed a strain on aircraft availability and readiness. ¹⁵	Lower operational flexibility for Arctic air operations, although air defence systems remain largely intact.
 Ground forces	Arctic units such as elements of the 200th and 80th Arctic brigades were redeployed to Ukraine and suffered significant losses. ¹⁶	Prolonged reduction of conventional land combat capacity in the Arctic due to slow regeneration of specialised cold-weather units. ¹⁷
Anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities	Limited direct degradation. Some air defence assets have been used in Ukraine, but core systems remain intact. ¹⁸	Sustains Russia’s layered denial capability along the Arctic coastline, reinforcing its defensive posture despite broader conventional constraints.

Instead, hybrid activities such as intelligence collection, cyber operations and infrastructure sabotage have emerged as tools of calibrated coercion¹⁹, meaning actions designed to exert pressure and shape behaviour without triggering open conflict²⁰. For instance, cyber operations targeting critical infrastructure, including energy and communications networks

in Northern Europe, have been attributed to Russian-linked actors in recent years. In the Arctic context, such activities are particularly relevant given the region’s reliance on vulnerable and often dual-use infrastructure, including in neighbouring NATO countries and across the wider North Atlantic–Arctic system. These activities remain below the threshold of open conflict while probing Western cohesion and response mechanisms but still increase the risk of miscalculation during broader geopolitical crises.

Russia has also strengthened anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities across the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation, a layered set of predominantly Russian air and coastal defence systems designed to restrict access and raise the risks for adversary forces, including domestically developed systems such as S-400 air defence systems and Bastion-P coastal missiles.²¹

14 Mathieu Boulègue, ‘[The Impact of the War Against Ukraine on Russia’s Arctic Posture: Hard Power on Vulnerable Ice](#)’, *Wilson Center Polar Institute*, June 14, 2024.
 15 Justin Bronk et al., ‘[The Russian Air War and Ukrainian Requirements for Air Defence](#)’, *The Royal United Services Institute*, November 7, 2022.
 16 Troy J. Bouffard et al., ‘[Russian Arctic land forces and defense trends redefined by NATO and Ukraine](#)’, September 16, 2025.
 17 Dr Sidharth Kaushal, ‘[Optimising the Royal Netherlands Navy for its Role within NATO](#)’, p. 8, *Royal United Services Institute*, December 19, 2024.
 18 Andreas Østhagen, ‘[The Arctic after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine: The increased risk of conflict and hybrid threats](#)’, *Hybrid CoE*, May 2023.
 19 Andreas Østhagen, ‘[The Arctic after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine: The increased risk of conflict and hybrid threats](#)’, *Hybrid CoE*, May 2023.
 20 Ibid.

21 Mariana Balona, ‘[From Exceptionalism to Militarisation: the Changing Landscape of the Arctic](#)’, *Atlas Institute for International Affairs*, July 4, 2024.

Together, these systems enable Russia to detect and engage air and maritime targets at ranges of several hundreds of kilometres, effectively creating overlapping defensive zones along its Arctic coastline, well into the Atlantic Ocean.

The Barents Sea forms a central operational hub within this architecture. From this maritime space, Russian naval and long-range strike units equipped with land attack cruise and ballistic missiles can pose a risk to targets across Europe and parts of North America. This dual-use intermediate range strike capability enables Moscow to project pressure beyond the Arctic theatre and reinforces the credibility of coercive actions below the threshold of open conflict.

The reopening of roughly fifty Soviet-era bases reflects a largely overt expansion of Russia's military footprint in the Arctic. At the same time, elements such as the expansion of the icebreaker fleet and the deployment of Arctic-capable research vessels are often framed in civilian or economic terms, while retaining clear dual-use potential.²² Together, this combination of overt military infrastructure and dual-use capabilities supports Russia's ability to sustain and protect submarine operations, including those of nuclear-powered attack and guided-missile submarines (SSNs/SSGNs) and ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), across the broader Arctic maritime domain.

This blending of civil and military functions allows Moscow to consolidate control while mitigating the optics of overt militarisation. Surveillance infrastructure has also expanded significantly, with modernised radar installations, satellite support systems and maritime monitoring facilities enhancing Russia's ability to monitor activity along the NSR and the adjacent Arctic.²³

At the same time, the route contributes to Russia's strategic flexibility. By linking the

Pacific and Northern Fleets along Russia's Arctic coastline, the NSR provides an internal maritime corridor that allows Moscow to shift naval assets between the Pacific and Atlantic theatres with limited external visibility. While surface movements can be monitored through satellite-based ISR, coverage in the High North remains intermittent, and the route's primary advantage lies in enabling operations within Russia's own maritime domain, under the protection of layered defences, with particular relevance for submarine movements. For naval planners, this potential for inter-theatre mobility adds an important dimension to the route's strategic significance.

Russia's posture does not aim to create an impenetrable Arctic fortress. Instead, it seeks to impose risk, shape escalation dynamics and complicate NATO operational planning. For NATO naval planners, the Arctic forms an extension of the North Atlantic theatre, where Russian nuclear deterrence, submarine operations and transatlantic reinforcement routes intersect. Environmental conditions, including complex seabed topography, variable water layers and sea ice, shape detection and counter-detection dynamics between submarines and anti-submarine warfare forces.

At the same time, logistics and sustainment remain major constraints for prolonged operations, as the limited numbers of ports, repair facilities and support bases compel external naval forces to rely on extended supply chains. Russia has introduced a range of regulatory requirements for vessels transiting the NSR, including prior notification or authorisation, mandatory pilotage and, in some cases, icebreaker escorts.²⁴ Additional notification requirements for foreign warships further reinforce Moscow's legal claims over Arctic waters, an interpretation that is not universally accepted under UNCLOS.²⁵ The result

22 Mathieu Boulègue, 'The militarization of Russian polar politics,' *Chatham House*, June 2022.

23 Federico Borsari & Gordon B. Davis, 'High Stakes in the High North: Harnessing Uncrewed Capabilities for Arctic Defense and Security', CEPA, December 16, 2025.

24 Andrey Todorov, 'New Russian Law on Northern Sea Route Navigation: Gathering Arctic Storm or Tempest in a Teapot?', *Belfer Center*, March 9, 2023.

25 United Nations, 'United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,' December 10, 1982.

is structural tension: the NSR is presented as a commercial shipping corridor yet is governed as a strategically controlled maritime space.

Strategic competition in the Arctic

Russia's consolidation of control along the NSR increasingly shapes how other major powers approach the Arctic. As a result, the region is becoming more closely integrated into wider patterns of geopolitical competition. Among non-Arctic states, China has emerged as the most visible external stakeholder in the region.

China's Arctic engagement reflects a long-term effort to reduce structural vulnerabilities in its global trade system while expanding its geopolitical presence. Chinese discourse increasingly links Arctic activity to the ambition of becoming a "Polar Great Power" by 2035.²⁶ Although China is not an Arctic state, its 2018 Arctic Policy introduced the concept of a Polar Silk Road linking Arctic routes to the Belt and Road Initiative.²⁷ By presenting itself as a near-Arctic state, Beijing sought to legitimise a greater regional role. Although this framing was moderated in response to concerns among Arctic states, China's practical engagement has continued to expand.

For China, the NSR represents strategic diversification rather than a near-term transformation of global shipping. Arctic routes are unlikely to replace established corridors such as the Malacca Strait or Suez Canal,²⁸ but could reduce dependence on vulnerable maritime chokepoints, notably in relation to China's "Malacca Dilemma", its reliance on narrow and potentially contested sea lanes for energy imports and trade. As Arctic sea ice retreats, the

region increasingly links the Indo-Pacific and the North Atlantic maritime theatres. Although Arctic routes will remain supplementary, they offer an additional northern connection between Asian and European markets and could partially mitigate China's exposure to disruptions along southern sea lanes.

China does not maintain a permanent military presence in the Arctic. Apart from limited joint exercises with Russia²⁹, its involvement remains primarily economic and scientific in nature, although these activities may have dual-use implications.³⁰

Chinese state-owned enterprises hold significant stakes in Russian Arctic energy projects such as Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG-2, which rely heavily on the NSR for exports to Asian markets. Following Western sanctions, Chinese financing has become increasingly important for Russia in sustaining its Arctic energy development³¹ These investments secure long-term resource access while embedding China within Russia's Arctic economy.

China has also expanded its scientific footprint through research stations in Svalbard and Iceland, polar expeditions, satellite constellations and seabed mapping initiatives. While presented as civilian research, these activities align with China's broader military-civil fusion strategy³². In locations such as Svalbard, this presence intersects with a strategically and legally sensitive environment shaped by the Svalbard Treaty³³, Russian activities and the archipelago's position in the European Arctic. China's expanding Arctic presence

26 The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 'China's Arctic Policy', January 2018; Camilla T.N. Sørensen, 'The Evolving Chinese Strategy in the Arctic: Entering the Grey Zone?', In: Hybrid Threats and Grey Zone Conflict (Edited by: Mitt Regan & Aurel Sari), Oxford University Press, April 2024.

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

28 Heather A. Conley, 'China's Arctic Dream', CSIS, February 26, 2018.

29 Riva Panchal, 'China's Adaptive Diplomacy and Economic Statecraft in a Fragmented Arctic Order', *The Arctic Institute's 2025 China Series*: 57, December 2, 2025.

30 Stephanie Pezard et al., 'China's Economic, Scientific, and Information Activities in the Arctic', RAND Corporation, January 23, 2025.

31 Karen van Loon et al., 'Cold Calculations: The future of Arctic Security and the role of the Netherlands', *Clingendael*, June 16, 2025.

32 Xiao Tianliang, 'The Science of Military Strategy', National Defense University Press, 2020.

33 *The Svalbard Treaty*, February 19, 1920.

therefore increasingly intersects with strategic considerations related to maritime domain awareness and operational knowledge of Arctic maritime environments.

China's engagement is above all pragmatic rather than strategic³⁴ Russia prioritises sovereign control over its Arctic zone and strict regulation of the NSR, whereas China benefits from stable and internationally accessible shipping routes.³⁵ Structural asymmetry further complicates this relationship: Russia's growing dependence on Chinese capital increases Beijing's leverage, while China retains diversified global trade routes. While Beijing avoids directly challenging Moscow's regulatory approach, its long-term preference for predictable and internationally governed maritime corridors diverges from Russia's sovereignty-centred perspective. Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation is therefore best understood as an alignment of convenience rather than a deeply integrated strategic partnership.

China's Arctic engagement does not currently constitute a direct military challenge to NATO, but it embeds the region more firmly within wider systemic competition. Economic and scientific activities, including dual-use technologies and data collection, may gradually expand Beijing's situational awareness in strategically sensitive maritime areas. As Arctic accessibility increases, the region could also provide China with a potential northern maritime pathway linking the Indo-Pacific and the North Atlantic. Chinese financial support for Russia's Arctic sector may further strengthen Moscow's resilience against Western sanctions. China is therefore best understood as a strategic follower in the Arctic, operating within a system in which Russia plays a leading role, particularly along the NSR, but

which remains contested and shaped by multiple actors, while gradually increasing its strategic presence in the region.

Together, Russia's growing military presence along the NSR and China's expanding economic engagement increasingly shape how the U.S. and NATO assess the evolving strategic environment in the Arctic and the North Atlantic. For Washington, the Arctic forms part of the northern strategic approaches to North America and the wider Euro-Atlantic theatre. U.S. strategic documents, including the National Security Strategy, increasingly frame the region within the context of great-power competition, emphasising homeland defence, early warning capabilities and the protection of maritime approaches to the U.S. In this view, the Arctic functions both as a strategic buffer and as an operational space linking the Arctic Ocean, the North Atlantic and the North American homeland.

Maritime access between the Arctic Ocean and the Atlantic is structured by chokepoints such as the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom (GIUK) gap, which remains central for monitoring submarine movements and safeguarding transatlantic sea lines of communication. While the NSR itself does not connect directly to this corridor, it supports the broader Russian military posture in the Arctic from which the Northern Fleet operates into the North Atlantic. In this way, developments along the NSR have indirect implications for the wider Atlantic security environment.

For NATO, these dynamics reinforce the growing importance of the Arctic within the Alliance's collective defence posture. Although the NSR lies largely outside NATO operational space, the strategic environment surrounding it increasingly shapes Allied security in both the Arctic and North Atlantic, as well as NATO's ability to monitor, reinforce and operate within its treaty area.

NATO has reinforced its focus on Atlantic maritime security through structures such as

34 Andrew Foxall, 'The Sino-Russian Partnership in the Arctic,' In: *On Thin Ice? Perspectives on Arctic Security* (Edited by Duncan Depledge & P. Whitney Lackenbauer), *The North American Arctic Security and Defence Network*, 2021.

35 Bohdan Ustymenko, 'Putin's Arctic ambitions: Russia eyes natural resources and shipping routes,' *Atlantic Council*, April 9, 2025.

Joint Force Command Norfolk (JFC Norfolk).³⁶ NATO's Regional Defence Plans³⁷ similarly integrate the Arctic into Alliance planning. Under Regional Defence Plan Northwest, the Alliance seeks to secure access to the North Atlantic and adjacent Arctic maritime domain while safeguarding transatlantic reinforcement routes. Because this corridor remains critical for reinforcement, Russia's Arctic posture increasingly intersects with NATO's strategic interests.

The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO further strengthen the Alliance's position in the region by improving coordination across the Nordic region and enhancing situational awareness across the Arctic–Baltic strategic space. At the same time, the strategic relevance of the Arctic and the NSR differs across the Alliance: for the U.S., it is closely tied to homeland defence and nuclear deterrence, whereas for European allies it is more directly linked to regional security and the protection of sea lines of communication, often with more limited capacity to shape developments independently.

Alongside these structural developments, NATO has expanded operational activity in the Arctic. Initiatives such as Arctic Sentry coordinate allied exercises, deployments and surveillance across the region, reinforcing deterrence while improving interoperability.³¹ These initiatives also reflect Washington's push for greater allied engagement as geopolitical competition intensifies, building on a longer-term increase in strategic attention to the Arctic rather than a single driver.

For European allies, including the Netherlands, the evolving Arctic security environment carries

direct operational relevance³⁸; this is reflected in long-standing patterns of allied cooperation, with the Royal Netherlands Navy and Marine Corps regularly operating in northern Norway alongside partners such as the United Kingdom and Norway in amphibious and cold-weather exercises, positioning the Netherlands as a capable contributor to Arctic operations.

Taken together, these developments illustrate how the Arctic is becoming increasingly integrated into NATO's collective defence planning. While the NSR remains primarily under Russian administration in practice, a position that is not universally accepted under international law, the strategic environment surrounding the route increasingly shapes Allied interests in maintaining access, situational awareness and deterrence across the Arctic–North Atlantic theatre. For European maritime states, these developments have growing strategic and operational implications.

Strategic Implications for the Netherlands and European Allies

Debate over the future of the NSR reflects its growing strategic relevance despite uncertain economic viability. Russia continues to invest in Arctic military infrastructure and capabilities, underscoring the importance that Moscow attaches to the region. At the same time, the United States increasingly calls on European allies to assume greater responsibility for managing the conventional Russian challenge. Expanding allied activity in the Arctic therefore signals Washington's expectation that NATO allies play a larger role in monitoring and managing emerging regional risks. The recent U.S. focus on Greenland reinforces this shift, reflecting concerns about securing critical nodes in the Arctic–North Atlantic theatre, including missile warning and space-based surveillance systems, maritime access routes

36 NATO Joint Force Command Norfolk, 'About Us', n.d.; SHAPE NATO, 'NATO's Allied Command Operations to Update Provisional, Regional Boundaries,' December 4, 2025.

37 Piotr Szymański & Jacek Tarociński, 'NATO's northern flank: allied forces and structures in the Nordic countries,' Centre for Eastern Studies, October 7, 2025.

38 International Association of Military Mountain Schools, 'The Joint Centre Of Competence for Military Operations in Extreme Conditions (J-KCMOX)', n.d.

and infrastructure, rather than a direct link to the NSR itself.

Although assessments of the Russian military threat have long focused on Central Europe, developments in the Arctic increasingly shift attention to the region. With the NSR at its centre, the region is evolving from a peripheral northern flank into a potential northern frontline linking the Arctic maritime domain to the North Atlantic and the GIUK corridor. Russia's expanding military infrastructure, A2/AD capabilities and hybrid activities along its Arctic coastline create an environment in which competition may unfold across the escalation spectrum, ranging from area denial and below-threshold operations to direct military confrontation aimed at establishing *faits accomplis*.

The Netherlands is well positioned to contribute to this growing allied role. Long-standing experience operating in Arctic conditions, combined with close defence relations with the UK and Norway and growing cooperation with the U.S. and JFC Norfolk, places the Netherlands in a favourable position within transatlantic defence cooperation. Participation in frameworks such as the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and the Quadlat cooperation format³⁹ further supports coordination and operational alignment.

Much of this responsibility falls within the domain of the Naval Command. As a medium-sized navy operating across multiple theatres and levels of intensity, the Royal Netherlands Navy faces a wide range of operational demands, with a growing emphasis on deterrence and collective defence, including anti-submarine warfare, integrated air and missile defence and amphibious operations, alongside maritime

security operations such as counter-narcotics missions. Maintaining Arctic readiness adds further complexity, particularly while much of the fleet is undergoing replacement.⁴⁰ This places additional demands on personnel, equipment and operational planning.

Why maintaining an Arctic focus remains strategically advisable:

- The Arctic is one of the more plausible regions where tensions with Russia could manifest below the threshold of armed conflict, including hybrid activities and signalling. Sustained presence and exercises strengthen NATO's deterrence posture by improving situational awareness and reinforcing the ability to operate in a strategically sensitive environment.
- It is one of the few regions where the U.S. relies significantly on allied contributions, creating opportunities for European allies to shape operational approaches and reinforce their role within the transatlantic security framework.
- Operating and exercising in Arctic conditions places exceptional demands on personnel, equipment and logistics, contributing to higher levels of readiness across the force and improving performance in high-intensity scenarios.
- Active participation in deterrence and defence in the Arctic contributes to defence in depth for the Netherlands by helping contain long-range threats originating from the Russian Arctic, including those affecting transatlantic sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and key chokepoints such as the GIUK gap.

Implications for Dutch and European defence policy:

- Strengthen contributions to allied operations, exercises and situational awareness in the Arctic as part of NATO's northern posture, for example by increasing the frequency and scale of Dutch naval and marine

³⁹ JEF is a UK-led multinational framework designed to enable rapid military coordination among a group of Northern European allies, with a particular focus on the Baltic Sea and the High North. Quadlat is a defence cooperation format between the UK, the Netherlands, Norway and the U.S. aimed at aligning operational planning, exercises and doctrine.

⁴⁰ Naval News Staff, '[Dutch Navy to replace OPV and LPD with a Single Class of Ships](#)', March 7, 2024.

deployments to High North exercises (e.g. in northern Norway), and by embedding Dutch staff officers more systematically in Arctic-relevant NATO command structures and planning cycles.

- Enhance European capacity to monitor and operate in the Arctic, strengthening the ability of European allies to shape regional security dynamics within NATO and reducing structural dependence on U.S. enablers, for example by investing in maritime domain awareness capabilities suited to high latitudes (e.g. ISR, satellite support, secure communications) and by expanding European-led intelligence sharing on Arctic maritime activity.
- Leverage cooperation frameworks such as the JEF and Quadlat to access capabilities and operational concepts that are not available within the Dutch armed forces inventory, for example by integrating more structurally into UK- and Norway-led operational concepts for High North contingencies, including anti-submarine warfare and littoral operations in cold-weather environments.

- Pursue greater European influence within NATO command structures, including but not limited to JFC Norfolk, as part of a broader effort to strengthen the European pillar within the Alliance, for example by prioritising Dutch personnel contributions to key planning and command positions related to SLOC protection and Arctic–North Atlantic operations, and by aligning national planning cycles more closely with NATO’s Regional Defence Plans (Northwest).

In this context, the strategic significance of the NSR for the Netherlands lies primarily in the evolving security environment along NATO’s northern flank. At the same time, its economic potential and legal status remain important dimensions of the broader strategic picture. This policy brief is part of a three-part series that examines the NSR from complementary perspectives, with subsequent briefs addressing the economic viability of Arctic shipping and the international legal framework governing navigation along the route.

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The authors would like to thank Chloé Valkenet for her valuable contributions to this report.

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