

Why Europe Is Quietly Rethinking Its 'No Drilling in the Arctic' Promise

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Note: the original article is provided as a separate file (attached to the email or downloadable from the website).

1. Explanation (Ages 14–18)

Five years ago, the EU vowed to keep Arctic oil and gas locked underground forever. Now, with war in the Middle East and a hostile Russia, Brussels is quietly reconsidering – and Norway is licking its lips.

What's Going On?

In 2021, the European Union announced a bold environmental position: it would push the world to leave Arctic oil, gas and coal in the ground. That promise is now wobbling. According to documents and officials cited by the Financial Times, the European Commission is reviewing its Arctic policy and may drop the call for a drilling ban by autumn 2026.

Why the U-turn? Two shocks rewired Europe's energy map. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine cut off cheap Russian gas, and a more recent war involving Iran has rattled Middle Eastern oil supplies. Suddenly, energy security is trumping climate ambition – and Norway, which already pumps gas from the Barents Sea, is positioning itself as Europe's reliable, democratic supplier.

How To Think About It

This isn't really a story about oil. It's a story about how a crisis forces governments to choose between two values they previously claimed to hold equally.

- Think of it like a school that bans junk food – until the cafeteria supplier goes bankrupt and suddenly vending machines reappear 'temporarily.' The principle didn't change; the constraints did.
- Or think of NATO during the Cold War: alliances and rules look permanent until a bigger threat shows up, then everything is renegotiated. Russia's aggression has done to EU climate policy what 9/11 did to airport security – reset what counts as 'normal.'

Key Things To Know

- The EU's 2021 pledge aimed for an international moratorium – a temporary global ban – on new Arctic fossil fuel projects. The document admits 'no progress' has been made convincing other countries to sign on.
- Norway is the EU's biggest winner here. It's not an EU member, but it has become Europe's top gas supplier since 2022 and wants Arctic drilling treated as legitimate.
- Norway argues its Barents Sea operations aren't 'really' Arctic – the waters are ice-free, with no polar bears or icebergs. Critics call this a semantic dodge.
- Russia is the most active Arctic driller, and the region – especially the 'Bear Gap' between Norway and Svalbard – hosts a huge share of Russian nuclear submarines. Energy and security are tangled together.
- What most people miss: over 10 oil companies lobbied the EU last month using 'energy security' language. The fossil fuel industry has learned that geopolitics, not economics, is now the winning argument.

Why It Matters

If you're going to vote, work, or invest in the next decade, this is the kind of trade-off you'll see constantly: climate goals versus security, long-term versus immediate, principle versus pragmatism. The EU spent years branding itself as the world's climate leader. Watching it potentially walk back a flagship promise tells you something real about how policy actually works under pressure – and why the green jobs, carbon markets, and clean-tech industries you might enter aren't on a guaranteed upward path.

The Bigger Picture

The Arctic is warming roughly four times faster than the global average, and melting ice is opening shipping lanes and drilling sites that were physically impossible a generation ago. Expect a scramble – Russia, Norway, Canada, the US and even China all want a piece. The second-order effects worth watching: weaker EU climate credibility in global negotiations, accelerated militarisation of the far north, and a precedent that 'emergency' exceptions to climate commitments can become permanent. The 2020s may be remembered as the decade the world quietly chose energy security over emissions targets.

2. Key Terms Glossary

Moratorium

A formal, usually temporary, suspension of an activity. Here, a proposed international agreement to halt new oil and gas drilling in the Arctic.

Hydrocarbons

Chemical compounds made of hydrogen and carbon – the technical term for fossil fuels like oil, natural gas, and coal.

European Commission

The EU's executive branch – roughly the equivalent of a cabinet – which proposes laws and sets policy direction for the 27 member countries.

Barents Sea

A section of the Arctic Ocean north of Norway and Russia. Ice-free year-round in much of its area, making it accessible for drilling.

Svalbard

A Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean, strategically located between mainland Norway and the North Pole.

Bear Gap

The strategic maritime zone between northern Norway and Svalbard. Important to NATO because Russian nuclear submarines must pass through it to reach the Atlantic.

Energy security

A country's ability to reliably access affordable energy supplies – increasingly cited as a national-security concern, not just an economic one.

Biodiversity

The variety of plant and animal life in a given ecosystem. International treaties commit signatories to protecting it.

3. Reading Comprehension Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Q1. Which choice best states the central idea of the passage?

- A) Norway has overtaken Russia as the leading Arctic oil and gas producer in Europe.
- B) The EU is reconsidering its opposition to Arctic drilling due to recent energy-security pressures.
- C) Environmental groups have successfully blocked all new Arctic oil and gas projects since 2021.
- D) Climate change has made the Arctic too unstable for further fossil fuel exploration.

Q2. According to the passage, the EU's 2021 push for a drilling ban has stalled primarily because:

- A) oil prices fell, making Arctic drilling unprofitable for companies.
- B) international partners have not agreed to support the proposed moratorium.
- C) Norway officially vetoed the policy at an EU summit.
- D) the European Parliament rejected the original 2021 proposal.

Q3. The passage indicates that Norway's strategy toward the EU includes which of the following?

- A) Threatening to cut off gas exports unless the ban is lifted entirely.
- B) Joining the EU as a full member to gain voting rights on policy.
- C) Framing its Barents Sea operations as distinct from typical Arctic drilling.
- D) Partnering with Russia to jointly develop Arctic energy resources.

Q4. As used in the passage, the word 'shore up' most nearly means:

- A) relocate to coastal regions.
- B) strengthen or reinforce.
- C) publicly advertise.
- D) gradually reduce.

Q5. As used in the passage, the word 'concede' most nearly means:

- A) lose a competition.
- B) apologise formally.
- C) accept or acknowledge.
- D) donate generously.

Q6. Which statement about the relationship between geopolitics and climate policy can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?

- A) Climate commitments tend to weaken when security crises emerge.
- B) Geopolitical conflicts always strengthen environmental regulations.
- C) The EU prioritises climate goals over all other policy concerns.
- D) Energy companies have no influence on EU policymaking decisions.

Q7. The passage suggests that oil and gas companies' recent lobbying strategy relies primarily on:

- A) highlighting the economic profits of Arctic drilling ventures.
- B) emphasising energy security rather than economic arguments.
- C) denying that climate change affects the Arctic region.
- D) promising to fund renewable energy research projects.

Q8. The author's tone throughout the passage is best described as:

- A) openly outraged at the EU's policy reversal.
- B) enthusiastically supportive of Norwegian drilling.
- C) neutral and reportorial, presenting multiple perspectives.
- D) dismissive of environmental groups' objections.

Q9. Which of the following can most reasonably be inferred about Norway's broader strategic goals?

- A) Norway hopes to use Arctic cooperation to deepen ties with the EU on other issues.
- B) Norway plans to abandon fossil fuels and transition to renewables by 2030.
- C) Norway intends to join Russia in jointly governing the Arctic region.
- D) Norway wants to limit EU access to Norwegian gas exports.

Q10. Which choice provides the best evidence for the answer to the previous question?

- A) 'Norway is the second most active country in developing an oil and gas industry in the Arctic after Russia.'
- B) 'When this obstacle is removed it means that we can get closer to the EU on other stuff such as space and other defence issues.'
- C) 'There are no icebergs or polar bears in the Barents Sea.'
- D) 'Norway, western Europe's largest petroleum producer, has become an increasingly important supplier of gas to the EU since 2022.'

My Score: _____ / 10

4. Answer Key with Explanations

Q1. Which choice best states the central idea of the passage?

Answer: B

The passage's core claim is that the EU is weighing dropping its 2021 push for an Arctic drilling ban because of energy crises tied to Russia and the Middle East. A is wrong (Trap C: real-world adjacent but the passage explicitly says Russia is more active than Norway). SAT Tip: For 'central idea' questions, find the choice that captures both the WHAT and the WHY of the passage – not just one fact mentioned in it.

Q2. According to the passage, the EU's 2021 push for a drilling ban has stalled primarily because:

Answer: B

The passage states the document acknowledged 'no progress' on securing backing from international partners. C is wrong (Trap B: uses passage vocabulary like 'Norway' and 'EU' but Norway, not being an EU member, can't veto EU policy). SAT Tip: When a question asks 'why,' scan the passage for cause-and-effect signal words like 'because,' 'due to,' or 'as a result' – the answer is usually anchored to a specific sentence.

Q3. The passage indicates that Norway's strategy toward the EU includes which of the following?

Answer: C

Norwegian officials are quoted arguing the Barents Sea is ice-free, has 'no icebergs or polar bears,' and isn't 'Arctic as most people consider it.' D is wrong (Trap A: opposite direction – Norway is positioning AGAINST Russia, helping NATO contain it). SAT Tip: Watch for answer choices that flip the direction of a relationship described in the passage – these are among the most common SAT traps.

Q4. As used in the passage, the word 'shore up' most nearly means:

Answer: B

The phrase 'shore up energy supplies' means strengthening them in response to the Middle East crisis. A is wrong (Trap B: takes the literal 'shore' meaning related to coastlines, which has nothing to do with the passage's intent). SAT Tip: On vocab-in-context, substitute each option into the sentence – the right answer preserves the original meaning. 'Strengthen energy supplies' fits; 'relocate energy supplies to coasts' doesn't.

Q5. As used in the passage, the word 'concede' most nearly means:

Answer: C

The Norwegian official says they've pushed the EU 'to concede this' – meaning to accept Norway's argument that the Barents Sea isn't truly Arctic. A is wrong (Trap B: 'concede' commonly means losing a game or election, but that's not the passage's usage). SAT Tip: Many vocab-in-context answers reject the word's most familiar meaning. If a definition feels too obvious, double-check by reading the surrounding sentence carefully.

Q6. Which statement about the relationship between geopolitics and climate policy can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?

Answer: A

The passage shows the EU softening a climate stance after Russia's invasion and the Iran war exposed energy vulnerabilities – suggesting security pressures can override climate ambitions. B is wrong (Trap A: opposite direction, plus the absolute word 'always'). SAT Tip: On inference questions, eliminate options containing absolutes like 'always,' 'never,' or 'all' first – the SAT rarely rewards extreme claims.

Q7. The passage suggests that oil and gas companies' recent lobbying strategy relies primarily on:

Answer: B

The passage notes more than 10 companies 'seized on arguments about energy security' in their EU consultation responses. A is wrong (Trap C: profits are a real-world motive for companies, but the passage specifically highlights the security framing they chose). SAT Tip: Inference questions test what the PASSAGE supports, not what's true in general. If you have to bring outside knowledge to justify an answer, it's probably wrong.

Q8. The author's tone throughout the passage is best described as:

Answer: C

The author quotes EU officials, Norwegian officials, and notes environmentalists' objections without taking sides – classic news reporting. A is wrong (Trap C: a reader might feel outraged, but the author's actual word choices are measured). SAT Tip: To judge tone, look at the author's adjectives and adverbs – not the topic. A controversial subject can be covered in completely neutral prose.

Q9. Which of the following can most reasonably be inferred about Norway's broader strategic goals?

Answer: A

A Norwegian official explicitly links removing the drilling 'obstacle' to getting closer to the EU on 'space and other defence issues.' D is wrong (Trap A: opposite direction – Norway wants MORE EU cooperation, not less). SAT Tip: For inference questions, look for direct quotations or paraphrased statements from the people involved – their stated motivations are the strongest evidence.

Q10. Which choice provides the best evidence for the answer to the previous question?

Answer: B

This direct quote from a Norwegian official explicitly states the strategic linkage between Arctic policy and broader EU cooperation. D is wrong (Trap C: factually true and relevant context, but doesn't speak to Norway's strategic GOALS, only its current role). SAT Tip: On evidence-pairing questions, lock in your answer to the previous question first, then find the line that DIRECTLY supports it. Don't pick evidence that's merely 'on topic' – it must specifically prove the previous claim.