

ORG EXPLAINS #7

**THE UK MILITARY IN THE
ARCTIC**



Subject:

This primer explains what military presence, relations and obligations the UK has in the “High North” region comprising the Arctic and the adjacent Northeast Atlantic Ocean between Scotland, Iceland, Greenland and Norway.

Context:

Barely mentioned in the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review, the UK’s commitment to defence of the Arctic has gradually become a pressing issue. On 30 September 2018 the UK Government announced that it would launch a new Defence Arctic Strategy in 2019 in response to geopolitical and climatic changes in the region due north of the British Isles. This is likely to reassert the UK’s key Cold War role within NATO in defence of Norway, Iceland and the waters between them. During October and November 2018, Exercise Trident Juncture 2018 will be the Alliance’s largest military exercise since the 1980s, with over 50,000 personnel simulating defence of Norway against invasion. Russia has said that it will retaliate with its own military exercises and presence in the High North.

Key Points:

- The UK is not an Arctic state but believes that the most direct military threats to its security derive from the High North, binding it to the defence of Norway, Iceland and the Norwegian Sea.
- Climate change has altered the geopolitics of the Arctic region by opening a potential passage for commercial and military vessels between Asia and Europe. Russia has responded with a revived military presence and China is investing heavily in Arctic infrastructure.
- Seven of eight Arctic states are UK allies, with five of them being members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Key bilateral defence relationships are with Norway, the United States and the Netherlands.
- The British Armed Forces have no standing presence in the Arctic but are regularly present in, off and above Norway. In 2019, a short-term deployment of RAF fighter aircraft to Iceland will also be made.
- Capabilities being revived or reinforced in 2018-2020 include cold weather training and equipment for the Royal Marines, under-ice training for Royal Navy attack submarines, and submarine-hunting aircraft for the Royal Air Force (RAF).
- Reviving cold weather capabilities, especially for anti-submarine warfare, is expensive and may well involve trade-offs with the UK’s ambitious global military posture and efforts to project military power into the Middle East and Asia-Pacific.

Is the UK an Arctic state?

The UK is not an Arctic state as its farthest northern territory (the Shetland Isles) is still some 600 km south of the Arctic Circle. The last British colonial territory to extend into the Arctic was the northern part of Canada (now mostly Nunavut), which achieved independence within the British Empire in 1867 and full sovereignty in 1982.

The “High North” is a more flexible concept that includes the Arctic and often also the land and seas to its immediate south with similar climatic conditions, such as southern Greenland, Iceland and the Norwegian Sea. Scotland’s northern isles, along with Denmark’s Faroe Islands, are thus sometimes seen as at the gateway to the High North and the UK has referred to itself as a “near-Arctic” state.

Paradoxically, the UK considers itself an Antarctic state through its claim to the uninhabited British Antarctic Territory, some 12,000 km south of the British mainland, and maintains polar-oriented scientific and security capabilities in support of this presence, including the armed icebreaker HMS Protector, in support of this presence.

What is the significance of the Arctic region for UK defence and security?

The strategic significance of the Arctic for the UK is very much tied to the perception of a direct military threat from Russia via the Barents and Norwegian Seas. Intrusions towards UK airspace by Russian strategic bomber or maritime patrol aircraft invariably follow this route through international airspace. Thus, the northern vector is the key orientation for UK air defence with Typhoon interceptors flying out of RAF Lossiemouth on Scotland’s north coast.

Likewise, submarines and warships of the Russian Northern Fleet must pass by Scotland, Iceland or Danish territories to reach the

Atlantic from their bases around Murmansk. Such vessels could then pose a threat to shipping between North America and Europe and, in the case of nuclear-powered and -armed submarines, to more readily attack Western Europe and the US eastern seaboard. The United States has claimed there has been a big increase in Russian submarine activity in the northeast Atlantic in the last few years.

However, the perception of both the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and Russia is that the former still has a significant maritime advantage in the North Atlantic and the ability to control the latter’s open sea access from Murmansk as well as controlling access to the Baltic and Black Seas via Danish and Turkish-controlled straits. Maintaining this maritime dominance is seen as vital to balancing Russia’s superiority in land and maritime forces in the Baltic region, where NATO states feel most vulnerable.

Traditionally it is the UK that has been the lead nation in controlling access over, across and under the Norwegian Sea and thence through the so-called **Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap** chokepoints. This was the Royal Navy’s principal NATO tasking during the Cold War and has resumed prominence in the context of post-2014 crisis in relations with Russia.

Climate change has also altered the UK’s strategic perception of the Arctic in the current century as the potential for commercial navigation of the Arctic Ocean along Russia’s northern seaboard becomes a realistic prospect. This could potentially open up new, cheaper routes for trade between the UK and Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. It has already led China and other Asian states to reassess their own security and commercial interests in accessing sea lanes just to the north of Britain. China has, for example, invested heavily in mining and infrastructure in Greenland and Iceland in recent years.

Norwegian waters are also the primary source of oil and gas imported into the UK (via

pipelines) and thus of critical importance to the UK economy and **energy security**.

What are the UK's defence commitments and relationships in the Arctic?

Of the eight states with recognised territory within the Arctic region, five are members of NATO: Canada, Denmark (via Greenland), Iceland, Norway and the United States. These are treaty allies of the UK, which it would be duly bound to defend in the face of external aggression.

Two more (Finland and Sweden) are members of the European Union (but not NATO) and it may be assumed that the UK has a commitment to their defence under the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy until at least March 2019. Both states have become close partners of NATO this decade and are participants in Exercise Trident Juncture 2018.

The eighth Arctic states is the Russian Federation, with which the UK has no defence commitment. Indeed, Russia is usually seen as the state most threatening to the UK and allied Arctic states.

Beyond NATO, the UK has two quite recent military alignments – which are not formal alliances – focused on northern Europe, including Scandinavia and the Baltic States. These entrench the UK's position as the leading (or "framework") nation in the defence of the European Arctic and High North zone.

The **Northern Group** was formed in late 2010 on the initiative of the UK government and provides a forum for NATO's northern European states (Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, the UK) to discuss defence and security issues formally with Finland and Sweden. The 11 defence ministers meet annually, as do leading civil servants and military officers.

The **Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)** is another UK-led initiative focused on military cooperation with Nordic and Baltic States. Launched in 2015, the nine members are the Northern Group minus Germany and Poland. It is intended as a globally deployable intervention force formed around UK military capabilities. In practice, the JEF is a mechanism for the UK and regional allies to coordinate and integrate military capabilities useful for the defence of Scandinavia and the Baltic States.

A third initiative for discussing security challenges, the **Arctic Security Forces Roundtable** was initiated by the US and Norwegian militaries in 2011 and includes senior military officers from the eight Arctic states (including Russia) plus France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK.

The UK's chief bilateral military relations in the Arctic region are with Norway, the United States and the Netherlands. British, US and Dutch marines have traditionally been tasked within NATO to reinforce and protect Norway's coast against attack by hostile forces that would seek to control the Norwegian Sea. Relations with Denmark, Canada and Iceland are also important in terms of seeking to control the GIUK Gap and the airspace above it.

What military presence does the UK have in the region?

The British Armed Forces do not have any standing presence in the Arctic and High North, although they have a presence there for at least part of each year. This presence is intended to train and familiarise key parts of the UK military with the extreme geographic and climatic conditions of the High North, as well to exert a deterrent function on Russia as part of NATO defence of Norway and Iceland.

The most regular presence is of Royal Marines, up to 800 of whom undergo **Cold Weather Training** with Norwegian forces, and

sometimes Dutch and US marines, during the coldest months of the year. This typically takes place around Bardufoss inside the Arctic circle, close to the Norwegian Air Force bases at Andøya and Evenes. Merlin and Wildcat aircraft from the Joint Helicopter Command are also involved. In recent years the number of Marines trained annually has fallen sharply but the Ministry of Defence has pledged to increase this back to a full Commando of 800 troops from 2019. This is not a British garrison or permanent presence in Norway.

Until the last decade RAF Harrier II attack aircraft also participated in winter training around Bardufoss, with the plan that these short or vertical take-off jets could be rapidly deployed to small air strips around Norway in the event of a foreign invasion threat. Such aircraft were retired in 2011. In theory, the RAF's new F-35B Joint Strike Fighters could be tasked with such a role in future but they will be far fewer in number and much more difficult to maintain and operate.

Since 2008, NATO has also made regular deployments of fighter aircraft to Iceland under the **Icelandic Air Policing** mission. For part of the year, four to six jets from member states fly out of Keflavík airport near Reykjavik on rotations of three to six weeks. Unlike during the Cold War, when the US Air Force had a permanent fighter base at Keflavík, or the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission over the Baltic States, this is not a standing presence and is more about familiarising NATO air forces with Arctic conditions than providing a quick response interception capability. The RAF will make its first deployment to Iceland since the Cold War in 2019, with four Typhoons joining the mission.

The UK also has a regular presence in **anti-submarine warfare** (ASW) operations in the High North and Arctic. Having declined markedly after the fall of the Soviet Union, this mission has received much greater attention since 2014 as NATO refocuses on Russia and the revival of Russian nuclear

submarine operations in the North Atlantic. The Royal Navy always has one ASW-specialised frigate assigned as **Towed Array Patrol Ship** (TAPS), a submarine-hunting mission designed to protect the approaches to the HMS Clyde submarine base at Faslane, western Scotland, and to prevent foreign submarines from tracking or ambushing the Royal Navy's Vanguard-class nuclear-armed submarines as they leave or enter the base. It is unclear how far north these patrols venture.

Also deliberately opaque is the operation of Royal Navy attack submarines in the High North. Unlike the Vanguard-class, these are intended for "hunter-killer" ASW operations. During the Cold War, their key mission was to lurk in Arctic waters off northern Norway or Russia to monitor Soviet submarine movements in and out of the Barents Sea, including under the Arctic ice cap. **Under-ice operations** are a highly specialised form of submarine warfare that only the US, Russian and British navies have expertise in. The Royal Navy ceased under-ice training between 1996 and 2003 and then again in 2007 until early 2018, when HMS Trenchant rejoined the US Navy's annual Ice Exercise (ICEX). Such training has now been prioritised as an annual commitment.

More broadly, the Royal Navy is able to monitor submarine movements through the Norwegian Sea and GIUK Gap via a network of undersea hydrophone sensors, known as the **Integrated Undersea Surveillance System (IUSS)**. This is a joint US-UK project run from the US Navy's Navy Ocean Processing Facility in Virginia, home to the largest concentration of UK military personnel in the United States.

US, UK and Norwegian militaries are currently working together to establish a joint capability to operate Boeing P-8A Poseidon long-range **maritime patrol aircraft** above the Norwegian Sea. The RAF's last such submarine-hunting aircraft were scrapped in 2010; the nine new ASW aircraft will begin to enter service in

2019 from RAF Lossiemouth in Scotland. During the intervening decade, the UK has relied on US, Norwegian and Canadian aircraft to respond to detected intrusions into its waters. In the 2020s RAF P-8As are likely to make use of NATO bases at Keflavík (Iceland) and Andøya (northern Norway) as well as Lossiemouth.

Radar coverage of the High North is provided by RAF Boeing E-3D Sentry Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft, which may use the specialised NATO air base at Ørland, central Norway. In wartime, these would be presumed to direct RAF Typhoon fighters operating at extended range over the Norwegian Sea. In 2018, the RAF is reopening a remote radar station at Saxa Vord, the northern most tip of Shetland, which was closed in 2006. Facing north, this is to provide fixed coverage of the Norwegian Sea approaches to UK airspace.

One capability that characterised the UK's Cold War approach to deployment in the High North that does not appear to have been reprioritised is the deployment of **aircraft carrier battle groups** into the Norwegian Sea. The Invincible Class of small carriers built in the late 1970s (and retired between 2005 and 2014) was originally designed to support ASW helicopter operations in the Norwegian Sea with Sea Harrier combat aircraft intended primarily to intercept Soviet ASW aircraft. The much bigger new Queen Elizabeth-class carriers are designed for a global power projection and land-attack role. While they could fulfil the more defensive role in the High North, they appear to have been initially tasked with operations in warmer waters, including the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Indeed, the need to protect the new carrier strike groups will absorb much of the RAF and Royal Navy's ASW capabilities from the 2020s, as the deployed carrier would normally be accompanied by an attack submarine, a P-8A patrol aircraft, a dozen or more Merlin ASW helicopters and two ASW frigates. More

generally, a focus on expeditionary operations in Asia and Africa in the current century has been achieved at the expense of more traditional cold weather capabilities. There may well be trade-offs in trying to revive the latter while maintaining a globally deployed posture and intervention capability.

Sustainable Security Programme
Oxford Research Group Development House
56-64 Leonard Street London
EC2A 4LT
United Kingdom
+44 (0)207 549 0298
org@oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk