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The UK's Arctic Defence Strategy: Negotiating the slippery geopolitics of the UK and the Arctic

Duncan Depledge, Klaus Dodds and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe

[ABSTRACT]

Following the UK Defence Secretary's announcement in September 2018 that the Ministry of Defence is to devise an Arctic Defence Strategy, Duncan Depledge, Klaus Dodds and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe look back on how UK defence has engaged with the Arctic over the past two decades and draw attention to the shift in focus from climate change to hard security threats. They analyse what this means for the development of national Arctic policy in general, including the potential for divergence with other stakeholders such as the Foreign Office and the Scottish government. They conclude by considering how UK Arctic policy might change after Brexit. [/abstract]

For the first time, the UK has an Arctic Defence Strategy (ADS). Announced by Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson at the Conservative Party Conference in September 2018, the full scope of the strategy is still evolving, with publication expected in the second quarter of 2019.¹ This development is significant and indicates that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) is being responsive to environmental, geopolitical and geo-economic trends affecting the Arctic. Making defence interests manifest in the development of the UK Arctic Policy Framework (or APF, first released in 2013) has not proved straightforward, not least because the Foreign Office's Polar Regions Department has seemed especially keen to promote a 'benign' image of the UK as a friend to the whole Arctic, including Russia.² This article interrogates and reflects on apparent differences between the MoD, the Foreign Office and other interested UK stakeholders such as the Scottish government, over how Arctic geopolitics is framed and negotiated.³

¹ Written Question to the Ministry of Defence, HC Deb, 26 November 2018, c13.

² HM Government, 'Beyond the Ice: UK Policy Towards the Arctic', 2018, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/697251/beyond-the-ice-uk-policy-towards-the-arctic.pdf>, accessed 15 March 2019. This document is referred to throughout the article as the Arctic Policy Framework.

³ The analysis draws on our experiences of working closely with Arctic policy practitioners in the UK government over recent years. This has included, for example, our participation in seminars, workshops and conferences organised by or attended by civil servants, our private conversations with officials, and our involvement in various commissioned government projects. In addition, Klaus Dodds was special adviser to the House of Lords Arctic Committee (2014–2015) and the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee inquiry 'The Changing Arctic', while Duncan Depledge served as special adviser to the House of Commons

Although the UK government has had a longstanding policy interest in the Arctic, as recently as 2010, Foreign Office and MoD officials were somewhat dismissive of the idea that the government should publicly explain, and justify, the UK's Arctic interests.⁴ However, following the 2010 Canada–UK Colloquium on ‘The Arctic and Northern Dimensions of World Issues’, the Foreign Office did publish a short statement on its website in 2011, highlighting that the impacts of climate change on the Arctic were of interest for scientific, commercial and environmental reasons.⁵ Overall, the UK's policy approach was to be one of ‘wait and see’.⁶ This was despite seasoned UK observers expecting that the government would face growing scrutiny of its Arctic policy decisions (or lack thereof) by civil society, experts and parliamentarians.⁷ Sure enough, since 2012, there have been five Parliamentary Select Committee inquiries⁸, which in turn have helped pressure the government into

Defence Committee inquiry ‘UK Defence in the Arctic’ (2017–2018). However, we bear full responsibility for the analysis provided.

⁴ Duncan Depledge and Klaus Dodds, ‘The UK and the Arctic: The Strategic Gap’, *The RUSI Journal* (Vol. 156, No. 3, June/July 2011), p. 72–79.

⁵ Ed Struzik, ‘The Arctic and Northern Dimensions of World Issues: Rapporteur's Report’, November 2010, <<http://secure.ditchley.co.uk/assets/media/2010%20Ed%20Struzik%20Report%20on%20Baffin%20Island%20Workshop.pdf>>, accessed 25 March 2019; Foreign Office, ‘Polar Regions’, 2011, <<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20111209134500/http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/global-issues/polar-regions/>>, accessed 25 March 2019.

⁶ Duncan Depledge, *Britain and the Arctic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁷ Global Biodiversity Sub-Committee, ‘UK–Arctic Stakeholders Report of Conference Held at the Scottish Association for Marine Sciences, Oban, 10–12 March 2008’, Joint Nature Conservation Committee, 2008, <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/pdf/gbsc_0809ArcticbiodiversityObanReport.pdf>, accessed 15 March 2019.

⁸ For details see: Environmental Audit Committee ‘Protecting the Arctic’, 2012–2013, <<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/environmental-audit-committee/inquiries/parliament-2010/protecting-the-arctic/>>, accessed 29 March 2019; House of Lords Arctic Select Committee, ‘Responding to a Changing Arctic’, 2014–2015, <<https://www.parliament.uk/arcticcom>>, accessed 29 March 2019; Scottish Affairs Committee, ‘Scotland and the High North inquiry’, 2016–2017, <<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/scottish-affairs-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/high-north-16-17/>>, accessed 29 March 2019; Defence Sub-Committee, ‘Defence in the Arctic’, 2017–2018, accessed 29 March 2019; Environmental Audit Committee, ‘The Changing Arctic’, 2018, <<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/environmental-audit-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/the-changing-arctic-17-19/>>, accessed 29 March 2019.

publishing two white papers (in 2013.⁹ and 2018.¹⁰), and, most recently, the Arctic Defence Strategy which is due to come out later this year.

There is a ‘slipperiness’ to Arctic geopolitics that makes the region challenging for policymakers, scientists, defence planners and other interested parties. ‘Slippery geopolitics’ is used as a reminder that what was once thought of as firm, true and reliable (such as the idea that the Arctic is a permanently frozen zone of peace) no longer prevails.¹¹ As the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee on ‘The Changing Arctic’ noted in 2018, the ‘nature’ of the Arctic is no longer self-evident (if it ever was), either in scientific or social scientific terms.¹² Arctic people and other living beings, infrastructure, resources, climate and the environment are on the move and in flux, confounding attempts to pin down the Arctic in both physical and mental maps. Developing any policy with something so slippery is a formidable intellectual and political task.

‘Slippery’ is also used to call into question motives, intentions and erratic behaviour. In this respect, one long-term aspect of the Arctic Defence Strategy worth pondering is whether an emphasis on military–strategic concerns about Russia could actually undermine key aspects of wider UK Arctic policy – as defined most recently in the government’s 2018 Arctic Policy Framework – such as science diplomacy and international cooperative elements in civilian sectors.¹³ For the past decade at least, UK science has been defined by the Foreign Office’s Polar Regions Department as the ‘motor’ of UK interest and activity in the Arctic. The Arctic Policy Framework also emphasises other soft power capabilities (such as business

⁹ HM Government, ‘Adapting To Change: UK Policy Towards the Arctic’, 2013, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/251216/Adapting_To_Change_UK_policy_towards_the_Arctic.pdf, accessed 29 March 2019. This document is referred to throughout the article as the 2013 Arctic Policy Framework

¹⁰ HM Government, ‘Beyond the Ice: UK Policy Towards the Arctic’, 2018, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/697251/beyond-the-ice-uk-policy-towards-the-arctic.pdf, accessed 15 March 2019. This document is referred to throughout the article as the 2018 Arctic Policy Framework.

¹¹ Klaus Dodds and Mark Nuttall, *The Scramble for the Poles* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).

¹² House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, ‘The Changing Arctic’, UK Parliament, 2018, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmenvaud/842/84202.htm>, accessed 15 March 2019.

¹³ Alan Duncan, ‘Beyond the Ice: UK Policy Towards the Arctic’, speech given in London, 9 May 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/launch-of-beyond-the-ice-uk-policy-towards-the-arctic>, accessed 15 March 2019.

investment, environmental protection and support for the rules-based system) as reflecting ‘the very best of what Global Britain has to offer’.¹⁴ Within the Arctic Policy Framework, the UK’s hard power capabilities are hardly touched upon. Over-emphasising the military dimension of UK interest in the Arctic – as the Arctic Defence Strategy might do – may therefore expose divisions within the government as to the appropriate balance between hard and soft power capabilities.

There is a risk, too, that the Arctic Defence Strategy will exacerbate domestic divisions between Westminster and Holyrood.¹⁵ Following the Scottish Devolution Settlement (enshrined in the Scotland Act 1998 and amended by the Scotland Act 2012), foreign affairs and defence remained reserved matters for the UK government. However, that has not stopped Scottish Nationalists from setting out a distinctly Scottish perspective on the UK’s future relationship with the Arctic in an attempt to leverage economic and political advantages. The Scottish National Party (SNP), in the weeks preceding the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, put forward a very different relationship to the Arctic, Atlantic and Baltic regions from Westminster.¹⁶ In addition, Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has been particularly active in promoting Scotland’s ‘Arctic’ identity and interests at the annual Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik, Iceland (the largest regular gathering of international Arctic stakeholders in the world). In 2017, Scotland hosted an offshoot of the Assembly in Edinburgh and hinted, with not much subtlety, that Holyrood was developing its own Arctic strategy. On 25 March 2019, the Scottish government together with Highlands and Islands Enterprise hosted an ‘Arctic Day’ of debates, workshops and networking to celebrate Scottish–Arctic links and explore new avenues for cooperation and policy exchange. Specifically in relation to defence policy, Martin Docherty-Hughes MP, who sits on the House of Commons Defence Committee, has been particularly critical about the lack of attention to the ‘bread and butter’ defence of Scotland’s seas.¹⁷ The SNP will likely

¹⁴ HM Government, ‘Beyond the Ice’, p. 2.

¹⁵ A point made some time ago by Richard Powell, ‘Subarctic Backyards? Britain, Scotland, and the Paradoxical Politics of the European High North’, *Northern Review* (Vol. 37, Fall 2013), pp. 87–100.

¹⁶ Duncan Depledge and Klaus Dodds, ‘The United Kingdom, Scotland and the Arctic’, The Arctic Institute, December 2017, <<https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/united-kingdom-scotland-arctic/>>, accessed 15 March 2019.

¹⁷ David Leask, ‘SNP: UK Failing on “Bread and Butter” Sea Defences’, *The Herald*, 16 August 2018, <<https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/16421721.snp-uk-failing-on-bread-and-butter-sea-defences/>>, accessed 15 March 2019.

demand that the Arctic Defence Strategy recognises Scotland's distinct Arctic interests, something which the 2013 Arctic Policy Framework allegedly failed to do.¹⁸ Although somewhat overshadowed by – if not exacerbated given the 'Scottish vote' to remain – the Brexit process, ongoing differences over Arctic policy, which continue to simmer away, could help Scotland 'slip' from Westminster's grasp, and reveal further very different geographical and political framings of the Arctic region.

It is in the context of this 'slippery geopolitics' that this article analyses the MoD's decision to produce the Arctic Defence Strategy. First, the article considers how the MoD's re-engagement with the Arctic in the early 2000s (following a period of post-Cold War disinterest) was initially driven by the concerns of successive New Labour governments since 1997 with climate change. It then charts the shift that occurred around 2010 with the election of the centre-right Coalition government. It was here that Arctic security policy started to be reframed as an issue of national energy security, NATO collective defence and Russian militarism.¹⁹ The third trend has been reinforced by growing anxiety about Russian intentions and ambitions in the Arctic, as well as adjacent areas of the North Atlantic and Baltic region, following the revisionist strategy Putin has implemented towards Ukraine since 2013 (and alongside more covert but hostile acts against the Nordics, Baltics and the UK in particular). The conclusion considers how UK policy towards the Arctic might develop after Brexit is resolved.

[h1] Climate Change and Security: Defence Re-engages with the Arctic

The UK has conducted military operations in the Arctic at least as far back as the Napoleonic Wars (1799–1815). During the First and Second World Wars, the Arctic provided a route for 'Arctic Convoys' from Britain and its allies to reinforce first Russia, and later, the Soviet Union. Greenland, Iceland and Svalbard also emerged as sites of strategic importance. Throughout the Cold War, the Arctic was a vital theatre of operation for defending NATO lines of communication across the Atlantic Ocean, maintaining continuous at-sea deterrence,

¹⁸ *The Herald*, 'Holyrood Urged to Act to Protect Arctic after "Snub" by Westminster', 2 February 2014, <<https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13143580.holyrood-urged-to-act-to-protect-arctic-after-snub-by-westminster/>>, accessed 15 March 2019.

¹⁹ It is worth noting that growing interest from UK stakeholders in Arctic economic opportunities between 2008–10 appeared to attract less attention from the defence and security community, except in the context of energy security.

protecting Norway, and mobilising NATO's maritime forces for a possible strike against the Soviet Union's nuclear-strike fleet and its bases in the Russian Arctic. After the Cold War, interest in the Northern Flank withered. Russia's Arctic military posture declined and NATO's military presence was scaled down, as the Alliance shifted attention away from the Northern Flank.²⁰

The post-Cold War peace dividend, however, brought about a period of reflection on the nature and purpose of security and defence, as well as increasing recognition that threats and challenges besides hostile states and groups could undermine national and international security.²¹ Particular concern emerged around the potential links between environmental change and conflict.²² This theme started to appear in UK security policy in the late 1990s and early 2000s (for example, in the 1998 Strategic Defence Review and 2001 update), before morphing into a specific concern about the security implications of climate change.²³ By 2007, the UK was in the vanguard of putting 'climate security' on the international security agenda.²⁴ Notably, then Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett chaired the first ever United Nations Security Council debate on the subject.²⁵ Meanwhile, then Chief of the Defence Staff Jock Stirrup stated that military planners needed to take the climate change threat seriously.²⁶

This was the context in which the Arctic re-emerged as a region of particular concern for the UK. In the early 2000s, the Foreign Office's Polar Regions Department had strongly supported the preparation of the Arctic Council's Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA) to help give greater credibility to the UK government's broader efforts to show international leadership on climate change.²⁷ This was a key issue at the G8 Summit in Gleneagles in

²⁰ Depledge, *Britain and the Arctic*.

²¹ Nick Ritchie, 'Rethinking Security: A Critical Analysis of the Strategic Defence and Security Review', *International Affairs* (Vol. 87, No. 2, 2011), pp. 355–76.

²² Jessica Tuchman Mathews, 'Redefining Security', *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 68, No. 2, 1989), pp. 162–77.

²³ Jon Barnett, 'Security and Climate Change', *Global Environmental Change* (Vol. 13, No. 1, April 2003), pp. 7–17.

²⁴ *The Guardian*, 'Beckett to Warn UN on Climate Change', 22 September 2006, <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2006/sep/22/greenpolitics.uk>>, accessed 25 March 2019.

²⁵ United Nations, 'Security Council Holds First-Ever Debate on Impact of Climate Change on Peace, Security, Hearing Over 50 Speakers', SC/9000, press release, 17 April 2007, <<https://www.un.org/press/en/2007/sc9000.doc.htm>>, accessed 25 March 2019.

²⁶ Jeremy Lovell, 'Armies Must Ready for Global Warming Role: Britain', *Reuters*, 25 June 2007.

²⁷ Depledge, *Britain and the Arctic*.

2005. The contribution of UK scientists to ACIA (2004) and the ‘Polar Chapter’ of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s Fourth Assessment Report (2007) also paved the way for UK scientists to play a prominent role in the International Polar Year (2007–08).²⁸ With climate change, climate science and climate security all becoming more prominent on the national and international agenda, the MoD recognised that the Arctic was on the verge of a profound ‘state change’, from a permanently ice-covered ocean to one which would be seasonally ice-free in summertime: and this perhaps within decades.²⁹

In January 2007, the MoD’s Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC) published the third edition of its Global Strategic Trends Report (GST3), which noted that Arctic warming was strategically disruptive.³⁰ In the following months, the defence community received a sharp reminder of the difficulties of operating in the Arctic when an under-ice accident aboard the Trafalgar-class submarine HMS *Tireless* resulted in the deaths of two crew members, and a subsequent suspension of under-ice submarine operations.³¹ Meanwhile, debate over the significance of the planting of a Russian flag on the seabed at the North Pole in August 2007 spilled into Parliament and the media, where dire warnings were issued about the Russian ‘threat’ in and from the North.³² Speculation about Arctic resources and anxieties about the strength of the international legal framework pertaining to issues such as navigation rights and the delimitation of the outer limits of continental shelves became entwined with the Russia question.³³ All of this contributed to a focusing of minds on the defence and security of the region, prompting DCDC to conduct a more in-depth study of the ‘Arctic out to 2045’, albeit one which was kept to a restricted audience.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Paul Berkman and Oran Young, ‘Governance and Environmental Change in the Arctic Ocean’, *Science* (Vol. 324, April 2009), pp. 339–40.

³⁰ Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, ‘The DCDC Global Strategic Trends Programme 2007–2036’, third edition, January 2007.

³¹ *BBC News*, ‘Two Sailors Killed on Submarine’, 21 March 2007.

³² *Daily Mail*, ‘Russians “Claim” Arctic with Flag Under the Pole’, 3 August 2007; Scott Borgerson, ‘Arctic Meltdown’, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2008; see also Liam Fox MP’s remarks in the House of Commons, which are discussed in more detail later in this article: *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, ‘Defence in the World’, 8 May 2008, Column 895–6.

³³ Andrew Foxall, ‘“We have Proved it, the Arctic is Ours”’: Resources, Security and Strategy in the Russian Arctic’, in Richard Powell and Klaus Dodds (eds), *Polar Geopolitics? Knowledges, Resources and Legal Regimes* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2014), pp. 93–112.

In 2008, in an attempt to get to grips with the Arctic's rapid reappearance on the geopolitical scene (and slippery issues such as resources, navigation rights, governance and security), the Foreign Office convened a workshop in Oban. DCDC's Arctic Strategic Trends work and a Foreign Office commissioned review of the state of UK Arctic science (prepared by the Scottish Association for Marine Sciences) were presented, together with talks about Arctic commercial opportunities and governance. The conclusion was that the Arctic demanded the UK's attention.³⁴ That view was affirmed in a joint in-house Foreign Office–MoD strategy paper written in 2009. This stated explicitly that climate change is the factor that makes the Arctic 'a more pressing strategic policy concern for the UK' as 'familiar policy issues' become relevant in the region:

[bq] protecting the environment and mitigating the environmental risks of climate change; ensuring that the potential risk of future territorial conflict is mitigated; ensuring that potential future energy reserves in the region are extracted sustainably with regulated access rights; making the most of other potential business and trade opportunities the Arctic offers, such as fishing and tourism; and ensuring all current and future activities in the region are sustainable.³⁵ [/bq]

The Arctic was a specific example of the geopolitical, security and defence implications of climate change, and sat alongside growing unease about the possibility of confrontation with Russia.³⁶

[h1] The Return of Hard Defence

Nevertheless, there was no move by the MoD to increase the UK's military presence in the region, not least because the UK's Arctic allies were keen – together with Russia – to downplay any suggestion of conflict potential in the region (see, for example, the 2008

³⁴ Global Biodiversity Sub-Committee, 'UK–Arctic Stakeholders Report'.

³⁵ Foreign & Commonwealth Office, *The Arctic: Strategic Issues for the UK*, (Place: Publisher, 2009), pp. 2–3.

³⁶ The UK government was not alone in drawing these conclusions. The European Union's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, also warned in 2008 that the 'geo-strategic dynamics' of the Arctic were changing with 'potential consequences for international stability and European security interests': see Javier Solana, 'Climate Change and International Security', Paper from the High Representative and the European Commission to the European Council, S113/08, 14 March 2008, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/reports/99387.pdf>, accessed 15 March 2019. In 2010, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander (2009–2013), Admiral James G Stavridis, voiced similar concerns at a NATO workshop on 'Environmental Security in the Arctic Ocean' hosted by the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge.

Ilulissat Declaration).³⁷ However, in 2010, the MoD reframed its interests in the Arctic, in line with more traditional ‘hard’ security concerns, diverging from the softer approach centred on climate change that it had shared with the Foreign Office (and particularly the Polar Regions Department) up to that point. This began with the 2010 election of the centre-right Coalition, which despite a pledge to be the ‘greenest government ever’, focused on delivering an austerity programme that saw interest in climate change cool. With Liam Fox MP, the new defence secretary, looking into a defence ‘black hole’ in the region of c. £74 billion between 2010–2020, the MOD’s first priority was to reduce its expenditure without undermining its frontline capabilities and commitments. In the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), responsibility for coordinating work on the security impacts of climate change was given to the Foreign Office.³⁸

Yet, during his time as the Conservative Party’s longstanding shadow defence secretary, Fox had cultivated an interest in the Arctic’s re-emergence as a potential source of conflict with Russia. As early as 2008, Fox was raising his concerns in Parliament about Russian ambitions in the Arctic.³⁹ That came after a visit to Canada where he appeared to be influenced by then Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s bellicose rhetoric about Russian adventurism in the Arctic.⁴⁰ In 2006, Fox made clear that his interest in what he called the ‘inextricable links’ between energy security, economic security and national security had also seen him take a particular interest in Norway.⁴¹ It was perhaps unsurprising then that a few years later, when the UK armed forces were drawing down from Iraq, that Fox emphasised the vital importance of the UK’s strategic relationship with Norway, especially for energy security and future developments in the Arctic, as part of his justification for rebalancing the UK’s force posture towards territorial defence within NATO.⁴² The spectre of Russian aggression in the

³⁷ ‘2008 Ilulissat Declaration, 27–29 May 2008’, <<https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2008-Ilulissat-Declaration.pdf>>, accessed 25 March 2019.

³⁸ HM Government *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review* (London: Stationery Office, 2010).

³⁹ *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, ‘Defence in the World’, 8 May 2008, Column 894.

⁴⁰ Klaus Dodds, ‘We are a Northern Country: Stephen Harper and the Canadian Arctic’, *Polar Record* (Vol. 47, No. 4), pp. 371–374.

⁴¹ Liam Fox, ‘Energy Security and Military Structures’, speech given at Chatham House, London, May 2006, <<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/International%20Security/220506fox.pdf>>, accessed 15 March 2019.

⁴² Liam Fox, ‘The EU Should Only Act When NATO Cannot’, speech given in London, February, 2010, <<https://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/601535>>, accessed 15 March 2019.

High North, and the associated threat to UK energy security, in particular, and NATO collective defence, more generally, was clearly more tangible than earlier concerns about climate security. In this respect, the MoD had an obvious role to play in defining a response (under previous New Labour governments, the requirement for a military response had been less defined).

Fox's brief time in office (2010–11) produced a remarkable shift in how the MoD conceptualised the Arctic.⁴³ Within months of taking office, Fox had created and launched the Northern Group of Defence Ministers. This was a first of its kind forum consisting of the Nordic and Baltic States, Germany, Poland and the UK (and later the Netherlands), tasked with discussing and promoting cooperation on defence and security matters in Northern Europe, including the 'European' Arctic. In 2012, the MoD signed a Memorandum of Understanding on defence cooperation with Norway, which was particularly well received in Oslo as a sign of the UK's return to northern Europe.⁴⁴ Despite his short time in office, Fox revitalised the MoD's interest in Northern Europe and the Arctic, as well as scrutiny of Russia's actions and intentions in the region. This left a legacy that has been embraced by his successors, and which has culminated in the Arctic Defence Strategy. Yet while the Arctic Defence Strategy appears to be directed towards Russia, the Foreign Office's Polar Regions Department has preferred to talk up circumpolar Arctic cooperation rather than point the finger at Russia.⁴⁵ That would suggest that instead of the kind of joined-up Foreign Office–MOD thinking that was in evidence in 2009, there is now a dual approach to Arctic security, with the latter now focused more on hard security and Russia.

The tempo of UK defence interest in the Arctic rose notably again after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. The subsequent adoption of a more aggressive military posture towards much of Northern Europe – including a substantial increase in Arctic military activity, as Fox had arguably anticipated, perhaps in part because of his Canadian and Norwegian connections – caused much debate as to Russian motives and the usual division over reading Russia as 'defensive' or 'offensive', but which also seems to have initiated a more expansive

⁴³ Depledge, *Britain and the Arctic*.

⁴⁴ Duncan Depledge, 'Looking North: Britain's Revitalized Interest in the Northern Areas of Europe', *RUSI Commentary*, 9 March 2012.

⁴⁵ There is, for example, no specific reference to Russia in the 'Defence' section of the 2018 Arctic Policy Framework, see HM Government, 'Beyond the Ice'.

perception of a 'Wider North' geography covering adjacent areas in Scandinavia, the Baltics and the North Atlantic.⁴⁶ This, understandably, has engendered growing concern among at least some UK politicians and defence officials that Russia's programme of military modernisation has stretched to a point at which its Arctic-based Northern Fleet is again able and eager to threaten NATO's North Atlantic and High North lines of communication. This is a capability not seen since the Cold War, and it could potentially be used to exclude NATO from its strategic and economic interest in the north.⁴⁷

In light of these concerns, the Arctic has become an increasingly important part of the MoD's narrative about the peer threat that Russia poses to the UK, the capabilities needed to meet that threat, and the related requirement for increased financial resources from the Treasury. For example, since taking office in 2017, Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson has warned that Russia poses a threat to NATO in both the Arctic and the North Atlantic.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, the Defence Committee has called for the UK defence budget to be increased from 2% to 3% of GDP.⁴⁹ As the MoD continues to face stiff competition for resources in the ongoing era of austerity, those demanding greater attention to Russian military activity in the North Atlantic and Arctic, including the House of Commons Defence Select Committee, are likely to be useful allies for the MoD against the Treasury.⁵⁰ The Defence Secretary's announcement that the Arctic Defence Strategy will put 'the Arctic and the High North central to the security of United Kingdom' may make it that much harder for the Treasury to pressure the MoD into

⁴⁶ Duncan Depledge and James Rogers, 'Securing the Wider North', *RUSI Newsbrief* (Vol. 36, No. 2, 2016), pp. 19–20.

⁴⁷ In September 2018, the UK Chief of the Defence Staff organised a workshop, which asked 'Does UK Defence need an Arctic Strategy?' Among those experts and government officials assembled, there were several conflicting views. That came shortly after the publication of House of Commons Defence Committee, 'On Thin Ice: UK Defence in the Arctic', Twelfth Report of Session 2017–19, HC388.

⁴⁸ Gavin Williamson, 'RUSI Sea Power Conference Speech', speech given in London, May 2018, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/rusi-sea-power-conference-speech>>, accessed 25 March 2019.; GOV.UK, 'Defence Secretary Announces New Defence Arctic Strategy', September 2018, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/defence-secretary-announces-new-defence-arctic-strategy>>, accessed 25 March 2019.

⁴⁹ House of Commons Defence Committee, 'Beyond 2 Per Cent: A Preliminary Report on the Modernising Defence Programme', Seventh Report of Session 2017–19, HC 818.

⁵⁰ Malcolm Chalmers, 'UK Defence and the 2018 Budget', *RUSI Commentary*, 30 October 2018.

cutting key assets such as submarines and Royal Marines, and associated training and exercises.⁵¹

In 2017, the Royal Navy's submarine service returned to the Arctic to participate in the US-led *Ice Exercise* (ICEX). A year later, HMS *Trenchant* became the first Royal Navy submarine to surface through the Arctic ice pack in more than a decade. Later in 2019, a new fleet of Maritime Patrol Aircraft will start to enter into service, tasked with providing better domain awareness and anti-submarine warfare capabilities over the North Atlantic and the Greenland–Iceland–UK (GIUK) Gap. That reverses the decision taken by the government in 2010 to scrap the UK's Maritime Patrol Aircraft capability.⁵² Perhaps most significantly of all, the UK's Royal Marines have now been committed to providing the main share of around 800 troops which will participate in annual training and exercises in Arctic Norway, jointly with Norway, the US and the Netherlands.⁵³ In the past, the Royal Marines (who have trained in the Arctic since the 1960s) have only been committed to conduct winter training in the Arctic on an annual basis. However, as part of the new Arctic Defence Strategy, they have been committed for the next ten years.⁵⁴ This has sent a clear signal to allies – and to Russia – that the UK will remain in the Arctic for the long term.

With NATO divided over how to react to Russia's increasing military activity in the Arctic, the UK has coordinated its response with Norway and the US, forming the three points of a 'Northern Triangle' (although given its volumetric nature, the 'Northern Prism' might be a more accurate description).⁵⁵ There are now two major areas of UK-US-Norwegian

⁵¹ GOV.UK, 'Defence Secretary Announces New Defence Arctic Strategy', 30 September 2018. As recently as 2017–2018, the Royal Marines' winter training exercises were cut in order to make savings: Deborah Haynes, "'No Money" to Send Marines on Cold-Weather Training', *The Times*, 14 July 2017.

⁵² Justin Bronk, 'The P-8 Poseidon for the UK', *RUSI Commentary*, 14 July 2016.

⁵³ The Royal Marines, along with lead elements from various army units, have trained in Norway every winter since the 1960s, but over the last two decades their numbers had fallen from around 2,000–3,000 to 200–300 (see House of Commons Defence Committee, 'On Thin Ice').

⁵⁴ GOV.UK, 'Defence Secretary Announces New Defence Arctic Strategy', September 2018, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/defence-secretary-announces-new-defence-arctic-strategy>>, accessed 25 March 2019.

⁵⁵ Stuart Elden, 'Secure the Volume: Vertical Geopolitics and the Depth of Power', *Political Geography* (Vol. 34, May 2013), pp. 35–51; Aaron Mehta, 'Northern Triangle: US, UK and Norway's Expanding Alliance', *Defense News*, 8 January 2017, <<https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/surface-navy-association/2017/01/08/northern-triangle-us-uk-and-norway-s-expanding-alliance/>>, accessed 15 March 2019.

cooperation in the north: maritime patrol and anti-submarine warfare over the North Atlantic with a focus on the GIUK Gap; and joint Arctic warfare training and exercises in Northern Norway. Meanwhile, the UK and US have renewed their cooperation on under-ice submarine operations. Canada, Iceland, Greenland (Denmark) and the Netherlands have also contributed to these activities in various ways. Recent joint military exercises, such as *Cold Response* and *Trident Juncture*, have brought more NATO allies to the Arctic.⁵⁶ The UK–Norwegian cooperation joins up with the wider concerns of the Northern Group, while the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and NATO’s Enhance Forward Presence Battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland have helped create a chain of military cooperation in the Wider North from North America to the Baltics. This is essentially aimed at deterring Russian aggression against NATO’s northern and northeastern borders. While the debate continues over Putin’s intentions in the area, the Russian military build-up and potential has inspired a robust military response.

[h1] The Return of the Northern Flank?

The decision to produce the Arctic Defence Strategy is a public declaration that the UK will maintain a military presence in the Arctic. It represents a culmination of defence policy activity over the past decade. In this process, the Arctic has been recast as a traditional hard security theatre in which the threat from Russia looms large. This vision is opposed to the perception of the Arctic as an arena of softer security concerns, arising mainly from climate change. However, despite this obvious shift, the Arctic Defence Strategy should not be seen as a declaration of a new Cold War, despite the obvious tension which currently characterises UK–Russia relations. Indeed, the Cold War provided perhaps a more stable and bipolar framework for Western–Soviet relations in the north compared to the plethora of new actors and interests – including from Asia – making their presence felt across the region.

Nevertheless, such ‘Cold War’ geopolitical framings are being revived in the UK and elsewhere, particularly since defence interest in the Arctic, North Atlantic, Scandinavia and the Baltics conjures up colourful memories of the Cold War and thus the

⁵⁶ NATO SHAPE, ‘Exercise Cold Response 2016 Wraps up in Norway’, 9 March 2016, <<https://shape.nato.int/2016/exercise-cold-response-2016-wraps-up-in-norway>>, accessed 25 March 2019; Christopher Woody, ‘The US Navy is Pushing North, Close to Russia in Freezing Conditions – and it’s Planning on Hanging Around up There’, *Business Insider*, 7 November 2018, <<https://www.businessinsider.com/us-nato-navies-in-arctic-circle-in-harsh-weather-for-trident-juncture-2018-11?r=US&IR=T>>, accessed 25 March 2019.

imperative to defend the ‘Northern Flank’. References to under-ice submarine operations, NATO’s return to the North Atlantic, and Russia’s ‘bastion’ in the north are couched in terms of old threats and challenges returning.⁵⁷ s

The rejuvenation of such terms has possible implications for how issues, actors and spaces are linked with each other, and it is this which potentially brings into tension the MoD’s decision to produce an Arctic Defence Strategy (implicitly targeted at Russia and a Wider North that does not necessarily encompass the whole Arctic) with the cross-government Arctic Policy Frameworks published in 2013 and 2018 (which emphasise the use of Britain’s soft power resources in a circumpolar Arctic, inclusive of Russia).

These diverging directions of UK Arctic policymaking are also evident in the fact that the Foreign Office’s Polar Regions Department is not the sole author of UK Arctic policy and strategy. In fact, while the Polar Regions Department has played a central role in coordinating and consolidating Arctic policy across Whitehall, it is ultimately up to individual government departments to determine their priorities in the region.⁵⁸ The absence of much discussion of defence and security policy in the 2013 and 2018 Arctic Policy Frameworks left the door open to the MoD to produce its own policy and strategy.⁵⁹ Whether the Foreign Office, and the Polar Regions Department in particular, agreed with the MoD’s decision to produce an Arctic Defence Strategy – and here the word ‘strategy’ and the antagonising of Russia in the Arctic could be especially problematic for other government departments – is largely immaterial in the context of how national policy towards the Arctic is orchestrated. As it happened, the call for an Arctic Defence Strategy arose from a forum hosted by the Chief of the Defence Staff in September 2018, but the *decision* to produce the strategy was taken ultimately by the Defence Secretary, without needing to consult with other government departments.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ See, for example, the collection of essays in John Olsen (ed.), *Nato and the North Atlantic: Revitalising Collective Defence*, RUSI Whitehall Paper 93 (London: Taylor and Francis, 2018).

⁵⁸ *Hansard*, House of Commons Defence Sub-Committee, ‘Oral Evidence: Defence in the Arctic’, HC 388, 31 January 2018.

⁵⁹ The main regional intergovernmental forum, the Arctic Council, explicitly excludes defence and security from its portfolio of interests (as noted in the 1996 Ottawa Declaration).

⁶⁰ Author interview with a Ministry of Defence official, London, 26 March 2019.

The potential for divergence between the MoD and Foreign and Commonwealth Office matters because, as noted above, the Polar Regions Department has seemed especially keen to promote a benign image of the UK as a friend to the whole Arctic, including Russia. The collaboration between the Natural Environment Research Council's Arctic Office and the government's Science and Innovation Network to promote dialogue between UK and Russian early-career scientists is just one example of how softer instruments are being used to maintain at least some positive relations with Russia and reinforce the UK's image as a good neighbour to all Arctic states and peoples.⁶¹ The UK is a longstanding observer to the Arctic Council – the principal forum for international dialogue about Arctic issues, created in 1996 and designed to focus on environmental cooperation, sustainable development and post-Cold War confidence building. The Polar Regions Department's view over the past decade has been that the UK needed to show deference to this forum or risk being shut out of Arctic affairs.⁶² However, following events in Crimea and the hostility Russia has shown towards the UK's Baltic and Nordic allies, the MoD has decided that the UK needed to make a public step change in its capabilities and preparedness. The defence secretary's rhetoric when the Arctic Defence Strategy was announced appeared to show little regard for the more nuanced relationship that the Polar Regions Department has been trying to foster with the Arctic states. The long-term ramifications of this move remain to be seen, although it may be that the MoD's approach is more tempered when it comes to producing the substance of the strategy. Notably, since the defence secretary's announcement, the Foreign Office has been actively consulted and involved in the construction of the strategy, particularly with regards to the diplomatic aims of reassuring allies and shaping conversation about the Arctic within NATO.⁶³ It will also be interesting to watch whether the Polar Regions Department downplays the uptick in UK military activity in the Arctic for international audiences, or whether defence will feature more strongly in future iterations of the Arctic Policy Framework.

[h1] Post-Brexit Britain and the Future of the Arctic

⁶¹ See, for example, the brochure produced by UKSIN, British Embassy Moscow and NERC Arctic Office, 'UK–Russia Arctic Science Diplomacy', 2019. This was distributed at the POST Annual Reception on Science Diplomacy held in the Houses of Parliament in January 2019.

⁶² Depledge, *Britain and the Arctic*.

⁶³ Author interview with a Ministry of Defence Official, London, 26 March 2019.

The 2018 Arctic Policy Framework states explicitly that the biggest issue facing UK policy towards the Arctic right now is the decision to leave the European Union. However, at the time of writing, no agreement on the terms of withdrawal with the EU has been reached, and the situation remains sufficiently uncertain that some, including Prime Minister Theresa May, have suggested Brexit may not happen at all. Until the continuing uncertainty over the future UK relationship with the EU is resolved, the implications for the UK's policy towards the Arctic will be hard to discern.

Nevertheless, as it creates the Arctic Defence Strategy, the MoD should be mindful of the fact that the UK will continue to need European partners, both NATO and EU, and non-NATO and non-EU.⁶⁴ This illustrates well how a seemingly bounded geographical space like the Arctic has a capacity to be stretched to encompass different policy-relevant issues. 10 years ago, there was far greater emphasis on climate change and climate security. More latterly, there has been a significant reassessment of defence strategy. If there has been one constant, it is that whatever the UK does in the Arctic is dependent on its ability to take part in, and keep up with, international Arctic science (of which the EU is a primary funder) and science diplomacy. This work has the potential to establish the UK as a partner of first choice across the Arctic (within and beyond the EU), while also keeping open communication channels with Russia at a time of considerable diplomatic strain.

The UK's strategic re-engagement with the North Atlantic and the Arctic should be a useful way to strengthen relations with non-EU states such as Norway, Iceland, the US and Canada. This might be regarded as a compensatory move intended, at least in part, to mitigate a change in relations with the EU (as well as a lack of coherence in NATO as a whole with regards to the Arctic).⁶⁵ There will, however, still be transformation. Following Brexit, the UK will likely no longer be part of the EU negotiating party that is monitoring an agreement regarding unregulated fisheries in the central Arctic Ocean, might lose access to European scientific funding for the Arctic (which is going to increase in the 2020s), and will need to ensure that it maintains good relations with EU Arctic states (such as Denmark, Finland and Sweden) that have been supportive in the past of the UK's observer position in organisations

⁶⁴ Rob Johnson and Janne Haaland Matlary (eds), *The United Kingdom's Defence After Brexit* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁶⁵ House of Commons Defence Committee, 'On Thin Ice'.

like the Arctic Council. Non-EU Arctic states like Canada might also look again before turning to the UK as first partner of choice, particularly when other EU states such as Germany also have much to offer the Arctic in terms of science and investment.⁶⁶

As the UK's new relationship with Europe (and the associated implications for its relations with Arctic countries) becomes clearer, the question of how seriously to take Arctic defence should be given proper consideration. It seems fair to say that from both a Western and a Russian perspective, the seams that divide the circumpolar Arctic from adjacent areas in the North Atlantic are coming undone. That is despite UK Defence Minister Mark Lancaster making clear to Parliament last year that the MoD's assessment is that the Arctic is a place 'where we have good cooperation. There is low tension. That co-operation really has meant that we have not seen some of the issues that perhaps we face elsewhere in the world', the latter likely being a less than coded reference to the confrontations with Russia over Ukraine, in Syria, and growing tension in the Baltics.⁶⁷

From the MoD's perspective (and one which the US and Norway appear to share), what appears to be happening could be described as a kind of 'Atlantification' of the more southerly latitudes of the Arctic (such as the European 'High North') which is shrinking the zone of peace and good cooperation described by the defence minister.⁶⁸ When Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson announced the Arctic Defence Strategy, it was notable that he distinguished between the 'Arctic' and the 'High North'. While both are to be made 'central to the security of the United Kingdom', the defence secretary has left room to, if necessary, distinguish between a relatively peaceful 'Arctic' on the one hand, and a potentially more dangerous 'High North' – which is enmeshed with wider concerns about Russian intentions in the North Atlantic, Scandinavia and the Baltics – on the other.⁶⁹ It also creates space for

⁶⁶ Kathrin Stephen, 'German Involvement in the Arctic: Policy Issues and Scientific Research', The Arctic Institute, 8 September 2015, <<https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/german-involvement-arctic/>>, accessed 25 March 2019.

⁶⁷ *Hansard*, House of Commons Defence Sub-Committee, 'Oral Evidence: Defence in the Arctic'.

⁶⁸ By which we refer to a geopolitical process rather than the physical process described by natural scientists, for example: Robert McSweeney, 'Atlantification of Arctic Sea Tipping it Towards New Climate Regime', *CarbonBrief*, 25 June 2018, <<https://www.carbonbrief.org/atlantification-arctic-sea-tipping-towards-new-climate-regime>>, accessed 15 March 2019.

⁶⁹ Gov.uk, 'Defence Secretary Announces New Defence Arctic Strategy', 30 September 2018, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/defence-secretary-announces-new-defence-arctic-strategy>>, accessed 15 March 2019.

the consideration of other sources of threat, as the Arctic attracts ever more interest from other extra-territorial and powerful parties such as China, Korea and India.⁷⁰ The involvement of extra-territorial actors in the negotiation of the fisheries moratorium in the Central Arctic Ocean was a timely reminder that the management of the most northerly waters is a global affair.⁷¹ While thus far only Russian and UK nuclear-powered submarines have operated in waters around the North Pole, this could change. It remains to be seen whether the Arctic Defence Strategy will commit the UK to investing, training and placing capabilities both in the High North and the wider Arctic, as well as whether future iterations take into account more novel Arctic actors and their military capabilities, which might warrant a return to what some observers have termed the ‘long polar watch’.⁷²

Either way, the MoD is catching up with the fact that the Arctic is becoming a more slippery space to operate in. It may be that less geographically bounded terms such as the ‘Global Arctic’ will prove more useful in the future than those such as the ‘Circumpolar Arctic’ as actors seek to pin down emerging geographic, geopolitical and geo-economic complexity in the region.⁷³ Terms like the ‘Wider North’ may also gain further traction as parts of the Arctic are tied to geopolitical circumstances affecting adjacent regions such as the North Atlantic and Northern Europe. Meanwhile, the Scottish government continues to develop its own Arctic strategy. Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs Fiona Hyslop noted at the 2018 Arctic Circle Assembly that ‘Scotland, as a near Arctic neighbour has lots to offer to partners across the region and this will be brought out more fully during the development of our strategy’.⁷⁴ Her speech did not mention Russia once, and self-consciously drew upon Scotland’s shared economic, political and heritage interests with Nordic neighbours.

⁷⁰ Anne-Marie Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁷¹ Elizabeth Nyman, ‘Protecting the Poles: Marine Living Resource Conservation Approaches in the Arctic and Antarctic’, *Ocean and Coastal Management* (Vol. 151, January 2018), pp. 193–200.

⁷² Rob Heubert, ‘The Arctic and the Strategic Defence of North America: Resumption of the “Long Polar Watch”’, in Christian Leuprecht, Joel J Sokolsky and Thomas Hughes (eds), *North American Strategic Defense in the 21st Century: Security and Sovereignty in an Uncertain World* (Berlin: Springer, 2018), pp. 174–86.

⁷³ For example, Lassi Heininen (ed.), *Future Security of the Global Arctic: State Policy, Economic Security and Climate* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁷⁴ Fiona Hyslop, ‘Scotland: A New Arctic Strategy’, speech given in Reykjavik, 19 October 2018, <<https://www.gov.scot/publications/arctic-circle-assembly-2018-ministers-speech/>>, accessed 15 March 2019.

Much, then, depends on what issues are used to define UK (and Scottish) interests in the Arctic going forwards. As the last two decades have shown, concerns about climate change and Russia have engendered a bigger role for the MoD, not just in framing threats and opportunities in the Arctic, but also in reordering attitudes towards the UK's (and Scotland's) allies in the region.

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