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The UK and the Arctic: Forward defence

Duncan Depledge, Caroline Kennedy-Pipe & James Rogers

The United Kingdom (UK) is not an Arctic state, but over the past decade its policies towards the region have developed in significant ways. Since 2013 the British Government has published two Arctic Policy Frameworks, setting out commitments to working cooperatively with the Arctic states and other stakeholders to ensure that as climate change occurs the region remains peaceful. In 2019, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) committed to publishing an Arctic Defence Strategy, that would “put the Arctic and the High North central to the security of the United Kingdom”. This article examines the evolution of UK defence interests in the Arctic, whilst also highlighting the emergence of a significant Scottish dimension in UK Arctic affairs.

Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) is not an Arctic state, but over the past decade its policies towards the region have evolved considerably. Where previously the UK was hesitant to say too much about its interests in the region, since 2013 the Government has published two Arctic Policy Frameworks, setting out its commitment to working cooperatively with the Arctic states and all other interested stakeholders to ensure the region remains stable and peaceful (Depledge, 2012; Depledge, 2018). More recently still, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) committed to publishing an Arctic Defence Strategy in 2019, that would, in response to recent environmental change-related developments,, “put the Arctic and the High North central to the security of the United Kingdom” (Ministry of Defence, 2018).

As we set out in this paper, that commitment has been driven by concerns about Russian ambitions in the region, climate change and commercial competition, and despite domestic chaos over how to implement the result of the 2016 referendum which determined that the UK should leave the European Union. On defence, the UK has been emphasising its role not just in NATO but also its own strategic concerns in what it increasingly terms the ‘High North’.¹ That is a marked shift

Duncan Depledge is a Politics and International Studies Fellow at Loughborough University, UK. Caroline Kennedy-Pipe is a Professor at Loughborough University, UK, and James Rogers is an Assistant Professor at the University of Southern Denmark.

away from the earlier tendency to downplay the defence dimension of UK Arctic policy and the uptick in what might be termed ‘Wider North’ defence cooperation with the US and Northern Europe (Depledge and Rogers, 2016).² We begin by considering the evolution of UK defence and security in the Arctic. We then consider more recent developments with regard to growing concerns about Russian and Chinese ambitions in the northern high latitudes. We argue that this strategic reassessment has prompted an increase in the UK’s military footprint in the Arctic since 2018. Looking to the future, in the last part of the chapter we consider the ramifications of ‘Brexit’ and Scotland’s increasingly independent approach to Arctic policy for the UK’s approach to defence in the High North.

The United Kingdom as a non-Arctic state

As early as 2007, the MOD anticipated that the impacts of climate change on the Arctic would be disruptive to UK defence and security (DCDC, 2007; Depledge et al, 2019). Little more than a decade later, the UK continues to stress that “the change in the natural environment in the Arctic and High North is driving a change in the security environment and, as the region becomes more accessible, there has been an increase in military activity” (Ministry of Defence, 2018). As with many other countries, concern among British defence officials has focussed on the implications of Arctic resources and trade routes becoming more accessible. While this could, in a long-term perspective, relieve pressure on other geopolitical choke points such as Suez, it would also result in a significant increase in traffic to and across the Arctic. That is likely to bring new opportunities, but also new threats as multiple stakeholders (state and non-state) move in to explore the potential of new trade routes and resource prospects.

In the years since 2007, the MOD has continued to assess potential threats to UK defence and security from the north. Declining output from the North Sea and rising oil prices in the wake of the Second Gulf War resulted initially in greater national security attention to energy issues. With the UK increasingly dependent on Norway for energy supplies, upon becoming Secretary of State for Defence in 2010, Liam Fox immediately singled out Norway as one of the UK’s key defence partners and visited Oslo. He also established the Northern Group of Defence Ministers (a forum consisting of the Nordic and Baltic states, Germany, Poland, the UK, and later the Netherlands), which was tasked with discussing and promoting northern European cooperation on defence and security matters. The Arctic was included within the group’s remit, implying that neglected regional concerns were part of a broader set of challenges facing northern Europe as tensions between the West and Russia rose (Depledge et al, 2019). This appears to have formed the basis for the widening of the British narrative about the High North, and, in particular, the idea that Arctic security and defence matters no longer existed in isolation.

Since Fox’s tenure, the UK’s concerns about energy security have receded, in part because of the shock collapse in oil prices from 2014 to 2016, but also because confidence in the potential of Arctic oil and gas to make a significant contribution to world markets has diminished in recent years (Gulas et al, 2017). However, in the wake of the Ukraine/Crimea crisis in 2014, military incidents and diplomatic stand-offs, the Russia ‘question’ has re-emerged in full, touching, arguably, all aspects of UK defence and security policy, including in the High North. American concerns about the possibility of future Chinese military activity in the Arctic are also being raised in the UK, although London has not gone as far as to use the same kind of confrontational language coming out of Washington.

The Russia-China axis in the Arctic

As far back as 2010, there were suggestions in the British press that Russian submarines had revived an old Cold War tactic of trying to record the acoustic signatures of the UK's *Vanguard* class nuclear submarines – the carriers of the Trident nuclear deterrent – as they entered and left Scottish waters, which, if successfully executed, would make these vessels easier to detect and track (Harding, 2010). More recently, British Defence Chiefs went public about their concerns about Russian submarine activity in the North Atlantic, particularly in the so-called Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap, that posed a potential and escalating threat to undersea communication lines between Europe and North America (BBC News, 2017). Russian submarine activity in the North Atlantic is directly linked to the Arctic because of the location of the Northern Fleet's bases on the Kola Peninsula.

At the same time, London appears to be increasingly concerned about the potential for Russia to disrupt the UK's ability to benefit commercially from new opportunities arising as the Arctic becomes more accessible. Part of what drives British interest in the Arctic, alongside commercial interest in resource extraction and shipping-related activities, is an awareness of how technological developments and innovation is creating new knowledges and new opportunities in the Arctic. For example, only some 15% of the Arctic Ocean has been mapped, but this is likely to increase in the coming years with greater use of unmanned vehicles. Furthermore, satellites capable of covering the High North will enable not just mapping but monitoring of the region, potentially improving safety of navigation and creating new systems for the surveillance of ecosystems, pollution and suspected illicit activity. UK interest in such opportunities also reinforces the Government's commitment to supporting good governance in the Arctic.

Recent moves by the Kremlin to assert Russia's 'rights' over the NSR raises the potential for an abrogation of the freedom to navigate through opening seas (The Maritime Executive, 2019). The UK's concerns appear to have been augmented by Russia's expansion of military activity in the Arctic even though that has taken place against the constraints of the Russian economy and what is an old and aging naval fleet. Russian investment in Arctic military projects also draws in resources from other critical socio-economic projects, calling into question the long-term sustainability of Russia's Arctic military and commercial presence in the Arctic. Nevertheless, Moscow appears adamant that Russia must retain control over access to the NSR and its approaches.

The Kremlin's assertion of legal, military and commercial primacy over the NSR has been accompanied by robust rhetoric from the Russian Defence Ministry directed towards NATO as well as Sweden and Finland. Simulated attacks against military installations, bases and exercise areas in the European High North have also been reported (Nilsen, 2019; Staalesen, 2019a). Most recently, Russia's large-scale military drills during Tsentr 2019 featured a substantial NSR component, which included the staging of an exercise involving more than 500 soldiers on Bolshevik island between the Kara and Laptev seas (Staalesen, 2019b).

The UK is of course not alone in worrying about Russia. Many Western states have over the last decade grown wary of Moscow's intent. Cyber-attacks against Estonia in 2007, the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and most recently, the worrying development of Russia applying 'pressure' through cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns on Finland,

Sweden and Norway all combine to increase suspicions of Moscow's agenda and what the endpoint of such organised disruption might be. While Finland and Sweden are not members of NATO, their geopolitical position and democratic cultures mean that 'probing' or so called 'hybrid warfare tactics' against them raises anxiety levels in partners such as the UK.

In the Far East, Beijing's decision to enunciate its own Arctic policy in 2018 raised the real prospect of future Chinese expansion and ambition in the region, which appears to be increasingly symbolised by the idea of a 'Polar Silk Road' (State Council, 2018). China is commonly referred to by its officials and commentators as a 'near Arctic' state and Arctic 'stakeholder'. Chinese investment in scientific research, commercial projects and icebreakers, the related accumulation of experience, knowledge and from experimental voyages in Arctic waters, and Beijing's warming relationship with Moscow, has prompted significant debate about Chinese ambitions (Pezard, 2018).

While Chinese military activity (as opposed to Beijing's commercial agenda) in the region remains somewhat unclear, since a group of naval vessels was sent within 12 nautical miles of the US Aleutian Islands in 2015 (coinciding with a presidential visit by Barack Obama to Alaska), there has been considerable speculation about the prospects of Chinese warships or submarines crossing the Arctic Circle in the near future³. Earlier this year the Pentagon went further still, warning that China's expanding submarine fleet was moving closer to a deployment capability for the Arctic (Department of Defense, 2019a; 2019b). Meanwhile, speculation that the Chinese military would participate in Russia's Tsentr 2019 drills was confirmed in September (Buchanan & Boulégue, 2019). Although there is no open source evidence that the Chinese military was directly involved in the Arctic component of Tsentr 2019, it is likely that it was monitoring the exercise carefully.

The UK's growing Arctic footprint since 2018

As recently as 2017, there was a real possibility that the UK's military presence in the Arctic would be substantially reduced in response to domestic budgetary pressures (Defence Committee, 2018). The Government actually cancelled Arctic warfare training for the Royal Marines in early 2018 in to plug a hole in the Royal Navy's operating budget. Around the same time, the Government entertained a serious debate about whether to scale-back the UK's amphibious warfare capability, including the Royal Marines. Even before 2018, the size of Royal Marine's annual deployment in the Arctic had fallen from c. 2,000-4,000 personnel at the end of the Cold War to c. 200-300. However, critics of that decision, which included the House of Commons Defence Committee, appear to have precipitated a shift in mindset that has actually led to an amplification of public messaging by the MOD around the UK military presence in the Arctic, which in turn strengthens the case for expenditure on critical assets for that region such as the Royal Marines.

Over the past year or so, the emerging narrative has started to consolidate the UK's military activities in the Arctic and project a single strategic picture of the need to respond to new threats to the UK and its allies from the High North. That includes, for example, the renewal of the UK's under-ice submarine capability: in March 2018, HMS *Trenchant* (one of the UK's remaining Trafalgar-class nuclear-powered submarines) surfaced through the Arctic ice cap, becoming the first Royal Navy submarine to do so since 2007. The expectation is that the Royal Navy is now working towards ensuring that the newer Astute-class nuclear-powered submarine will be similarly capable of under-ice missions. Last Autumn, the MOD also announced that the UK would deploy

around 800 Royal Marines for Arctic warfare training in Northern Norway in early 2019. However, this move was significant not just because it more than doubled the number of Royal Marines being deployed to Norway, but because this time it was to be part of a decade-long commitment to train with Norwegian armed forces on an annual basis. Historically, the Royal Marine deployments to Norway had only been planned a year or two ahead (which is what made it easier to cancel the deployment in 2018). Moreover, surges are expected to occur every other year when personnel numbers will swell to around 1,400. In addition to working with Norway, the Royal Marines will also continue providing valuable cold weather training to the US Marine Corps (as they have done since 2016). A third aspect to the emerging narrative relates to the anticipated arrival next year of new Boeing P-8A Poseidon Maritime Patrol Aircraft, which will be based in RAF Lossiemouth in northeast Scotland. In 2018, the MOD confirmed that it planned to use the aircraft to monitor Russian submarine activity in the High North. Fourth, before the end of this year, the UK will conduct air policing over Iceland for the first time.

The UK has also been acting in concert with a wider set of allies. In October, NATO undertook 'Exercise Trident Juncture' (EXTJ) its largest military exercise since the 1980s. EXTJ was centred on Norway but also involved air and naval operations in adjacent areas of the Arctic and North Atlantic (NATO Review, 2018). American involvement in the exercise witnessed the deployment of a carrier strike group north of the Arctic Circle for the first time in nearly thirty years. However, NATO is still essentially divided over how to respond to Russia's military ambitions in the Arctic. While some members are simply unable to focus on the region because of competing priorities in the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe, NATO is also mindful of Norwegian and Canadian concerns about the possibility of an enhanced alliance presence exacerbating rather than reducing tensions.

While the UK would like to see greater alliance unity with regard to the High North, its more immediate focus has been on enhancing its defence partnerships with northern European nations and the United States. HMS *Trenchant's* recent deployment to the Arctic was part of joint UK-US cooperation on under-ice submarine operations. As already set out, the UK is also working more closely with Norway and the United States to enhance interoperability between the Royal Marines, US Marine Corps and Norwegian armed forces. That cooperation has extended to the air, with the three countries agreeing to work together on maritime patrol and anti-submarine warfare over the North Atlantic and High North. The UK and US have further strengthened their commitments to military training exercises in northern Norway, Finland and Sweden. In 2019, Sweden invited the UK's Royal Marines to participate in 'Exercise Northern Wind', together with Finland, Norway and the United States. The Defence and Security Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2018 between Iceland and the UK also indicates the importance of that country to the UK's emerging defence strategy in the High North. Meanwhile there is still potential for UK-Denmark cooperation to be expanded, including in relation to Greenland. The UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), which includes many Arctic nations, has meanwhile been conducting maritime exercises in the neighbouring Baltic region. However, British defence officials are talking increasingly about the possibility of directing the JEF towards the High North as well in the future. Combined with the UK-led battlegroup in Estonia (part of NATO's enhanced forward presence that was a direct response to Russian actions against Ukraine), a chain of military cooperation stretching from North America to the Baltic is emerging, encompassing not just the High North, but the Wider North.

Post-Brexit Britain and the Arctic

All of the above needs to be set against the turmoil that has been caused in the UK by the 2016 referendum which called on the British Government to end the UK's membership of the European Union. Three years on it is still unclear what the final outcome will be. Nevertheless, the enormity of the decision to leave was reflected in the UK's 2018 Arctic Policy Framework, which stated that "perhaps the biggest change to the UK's Arctic position since 2013 was the decision by the people of the UK to leave the European Union" (HM Government 2018). However, until a final agreement with the EU has been reached, there is little that can be said with any degree of certainty about how Brexit will impact upon the UK's Arctic interests (Depledge et al, 2019). As of October 2019, there is still uncertainty over the timetable and terms on which the UK will leave the EU, if at all. However, whilst Westminster politics remains uncertain, the commercial, scientific and defence communities continue to call for an enhanced UK presence in the High North.

The position of the UK has also been complicated by the fact that Scotland has been increasingly assertive in pushing and defining its own Arctic credentials. Expressions of Scottish 'Arctic-ness' have grown over the past decade, particularly since the Scottish National Party began articulating a distinctly northern (if not 'Nordic') identity narrative that separated Scotland from the rest of the UK in the run-up to the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum (Depledge & Dodds, 2017). Following several prominent appearances by SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon at the annual Arctic Assembly in Reykjavik, Iceland, in September 2019 Holyrood launched its own Arctic Policy Framework.

The Scottish Arctic Policy Framework rests primarily on claims of a shared cultural and historical experience with northern neighbours but also interestingly points to shared experiences of the 'peoples' of Scotland and the Arctic. Not least the framework emphasises the challenges of sustainable economic development in rural and isolated areas and in a side swipe against London points to the fuel poverty of some Scottish communities highlighting the fact that Scottish citizens pay 7-9% more on their fuel bills than the average British person. No mention though was made of the growing presence of Norwegian commercial and energy interests in Scotland itself (Middleton, 2019). Synergy with Arctic communities and Indigenous peoples as well as a role as a 'gateway' to business has been highlighted by the establishment of an Arctic Unit within the Scottish Government's Directorate for External Affairs. While at the moment the claim to be geographically the Arctic's nearest non-Arctic neighbour does not appear to have ruffled too many feathers further south, a second referendum on Scottish independence could yet undermine the coherence and claims of the UK Government, not least in the realm of defence given the ongoing basing of key UK military assets in Scotland.

Conclusion

The UK is faced with a series of challenges in redefining its foreign and defence strategies whilst in a period of deciding and trying to leave the EU. Part of the Government's response has been to reiterate its military and defence interests in the Arctic and High North. A decade or so ago, there was far greater emphasis on climate change and energy security, followed by economic opportunities, and now strategic and defence re-assessment. Rooted in a firm commitment to NATO and Northern allies, the UK's emerging defence policy now rests on resisting both Russian

expansionism and mischief making, while also looking to counter new players in the Arctic such as China.

The 2019 launch of an Arctic defence strategy by the MOD is also fully mindful of the reality that the UK still needs European partners, drawn both from NATO and EU as well as from non-NATO and non-EU friends and allies. The UK strategic re-engagement with the North Atlantic and the Arctic should therefore also be regarded as part of a concerted attempt to strengthen relations with non-EU states such as Norway, Iceland and the US. This could be seen as a compensatory move designed, in part, to mitigate a change in relations with the EU.

Notes

1. It is important to note that the UK definition of the High North is distinct from that of other states, most notably Norway, in that it encompasses the Arctic as well as the northern reaches of the Atlantic.
2. Defence is hardly touched upon in the two Arctic Policy Framework documents despite the British Government making the maintenance of peace and stability in the region its foremost priority.
3. After all, Chinese military in the Arctic is not new. It can be traced back to the 1950s, when nuclear submarines were developed for the purpose of great power deterrence. During the Cold War, however, China's aspirations were hamstrung by technical difficulties associated with operating undetected in Arctic waters (Brady, 2017).

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