HOUSE OF COMMONS

Scottish Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Defence in Scotland: the North Atlantic and the High North, HC 81

Monday 27 March 2023

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Pete Wishart (Chair); Deidre Brock; Wendy Chamberlain; David Duguid; Sally-Ann Hart; Christine Jardine; Andrew Western; Dr Philippa Whitford.

Questions 63-118

Witnesses

I: His Excellency Sturla Sigurjónsson, Icelandic Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Icelandic Embassy, and His Excellency Wegger Christian Strømmen, Norwegian Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Norwegian Embassy.

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Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: His Excellency Sturla Sigurjónsson and His Excellency Wegger Christian Strømmen.

Q63 **Chair:** Welcome to the Scottish Affairs Committee and our second evidence session on "Defence in Scotland: the North Atlantic and the High North". We are absolutely delighted to be joined by a brace of ambassadors from the Arctic region. We are very much looking forward to what they say and how they will help the Committee with our inquiry. I will let them introduce themselves but, to give the game away, they are from Norway and Iceland. May we start with His Excellency, the Ambassador of Iceland?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: My name is Sturla Sigurjónsson, the ambassador of Iceland. I have been as such in the UK since November 2020, so a bit more than two years now. I have served in the foreign service of Iceland for 36 years, in different places in different parts of the world, in different jobs.

Wegger Christian Strømmen: My name is Wegger Strømmen. I am Norway's ambassador here in the United Kingdom. I have been here since 2 January 2019, so a little more than four years.

May I say a practical thing? It is my left eye that works, and not my right eye. I was born with very strange eyes, and I know that it can be a bit confusing, so if I look confusing or arrogant, give me one extra chance and look at the left eye. There is nothing I can do about that.

Thank you for having us. I am looking forward to this. The issues, as the Committee members will understand, are of huge importance to Norway; I am sure the same goes for Iceland.

Q64 **Chair:** We are grateful for you giving up your time to help us out today. We also have representatives of Denmark and the Faroe Islands with us today, so thank you for coming along to the session. We will want to speak to you in the course of this inquiry.

You understand how important this is, how things have changed in the North Atlantic and how the whole geopolitical situation has become unrecognisable probably compared with what it was about 10 years ago. The war in Ukraine has had a massive impact on how all the countries with an interest in the High North and the Arctic approach their priorities in the North Atlantic. To get things started, will you outline your nations' priorities when it comes to defence in the High North? What do you see as the major issues and concerns? You might even start to talk to us a little about how you are preparing for them? We will start with you, Ambassador Strømmen.

Wegger Christian Strømmen: Thank you very much. I will certainly not speak on behalf of Iceland, but Sturla, my friend here, will. We are from the same sort of generation of Nordic diplomats, and I must say that the last year has been almost unbelievable for people like us. I think we were both born in 1959, or about then.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: '58.

Wegger Christian Strømmen: '58. Yes, we are the same. For us, there has been enormous change in the last year. The obvious factual thing is of course the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the invasion of Ukraine, and I will leave that out, but that has huge implications for northern Europe and for the North Atlantic, which involves the United Kingdom and Norway, clearly.

Extremely important is the fact that Sweden and Finland have asked to join NATO. It is hard to overestimate that. That was something that we spoke and thought about in theoretical terms if you go back a few decades, and you could say it was sort of a Norwegian diplomatic dream that we would all, in northern Europe, hang together. Now, all of a sudden, we are in a situation where Sweden and Finland will be members of NATO—maybe Finland a bit before Sweden. For us both, that is very important, and that will change not only the dynamic, but the strategic outlook for northern Europe, including the North Atlantic and, clearly, the northern part of the United Kingdom—for Scotland and for the maritime areas in the north of these islands.

We will have a new NATO-Russia border—a long one. If my memory does not fail me, I think we are talking about 1,400 km or something. We manage a border with Russia that is 196 km and, believe me, that is a task in itself. I would not say that we are proud of it, but we have been doing our best to manage that border through the cold war. It is not an easy one. We are helped by climatic conditions; it is a cold and dark place for much of the year but, nevertheless, it was where the Russian Federation met NATO. Now that will change. Both Finland and Sweden are modern industrialised democracies and rule-of-law-respecting countries with industrial bases and armed forces that will really change the strategic situation in northern Europe.

Coming to the west, because I represent more the western part of northern Europe, we are massively interested in the United Kingdom taking its role as a major regional power in northern Europe. You are the leading military and intelligence power in northern Europe. I did not, by that, make a comment on the integrated review and tilt to the Pacific or to the Indian ocean, but Norway is not in the Pacific or the Indian ocean and my task, on behalf of my Government, is not to talk about that, but I will talk about the North Atlantic.

If that was the sort of factual and the strategic military setting, politically-speaking, I think we are helped by a couple of other factors. Relations between the countries of northern Europe are actually very good, and they have probably improved over the last few years. There is very close

collaboration there always, but there is also a sense of the practical, and that does not only relate to the invasion of Ukraine; there is a sort of political kinship, in a way, because we face so many of the same tasks.

Q65 **Chair:** Do you feel the UK is included in that—this new sense of coming together and working to consensus?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: Yes, I do. Absolutely. Now of course there is a geographical element to that, particularly for Norway. The North Atlantic is a vast area. Eighty-four per cent. of what is under Norwegian jurisdiction is salt water. Sixteen per cent. is dry land. This is what we have. We are basically salt water. That is what we look after. The United Kingdom is also a major maritime power, of course. Given the situation in Ukraine and the strategic situation in the north of Europe, our closest and largest ally is the United Kingdom. We share the same interest in the same area; there is a total overlap. Looking after these areas is costly and important, so to the extent that we can share the costs and collaborate, that is a huge and good thing, and that is increasingly happening. It pleases us immensely, and I think it is a natural development from good neighbourly relations and very close economic relations—the energy sector being clearly the most important one.

Q66 **Chair:** We will try to unravel and unpack all this, because it is very interesting, and I know that colleagues will want to ask you a number of things and pursue further. I am keen to hear from Ambassador Sigurjónsson. Has Iceland had the same experience? Are there changing priorities? What have you noticed and detected about what needs to be done now?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Very much so. Even as a smaller state, we have the same fundamental obligations as the larger ones. In terms of other sovereign states, our Government have to safeguard the territorial integrity of the country and the safety of the nation—these are the basics—but as the only founding member of NATO without national armed forces, this has always been challenging in some ways. Throughout the cold war, we had, on the one hand, NATO membership and the collective defence commitments there and on the other a bilateral defence agreement with the United States, including US forces in Iceland. Those were the two main pillars of our security and defence policy.

After the closure of the US base in Iceland in 2006, we assumed the role of host nation, as it is called, and we assumed the responsibility for running and maintaining defence-related facilities in Iceland, which could then be used by allies—not only for the defence of Iceland but for the collective good, so to speak. The main elements of what we have today, for example, are NATO air policing, which is periodic—it is not continuous—and allied deployments as needed, including in ASW, or anti-submarine warfare. Then, of course, we have exercises.

Even though we were reliant on these two main pillars throughout the cold war years, since the end of the cold war the Government of Iceland have been widening the scope. I might mention two elements that have come

up since, which we think have been working well and we see a future in: Nordic defence co-operation, which is very practical in many ways—it looks at procurement and logistics, for example—and, of course, the JEF, which is a more recent phenomenon. We entered it in the autumn of 2020.

Chair: This is the joint expeditionary force.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: The UK is what is called the framework nation, but it is basically the UK, the Netherlands, the Nordic countries and the Baltic states. It is a group of 10 very like-minded countries that are used to working together and have a very similar approach to practical issues in the area of defence. That has been evolving in a very interesting way, and also getting a policy dimension. I might mention, for example, the summit meetings in the JEF. There was one held here in the UK in the spring of '22, if I remember correctly, and there is another one coming up.

I might add something in terms of how we have reacted not only to the invasion of Ukraine but earlier. As a country without armed forces, we have always been thinking about how we can contribute in a way that adds value. We have done different things through the years but I might mention financial contributions, the provision of strategic airlift and civilian experts who have been integrated into headquarters and have had special functions. We have a number of those in different countries as we speak.

However, as Wegger Strømmen mentioned, the change in the past year or so has been enormous, if you look at the security architecture of Europe, not least northern Europe and the North Atlantic. That has inspired, or created, a debate in Iceland—which, for me at least, has been very interesting to follow—which takes into account these new challenges and asks how we might react to them, in a realistic way, considering our capabilities.

Sweden and Finland were mentioned, and their membership of NATO, which, of course, we welcome very much. That has also made an impact on Iceland. I think it has underlined the seriousness of the shift we are seeing—

Q67 **Chair:** When you have a Nordic country like Finland, which has a massive standing army, coming into defence arrangements and relationships across the High North and Arctic, and you compare and contrast that, as you have said, with a small nation like Iceland, with no armed forces, that will have quite a psychological impact, I would imagine, in terms of how—

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Yes, and I think many people have woken up. When they see those countries taking those steps—which are major steps, considering their history—then, without being flippant, something is obviously wrong and needs to be addressed.

Chair: Okay, thank you. I am conscious that my colleague, Dr Philippa Whitford, is representing the Committee in another session with the Secretary of State. I know that she wants to ask a couple of questions before she has to leave us, but she is going off for official Committee

business.

Q68 **Dr Whitford:** Thanks very much, Chair. I will also come to Ambassador Strømmen first. Obviously, we are talking about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but Russia has been militarising the High North for quite a long time. The receding ice also brings the potential of an Arctic trade route and access to resources, whether mineral or fishing, so that potential for tensions must have been growing for quite a long time.

In March 2022, the UK published "The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North". That was just after the invasion, but, of course, it will mostly have been written before that. That was then followed up, just last month, with "Looking North: the UK and the Arctic". Looking at that, do you feel that the UK's approach to the Arctic and the High North is now very clearly laid out, in those two papers? Can colleagues in all of the High North countries—obviously there are quite a lot of loose terms used—recognise, "What does the UK plan to do?" and "How is it going to contribute?"

Wegger Christian Strømmen: I think the answer to that is yes, but, as those questions are so important to us, we take those documents and then add on what we hear when we talk to our British counterparts, to you, to Members of Parliament, to the defence establishment or to the Government in general.

Now, we are lucky, and we are blessed by the fact that we have very good access. Those questions are under continuous dialogue between our two countries. They are so important that you really have to talk about them every day, and, since we can do that, I think I have the confidence to say that the answer to your question is yes. We do recognise that much of it was probably written when the factual situation was different, but, if you then add what we consult on and hear, altogether, I think we absolutely have the necessary understanding of where the UK is on these issues.

Q69 **Dr Whitford:** Do you feel that is a change? You mentioned the Indo-Pacific tilt; do you feel that the UK was not paying quite the same attention previously? Has the invasion of Ukraine and the opening of the Greenland-Iceland gap because of ice really woken up the UK, and is this therefore a change in policy?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: Some of the issues relating to the ice receding have been there for a long time. I think the invasion of Ukraine changed the outlook for almost all of us, at least to some extent—maybe not as massively for some as for others—but these would be new factual things.

When it comes to the receding ice, the fact that the Arctic and the northern areas are changing so rapidly raises a number of issues, but ice will still be a major issue, and darkness does not change. Some factors change; others do not. Darkness will still be there; the navigational issues are very big; the Russian territory in the north is still the same as it was before the invasion and before the ice started to recede. Use of the north-western passage raises a number of issues, but some of the factors, such

as the darkness and the dangers of pollution, were there before and will certainly be there for a long time still, although we hope to find technological solutions to some of them. The biggest coastal state in the north is the Russian Federation; that's the way it is. Collaboration with the Russian Federation is very difficult. Norway is taking over the chair of the Arctic Council.

Q70 **Chair:** Is that this month?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: Yes, it is this month—or April. They are just about to take over. That has to be managed within a framework that we all agree on. There is no denying that 50% or so of the coastline in the north is Russian sovereign territory, so we will have to operate within these limits.

Q71 **Dr Whitford:** We discussed this in a totally separate event that you attended. Do you see the Arctic Council meeting again under Norway's chairmanship? It has not been able to under Russia's chairmanship.

Wegger Christian Strømmen: There will be limited activities—I will limit myself to saying that there will be some limited activities. We are looking very hard at it. I will be more than happy to come back to the Committee with the details of that, but we are in a tricky situation. Some of the issues one has to address continuously. Given the sanctions and the political conditions at the moment, there are clear limitations on what one can do. All I can promise you right now is that we will do our best, although it will not be easy.

Q72 **Dr Whitford:** Ambassador Sigurjónsson, I have the same questions for you. Do you see a change in the UK's policy, and in its interest in contributing to the defence and security of the High North? Iceland does not have a standing army; do you feel that you get the same liaison with the UK Government, and the same recognition of your concerns?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Understandably, if you look a bit further back to the first decade of the millennium, there was limited bandwidth, not only in London but in most European countries, and in the US, because of Iraq and Afghanistan. Also, at the time, Russia was regarded as a partner. The Russians at that time were very much taken on trust, but of course that changed through changed realities, not least with the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

I might just mention an interesting fact. I mentioned that the US closed its base in Iceland back in 2006. On the same day or thereabouts, the Russians sent strategic bombers down to Iceland, which they had not done since the end of the cold war. We felt at the time that this was a very strange signal, because the closure of this relatively large facility could have been interpreted as a de-escalation of sorts in the region, and also because, as I mentioned, Russia was regarded as a partner at that time. I mention this because it shows, in my view, the falseness of the narrative that they were dealing with NATO encroachment; quite the contrary.

As for interaction with the UK in later years, we have been very pleased with how that has progressed. We have a bilateral MOU with the United

Kingdom on defence co-operation, and we have regular consultations and co-operation with different entities relating to security and defence in the UK. The flow of information and communication between the two capitals is quite good.

Q73 **Dr Whitford:** Has it changed? Has it stepped up?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: It has stepped up, yes. Of course, there are issues that I would say are not bilateral, but that affect both countries directly. I had the pleasure of visiting RAF Lossiemouth in the spring of '21. The squadron there has the new P-8 maritime patrol aircraft, one of which is called the Spirit of Reykjavik. They will be operating in the North Atlantic, along with the Norwegian and US planes, and we will be pleased to provide facilities for these allies as needed.

The integrated review came up. We are very concerned about the security of submarine communications cables. We are particularly vulnerable in that regard; there we share a concern with the UK, which I understand has commissioned two vessels that are supposed to deal with the security of this particular type of infrastructure.

Q74 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Good afternoon, ambassadors. Given Russia's increasingly militarised approach and the activity in the High North since 2007, and now the war in Ukraine, the tensions with Russia are quite considerable. You have raised the security and defence concerns that both your countries have, and, Ambassador Sigurjónsson, you have touched on the subsea infrastructure. What are the increasing Russian activities that your countries have had to deal with? Do they stretch beyond security and defence concerns? Ambassador Sigurjónsson, would you answer that question first?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: If you look at the past 15 years or so, the visible Russian presence—around Iceland at least—has been initially primarily in the air, but the intensity of that air activity has fluctuated a bit from one year to another. Then, of course, there are naval vessels. Last but not least, there are the submarines; all information in that regard is held very close, so I will not go into it in any detail, but that is obviously the primary concern of the alliance, and of individual countries like ourselves. In the context of the war in Ukraine, we must remember that the Russian fleet is completely intact. A large part of their nuclear capability is in fact onboard vessels belonging to the northern fleet, which is of course closer to Norway than to us, but it still seeks to have access to the North Atlantic.

Sally-Ann Hart: Thank you. Ambassador Strømmen?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: Some of these issues are a bit hard to speak about in an open hearing that everyone can watch, but I will try my hand a little.

What we see—which I think also, along the Finnish border, the Finns would see on land—is that there is less activity than we would normally see throughout the year. Of course, the Russians have their cycle of exercises. So many of the units have gone to Ukraine from the north—

units that normally would have their bases, activities and exercises close to our territory. Many of them are gone, and are obviously on the Ukrainian front.

As my Icelandic colleague was saying, there is not really much of a change when it comes to the navy and maritime capacity. That is probably still there and, in a way, it has not really been affected all that much. We see roughly the same type of activity that we would see in a normal year, and the air force is probably somewhere in between. I cannot go on—I don't really have control over all the details—but in a way, that capacity would still be there. In the air and maritime, we see patterns that we are used to, and probably activities on the level that we are used to, or that would be predictable to us. On land, things are quieter because they have left for other places. The Russians are bringing down from the north large units to join the fighting in Ukraine.

Q75 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Thank you. As allies, we are all thinking about the security and defence risks. Do you think that Russia has also thought about opportunities in the Arctic and High North, or is it taken up with Ukraine and other battles? Do you think it is a genuine risk?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: In my view, Ukraine in itself is such a huge thing. I think what happened there is not really related to the Arctic; the Russians are able to do more than one thing at the same time. I would not draw, politically speaking, a line from one place up to another. However, it will have had significant political and military effects—Sweden and Finland joining NATO in particular. If you take a look—and I really encourage you to do so—at the numbers and capacity of the armed forces and the industrial base of Sweden and Finland, Europe has changed, like it or not. That has something to do with our biggest card in the liberal world, which is that we actually have friends and allies; we can collaborate and rely on each other. We will try to play a role in the North Atlantic to release resources that our friends, allies and neighbours can then use in other places efficiently. It helps to have friends and allies.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: On the Arctic, there has been a lot of talk in recent years about increased navigability, but as far as I can see, there has not been much visible evidence so far. It is still difficult and very expensive, and there are unresolved governance issues. However, the potential is definitely there, and we could even say that the prospect is there. As Western allies, the countries in the northern part of Europe, in particular, should prepare, and try to discuss and define what the security implications might be.

Q76 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Thank you. Ambassador Sigurjónsson, you touched earlier on the receding ice. Does climate change present defence and security challenges for the High North? Do Iceland and Norway have concerns about the opening up of new sea routes? What issues might arise due to the freedom of navigation as a result?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: It is exactly as I said earlier: we need to try to define and discuss the possible security implications of climate change in

the region. In my view, we need to go much further than we have done. These changes are taking place, but how rapid they will be and what practical implications they will have on, for example, shipping or accessibility remains to be seen. It also remains to be seen how long into the future we are looking. Iceland doesn't really have any specific concerns relating to this issue, but we share the more general concerns of our neighbours and allies. It doesn't impact Iceland as such—at least, not in the near future.

Q77 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Thank you. Ambassador Strømmen?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: Any major factual or geographical change, such as climate change and the receding ice, will of course present a new situation. We operate in these areas. As I said, 84% of Norway is salt water, so for us the fact that the geography is changing is a major thing that we have to look into. How much is it a security concern? It is clearly an environmental concern, in terms of biodiversity, wildlife, animals and so on, but it can be a bit hard to say how much it is a security concern. I need to assess that, but it is clearly a factor, simply because the world is changing around us. When your physical world is changing, everything changes, at least to some extent.

As Sturla said, there are many issues linked to new sea routes. One can, of course, hypothetically construct a number of very interesting problems—"If this happens, what would happen? Would it drive a confrontation?"—but there are many outstanding basic issues relating to navigation. There will be ice drifting around the North Pole for a long, long time, and that is very dangerous. It will still be dark. You will need permissions of all sorts. You will need some kind of Russian collaboration on many of these issues. I would caution you a bit against drawing up interesting or dangerous hypothetical scenarios, simply because some of the fundamentals will still be there, even though undoubtably the geographical fact that the ice is receding is something that we face every day. You can see it in front of your eyes in the Arctic. It is actually quite scary.

Q78 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Hypothetically, should there be greater freedom and more sea routes? Would Norway, for example, need its armed forces to play a greater role in policing those sea routes and would it require collaboration with its allies, or is that something that has not been determined or thought about it yet because it is still very difficult to navigate the High North and the Arctic?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: Any maritime activity needs somehow to be monitored. These areas are fragile, not the least for environmental reasons. If there were to be more maritime traffic, we would need to look closely at that for reasons not only of security, but simply of safety. Our coastguard, which is part of the navy—we have one maritime command—looks after fishery living resources and so on as well as search and rescue. For them, if we were to see more activity from any country, we would of course need to step up the monitoring, and we will.

Q79 **Sally-Ann Hart:** And you would expect the UK to play a role in that.

Wegger Christian Strømmen: And I'm sure they would. And we would share that.

Q80 **Chair:** I don't know what you make of some of the things that Russia has been saying about the northern sea route, where they are really asserting their rights in regard to some of the territorial ambitions around that. They're saying all sort of things, such as that they would see it in much the same way as the Egyptians see the Suez Canal, and that 45 days' notice would have to be given before any vessel could approach—I think there was even talk about Russian crew being on and accompanying vessels that were going through the sea route. They seem to be very assertive in making claims around all this. Is that a realistic option for the Russians? Would they be able to enforce this? What impact would that have on any business or enterprise that is looking at the opportunity presented by these new routes, and how would they negotiate all these difficulties?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: I think that is how it is as we speak. They will, for example, want Russian pilots on board foreign vessels, or at least merchant vessels. As for the legal questions, a bit more expertise than you have here at the table would be required to analyse them.

Q81 **Chair:** But even if there are legal challenges and it goes to the United Nations for resolution, this presents a number of problems for anybody who is looking at this as an opportunity, surely?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: Just a thought—the north-east passage is a very, very long route; although it is quicker, it is very fragile. I know I have said this before, but caution against going too quickly down that road and starting to think about all the opportunities—

Q82 **Chair:** Do you think we are getting a little bit ahead of ourselves when we are looking at this?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: Well, I wouldn't use those words. Some of the concerns that the Russians are raising, all of us would raise. Consider an environmental disaster involving a vessel up in the north-east passage. That is a terrible thought. These are very fragile, very vulnerable areas. There are so many concerns that not getting ahead of ourselves is probably a good idea. When and if things start to open up, you can be sure that the UK and others have a major partner, as goes for the other countries around there, such as Canada, the United States, and Denmark on behalf of Greenland. There would be a number of issues, not the least all the flag states of whatever vessels would go up in the north.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: In terms of preparedness, I think one issue that needs to be looked at now is search and rescue in the region. We already have a lot of recreational maritime traffic, such as cruise ships, going to the very High North, and the possibility of major accidents without close assistance is rather frightening. Of course, with increased traffic due to changed climatic circumstances, that would become an even more important factor.

Q83 **David Duguid:** Thank you for coming in today, your excellencies. Ambassador Strømmen, I do not know if you remember, but we met back in 2019 not long after you became ambassador. We had dinner with other MPs, MSPs and councillors in Aberdeen.

Wegger Christian Strømmen: Yes, I remember that.

David Duguid: I recall that we talked about, among many other things, the resources that we share in the North sea, such as oil and gas, and fisheries, as has been mentioned. I will never forget one thing you said about the North sea between Norway and the UK, and Scotland in particular: that people think of it as separating us, but it actually connects us. That has always stuck with me.

On the subject of natural resources—this is for both of you, but I will start with Ambassador Strømmen—do you anticipate growing competition or disputes over resources in the Arctic and the High North as it opens up?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: I am very happy that you remember that, because in our national psyche water unites people; it does not separate. I know that can appear strange, but if you were familiar with my geography, you would probably agree. In the old days, the only way to get from one place to another, or the only way to get to church on a Sunday, was to use a boat. To go over the mountain was no option whatsoever. We have this notion that you are bound together by the sea; you are not separated by the sea. That we are separated by the channel is not our way of thinking about it.

I really do not see that there will be disputes over, or a race for, the resources. Most of these things are well regulated in the law of the sea, and there are established patterns of collaboration, such as the fishing commissions, so I really do not see that. There will always be issues, which is why I mentioned my hope that at some point in the future we will come to a situation where we could use the Arctic Council to a larger extent than we do now. I do not see that we are in any kind of race or dispute over resources. These are very fragile areas. Even if there were resources there, the cost of bringing things out would be very high, it would be very dangerous, and it would involve huge environmental risk. We would be very cautious to proceed. As it is all under some kind of regulation, I am pretty confident that we will manage whatever comes our way in a reasonable way. The same goes for the United Kingdom.

Q84 **David Duguid:** Ambassador Sigurjónsson, you were nodding there. Do you agree?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: I agree completely with what Wegger just said. I think it is important to remember that the Arctic is very different from the Antarctic when it comes to governance. A large part of the Arctic region is either national territories or exclusive economic zones of the member states of the Arctic Council. A free-for-all is not probable, in my view. As Wegger mentioned, the extraction of minerals, oil or gas outside the

territories of the eight members states' zones would be prohibitively expensive—if it were possible at all.

Q85 **David Duguid:** That leads me on to another question that has been rattling around in my mind for a few weeks now, ever since the United Nations high seas treaty was announced. That came out just as we were starting this inquiry, so I have wondered how that would be policed in an area such as the High North. Does either of you have any opinion on that?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: It is a good question. I am aware that there is some co-operation with regard to what is called pirate fishing on the high seas—for example, when it comes to such vessels' access to ports and so on—but I have to admit that I am not sure about the implementation of this particular agreement.

Wegger Christian Strømmen: Whatever is under some kind of national jurisdiction would be looked after according to the law of the sea treaty and the national jurisdiction. That would cover by far the largest part of any territory in the north. However, you would always be left with issues where you need to collaborate to do these things efficiently. Even if something is done on territory that you police, it could have effects on the other side.

If you allow me, at this point I would like to mention the infrastructure we have in the North sea and the North Atlantic. There are pipes for gas and oil, interconnectors for electricity, and other kinds of infrastructure. It is massively important. If something were to happen on our side of the border, it would have an effect here. The United Kingdom imports somewhere between 35% and 40% of its gas from Norway. Don't worry, we will keep it up, but anything that happens on our side—whether it an accident, a deliberate action or whatever, will have a huge impact on your side, and likewise. So there is no way of avoiding a very, very close collaborative effort to look after these issues. The answer here is to collaborate and not quarrel about who should go first.

Q86 **David Duguid:** The United Nations convention on the law of the sea often gets brought up as the collaborative approach by law, or by convention at least. Do you not see that as being at risk at all, particularly given the recent actions by Russia, or indeed China, which is becoming increasingly interested in the Arctic and referring to itself as an Arctic state. Does China's new interest in the area worry you at all?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: From our perspective, anyone is welcome—for instance, as observers in the Arctic Council. We acknowledge that the Arctic is of interest to anyone, but the basic law for everything here is the law of the sea. The North Pole is a sea. Antarctica is a continent surrounded by sea, and the North Pole is a sea surrounded by territory. There is a huge difference there. The law of the sea regulates the basic jurisdiction of these areas, and that is the foundation—that is the basic law for these kinds of things. I think it has worked over the decades since it was finalised.

On top of that, you have to add normal diplomatic and neighbourly relations in order to manage these things, because there will be new challenges coming along all the way. You have a legal framework, and on that you build a good collaborative effort between those that are interested and those that border these areas. That is the solution. I think we handle that very well with the United Kingdom, and I thank the United Kingdom for their efforts in making that happen.

Given China's huge economic growth, you can understand that they are looking at these issues, but they are meeting exactly the same kinds of challenges. It is still dark and there is a lot of drifting ice, even if you are on a Chinese vessel. It is no less for them, although they build many, and the Russians are still there. They have exactly the same framework, and we must hold them to that—and we will. Of course one can understand the interest that more and more countries take in this area, but they are meeting the same kind of challenge that we have spoken about for decades.

David Duguid: Ambassador Sigurjónsson, do you have anything to add?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Of course we are aware of the Chinese interest, which has been there for a number of years now. We have welcomed them as observers to the Arctic Council, which gives them the opportunity to enter into scientific co-operation related to or emanating from the council, for example. You mentioned that the Chinese themselves have defined China as a near-Arctic state, but that definition has no legal meaning and any other country in the world could use it, I guess.

Q87 **Christine Jardine:** When you were speaking about China and their interest, you were saying it is still dark, with a lot of ice floating about, and we spoke earlier about the changed nature of international relations since the outbreak of the Ukraine war. Demonstrably, China is now increasingly close to Russia. Do you think there is any danger of them using Russia's potential dependence on them during this war as leverage to have more influence in the Arctic through Russia, rather than independently on their own?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: That is a hard one. I think that would be getting a little bit ahead of ourselves. I am not saying that that way of thinking is irrelevant: it is a thought we should have of course, but I cannot see it happening at the moment. I could offer an observation gained over many years that the Russians are looking after their territorial interests very closely, and that relates to everyone including China. Some of the standard Russian objections would probably still be there in relation to the Arctic issues and the north-east passage, but I will let them answer that question themselves first, and then we will analyse what they say afterwards. That is the best I can offer.

Q88 **Andrew Western:** Ambassador Sigurjónsson, I have a couple of specific questions and then I will come back to something that you said earlier. The first question is whether there is a need for the UK and Iceland to intensify co-operation to patrol the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap. Secondary

but linked is the signing of the MOU in 2019 and—you have covered some of this already—how defence and security co-operation has grown since then, whether it has grown enough and what more we could perhaps do.

Returning to something that you said about the reaction of people in Iceland to the growing geopolitical issues in the area and Sweden and Finland's decision to apply to join NATO—people realising that something is going on in the wider region—what is the public consensus about what Iceland's response to that should be? Clearly a number of different actions have been taken—intensification of certain things that were already in train—but is there a particular settled will of the Icelandic people in terms of the correct course of action?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: In terms of support for the Ukrainian cause, there is full consensus. Of course, you will always have varying opinions, but I would say that the vast majority of the population are quite solid in their support for Ukraine, and find the war and the invasion abhorrent. Transferring that to our own security and defence debate and assessments is really a work in progress. Only a year has passed since the invasion, and there is a lot of fermentation—if I may use that word—going on in many of our countries with regard to security and defence. Many of the discussions and the decisions that will be made now, in the coming months and the next couple of years, will have an impact on these things for the next two or three decades. That would be my guess.

I think we will also have to have a debate on the character of our contribution, but I cannot really comment on where that might go. Everybody agrees that it needs to be addressed, and that we will once more have to find the niche that is suitable for Iceland, but we are not there yet—but I think it has started.

With regard to the MOU, yes, it was signed. If I remember correctly, we made this MOU back in 2010 or 2011 originally, and it was updated in 2019. It does not involve any obligations or commitments; it is just a statement of intent, where both parties recognise certain common interests and declare a willingness to co-operate. Like many documents of that sort, it is a framework or a basis on which to build. We can refer to it, in terms of practical co-operation. So, even though it is not spelled out in the agreement itself, in the MOU, it can happen. The MOU can be used as a reference point, so to speak.

I mentioned the P-8s earlier. Definitely that is an area where, even though we do not operate such aircraft, we have the facilities and geographical location for the monitoring and defence of the GIUK gap. During the Cold War, in security circles, the phrase "ASW capital of the world" was sometimes used of Keflavik in Iceland—for obvious reasons, if you look at the map. I also mentioned the submarine cables and the security of infrastructure, which is another issue we would like to discuss further with the UK.

Co-operation like that is not always in the big issues, or the visible ones. It tends to be day-to-day communication on small, practical issues that lead

to something bigger. The last question was on the intensification of co-operation, and that is basically what I have been speaking about.

Q89 **Andrew Western:** Ambassador Strømmen, I have a specific question. Will you explain how the UK and Norway co-operate on the basing and maintenance of the P-8A maritime patrol aircraft?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: Yes. We have bought almost the same. We are very thankful that we can learn from the Brits, because you had them first, so some of the things that one always struggles with, we can learn from you. I understand that Boeing has facilities at one of the bases here in the UK, so we can fly here. The abilities we can use almost totally overlap, so we are talking about more or less exactly the same kind of capacity.

Operationally speaking and from a cost perspective, that is very good, because we can do this in the cheapest possible way for both of us. When the capacity totally overlaps, we do not have the concern of losing anything out of it. We are able to substitute for each other when something happens, or cover different parts of the area—if you need your plane to do something else, we might be able to fill in for a while, and vice versa. We are looking at the same territory in the North Atlantic. The UK probably looks a little bit more to the south than we do.

It goes without saying that you are talking about a huge potential for making this more efficient and more cost-efficient, and we are exploiting that. We depend on some bases here and you depend on some of our bases, and we can fly across; it is not very far. When you are in Shetland, the closest railway station is in Bergen on the west coast of Norway. We like to point that out. We have certain shared historical traditions with parts of Scotland and very strong historical connections to parts of Scotland—if ever there were two countries able to collaborate about a concrete proposal like the P-8! This is more important than ever. I mean, maritime surveillance; come on—this is really important.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Of course, the RAF has participated in air policing and we encourage them to continue to do so. In that context, I will mention one of the facilities that we assumed responsibility for back in 2006: the air defence system—four radar stations in each part of the country, with a command and control centre located in the south-west. This is connected to allied countries, including the UK, so there is air surveillance co-ordination between Iceland and the UK.

Q90 **Andrew Western:** That may have answered my next question, which is: what other opportunities are there for collaboration of this type?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: There are many. Let me stop after one word: submarines. That is a costly thing. Anywhere where you are looking for the same things or doing the same things from a defence perspective, there would be huge opportunities for sharing costs, so the fact that we are coming closer and closer to a total overlap is a very good thing. Maritime surveillance—both surface and subsurface—is the obvious thing. The same goes for the air territory.

We are also very thankful, if you will allow me to say, for the Royal Marines training in Norway. I know that is a tough school—to go almost to the top of Norway and train in the winter. They are proud of it and they should be. It is a very good thing. We have built new facilities for them and we hope to see them often.

Q91 **Wendy Chamberlain:** Apologies for missing the start of your evidence; I had to step out to the Chamber. I want to ask a couple of questions about NATO. It will not surprise you to know that we have already had quite a lot of evidence in relation to NATO, particularly the prospect of Finland and Sweden joining, not only because that will obviously significantly change NATO from a land border perspective, but also because NATO will need to develop plans for their defence. In fact we had evidence saying that it will require a fundamental rethink of an awful lot of NATO's defence assumptions. How do you think the NATO expansion will change the alliance's priorities in the High North?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Obviously, with the inclusion of Finland and Sweden, a lot of internal homework will have to be done, and that will take a while. For one thing, we have to come to a conclusion on the debate on the command structure. Throughout the cold war decades, we in Iceland interacted with SACLANT—as it was called at that time—in Norfolk, and later with Joint Force Command, which is also in Norfolk. From our perspective, when it comes to the command structure, it will be important to maintain the Atlantic perspective of the headquarters and, of course, to direct US involvement in the structure.

Q92 **Wendy Chamberlain:** Are you suggesting that a command structure for the High North is something that NATO should be considering?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: That is being discussed, but SACEUR will hopefully come to a conclusion on this later this year, including on the boundaries and on how Sweden and Finland will be incorporated. The debate is not over yet, and I am not privy to where it is leading, but obviously there will be a place for them.

Q93 **Wendy Chamberlain:** So those conversations are happening. An Icelandic representative told the UK Defence Committee in 2018 that the High North should be higher on NATO's agenda. Obviously, the Ukraine war has changed some of the parties and actors, but do you feel that even before that was happening the High North was going up the priority list?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Coming back to what I said earlier regarding the Arctic, NATO is responsible for the national territories of member states. They are, to a large extent, in the Arctic, so my answer to your question would be yes, speaking from a national viewpoint.

Q94 **Wendy Chamberlain:** So a change over time. Thank you very much. Ambassador, could I come to you with a similar question? Also, do you think the UK will need to take on new responsibilities as NATO changes?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: I do not really see NATO changing its priorities, but I see it changing some of its operational patterns and plans,

which will have military implications, cost implications and other things. I think it is more an operational—

Q95 **Wendy Chamberlain:** But I suppose strategic priorities have not changed, and that is why Finland and Sweden saw fit to apply to join it.

Wegger Christian Strømmen: I will give you a little bit of background. Most of the capacities of Finland and Sweden are where the population is concentrated in the south of both countries—in Finland, that is particularly the southern part and, in Sweden, also mostly in the southern part. For us, that is very different: we are in the north. Half a million people, or 300,000 to 400,000 Norwegians at least, live in the north along that coastline that we are very proud of, but it is way up there. We hold a lot of our military capacity in the north. That is not reflected on the other side of the border, but in the Baltics the balance will tip, so we will have to think about not only what we now call the High North or when we speak about the Arctic, but to balance this with thinking about the Baltic. We are not in the Baltic; we are where you enter the Baltic. I grew up where you enter the Baltic. It is, first and foremost, more of an operational issue, and then there is an additional, very important element, which is the political element. It is the fact that two other modern northern European countries are neighbours, friends, and also now allies.

Norway is not a member of the European Union, but through the EEA we are linked to them. We have a long history with our neighbours. The fact that we are integrated in the same kind of command structure and armed forces, and given that we are faced with a war in Europe—on European territory—of a dimension we have not seen for decades in Europe, brings new political dimensions.

Q96 **Wendy Chamberlain:** And the politics have already changed with Finland and Sweden's intention to join, as opposed to the fact that they are not actually part of NATO yet.

Wegger Christian Strømmen: My view is that we have not had relations as good as we have now in northern Europe for a long, long time. They were not bad, but they really have improved, so there are some political dimensions for parliamentarians to pick up.

For the UK, there will be some military operational issues, and I know that your people are looking into them. The UK is a net exporter of security in Europe, and we are very interested in that dimension. We are very interested in the UK taking up its position—its natural leadership role—in northern Europe. The JEF is a very good example of that; it works very well on many levels. The operational side—the Royal Navy, the Air Force—will follow patterns that are pretty predictable, and they will be adjusted with the rest of us.

Then there is of course the additional political element for the United Kingdom—the fact that you will now have a united northern Europe, where everybody is also a member of NATO. What does that mean for the largest military power on the western side in the area? That is for you to decide. I

am a guest in this country; you will make that decision, but we are very interested in what you come up with.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: We also have to acknowledge the UK's leadership in starting the JEF considerably before the Ukraine war started. Even though that was not the intention at the time, it has facilitated in a way the Finnish and Swedish movement towards the alliance.

Wendy Chamberlain: That's great. I think that is the next area of questioning. Thank you very much for your input on how we make our decisions.

Q97 **Deidre Brock:** Good afternoon, your Excellencies. I want to ask about the Joint Expeditionary Force. The witness from the Human Security Centre told us: "JEF is important to preserve the second centre of decision-making. It has a great utility in terms of being not NATO. It can explore ideas, particularly developing concepts that do not involve the US to a significant degree, without offence. It has a higher degree of flexibility than a European Union entity perhaps might have in the future." Would you reflect on those words? How valuable do you think JEF is to the co-operation among the nations within it, which you have mentioned a lot this afternoon?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: JEF started out before Finland and Sweden applied for NATO membership and before the invasion of Ukraine. Those are fundamental facts. Of course, we were interested in that element back in those days because it also integrated non-NATO countries in security thinking in northern Europe. For us, it was an excellent institutional instrument that we could use in our relations with our neighbours—Sweden and Finland—so the Norwegian motivation was quite obvious.

Fast forward, and we have the invasion of Ukraine, and Finland and Sweden have asked to join NATO. The beauty of the JEF was that it turned out to be so flexible. It turned out to be complementary to NATO and what EU members were talking about in this field. That was extremely helpful when these events started to happen. We were all looking for something that could meet on a Defence Ministry level, and all of a sudden we ended up with Heads of Government relations. We sometimes go to these meetings. Since it had not totally found its feet, it could be adjusted to fit exactly that kind of purpose. So the military people were doing their bit, the politicians were doing their bit and the diplomats were doing their bit.

It was almost like something that, if it had not been around, we would have had to invent. That is why we are so full of praise for the JEF, and we want to keep it that way—as a flexible instrument, under extremely different circumstances from just a year and a half ago.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: The JEF is still very much a work in progress, but it has, in a short space of time, evolved in an interesting and satisfactory way. Wegger mentioned flexibility. I think everybody appreciates that, definitely, and in terms of role, I think so far the main focus has been on

below-the-threshold operations—being able to react quickly to possible upcoming security threats.

You also mentioned the configuration—how the group is put together. Considering how good the co-operation has been, it is interesting that, of the 10 countries, there are seven member states of the European Union, and the UK is the framework country, as it is called.

Q98 **Deidre Brock:** That is an interesting point, isn't it? We will see how that evolves. I wanted to pick up on what you said about it being so flexible. When we were at St Andrews, one of our witnesses commented on the fact that the JEF has so far been focused on the Baltic region, but she felt that it could pivot quite quickly to the High North if required. Would you agree?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Yes, indeed. There are no specific plans, but that is definitely, as far as I can hear, the intention.

Q99 **Deidre Brock:** Okay. Do you think the same?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: Yes. It could be if the need arose.

Q100 **Deidre Brock:** Could I turn to the Arctic Council? We have touched on this briefly. Russia holds the current chair of the council, but the other members suspended participation after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. To what extent has the suspension of those meetings made it difficult to manage common challenges in the region? Obviously, Norway is going to be taking over later this year, but could you tell us a little about the challenges that the countries involved have faced as a result?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: Unfortunately, I think the answer to your question is yes—you are really on to something. We have to manage it. We have to pursue it. We have to try to adapt. There will clearly be limits to what you can do, and they are laid down politically and legally—sanctions that we will have to live within. We support them. However, the issues, in substance, are suffering. The Russian Federation is still the largest coastal country in the Arctic. We will have to try to see what we can do with some of the issues, almost from a technical perspective.

We are drawing up—and I have seen some first drafts—plans of what we will do. I think it is a little bit early days, but I would be very happy to provide members of the Committee with a pretty detailed plan for how we plan to go about the Arctic Council, its agenda and its activities and how we plan to relate to the Russian Federation. I am more than willing to come back, or I could forward a document to you that would set this out in some detail. We would be very happy for your input and your views—any UK views—on these issues.

Deidre Brock: We would be very grateful to receive that, ambassador. Thank you.

Wegger Christian Strømmen: It is not an easy issue. It is not an easy call. There is not a straightforward yes or no to that question. We will try

our best. If it is of any comfort, these issues are also so important to us that at least we will invest a lot of energy in them.

Q101 **Deidre Brock:** Is there anything you would like to add to that, Ambassador Sigurjónsson?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: We had the chair in the Arctic Council before Russia, but that was more or less put off track by the pandemic at the time. We handed over to the Russians after our chair period was over; this was, of course, before the war in Ukraine.

I think I can say that the Arctic Council is a very valued forum for all the participating countries—all the member states—and we tried to maintain it as far as possible and keep it working after the annexation of Crimea. We did away with meetings of chiefs of defence, which had been conducted earlier in the context of the Arctic Council, even though it does not have security defence in its mandate. That was a warning signal, in a way, but carrying on with business as usual following the invasion was unthinkable.

That is where we are at the moment, but I agree with Wegger that, in the longer term, we obviously hope that we can return to normal co-operation when we have returned to normality in Ukraine.

Q102 **Deidre Brock:** Forgive me, but I am not familiar with how the chair is arrived at. It is every two years, I think, isn't it?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: It is rotational.

Q103 **Deidre Brock:** You take a turn and it rotates. Forgive me, Ambassador, could you remind me what the population of Iceland is?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Sometimes I say less than a million, but we are about 400,000.

Q104 **Deidre Brock:** Obviously, Norway's population is about 5.5 million.

Wegger Christian Strømmen: Yes—you have counted everyone. I think it is 5.5 or 5.6.

Q105 **Deidre Brock:** But you are taking your place chairing the Arctic Council—fantastic.

Wegger Christian Strømmen: If you will allow me one final comment, I think you could argue it is the truth that the Arctic Council is the largest—or at least one of the largest—multilateral successes of the last 20, 25, 30 years, and here we are. Somehow it must be preserved; we cannot give this up at this point. Again, it must be handled diplomatically and in a collaborative manner, such that there could be a possibility to revitalise this. We must then look at some of the very important issues that are on the agenda. There haven't been all that many multilateral successes over the last years, but this might actually be one of them—we would argue that it is one of them.

Q106 **Deidre Brock:** That is good to hear—we need some positive news, don't we? Are there ways in which you think the UK could be stepping up

participation in either the JEF or the Arctic Council? Are there areas where you might like to see the UK strengthen its role a little bit? Are you able to say?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: It is always a question of resources, and when you get to resources it can become very tricky. We at least are not in a position to tell, or try to tell, others what to do.

Wegger Christian Strømmen: I have to say that we always find willingness on the UK's side on these issues. We never have a problem. Access is excellent, and they will always listen too. There will be nuances, and they will not always totally agree with us, but at least the willingness to take these issues seriously and reach out to your neighbour on the other side of the North sea is excellent. I don't have a problem with that at all.

We will respect the choices that the UK makes in these issues. Whether you do more or do less, we will live with whatever you decide, but at least the collaboration is very good.

Deidre Brock: On that very positive note, I think I will end.

Q107 **Chair:** Thank you for the generous offer to either get back to us or write to us about the agenda that Norway will initiate as the new chair of the Arctic Council. We look forward to that. One observation is that there seems to be a lot of defence fora across the High North and the Arctic. NATO is obviously the main one, but there is the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, and the Northern European Defence Policy Forum. There is a lot of infrastructure in place that deals with security stuff. The Arctic Council is the only one that deals with the non-military side of things, isn't it? Is that correct?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Apart from regional fisheries organisations.

Wegger Christian Strømmen: If we start talking about fisheries, you will be here all night. You are not going to get out of this room.

Q108 **Chair:** The thing I am getting at with those observations is whether there is too much interest exclusively in defence issues in the North Atlantic and Arctic, given the number of fora in place? Is there enough focus on the other practical things that need to be done?

Deidre Brock: Culture.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: For a long time—many decades—the Nordic Council of Ministers, which dates back to the early '50s, if I remember correctly, has been a fixture in Nordic co-operation and, in some ways, the basis of it.

Chair: The Nordic Council—

Sturla Sigurjónsson: The Nordic Council is the parliamentary part, and the Nordic Council of Ministers is intergovernmental, but at all levels. The level of integration between the countries through that has been very

high. For a long time, throughout the cold war, security and defence—or at least security policy—was not on the agenda.

Q109 **Chair:** Security was not on the agenda?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: No, it couldn't be. It was only after the end of the cold war that, for example, parliamentarians in the Nordic Council could start discussing these issues. If you look in a longer perspective, there has not been too much focus on security. It may sound like there has been lately, but that is because of external circumstances.

NORDEFCO, which is the Nordic Defence Co-operation, goes back maybe 15 years, to the Stoltenberg report, I think. That is relatively recent.

Q110 **Chair:** I heard my colleague say "culture". In Scotland, we are interested in that, with our own specific relationships, which you referred to, Ambassador. We have a unique relationship with our Nordic colleagues and comrades. Are there more things that we could do to develop that? What about a sub-national actor such as Scotland being more a part of an Arctic Council arrangement, which would operate across the High North and the Arctic?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: I think there exist a number of mechanisms and organisations; they just do not get the same kind of attention as the security and defence-related ones. Very quickly, when someone holds a seminar or there is a public meeting or hearing, it drifts to defence and security-related issues. I can suggest a number of institutions, both governmental and non-governmental, in particular, that deal with cultural issues and indigenous issues, which, in my case, would be very important—the Sámi people.

The Arctic Council picks up on quite a lot of those issues, and there are also other institutions. But I would agree with you when you say that they probably do not get the kind of attention that they deserve.

Chair: A few of us were at a meeting with the MOD the other day. They gave a very helpful briefing and were keen to stress that security underpins all the other things we could do. Without it as a bedrock, all the other issues and things that are discussed here would not be able to happen. There needs to be confidence that the right security arrangements are in place. We will leave that there.

Q111 **Christine Jardine:** Thank you, but I am now going to go back to defence—notwithstanding everything the Chair just said. We have had contributions before to the Committee suggesting that the UK's defence capability, in terms of contributing to defence in the High North Atlantic, might need some strengthening. I would like to find out a wee bit more about that with my questions. Which of the UK's current capabilities, including, or perhaps especially, those based in Scotland, make significant contributions to defence and security in the North Atlantic and High North region?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: At the risk of sounding repetitive, I come back to the P-8s, which are an extremely important element. Of course, we should not forget that facilities in Scotland are extremely important, because this is the southern flank of what we call the GIUK gap. Sometimes when we talk about the gap, the focus is on Greenland and Iceland, but the UK is the southern anchor. But if I need to pick one thing, I would pick the P-8s. There has been a lot of debate in Europe lately about armaments and the need to co-ordinate, and this is an excellent example of how things can be done in a positive way. These three countries have bought basically the same equipment, or at least the same platforms, and they are also used to working together and inter-operating, so that is what I would mention.

Wegger Christian Strømmen: Intelligence co-operation is hugely important. The P-8, as my Icelandic colleague mentioned; anti-submarine activities; the F-35, which Norway and the UK have; the Royal Marines training in seriously cold weather capacity—that would be sort of a first list. I would need to talk to some military people for a more detailed one, but I would be willing to come back to you with a longer list.

Q112 **Christine Jardine:** One of the things that Dr Marc DeVore mentioned was the shortage of ice breakers and ice-hardened ships. Do either or both of you feel that the UK has sufficient cold weather capability to be a strong ally?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: As far as I am aware, that hasn't really been a problem so far. At least, I have not heard any references to that as a weakness or vulnerability. As for ice breakers, the conditions in the North Atlantic at least don't really call for them. You have to go quite far north to need those, and then of course you have to define for what purpose.

Q113 **Christine Jardine:** As you said earlier, although the ice is breaking up, it will still be dark, and there will still be navigational difficulties. Do you think we are sufficiently geared up for that? Have we always been aware of it and working towards it?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: We were very interested in your cold weather capacity. That's why I have said a few times that the Royal Marines are always welcome to Norway to train. For us, when anyone is willing to build cold weather capacity, that's a very good thing. They have been doing brilliantly—they have to learn how to ski and manage in very challenging temperatures. That is obviously a capacity that we would be very interested in. Of course, for the UK, as for any country, it's a question of how you balance your resources; but we're very happy for the Royal Marines to train in Norway in the winter.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: As well as ice or severe cold, as you know, the weather conditions in the North Atlantic can be very challenging, particularly in winter time. The UK borders the North Atlantic, and you have this maritime tradition and experience that enables the Royal Navy to tackle that.

Q114 **Christine Jardine:** The war in Ukraine has undoubtedly made us all more aware of the danger in Europe, and the danger of tilting too far towards

the Pacific. Do you think there is a need to refocus our attention on our defence capabilities, or do you think that that awareness is still there, and that Ukraine has simply underpinned it?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: We have been rediscovering some phrases and acronyms from the cold war, and one thing that I remember being frequently discussed was SLOCs—sea lines of communication—across the Atlantic from North America to Europe. That primarily related to reinforcements. I am not saying that we are there again, but it is interesting that the term has returned, as we have seen with the provision of equipment for Ukraine, some of which has to travel a long way. That is just one of the things that I think we have to revisit in a slightly different way.

Christine Jardine: Thank you very much.

Q115 **Chair:** One of the things that has come out in this inquiry that has maybe surprised us a little bit—I don't know if it will surprise you distinguished gentlemen—is talk of the use of space-based technologies. Increased talk about that, with regard to defence infrastructure, has been a feature. Is that something in which your nations are taking an interest? If Dr Whitford were here, she would be asking that question, given her keen interest in our nascent space industry in Scotland, which brings so many opportunities. Is that a feature that we will focus on, and is there room for co-operation between our nations on that?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: The answer is clearly yes, again, because of the geographic location. For obvious reasons, it is true that space technology calls for the top of the world. These are expensive things, so, again, the cost-effectiveness of looking at doing things together, instead of duplicating, will obviously be there. We are very interested. Again, it comes from the geographic location.

Q116 **Chair:** Are your nations looking at the space sector as an opportunity?

Wegger Christian Strømmen: Oh yes, absolutely.

Q117 **Chair:** Is that the same for you, Ambassador Sigurjónsson?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Well, our exclusive economic zone covers about 750,000 sq km, so, for us, it is a huge area to monitor and control. One of the tasks of our coastguard is to do that, but it has access to ships and aircraft. We are therefore looking at the possibility of drones, but also at satellites and space, which might be very effective, and probably less expensive in the longer term.

I might add that we signed an MOU with the UK in 2019 called "Co-operation on Education, Research and Innovation, and Space". So we tied those things together, meaning that it is a question of not only co-operating specifically around the space programme but how we can use it for mutual benefit. That is where we come to education and research.

Q118 **David Duguid:** Obviously, there is horizontal launch capacity in Dr Whitford's constituency, but further north, in Sutherland and Shetland,

we are looking at vertical launch capacity. The flightpaths of the rockets taking off from the north of Scotland will presumably go over some of your territories. Is there adequate collaboration on understanding that perspective of our space launch capacities?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Yes. Of course, there are certain procedures in force that are used for notification beforehand and so on.

Wegger Christian Strømmen: I don't have anything to add. I would have to look more carefully at that one before I dared go into too much detail.

David Duguid: From my understanding, the concern was more from Iceland than Norway, anyway.

Wegger Christian Strømmen: I haven't heard of that.

David Duguid: It was a question that just occurred to me as you brought up the subject, Chair.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: I must add that that reflects the fact that space is not necessarily new for many countries, but the utilisation of space, as we have seen it develop in the last few years, calls for a lot of homework in many places, including my country. Jurisprudence relating to space is one area that will be interesting to follow in the coming years.

Chair: That is an issue that this Committee will turn its attention to in the not-too-distant future. That is something we will want to look at and explore, having done this inquiry, and given some of the things that have been said about the opportunities arising from Scotland emerging as a hub.

For today, thank you both. We knew this session would be fascinating and invigorating, and of course it was. We are very grateful to you for your time. I know you are very busy, gentlemen, and you have a number of things to look after, but you said you might help us out with a couple of details, particularly around the Arctic Council, which we are very interested in. We will not trouble you by bringing you back to the Committee, but if you could provide any papers or documents, that would be more than helpful. If there is anything else you can think of to help our inquiry as it goes on, we would receive it gratefully. Thank you ever so much for your attendance at the Scottish Affairs Committee.