



International Relations and Defence Committee

Corrected oral evidence: The Arctic

Wednesday 3 May 2023

11.30 am

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Members present: Lord Ashton of Hyde (The Chair); Lord Anderson of Swansea; Lord Boateng; Lord Campbell of Pittenweem; Baroness Coussins; Baroness Morris of Bolton; Lord Robertson of Port Ellen; Lord Soames of Fletching; Lord Stirrup; Baroness Sugg; Lord Wood of Anfield.

Evidence Session No. 3

Heard in Public

Questions 43 - 53

Witnesses

I: Katarzyna Zysk, Professor of International Relations and Contemporary History, Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies; Mathieu Boulègue, Consulting Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham House, and Global Fellow, Polar Institute at the Wilson Center; Nick Childs, Senior Fellow for Naval Forces and Maritime Security, International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Examination of witnesses

Professor Katarzyna Zysk, Mathieu Boulègue and Nick Childs.

Q43 The Chair: Good morning. Thank you very much for coming. We have Professor Zysk in Norway, Mr Boulègue from the USA—very early in the morning; a special thank you for that—and Mr Childs here in the committee room. Thank you very much, all of you, for coming to this committee's third evidence session for the inquiry on the Arctic. We are going to focus today on Russia's strategy in the Arctic and the implications for other Arctic states, including the UK.

This is a public session streamed live on the Parliament website. A transcript will be taken and when we have finished we will send you a transcript so that you can have a look and correct anything that is wrong.

We are going to cover a lot of ground today and we have just under an hour. We will aim the question to one of you. If any of the other witnesses feel that they want to add something, please do, but do not feel the need to answer every single question.

As some of you may or may not have come in earlier, could you introduce yourselves very briefly and explain who you are and your background?

Professor Katarzyna Zysk: Thank you very much. It is an honour to be able to address this committee and share with you my expertise. I am based in Norway, in Oslo, at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, where I have been since 2007. One of the main focus areas of my work has been the Arctic and especially security developments and Russian policies in the region.

Mathieu Boulègue: It is an honour to be here as well and I am very thankful to be joined by my colleagues. I live in New York but I am affiliated to Chatham House. I am a consulting fellow at Chatham House. I am also a global fellow at the Polar Institute at the Wilson Center in Washington DC.

Nick Childs: I am the senior fellow for Naval Forces and Maritime Security at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. I have been that since 2015. Before that, I was a correspondent and journalist for the BBC for more than 30 years, mainly covering defence, security and international affairs at the institute. I have been doing a lot of work focused on the Arctic and the High North in recent times, including some very good conversations with my good friends Katarzyna and Mathieu.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I will direct the first question to Professor Zysk. We are talking about Russia and Russia's view of the Arctic, and its particular approach. Could you outline briefly what place the Arctic has in Russia's strategic and military thinking? Is there anything distinctive about the way the Russian military and government policymakers think about the Arctic compared with other Arctic states and near-Arctic states such as ourselves?

Professor Katarzyna Zysk: Yes, the Arctic plays a central role in Russian military strategic thinking. Notably, it has not changed since the end of the Cold War. However, after the turn of the millennium, the focus of the Russian authorities on the Arctic has been increasing. There are several reasons why that is the case, which also distinguishes the way that Russia approaches the region compared with other Arctic states.

The most important are the military factors. The Arctic has remained critical to Russian military doctrine, particularly to strategic deterrence missions. Consequently, Russia has made significant investments in modernising and deploying new nuclear, strategic non-nuclear and other capabilities and infrastructure in the region over the past 15 years. That has also resulted in a sharp increase in the number and complexity of Russian military exercises and training in the region.

What is important in this context to note is that Russia has increased its investments also in the central and eastern parts of the Arctic, especially since 2010, but the main point of gravity for the military investments has remained in the High North, the European part of the Arctic, centred around the Northern Fleet, which remains the strongest part of the Russian navy. It hosts the largest share of the Russian strategic submarines on the Kola Peninsula, just across the border with Norway.

The Arctic is also important for the Russian air-based nuclear deterrent. Several forward bases along the Arctic coast have been used for basing and dispersal of strategic bombers, as was well demonstrated after the drone attack on the Russian airbase in Engels during the Russian re-invasion of Ukraine.

The military strategic importance of the Arctic in addition to all of that is further strengthened by the fact that there are crucial elements of Russian military infrastructure. There are shipyards and intelligence installations. The Plesetsk Cosmodrome in Arkhangelsk Oblast is used for test launches of ICBMs, military satellites and anti-satellite missiles. The region also serves Russia as an important testbed for new weapons and technology, including hypersonic weapons. It also provides Russia with access to the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. This is very important because the Russian naval potential remains separated between the four main theatres of operations.

The Northern Fleet's primary mission remains the Bastion defence, protecting the submarines and their operational area through several layers of defences. Importantly, the region also is important for Russia because it plays a role in nuclear deterrence and strategic balance with the United States. Also, the long-range precision weapons deployed in the Arctic pose a threat to targets in Europe and to strategic sea lines of communications in the North Atlantic.

In addition to all of that, the opening of the Arctic Ocean to economic exploitation has further increased the value of the Arctic to Russia from the economic point of view, but it also has fuelled the Russian threat

perception. Russia has been very concerned about the increasing international tension in the Arctic since the turn of the millennium.

Finally, the Arctic also holds a symbolically important place in Russia's history and national identity and the Russian authorities have leveraged that role over the past few years, in particular for signalling proposals both aimed at foreign and domestic audiences.

The Chair: Thank you very much, that was a very good background briefing. Would anyone else like to add anything else to that? In which case, can we move on to Lord Stirrup?

- Q44 **Lord Stirrup:** Thank you. Professor, you have painted a fairly broad canvas there. I would like to explore some of those issues in a bit more detail, in particular with regard to Russia's agenda in the region, and perhaps its changing agenda. You talked about its strategic priorities. A lot of what you talked about was defensive capabilities, and Russia has always claimed that its militarisation and its modernisation of its military in the Arctic have been for defensive purposes. However, you also mentioned some offensive capabilities in your introduction. To what extent is Russia's claim to be using its military in the Arctic for purely defensive purposes credible? Also, to what extent has its thinking about the importance of the Arctic and its utilisation of the Arctic changed with the invasion of Ukraine and the accession of Finland and potentially Sweden to NATO and the expansion of the NATO-Russia front, as it were, well into the Arctic?

In addressing that, to give us a sense of perspective, we tend to talk about the Arctic and the militarisation of the Arctic and military operations in the Arctic as if they are the same as everywhere else, but we have heard in evidence already that even with global warming the Arctic is an incredibly difficult place in which to operate. How does that affect what Russia is doing and thinking about in military terms? Could we start with Mr Boulègue and, Professor, you could come in afterwards?

Mathieu Boulègue: Thank you very much, I am very happy to address this question. To start with your first question in terms of the defensive and offensive approach. I do not believe that the distinction is relevant any more. We used to say that Russia has a defensive posture but very offensive military capabilities. The issue is that it is using this as a form of control and a form of deterrence against us interchangeably. I would argue that Russia has a fundamentally double-dual approach to the Arctic. The first is a dual-use approach. In terms of infrastructure, Russia is equally using its infrastructure for civilian and military purposes interchangeably. It can use it for search and rescue operations and ensure sovereignty enforcement along the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation, but also for military purposes—so a double use, fundamentally.

The second dual is dual purpose, the use of this rhetoric and the use of these capabilities that, by a switch of a button or the flick of a button, can be used for defensive or offensive purposes. So, in a way, it is both

defensive by nature and offensive in intent, with very clear lines when it comes to Russian strategy. This is something that we can see very clearly in what my colleague Katarzyna mentioned with the Bastion defence, for instance, which is technically a defensive, multilayered network of sensors, missile systems, coastal defence systems and electronic warfare capabilities that are supposed to create a protective dome around the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation, but in reality could be very well used for standoff purposes, for deterrence purposes and offensive warfare capabilities. I call this the bastionisation of the Russian Arctic, in the European High North but also increasingly in the North Pacific, with the willingness very clearly in the Russian mind and the Russian doctrine to try to remove tension away from the Arctic as much as possible.

As you mentioned, nobody wants to fight in the Arctic, because the environment is incredibly complicated and the impact of climate change is very hard to mitigate. Therefore, Russia wants to increase its defence in depth, remove the tension from the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation, and extend its military capabilities away from its coastline and its shoreline, with clear ambitions of denial. That is putting more pressure on the North Atlantic, especially the sea line of communication, and therefore putting more pressure on the United Kingdom itself, with pressure on that very well-known now GIUK gap, the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap, but also the Greenland-Iceland-Norway gap. Russia wants to interdict freedom of navigation, create contested access in regions that are owned by NATO and allies and in a way try to put more pressure on these regional choke points. It is similarly true in the Bering Strait, for instance, on the other side of the world. However, I would not be too sure about Russia's capability to close the gap, inasmuch as its capabilities to extend and project power and be credible in operating beyond its borders that far into NATO territory should be contested. This is part of deterrence but I am sure that we will come back to it.

Finally, when it comes to Russian objectives in the region, it is very interesting to see that it does not fundamentally understand the Arctic in the same way that we do. We tend to look at the Arctic from flank analysis, or we try to divide sectors from what happens in the Pacific, what happens in the West or what happens at the North Pole. Russia fundamentally sees an interconnected continuum. It is a very long continuum, stretching from the North Atlantic to the North Pacific. Therefore, what happens in one region has direct consequences in another one, which I argue is a gap in Western analysis on how we approach Russia's Arctic.

Similarly, just as much as it has this horizontal approach to the Arctic, it has a sort of vertical approach to the Arctic, with the logic of horizontal escalation from one theatre of operation to another one. It is a geographic stretch going deep down from the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea to the Arctic and now the North Atlantic. It is very much a vertical logic in how it sees an escalation in one theatre and the consequences that it has on another one.

What is unique about the Arctic—and I will finish there—is that Russia feels in a sort of position of strength, contrary to other theatres. It feels that it owns the Arctic symbolically, as my colleague mentioned. Russia considers itself a sort of hyper-boreal country, a very large country that has the ability to operate in this region and should not be contested. Therefore, it wants to impose costs on the access to foreign navies in particular but also to civilian ships increasingly in the Northern Sea Route.

Lord Stirrup: Thank you very much. Professor Zysk, does Russia feel that its sense of ownership of the Arctic is threatened by NATO's expansion into the Arctic with Finland and potentially Sweden?

Professor Katarzyna Zysk: Definitely. It increases Russia's sense of vulnerability. In general, the many unintended consequences of the Russian assault on Ukraine have profoundly reshaped Arctic security and co-operation and governance regimes in the region – also for Russia. It has heightened the role of the Arctic as an arena of confrontation between Russia and the West, again stimulating the Russian threat perception. Regional dynamics have also been influenced by the ripple effect of the ongoing strategic competition between the United States, China and Russia.

As a result of that, the Russian military strategic approach to the Arctic has evolved in several ways. Notably, despite Russia being bogged down in Ukraine and suffering a host of negative military, socio-economic and political consequences, Moscow has not deprioritised the Arctic, as many had expected. Quite the contrary. The political will to prioritise the Arctic seems to stand strong in Moscow. It has been corroborated in a number of ways at the doctrinal and policy-implementation level, including in the updated maritime doctrine in July last year, which has moved the Arctic to the top of the list of regional priorities. The region is also referred to as vital now in Russian strategic documents—vital to Russia's national interests. The continued Russian focus on the region has been reflected also in quite intense military activity taking place in the region.

As you know, one result of the weakening of the Russian conventional forces is a stronger focus on nuclear weapons, which makes the High North again more important to Russia. The expectation is that,, as it will probably take years for Russia to rebuild parts of the conventional force that has been decimated in Ukraine, nuclear weapons will stand very strong. They are at the core of the Russian military doctrine.

Russia has used both the region and the forces from the Arctic in the assault on Ukraine. The strategic bombers that are stationed in the High North have been engaged in aerial assaults on Ukraine. Since February last year, the Russian Arctic 200th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade, the 80th Arctic Motor Rifle Brigade and other units have lost hundreds of personnel and materiel on the battleground in Ukraine.

Notably, other parts of the Northern Fleet have remained largely unaffected by the war, which means that the strategic deterrence forces

are able to conduct the core missions that I mentioned earlier, at the local, regional and global levels. With the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, the importance of the Arctic to Russia is likely to increase and strengthen the Russian sense of vulnerability. There is a reassessment in Russia going on regarding deployments, weapons and organisational structures in the region.

With the weakening of the Russian conventional forces, I think, as Mathieu has mentioned, that the non-military and dual-use capabilities in the Arctic will play a larger role. This is also confirmed by the Russian authorities. This concerns the capabilities that belong to the Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research, which can disrupt or degrade critical subsea infrastructure and other marine infrastructure. The Russian authorities have also highlighted the importance of increasing civilian-military co-operation. This includes using Russian civilian ships and vessels for military operations.

Lastly, the Arctic has been a currency in the hands of Putin in his relations with China. China, as you know, has been interested in strengthening its position in the Arctic and, as Russia is looking for Chinese support, it is growing more dependent on Beijing. We have already seen some ripple effects of that in the Arctic. One recent example is the memorandum that was signed a few days ago in Murmansk between the Chinese and Russian coastguards. This is interesting and important because it opens up extensive co-operation in Arctic waters, including joint efforts on fighting terrorism, illegal immigration, smuggling and illegal fishing. We will see how this kind of co-operation will develop and what kind of content it will have, but it certainly has the potential to include a security dimension in this co-operation, which is a new quality in Russia's approach to China in the Arctic.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We have quite a few questions that we need to get through, so please be as concise as you can.

Q45 Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: In many ways, you have answered a number of questions in that last answer that we might have asked, and I would be interested especially in the dimension to do with bringing China in—the Eurasian aspects of the Arctic. However, I want to focus at the moment on the Russian military capability, which you have also addressed. There have been some indications from intelligence that Arctic forces have been seen in the Donbas. Has there been a degrading of the Russian land forces in the Arctic brigade because of the deployment of forces to Ukraine?

The second aspect is whether or not you see the effectiveness of the Russian armed forces in the Arctic as being as bad as they clearly were in the initial assault on Ukraine. Clearly the high command was taken very much by surprise by the ineffectiveness of the Russian armed forces in that initial invasion. Has there now been a reassessment of all the forces in the Arctic as a consequence of that re-evaluation?

Professor Katarzyna Zysk: Yes, on the first question, definitely. The Russian ground forces have been severely weakened in the Arctic. I mentioned the two brigades. We know that there are probably more than 1,000 people who have been lost in Ukraine; the number is uncertain. That will take years to rebuild. This influences especially the protection and the defensive roles of the Russian military in the Arctic. However, as I mentioned, the air force and naval force have been largely unaffected by the war in Ukraine, which again means that, especially when it comes to threatening NATO or European targets but also the nuclear deterrence in relation to the United States, these roles are not affected by the war; this remains a force to be reckoned with.

When it comes to the ineffectiveness of the Russian military that we have seen in Ukraine, there is a large number of weaknesses and problems that have been clearly exposed, for instance the Russian command and control, the inflexibility and the slow learning process. However, drawing conclusions from what happened in Ukraine—we have to remember that it was not just a question of whether Russian forces are strong or weak but also how they have been used. We know very well that the force that was not really prepared. There were no plans to use it in the way that it was used in Ukraine. This also influences the effect and certainly exacerbates weaknesses and problems in the Russian military. I think that Russia would not underestimate a potential confrontation with NATO. Certainly the Northern Fleet and the forces deployed in the Arctic are aimed for these kinds of roles.

Nick Childs: If can briefly pick up on Katarzyna's points, Lord Robertson, in terms of an assessment of capabilities in the north and a read-across from what we have seen in Ukraine, as Katarzyna mentioned, certainly the thinning out of the land forces in the North and the damage that those forces that have been deployed into the Ukraine conflict have faced has raised questions about the capabilities on land as far as the North is concerned. When you add to that the points made earlier about the inclusion of Finland and presumably also Sweden into the mix of NATO countries, the correlation of forces in that area from a Russian perspective has changed.

However, that does not necessarily affect, and actually probably gives a rather different perspective, in terms of certain of the capabilities in land-based missile capabilities, both defensive and offensive capabilities. Precisely as was mentioned, as far as the naval forces and particularly submarine forces are concerned, these have not been directly affected. They have not been directly involved and there has always been an assumption, which still holds up to a point, that these have been the crown jewel capabilities to some extent: that they have been maintained and are operated at a higher level than some of the other general land forces in particular. That has not been tested, but it is still reasonable to assume that that is the case.

Perhaps more important than that, these naval forces, the submarine forces that operate in the Arctic, as Mathieu has suggested, are also at

the vanguard of being able to threaten NATO out of the Arctic into the North Atlantic. The importance of those forces relatively will increase. Whatever the outcome is in Ukraine, if you have a damaged and resentful Russia that is trying to rebuild its land forces, the naval forces in terms of being able to maintain at least the perception of great power capability that can coerce or influence NATO and the naval forces based around the Kola Peninsula in the Northern Fleet become a significantly greater lever in that.

The question going forward is how that may be affected in terms of resources. It has been a case that, although capable, submarine forces in particular are small in number—the Russian shipbuilding industry, inefficient as it is, has struggled to deliver on time and in the numbers required—and where the balance of investment will be in terms of rebuilding land forces and air forces or putting more resources into sustaining these crown jewels is an important question. Given the role of the Arctic and the increased importance of the Arctic from a Moscow point of view, I would say that that will become a more significant area of investment in order to sustain these key capabilities.

Q46 **Baroness Morris of Bolton:** Thank you very much to all three of you for joining us from near and far. It has been fascinating so far. Mr Boulègue, Russia has conducted numerous operations in the Arctic that could be regarded as provocative or threatening to other countries in the past, yet you said in your earlier remarks that Russia looks as if it wants to remove the tension from the Arctic regions. My first question, which is in two parts, is: in your view, could a conflict between Russia and the West be initiated in the Arctic? Secondly, you also mentioned that escalation in one region could easily spill over into another. In this respect, how high do you think the risk is that a conflict between Russia and the West in another region could spill over into the Arctic?

Mathieu Boulègue: To start with, as my colleagues mentioned, Russia's force posture has been vastly vindicated by the war, therefore validating the logic in the Kremlin that NATO's borders are expanding, that NATO is out there to get closer and so on: that part of Russian propaganda. If you look at a map, it is true that the non-Russian Arctic is now technically NATO territory, or a form of 'NATO Seven'. The non-Russian Arctic is the 'NATO Seven' instead of the 'Arctic Seven'. It is therefore putting more pressure on Russia to respond and to replace that sense of strength that I mentioned with the sense of vulnerability that Katarzyna alluded to. Therefore, it is a *fait accompli* that we need to live with. It is a fear of encirclement in the Kremlin, which is forcing Russia to respond through provocative action and through a form of tit-for-tat action-reaction dynamic increasingly shaping Arctic security.

However, I do not believe that a conflict in the Arctic could happen *per se*. There is very little likelihood of a conflict arising from the region itself. I am not saying that things could not degenerate into the Arctic, but the risk of a confrontation or a conflagration between NATO, Western forces and Russia within the Arctic to this day remains fairly low. The threat passing through the North is greater than the threat to the North itself

today, just as much as Russia's presence, remilitarisation and build-up in the Arctic is about the Russian Arctic rather than for the Russian Arctic. Once again, it is about putting more pressure on the North Atlantic and, increasingly, the North Pacific.

There are, however, many risks associated with this force posture, especially in the context of Russia willing to take more risks and willing to be more accepting of these risks. The first one is the risk of escalation: the horizontal escalation that I mentioned, the spillover effect that could degenerate from one region to the other, specifically in a Baltic-Nordic environment and the continuum between what happens in the Baltic Sea in the context of Sweden and Finland joining NATO, and in the High North potentially degenerating into the North Atlantic, not least because there is a lack of transparency and increased secrecy around Russian activities in the Arctic. If we look at the track record of Russian incidents in the past few years, whether it is the Norilsk spill or the Nyongksa radiation incidents that were picked up by the Norwegian radiological agency, there is more secrecy around activities that could lead to further escalation if we do not know what is going on. This is putting more pressure on us in the collective West to have better domain awareness and intelligence gathering around Russian activities there.

This risk of escalation is compounded by what I call miscalculation and tactical errors. The very simple equation is that a changing Arctic means more people, more human presence, military and civilian, and more presence means more incidents, more accidents, and more incidents at sea and in the air. If we look at Russia's reaction to or reception of different events—for instance in Syria with the spats with Turkey in 2015, or the recent intercept in the Black Sea that was already mentioned—I would not take Russian restraint for granted any more when it comes to managing the Arctic in a low-tension environment.

It would not benefit Russia to escalate in case of accident in the region, once again because it wants to move tension away, but accidents happen and there is always the possibility and the opportunity for accidents to happen—hot-headed pilots who have been decimated in Ukraine taking a very strong and very brazen reaction, which therefore leads to brinkmanship activities that could increase the cost of deterrence and therefore lead to escalation, if not confrontation. There is less restraint and more pressure in this environment.

Finally, another risk is linked to sub-threshold activities, what we commonly call hybrid activities or below the threshold of Article 5 activities in multidomain operations. This is significant these days when it comes to deep-sea infrastructure or subsea infrastructure, with a risk of Russia increasingly putting pressure on critical national infrastructure subsea from cables, for instance network cables and data cables, and for pipelines as well. We have a track record now around Svalbard, Nord Stream 2 incidents, the recent drone overflights over energy facilities in Norway, damages done to cables in the Faroe or Shetland Islands and so on. There is definitely more pressure in this area, whether it is the Baltic

Sea, the High North and increasingly around the GIUK gap. Russia is willing to take more risks and accept more costs. Subsea warfare is increasingly becoming a thing that we should all be aware of.

The Chair: Thank you very much, that was very comprehensive. Is there anything brief that Professor Zysk or Mr Childs want to add?

Nick Childs: In particular with respect to this, I will just reinforce Mathieu's point about the interconnectedness of the regions: if not a direct threat in the Arctic, then in and around the Arctic and the needs, particularly with the changes in NATO, to see the Baltic and the Arctic interrelated and in terms of potential hotspots to look for in and around this region that will potentially cause frictions. Mathieu mentioned Svalbard. As a lever point, while it has Norwegian sovereignty, there is a Russian population there that Moscow has been very adept in the past at using as a lever for a pressure point. That is an important aspect.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Lord Soames, and Lady Coussins has a supplementary, so you are going to get two questions now.

Q47 **Lord Soames of Fletching:** Mr Childs, with Russia's new cosyng-up to China and vice versa, what assessment would you make of the impact that that may have on the Arctic, given that China has already been seen to be interested and considers itself to be a near-Arctic state? How do you think that that will play out in the near future?

Nick Childs: That is absolutely an important nexus. Moscow will become increasingly reliant on China, potentially, to help prop up and support the investments required in order to sustain the Arctic as that fount for potential future economic stability as far as Russia is concerned, in the context particularly of enduring Western sanctions. That is probably also the case for a number of other potential Western partners¹. India is another one. That will have an effect.

It will also affect potential issues around governance. This affects how NATO may or may not proceed in trying to balance that requirement between sustaining and improving deterrence, not provoking but also trying to ensure stability in the Arctic. That is whatever happens as far as the governance of the Arctic going forward. One of the casualties in the fallout from Ukraine as far as the Arctic is concerned has been essentially putting into deep freeze the Arctic Council, in many respects.

The interests of China in particular, in conjunction with Russia, having a greater role in the Arctic and potentially setting up a rival sphere of influence so far as Arctic governance is concerned, is an issue to be concerned about. Further down the line, there is a question mark over how far that goes in terms of a Russia-China relationship. Mathieu has coined a phrase apropos Russia's attitude to NATO in the Arctic of "too much NATO in the Arctic", as far as Russia is concerned. There is an issue around whether potentially there could be "too much China in the Arctic",

¹ Post-meeting note: Nick Childs has confirmed that the reference to "Western partners" should be replaced with "Asian partners".

as far as Russia is concerned. Therefore, the extent to which the shared interests will cement the Russia-China axis or potentially provide friction ultimately is an open question.

The other question in those calculations and in terms of whether there is a bill to pay in Moscow for Chinese support for Russia generally over Ukraine is whether that would involve at some point a renewed request—and it has been reported that requests have been made in the past—for China to have port access and greater naval access from Russian bases in the Arctic as a way of further increasing its presence in the long term and potentially its role and influence as a naval and military power in the Arctic as well.

Q48 Baroness Coussins: I want to stretch the global perspective still further. We heard from another witness in a previous session that we should not ignore the increasing interest in the Arctic region shown by certain Middle Eastern countries, notably Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Could you comment on that: what the particular objectives of that increasing interest are and what the potential implications are for the Arctic states and near-Arctic states themselves?

Nick Childs: I think that it would be wrong to underestimate the extent to which there is global interest in what is unfolding in the Arctic. As far as Middle Eastern countries are concerned, the context is their strategic position as the world readjusts in terms of energy requirements, readjusts in terms of how trade flows will evolve if the Northern Sea Route and other routes in the Arctic become more navigable apropos Asian and Euro-Atlantic trade links, and where that would leave the Gulf and the Middle East in terms of their long-term strategic position.

At the moment, the Gulf has pivoted in where its interests lie—towards Asia, China, Japan and South Korea as importers of energy. Where that will go in the longer term is a question. Everyone is watching the dynamics of the Arctic and its potential role in it. Saudi Arabia is one and Turkey is another that is expressing an interest as well. That goes back to the point about the need to be careful about how to calculate between raising tensions and maintaining stability and returning to a sustainable and acceptable level of governance in the region, in the Arctic in particular, as a result of the greater global interests and the more varied constituency to which countries like Russia and China can appeal in terms of how governance and maintaining stability in the region is going in the future.

Mathieu Boulègue: I would push that logic even further. China has demonstrated a willingness to change the norms and the governance facts in the Arctic. It wants a free-for-all global common. I would argue that, if you let that logic go along and if you do not protect Arctic institutions and a sense of national interest in the Arctic, you could very well imagine a future, a not-so-distant future, where China tries to coalesce a certain number of states proclaiming to be 'near-Arctic', even though that term is very contested, and tries to push for different norms,

not necessarily better norms but norms that would fit the Chinese agenda.

Imagine all the shipping nations of Asia, some shipping nations in the Gulf for instance or in other parts of the world, pushing in the same direction with China at the forefront. That would completely and drastically change the way that we approach the Arctic. It might be a far-fetched scenario, but if we can think about it then there is probably a plan for it somewhere in Beijing.

Q49 Lord Anderson of Swansea: What significance do you attach to the recent summit between China and Russia at Murmansk, supposedly on maritime law enforcement?

Mathieu Boulègue: There is a lot of posturing, inasmuch as Russia and China relations are very much about the format and less about the substance. Let us judge it by the substance and see how deep this collaboration goes. So far they are testing the water, so to speak, in terms of soft security—constabulary forces, search and rescue, better communication and collaboration and soft security elements. If this is pushed further in terms of hard security or military exercises or drills or a more military intent in the region, then, yes, we will have cause for concern. However, so far it is part of the package of the relationship between Russia and China where they are trying to increase their footprint together and show that they can do better together than apart. Therefore, I would not be too concerned so far but I would definitely keep tabs on activities, especially if they verge on the harder security element.

The Chair: I would like to move on because we have quite a lot to deal with. We will move on to how we respond to Russia.

Q50 Baroness Sugg: Professor Zysk, we spoke earlier about the relatively low risk of conflict being initiated in the Arctic but also about the incidents that may happen. Given the current state of Russia-NATO relations, obviously there is an increased risk of miscalculation and misunderstanding around those incidents. Do you think that other Arctic states can and should still try to seek some co-operation with Russia and try to have deconfliction activities to help reduce that risk?

Professor Katarzyna Zysk: Yes. Since the early days of the invasion, questions have been raised in the policy and academic circles about the possibilities of opening some limited, pragmatic co-operation with Russia in the Arctic, for instance at a lower level of working groups within the Arctic Council. I think that for now the prospect of co-operation with Russia remains remote, especially since the discovery of the ever-multiplying Russian war crimes and atrocities committed by the Russian armed forces in Ukraine.

This kind of co-operation also poses a risk of offering Moscow an opportunity to set a foot in the door, which it has been seeking, and to slowly get back to the business as usual that Russia is hoping for. Such co-operation could also provide Russia with international legitimacy.

There is a risk also that Russia could instrumentalise and exploit it for political purposes.

That said, given the growing tensions, and the high and increasing level of military activity also from NATO countries, it is critical to maintain communication channels. That is a very important instrument to reduce the risk of conflict and increase also accountability for possible dangerous military practices and situations. A very good example of that is the hotline that is maintained between the chief of the Norwegian Joint Headquarters in Reitan in the High North and the commander-in-chief of the Northern Fleet on the Russian side. This is a very important deconfliction mechanism. I think also that practical co-operation on saving lives, such as search and rescue, is another example of co-operation that should be maintained.

- Q51 **Lord Anderson of Swansea:** NATO already has close links with Finland and Sweden through Partnership for Peace and operations, but obviously the accession in time of both Finland and Sweden will increase NATO's interest in the area. Can you chart that evolution through summit communiqués and so on? What do you think will be the effect of the accession already of Finland and soon of Sweden? Would you expect it to figure, for example, at the coming Vilnius summit? What are the risks of increased NATO interest in the region?

Mathieu Boulègue: The consequence of the war is this vindication of an all-NATO Arctic for Russia. There has been renewed interest or a new-coming interest in the alliance in Arctic operations, not just in the North Atlantic but the Arctic and the High North, with the creation of Joint Force Command Norfolk for instance a few years ago, an expansion of the alliance now that is strengthening the Baltic and Nordic flanks, and also increased American interests with the recent White House strategy on the Arctic that is coalescing all the efforts in the United States.

The issue with NATO is that the moment that you place it in any form of environment it vindicates Russia's posture and Russia's willingness to engage because NATO is coming. Therefore, since it is a military machine we should be careful about NATO and the distinct role and place that NATO should have in the region, ideally between the 'Arctic Seven' and with Russia, to keep as low tension as possible, away from geopolitical competition, even though that world might be over.

The question of how much NATO is necessary in the Arctic should be posed. We must find innovative ways to be involved in regional military security at the level of the alliance without monopolising the debate, without completely crystallising everything around military security and around military affairs. Then it is a question of defining the role and place of NATO. More than what NATO should do, it is about its role and its place. I am not sure that NATO needs a full-fledged or proper Arctic strategy, but it definitely needs a form of framework of response for operating, sustaining and deploying force in the environment.

Then there comes a question of the command structure, which is still very unclear. It is a question that is now asked, for instance, in the United States. Should it be between NORTHCOM or EUCOM, Northern Command or European Command? Should operations sit in Norfolk or in Brunssum? Just as we do not have a lot of clarity in the interaction between Joint Force Command Norfolk and US structures as they move along in this environment, so we do not have a very clear distinction of the division of labour between NATO itself and NORAD and the North Warning System on the other hand. A more streamlined division of labour is now necessary. All these questions are here and they are on paper, so there are a lot of people working on them to make sure that there is no replication of effort and that there is good redundancy but no duplication of effort in the region.

The internal risk that it poses is militarising or securitising the debate around the Arctic. Just as much as we do not discuss with Russia about military security, co-operation is next to impossible. NATO is moving closer to the Arctic and there is a risk of military security affairs overtaking the debate so that we do not discuss what really matters in the Arctic, which is the impact of climate change, the protection of indigenous and local communities in the Arctic and so on. Therefore, it is crucial to have a forum to discuss military security issues, but that is not NATO. Otherwise, it might drive the discussion and lead to a form of over-securitisation of the debate, which would collapse the reality of low tension that we need.

Beyond low tension, we need more predictability and more stability to make sure that we minimise misunderstandings with the Kremlin without fully engaging with the Kremlin or offering olive branches to Russia, as it were.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We only have about nine minutes.

Q52 **Lord Boateng:** Mr Childs, can we now turn to the contribution that the UK might play in defence and deterrence in the Arctic? How can we best support our Arctic state allies? What capabilities do the UK and the US through NATO have in this area and how can we project forces into the European Arctic in the event of conflict? What additional capabilities, if any, do we need to invest in, in your view?

Nick Childs: To pick up from Mathieu's line of thought on NATO but focusing on the UK and others in the alliance, delivering a more consistent but also transparent message on presence into the Arctic to support allies is an important one because, although there is a sense, as was said very early on, that nobody really wants to operate in the Arctic, in terms of credible deterrence, showing an ability to relearn the lessons that have been forgotten since the Cold War of operating in the region is important. That could potentially include certain capabilities that Arctic partners within the alliance do not have in terms of high-end capabilities or, for example, littoral manoeuvre capability that is being developed but probably needs greater investment—the Littoral Response Group that is already practised up in that region.

However, in order not to overheat the situation, not to escalate and provoke rather than just to add presence, it needs to be a mixture of capabilities. Presence may be delivered with lower-end capabilities in order to sustain those interests that we say that we support, like freedom of navigation. It is interesting, for example, that the United States is reinvesting, after a long gap, in icebreaker capabilities. There is a question mark over what actual military value that has, but in terms of enabling a capability that can operate effectively in the region, that would be one. Canada is doing the same.

Whether the UK should also look seriously at raising its Arctic and ice-capable forces is an open question. It may be that the UK missed a trick, when the British Antarctic Survey ordered the Sir David Attenborough ship, in not ordering three so that the Royal Navy could have an Antarctic and an Arctic patrol vessel that would be able to signal intent and capability in the region, but not in a provocative way.

The other area, picking up on what Mathieu said, is the growing importance and growing concern, highlighted by Nord Stream, of critical seabed infrastructure and seabed warfare in that region, further investment in capabilities like the multirole ocean support ships—Nord Stream has shown clearly that there is a huge deficit in the West in terms of being able to deliver that. What the UK has done is a start, but only a start. That is an area that could be further developed.

Q53 Lord Wood of Anfield: Mathieu, I want to ask a question about the Northern Sea Route and how provocative or wise it would be for the UK and other partners and NATO partners to conduct freedom of navigation exercises in these waters, particularly given the law that Russia passed at the end of last year requiring 90-day notification. Is there any value in these exercises and is the degree of provocation now significantly greater than it otherwise would have been?

The Chair: Could I ask you to be very brief, because Professor Zysk would like to add something as well?

Mathieu Boulègue: Katarzyna, please go ahead. I might jump in afterwards.

Professor Katarzyna Zysk: Whether this kind of operation should be conducted in this current situation depends on the level of appetite for risk. I do believe there is a heightened risk between Russia and the West, given Russia's increasing sense of vulnerability, which I have mentioned earlier, deriving from the growing military, economic and political weakness. There is a possibility that Russia has grown more sensitive to this kind of operation along the Northern Sea Route. As you mentioned, the Russian authorities have expressed increasing concern about the foreign military presence in the Arctic. Russia has done it for years but now it seems that there is something more concrete to this. It has been reflected in strategy documents, including in the maritime doctrine but also in the new federal law that you mentioned, which was signed in December.

On the one hand this law was in a way necessary because the existing rules for regulating navigations along the Northern Sea Route are based on Article 234 of the UNCLOS. They did not apply to foreign warships or other non-commercial government vessels. So this was in a way a necessity but, as you said, there are other new rules. There is the application. The vessel has to apply for permission 90 days before the passage and the application can be declined for security reasons.

A new rule that is interesting is the limit of no more than one warship that is allowed to be in these waters at a time. Submarines are required to surface and show their flag while passing through the Northern Sea Route internal waters. As we know, the new law applies to internal waters along the Northern Sea Route, which in general is a quite small portion of the maritime channel, but importantly it applies to the disputed straits that the United States and other nations consider international straits and therefore subject to transit passage.

Therefore, Arctic FONOPs carry inherent risks that will now go against the law, should the law be ignored, and could be seen as a provocation, and there is a chance that Russia would take a more assertive stance in the region. However, if the FONOPs were to take place, they would have to be carefully planned and well-co-ordinated with other partners and allies in the region and skilfully communicated as well, to calibrate the risks.

Nick Childs: I absolutely agree with Katarzyna. The one addition I would make is that there is also a risk in not doing it. There is a risk in not maintaining that presence and not carrying out those actions, because then it becomes a customary *fait accompli* in international terms. How you do it—whether it has to be the most provocative capabilities or something a little bit more benign but at least to show it—is part of the calculation.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We have come to the end of our session. We could have gone on for another hour at least. We are particularly interested in the answers that you would have given to questions 11 and 12, which are on key recommendations and whether we have set the right priorities. If it is not too much to ask, could you write an email with your answers to those questions, because they are particularly interesting to us and we could have discussed them for a long time?

Thank you very much, all of you, in your different time zones, for coming. I remind you that a transcript will be sent to you and you can have a look at that and make any corrections that you want. We are very grateful to you for letting us have your knowledge and for making the effort to come.