

Defence Sub-Committee

Oral evidence: Defence in the Arctic, HC 879

Wednesday 15 March 2017

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Members present: James Gray (Chair); Douglas Chapman; Jack Lopresti; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Ruth Smeeth; Phil Wilson.

Questions 39–117

Witnesses

I: Lieutenant Commander Dr John Ash RN (Rtd), Institute Associate, Scott Polar Research Institute, and Dr Igor Sutyagin, Senior Research Fellow, Royal United Services Institute.

II: Group Captain Clive Blount RAF (Rtd), Nick Childs, Senior Fellow for Naval Forces and Maritime Security, International Institute for Strategic Studies, and Lieutenant Colonel Matt Skuse RM (Rtd).

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Scott Polar Research Institute \(DIA0009\)](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Ash and Dr Sutyagin.

Q39 Chair: Can I welcome our two panellists on the first of two panels today? We have an hour—until 10.15 am—or thereabouts to discuss with you the topic of our inquiry: defence in the Arctic, High North and North Atlantic. Before we start, can you identify yourselves for the record?

Dr Ash: I am Dr John Ash, an institute associate at the Scott Polar Research Institute.

Dr Sutyagin: I am Dr Igor Sutyagin, senior research fellow for Russian studies at the Royal United Services Institute.

Q40 Chair: Can I start with a rather general question? How would you define the role of the armed forces of any nation currently operational in the Arctic? What are they there for? What is the purpose of military activity by both the Russians and NATO countries in the Arctic?



Dr Ash: I would say it is in three parts, basically. The first is to provide defence where necessary—that is to say, should a political situation be reduced to the point where there is outright hostility. Secondly, there is an important role to be played for semi-military activities such as search and rescue and counter-pollution. Counter-terrorism may be a new dimension in the Arctic. The third is what I would regard as soft power: providing measures of support to Arctic communities in general where there is a benefit to be had. So we can see in local, perhaps indigenous communities that there is potentially a role for the military to provide support that has a cultural benefit.

Dr Sutyagin: I will probably concentrate on Russia, because that is my area of expertise. For the Russian armed forces, it is an organic element of the more general foreign policy and the policy of the Russian state in general. While the task of defence per se is extremely important, that is subordinate to the role of promoting and defending Russian influence in the Arctic and influence that originates from the Arctic. That is probably the most important part. The defensive role of the Russian armed forces there is subordinate to that. The most important element of this role in the Arctic is deterrence, which is to defend Russian influence in the international arena—to defend the role of an absolutely important player, which whoever wants to deal with the Arctic region must consult. That is probably the most important part. The non-military element of that is safety and security in the Arctic in the more general sense; because the Russian armed forces participate in and contribute to civilian activities there. For instance, search and rescue operations are carried out jointly by the Ministry of Emergency Situations and the Ministry of Defence in the Arctic.

Dr Ash: May I just add to that, there is an important role in respect of national sovereignty represented by military activity? To understand that, you need really only look at two elements. The first is the Canadian Rangers. Now Canadian Rangers are to some extent made up by indigenous people; but their physical presence in the Canadian Arctic is seen as important by that Government in asserting their sovereignty.

The other thing I will draw your attention to is the Sirius Patrol, which is a Danish navy dogsled patrol that operates on the north-east of Greenland, in the world's largest national park. What they do is patrol the coastal region in a set of dog teams. Basically, they build their own sledges, and then they patrol the coast region in a pattern, to ensure that every so many years they actually cover everything. They have a constabulary role. They have a scientific role—they collect scientific data—but they are boots on the ground, so they are an expression of national sovereignty that you don't get by simply flying over something.

Q41 **Chair:** That of course is fine, and all the things you describe are of course perfectly legitimate, perfectly normal peaceful activities that any state would undertake anywhere in the world. We have several battalions deployed on the east coast of Norfolk. That is no different to what you describe, and it is precisely what has occurred, really, since the end of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the Cold War. But there are two things you have not mentioned or talked about. One is the consequence of the retreating ice and the likely increasing commercial activity in the High North over the next 20, 30 or 40 years and the degree to which remilitarisation might be caused by that: that is question No. 1. Question No. 2 is whether or not the Russian bastion concept and the force projection into the North Atlantic is actually what it is all about. It is not actually about sovereignty and about health and safety, and search and rescue, and all that; it is actually about projecting Russian power into the North Atlantic and thereby controlling the northern resupply routes just as they did in the Second World War. So there are two things: one, is it about the retreating ice and commercial activities? Two, is it about super-strategic long-term bastion creating?

Dr Ash: May I just address both of your points, because I think they are important ones. The first is that if there is an increase in economic activity you are likely to get a requirement to provide security for those activities across a broad spectrum. We have already mentioned the search and rescue and anti-pollution issues. If you are going to take more cruise liners, for example, up into the Arctic, you have to be able to provide response rapidly, should any of those get into trouble. They also represent to some extent potential terrorist targets, so they have to be protected.

An increased number of oil installations, where that is economically feasible, will require protection also. You should not necessarily simply equate ice retreat with an increase in activity in oil and gas, because it is more complex than that. From an engineering perspective shore-fast ice may be a better option because you can actually build on it. You can build ice roads on it. To some extent, it provides a benefit because you have increased access by sea.

Other activity which may increase: fisheries, certainly, both because of ice retreat and the availability of easier passage, but, more importantly, because the fish stocks will actually move in location. There is a defence requirement there; if you have more economic facilities they require protection. I think most nations would argue that they would see it as their responsibility to protect whatever economic activities are in place.

The bastions originally came about as a defensive response to NATO policy change. The idea was, principally, to protect nuclear assets. As far as the area of the Barents is concerned, there is a significant proportion of strategic assets there—I am talking about nuclear weapons carrying assets, ballistic missile submarines—that require protection from the Russian perspective. If you look at the forces that have been assembled there, the interesting question is to what extent those forces are sufficient and appropriate for protecting nuclear assets. Do they in some way represent a response to the fact that the ballistic missile submarines would have to travel further in order to obtain the protection of the ice, for example, if they wished to do that? Or do they represent in some sense a change in policy towards a more aggressive stance in which power projection might occur?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

As far as the refurbishment of the islands along the northern sea route is concerned, I think we can look at those and say that in effect a new and rather porous border has opened up to the north of Russia, which is over 3,000 miles in length, if you look at the sea route distance from the Baring strait to Murmansk. That requires protection. It also requires facilities, so that in the event of a civilian ship casualty, assistance could be brought rapidly. Time is everything in an emergency situation. I have done quite a lot of work on dynamic risk management and time is the critical factor. Having local ports and local runways that you could use is extremely valuable if you are going to properly protect that sea route.

Q42 Chair: Of course. I am sorry to jump in, Dr Ash.

Dr Ash: I beg your pardon.

Chair: What you are describing is of course perfectly correct, but it is not addressing the main question, which is, if there are significantly increasing commercial activities in the High North, is there not a likelihood that Russia will seek to extend its area of activity northwards—for example, patrolling the northern sea route in its various formats? You are quite right in saying that the military activity around the Kola peninsula has always been there since the end of the Cold War to defend Russia from the US—that is perfectly true. That doesn't account for two fully trained, cold weather brigades exercising five miles from the Norwegian border just outside Kirkenes, which we saw when we were there a couple of weeks back. You seem to me to be describing a perfectly normal state of affairs that is pretty much like it has been for the last 20 years. Don't you think there has been a change? Maybe Dr Sutyagin will answer that point differently.

Dr Ash: Yes; surely. Please.

Dr Sutyagin: Probably, I could provide some details about this change. The changes happening in the Arctic are mainly related to this "what if?" approach. The Russian Government see the worst-case scenario and tries to prepare for that. That is why. They do see that it might happen that there would be more active traffic along the northern sea route, which means that there would be a porous—I would say, just empty and undefended—border on the Russian north. It is 6,700 km gap in coverage. If you have a look at the slides that I prepared, on slide 2 you will see in the top left corner the radar coverage that existed just five years ago. It was absolutely unacceptable from the Russian military standpoint, because it was possible to penetrate Russian airspace from the Arctic, and not be detected until the aircraft reached, say, the Trans-Siberian railway. It is absolutely empty space—no one will notice penetration. That is why part of the activity now is to re-install—

Q43 Chair: The top left one was radar coverage in—

Dr Sutyagin: Top left—five years; approximately 2011. The bottom right is what they tried to create; that is what they are approaching now. They tried to close the gap by establishing additional radar pickets for military purposes and for air traffic control purposes, just to get back situational



HOUSE OF COMMONS

awareness about the situation in the Arctic. That is part of that. Because it is a very harsh environment, the military would be better suited to serve that goal. That is one of the roles that they play in the Arctic. It is perceived as the militarisation of the Arctic, but it is actually predominantly a matter of defence and situational awareness for the Russian military and the Russian Government. That is point 1.

For point 2, on slide 3, you can see the reinforcement plans for the Arctic deployments. It is actually to gain back control of the shore, which was never defended in Soviet times because the Arctic was closed; it was ice and it could not be approached. If—this is a “what if?” approach—there will be more active traffic along the northern sea route, there is the possibility of some diversionary or sabotage forces dropped out of cargo ships, which no one will know about and no one will have the chance to respond to those challenges.

The Arctic is terribly important for Russia, because it is responsible for—as I wrote in the written material—between 12% to 15% of Russian GDP and 80% of Russian gas. If there were a serious sabotage act there, it would be a very serious blow to the Russian economy and so Russian national security in general, not only defence and military security. That is why they want the ability to react to that and to defend it if necessary.

That is why they are establishing these brigades. There will be two brigades on the Kola peninsula. The 280th brigade will be under the command of the northern fleet. Allegedly, it would be the 82nd, so there is one more brigade for which the number is still not known, because the Minister of Defence did not associate that number with the brigade. The central military district will establish that approximately in the middle of the Russian Arctic. The eastern military district Pacific fleet will establish the 99th coastal defence division in Chukotka, on the easternmost part of the Arctic. The current plan is to expand the existing brigades—the two plus one in the central military district—to division size. That is the defence.

Q44 Chair: Hang on. Let me pick up on that. I will pass on in a moment, but this is my last go at this one. You two are describing activity that is perfectly legitimate and a perfectly normal thing for a nation to do; indeed, they are things that have happened pretty much over the last 20 years. However, in defending the northern sea route and the Arctic itself, what is the purpose of having that divisional-strength infantry you described? Why on earth would you deploy enormous numbers of infantry on a coastline where your main concern is to do with the sea?

Dr Sutyagin: Very briefly, the rule of thumb in Russian special operations forces is that one platoon of special operations forces can lock on to 20 platoons of infantry. If you are concerned with special operations in the Arctic, you need at least a 20-times size force that would be able to block special operations there. That is probably the reason to have such a numerous force there.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Ash: They won't be regular infantry, either; they have to be Arctic-trained and they have to have some expertise in dealing with special forces.

Q45 **Chair:** But they are land-based, aren't they? That is nothing to do with the sea.

Dr Sutyagin: They are land-based.

Dr Ash: But you need defence in-depth. If your detection system and your interdiction do not keep them away from your shore—no system is 100% perfect—you then have to deal with them in-depth once they actually get ashore.

Q46 **Chair:** Sure, but they are land-based. Who are they defending against? That is the point I'm getting at. If you have very large numbers of infantry—land-based troops—deployed high in the north, why? Who are they defending the land against? Who does Russia perceive to be the land-invading threat along the North Atlantic?

Dr Sutyagin: NATO and China.

Dr Ash: Also, I would add that there is potentially a terrorism threat.

Q47 **Chair:** But you wouldn't deploy three divisions against terrorists, would you?

Dr Ash: If you didn't know where they were, how well they were armed or what their targets were.

Q48 **Phil Wilson:** You both referred to terrorism in your answers. Which sort of terrorist organisations do you see the terrorist threat coming from? What would their potential targets in the Arctic be?

Dr Sutyagin: First of all, oil and gas production installations—those are the main targets. That is precisely what has been happening in the Persian gulf, so it is well tested activity. The Russian military are still preparing for the last war, which is that sort of terrorist war against oil and gas rigs.

Dr Ash: Can I add to that? In addition to oil and gas, which are obviously of great economic value, the Arctic attracts a great deal of attention as a theatre of operations. It is popular in the public imagination. Terrorist organisations would be more than happy to throw flowers if they felt that it would get them attention.

Attacking a target in the Arctic would get a great deal of attention because of its remoteness and its popularity as a geographical area. With a target such as a cruise liner, it makes quite a significant political statement for terrorists to be able to do that. They are attacking a set of passengers whose demographics quite often place them in the fairly wealthy area of society. It is an affront against the flag of that particular ship, and it is proof that they can go where they choose and that nowhere is safe. Remember that they do not actually have to get on board in order to do a lot of damage; with just a relatively small vessel and some anti-tank



HOUSE OF COMMONS

rockets, they can inflict extreme damage, especially if they succeed in causing a fire on board.

Q49 Phil Wilson: Who would be the perpetrators of those terrorist actions? Have you got anybody in mind—ISIS, Chechens? Who do you think it would be?

Dr Ash: Whoever has an axe to grind.

Dr Sutyagin: It seems that the main potential concern at this stage is about whoever on the Islamic front, because unfortunately Russia got involved in the conflict with the Sunni Islam world.

Dr Ash: May I add to that? In my judgment, it would be erroneous to form the opinion that Islamic terrorists don't do cold weather.

Dr Sutyagin: Especially keeping in mind that they can hire Slavics to work for them, so it might be Islamic-originated, but there might be Slav security there on their behalf.

Dr Ash: If you look at the Siachen glacier conflict, which has been going on for a very long time, a number of forces there have fought with great vigour and enthusiasm to defend their nation's interests—I am thinking in particular of Pakistani forces—but it is unfortunately the case that some Pakistani personnel have been turned by terrorist organisations. So you could actually have a readily trained, already experienced cadre of individuals who are capable of cold-weather warfare. After that it becomes a problem of logistics.

Q50 Douglas Chapman: I want to know what the relationship is. You described what seems a fairly benign set of circumstances, based on each individual country looking at how they best deter either terrorism or forces from outside coming into their space. What role does the Arctic Council play in setting the tone for the relationships between the various countries? Is that going to change in any way with the opening up of the seaway and the various economic changes that are predicted in the High North and the Arctic?

Dr Ash: The Arctic Council plays a critical role with respect to issues such as environmental protection, indigenous rights and economics. It does not deal with military security. There is a strong view that it should not begin to deal with military security, because that would prejudice the success that it has enjoyed in its other roles.

Q51 Douglas Chapman: Does that create any tension in terms of an overlap, or is it very protective of that role you have suggested?

Dr Ash: Well, if you look at its establishment, the concept was that it would not have a role in military security, so acquiring such a role may potentially prejudice its ability to deal with the issues that it has so successfully addressed thus far. I think that some people are deeply concerned that that would be the case. There have been voices that have said that the Arctic Council should look at military security. This is not a monolithic opinion, but from looking at what it has achieved so far, an



HOUSE OF COMMONS

awful lot of people would be deeply concerned if military security was added to its portfolio.

Dr Sutyagin: May I add that it may be counterproductive? Currently, Russia is the only non-NATO member of the Arctic Council. If the other six tried to push this military agenda in the Arctic Council, it might be lost as the forum for discussion for Russia—they can just withdraw—because Russia will feel outnumbered and pressed. So that is probably a bit counterproductive.

Q52 **Ruth Smeeth:** I would like to expand on what we have already touched on. What do you consider to be any potential flashpoints in the Arctic that we should be concerned about?

Dr Sutyagin: A potential flashpoint would be an attempt to enforce the sovereignty of certain sectors of the Arctic—to claim them and enforce sovereignty. Russia does nearly everything to prevent and deter such attempts and to show their fruitlessness. That is why Russia not only tries to claim the North Pole—effectively, to restore the Soviet Union sector of the Arctic—but deploys substantial forces, both land and air forces, to execute de facto control of the area.

For example, this year, when the Danes arrive with their claim for the North Pole on the base at Greenland, a quite natural question from the Russian side might be, “We have aviation that reaches beyond the North Pole, so we de facto control this area. Do you have something similar? You don’t. So the one who is stronger is in charge.” That might be the approach. Attempts to enforce that via a legal path might provoke some clashes because Russia will try to raise the stakes and support its claims for de facto control of the area. That might be the cause of some tensions.

Dr Ash: I have worked up a set of scenarios that really draw on some of my previous work and are issues that the Committee may wish to consider. First, I think bio-marine resources are going to become increasingly important—perhaps the most important resources—as this century draws on. Climate change is actually going to affect the distribution of those resources. We have already seen some of the fin fish stocks moving north. That is to say, some of the nations that depend on fish as part of their food supply are going to find their resources diminishing, and northern nations—Norway in particular, but also Greenland and Iceland to some extent—will find that their catches improve.

As with any resource of this sort, particularly where there are large quantities of money involved, as there are with this, you are likely to get pirate fishing as it is commonly referred to—unlawful and unrecorded fishing—and that has to be protected against. It is already the case that the value of the catch in a fishing vessel can exceed the value of the vessel itself—so we are getting into drug economics—and with those stakes involved people will become violent. There is a strong element of potential for conflict there at the sub-national level.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Will that escalate? Potentially it could. There are two areas that I think you might want to consider. The first is Svalbard and the unresolved issues associated with rights to fishing surrounding the archipelago. Secondly, if China as a player took the view that its fisheries were being unfairly treated by other nation states, it might choose to intervene in due course. Let us deal with the Svalbard issues because—

Q53 Chair: Briefly, if you can.

Dr Ash: Yes, I do apologise. Under the terms of the 1920 treaty, the resources are available to all. The problem is associated with the definition of the maritime resource areas that are predicated under the treaty. That is subject to interpretation. It is not at all clear that all the NATO members would take the Norwegian view in that regard.

On other issues, as far as Svalbard is concerned, there is a potential flashpoint. There is a Russian population on Svalbard. The last population size I saw—this was at Barentsburg—was about 471 people. That could potentially constitute a casus belli under circumstances in which Russia wished to assert greater influence on the archipelago. That is only one potential scenario. I do not necessarily regard it as likely. I regard it as much more likely that a conflict elsewhere would actually spread to the Arctic for two reasons. First, that is where the hardware is as far as the Russian northern fleet is concerned. Secondly, it is the northern flank of NATO, so you will either have to make a choice as to where to interdict or suffer the potential interdiction of your forces during the resupply of Europe.

Q54 Chair: Before we continue with Madeleine Moon, can I ask one question about Svalbard? If both Barentsburg and Pyramiden are perfectly worthwhile Russian bases, and if I were Mr Putin looking for some way of tweaking NATO's tail, sticking some people in green uniforms as maintenance engineers in Barentsburg would surely be a good way to do that. They have already tried that with troops passing through non-European airports on the way north, so there is already a degree of testing out Norwegian and NATO determination on Svalbard. Is that not correct?

Dr Ash: Potentially, yes, but it would be a risky strategy. Let us put it that way.

Q55 Chair: So was Crimea.

Dr Ash: Yes, you are quite right. We have seen similar tactics to the ones that you outline used before in other parts of the world. There is a Russian population there. Irrespective of their present views—I do not suggest at all that the Norwegians would do anything to provoke them—I am simply saying that they could form in a hybrid warfare environment a casus belli.

Let me say also, though, that it has been the case in the past that Russia has been very careful about observing the rights claimed to the biomarine resources by Norway. There was an incident a few years back—it was in 2002—in which one of their warships was sent in response to a request



HOUSE OF COMMONS

because Russian fishermen felt they were not being fairly treated. That warship did not penetrate the fisheries protection zone claimed by Norway. It turned back. Indeed, its activities were explained as being related entirely to the inspection of Russian fishing personnel. So the Russians have been very careful to obey the rules as established under normal international practice hitherto.

Chair: All that was long before Crimea. Anyhow, let us move on to strategic matters.

Q56 **Mrs Moon:** Am I right in getting the picture that Russia is building up an anti-access bubble around the Arctic that it can or cannot impose, depending on its particular mood or perception of threat? Is that a fair assessment?

Dr Sutyagin: First, I would slightly disagree with the use of the term “anti-access/area denial”. It is a slightly misleading term. It is a buzzword now, but it is slightly misleading. The very essence of the term assumes some restriction of activity. It is not defensive. The proper term in the Russian military jargon is “isolation of the theatre of military operations.” That is just a precondition for further operations. You secure your area. That is what they are doing. It is not exclusively defensive. It does not imply that it is there just to sit under this bubble. It is the creation of a condition to go out and interdict, for instance, transatlantic sea lines of communication. They are building it as a very useful option to act. They can use it both as support for forward actions or as defence if NATO, for instance, tries to enter the area or if the Chinese try to enter the eastern part of the Arctic.

That is what they are building. They are trying to build it because they feel some threat. The deployment of Bastion anti-ship missiles on the northern island is clear evidence that they are trying to get prepared for the deployment of, say, BMD-capable ships in the Barents sea. They want to be sure that their deterrence potential and at-sea patrols are secure, in terms of submarines trying to hunt Russian submarines and NATO cruisers or destroyers trying to hunt Russian ballistic missiles launched from Russian submarines. That is why they are trying to push away. That is why I said that the role of the Russian military in the Arctic is to protect the Russian influence.

The Russian perception is that if Russia is perceived by anybody in the world as incapable of delivering an assured retaliatory strike, why bother consulting it, because it is just weak? That is why they are trying to preserve an image of strength—an aura of power. They need this bastion to defend the feeling that they are unchallengeable in this area. Its role is to ensure international influence. If they know that they are secure in that area, they can push some tiny but potentially important forces into the Atlantic.

Q57 **Mrs Moon:** No matter what way you try to turn it around, it would provide an anti-access capability.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Sutyagin: Because of the isolation of the theatre of military operations. You isolate and effectively deny any ability to operate in it. The term itself is slightly misleading, because it implies a restricted or isolated operation—it is just anti-access. It is not anti-access; it is the precondition of further operations, either defensive or offensive.

Dr Ash: You should understand that under the terms of UNCLOS, the Russians have the right to make fair charges for services such as pilotage and ice breaking. That is a revenue stream, and why should they give it up?

Secondly, because they are ice-adjacent waters, the Russians have the right to impose restrictions on the basis of vessels that are not properly prepared for activities in those waters. That has a legitimate element to it—why should they allow pollution in their waters?—but they can also use it in a political way, and I understand that that has already happened. For example, if you are an NGO operating a ship, and they feel that you are a political inconvenience, they might decide to board you and revoke any rights you have to access their waters. Any nation might take the view that, in its waters, it wishes to have control over any potentially polluting vessel, so there is nothing unusual about that.

The other thing is, in terms of establishing a bubble, why would you give up a revenue stream? At the present time, the uptake of vessels going through the northern sea route is relatively small. It is modest at the present time, but that will not necessarily be the case in future. If you look at the way the ice is going to ablate, it is probably going to retreat from the Russian side first. That is just the way the physics works. Their access across the top of the world is probably going to become the first one available. It will not necessarily be predictable, season on season, and it may not always be economically viable for all traffic types.

For example, it favours bulk rather than container because of the time factors involved. It will potentially provide quite a significant economic advantage. Between some ports, you could gain a reduction in sea distance of as much as some 26%. You wouldn't necessarily gain in speed. You might find that you were limited in speed by between 1 and 3 knots, so your total number of sea days will not necessarily be as beneficial as you might think, but once it starts to become a predictable resource, it will become a revenue stream of value. Why would you then shut it off?

Q58 **Mrs Moon:** I understand all that about the revenue stream and I have got no problem with that at all. What worries me are earlier statements from you in relation to the fear being from NATO, China and a terrorist threat. Let's look at NATO first, which is a defensive alliance, not an attacking one. Does NATO have the capability and platforms to challenge Russia in the Arctic and the High North, if it needed to?

Dr Sutyagin: Yes.

Q59 **Mrs Moon:** Is it a realistic threat? Are the capabilities there?

Dr Ash: Is NATO a realistic threat to Russia? Is that what you meant?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mrs Moon: Yes. In the Arctic and the High North.

Dr Ash: Well, in the Arctic it could certainly inflict unacceptable damage on Russia. There is no reason to suppose it would do so, but Russia might have an entirely different perception. It may simply regard itself as being encircled. If memory serves—and please correct me on this—

Q60 **Mrs Moon:** Encircled in the Arctic?

Dr Ash: Well, no. It is now a full encirclement whereas they had only a partial encirclement.

Q61 **Mrs Moon:** No; I asked about in the Arctic and the High North. How can NATO encircle Russia and how can NATO threaten?

Dr Sutyagin: Russia feels under threat in the Arctic because—

Q62 **Mrs Moon:** I understand the paranoia. I am talking about the practicalities.

Dr Sutyagin: The platforms do exist for that. The Barents sea is part of the Arctic and the Barents sea is half open all the year. So the southern part of the Barents sea and the south-eastern part of the Barents sea is open; it is not under ice. If you deploy the BMD-capable Norwegian ships there, then Russian ICBMs potentially going to the United States over the polar zone will be potentially in the intercept range for these ships.

If you deploy surface combatants with thousands of cruise missiles on board, these missiles can reach very deep into Russian territory. If Trident subs converted to carry cruise missiles are deployed there, they can reach even deeper because they can come closer.

If attack submarines of the United Kingdom, the United States and France, which probably will not deploy but can, and if diesel subs of Norway are deployed there, they can maintain serious pressure on the outer screens of the Russian SSBN bastion. Some of them can penetrate that bastion and attack Russian SSBNs.

There will be just a couple of them permanently at sea there. It is just one or two SSBNs. The maximum of what they could deploy realistically there would be five or six SSBNs, which would constitute at least maybe 15% of Russian deterrent potential. Five submarines with Russian flags can be followed by five subs of NATO.

Q63 **Mrs Moon:** You are telling me what the Russians have got. I am asking you what potential has NATO got to challenge Russia in the Arctic and the High North? I appreciate that the Russians have got all sorts of capability. I am a little worried about what it is they think we have got. What is the threat that they see coming from NATO? Okay, missiles can be lobbed from somewhere. Fine, you can lob missiles from anywhere. In terms of capability in the Arctic and the High North, what are they afraid of? What do they think we have got, apart from Britain's four subs?

Dr Ash: No, more than that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mrs Moon: Well, nuclear subs.

Dr Sutyagin: You should add to that at least 20 American subs that are very capable. You should add the irregular deployment of US and British subs under ice just to test their ability—

Q64 **Mrs Moon:** British subs do not regularly test under ice.

Dr Sutyagin: Now, not regularly. As far as I remember, they do not deploy there since 2007 at all, but the Americans are still there and the Brits have not lost completely the experience of going there. That is why I mentioned that the Russians have a “what if?” approach. They try to get prepared for the worst-case scenario. The worst-case scenario is the United Kingdom restarting its deployment of under-ice patrols of its subs. That is the worst-case scenario and Britain has the chance to send at least one sub, accompanied by a pair or five American subs.

Q65 **Mrs Moon:** So it is mainly submarines?

Dr Sutyagin: The most immediate threat in the High North—in the Arctic under-ice—is exclusively submarines. The surface combatants situated near the northern part of the Norwegian coast can represent a threat to Russian territory as well. You should not overlook the fact that the Americans exercised their carriers, deploying there into the fjords and effectively launched an imitation of an air attack against Russian territory. They can repeat that. A carrier can be deployed in the very High North Atlantic, which is within reach of Russian territory.

That is what they perceive: Americans still have these carriers and BMD-capable destroyers and cruisers, they have surface combatants with cruise missiles on board and they have submarines, and the Brits can help them in that. Those potentials are not that large but, keeping in mind the restrictions of Russia’s own potential there, it is substantial. Russia currently has just seven ocean-going surface combatants in the northern fleet. Just seven, and not every one of them is ready at a moment’s notice to go to sea to defend Russia. Russia has just 12 nuclear-powered and three diesel subs in the northern fleet. The operational tempo that they can maintain is realistically more or less just one half of that amount. They can deploy and maintain at sea a maximum of approximately seven or eight subs. If five American subs arrive there, that has very serious potential from the Russian standpoint.

Q66 **Mrs Moon:** So does NATO have the potential to contest Russia’s new planned denial and control capabilities?

Dr Sutyagin: Not the potential to contest the Russian denial of the area, but NATO has the potential to challenge Russia’s unquestionable rule of the area. That is the source of concern for the Russian planners.

Dr Ash: The answer to the question is that you can’t have complete containment. What you could have, though, without crossing the nuclear threshold, is unacceptable damage inflicted by conventional weapons—particularly submarine or air-launched cruise missiles.



Q67 Mrs Moon: We have a situation in which there is quite often a stand-off in the South China sea over freedom of movement and freedom of access. In your view, are we heading for that sort of potential in the Arctic? If so, should NATO be challenging that and making sure that we maintain freedom of access and freedom of movement? Should there be greater exercise up there, or will that just increase the paranoia?

Dr Sutyagin: My standpoint is that Russia is not going to replicate the situation in the South China sea because Russia is not interested in that. Russia has a certain degree of control of that area and does not need to raise that degree now. They are just slightly improving what they have, while the Chinese are trying to claim that territory. That is the difference. No one actually challenges Russia there, and probably should not, because there is no point to it.

Dr Ash: Russia is going through the appropriate legal and political channels in order to establish its claims. It has a right and responsibility to make those claims. It has gone out of its way to settle long-standing disputes with Norway in the Barents sea by discussion and no other means. There is no reason to assume that there would be armed conflict with regard to, if you like, the maritime boundaries.

Also, the loss of opportunity to Russia in trying to establish close control over sea areas would be significant. My perception is that Russia wishes to be open for business in the north. It wishes to use the northern sea route and it wishes to have oil and gas opportunities. To some extent, it has been frustrated. The northern sea route has not opened up perhaps as rapidly or as predictably as they might have hoped and, of course, with the world prices of oil, they have not had the revenues they perhaps might have wanted. However, they don't really have very much to gain by becoming aggressive over maritime boundaries.

Q68 Chair: Before I bring in Phil Wilson, may I try to sum up? I hope I am not going to excessively simplify what we have said so far, but, broadly speaking, you have been arguing that what Russia has been doing in the Arctic has been perfectly legitimate and perfectly normal: some degree of change, but nothing excessive; looking after commercial interests, search and rescue and all the things that come within the Arctic Council; perfectly legitimate control of its military assets and the Kola peninsula. In other words, "Nothing to worry about, fellas, it's all going extremely well." I'm using slightly simplistic language, but you will be familiar—apart from anything else, you were both here—with the RUSI paper produced last week, "NATO and the North Atlantic: Revitalising Collective Defence". Again, without unduly simplifying that paper, its broad thesis is that post-Afghanistan and post-Iraq, NATO should be, but is not, returning its attention to the northern flank, because Russia's interests are controlling the transatlantic resupply route and if there is a war anywhere, the North Atlantic resupply route will be just as vital today as it was in the Second World War and that all the increased Russian activity in the Arctic is nothing to do with seeing off a few terrorists or protecting a cruise ship, but is about projecting Russian power into the North Atlantic against such a global conflict. It seems to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

me that what the RUSI paper said is completely and utterly different from what you have been telling us this morning.

Dr Ash: My view is basically that we should follow the old military axiom: "Work for peace, but prepare for war." The political progress that has been made in the Arctic has been substantial and brings great credit to all those involved; it has been very significant. In fact, to some extent—

Q69 **Chair:** Yes, but we are not talking about the Arctic; we are talking about the globe. We are talking about Crimea, Ukraine, Syria and the possible consequences of those conflicts in the North Atlantic. We are not talking about whether or not Sweden gets on with Russia. Those things are tactical-level considerations, and we are actually talking about grand strategy here, aren't we?

Dr Ash: Yes. The other part of what I was saying is that it is much more likely that conflict will spread to, as opposed to from, the Arctic. Under those circumstances, you would need to be able to deploy forces that could operate in the Arctic and have the right equipment, the right procedures and the right training to deal with whatever threat arose. There are two elements—

Q70 **Chair:** Hang on. You are certainly right about training and all that, but what I was describing was the possibility of some form of conflict somewhere in the world and significant nuclear deployment in the North Atlantic. The degree of training of the Royal Marines, or cold weather training in northern Norway, ain't gonna do anything about a Russian division 10 miles away crossing the Norwegian border. We are talking about grand strategy—major global conflicts. We are trying to work out why the Russians have remilitarised. Is it just for the legitimate reasons you described, or is it against the possibility of such a strategic-level global conflict in the future? A bit of training ain't gonna do anything about that—that is neither here nor there.

Dr Ash: Well, that is simply not what I'm arguing for. There is also a difference between securitisation and militarisation that I think is very important. I think those ground forces are much more likely to be held in readiness for defence of land within Russia, rather than to make a strike against northern Norway, but that is purely a personal opinion.

Q71 **Chair:** A division up there against the possibility of NATO invading Russia—is that what you are saying?

Dr Sutyagin: Two divisions against three battalions of Norwegians—that is a very serious imbalance. May I add a bit of detail to that? In the design that you quite rightly described, I would say that the Russian preparations are more defensive. They are to show the West Russia's preparedness and the fruitlessness of attempts to challenge it in the West to distract its attention from Syria or Ukraine: "You cannot mess with us in these areas, so you'd better not try."

NATO's preparation for operations in the Arctic is probably to fix the imbalance in NATO's ability to distract Russia's forces. If NATO is able to portray itself as capable of challenging Russia in the northern area, it will



touch a very sensitive point in Russian feeling on Russian defences. That will be the way for the West to force Russia to be more restrictive in other areas—in the south, the Mediterranean, Ukraine or wherever. That is probably what stands behind the NATO preparations and this call to be better prepared to deal with the Arctic. It is not because Russian divisions are going to invade Norway. While we cannot exclude that in a worst-case scenario, Russia is actually not well prepared to operate in the Arctic. As I tried to show you, for instance, the interdiction of Atlantic lines of communication is a very important option and Russia can try that option—sending, maximum, one, two or three submarines on those lines. Russia can try that option only in the case that it feels secure enough in the High North.

If NATO poses a threat for Russian SSBNs and Russia land-based defences there, Russia will just have to restrict itself and avoid deploying its one, two or three subs to the Atlantic to interdict that course. That is the next step in this game by NATO. It is not to defend from Russia; it is to deter Russia from acting somewhere else in the belief that it is absolutely secure in the north.

Q72 Phil Wilson: If not through NATO, how else could we respond to Russia's military activity in the Arctic? What other means do we have to deal with any military activity in the Arctic?

Dr Ash: First, in terms of responding to their military activity in the Arctic, as you put it, one of the things we could do is collaborate. There is no reason why we shouldn't. I myself was personally involved in a project at the end of the Cold War. I had two Russian researchers working for me at Cambridge. We were looking at the radionuclides that have been disposed of in the northern seas. So there is absolutely no reason why we shouldn't work with the Russians on issues of concern to all parties. Those include some security issues.

As far as whether we move more with NATO or with an alternative, I have proposed that we place greater emphasis on our relationship with Canada and Norway. I think that would be beneficial to all nations involved and it would provide some assurance that, irrespective of what happens politically within NATO, there will be security in the north.

Dr Sutyagin: I would probably add the military dimension to that. It seems to me that, by actually showing Russia that there is no option of a free hand in the Arctic, you will calm the situation down because Russia will know that it has its own weakness or sensitive point, so it will just have to act a bit more rational, keeping in mind that this week we saw a potential challenge in the north. That is why probably closing the gap of Arctic capabilities and the ability to operate in the Arctic environment would send a refreshing message to the Kremlin that, "You cannot have an easy ride in the Arctic, so you better not plan on other adventures somewhere else in the belief that you are safe and secure in the Arctic." While that might look like a sort of arms race or tension in the Arctic, it could contribute to safer, calmer and more co-operative relations there and maybe even elsewhere.

Q73 **Phil Wilson:** How do you think Russia would respond to greater NATO or western military presence in the Arctic?

Dr Ash: With concern.

Dr Sutyagin: And with alarming-looking actions. They can immediately change the plan and raise the division on the base of the 100th Brigade sooner rather than later, to keep pressure on your perception and trying to show you that you are in danger. They will try to raise the stakes in that case. They do feel challenged and insecure in this area. After all, that is the competition of the country that has GDP 20 times less than the western alliance.

Q74 **Chair:** Forgive me, Dr Sutyagin; I think you gave two mutually exclusive answers to the last two questions. One moment you said you felt it was important that we should send a message to Moscow that they are not secure in the High North and we should do that by increasing the level of NATO activity in Norway and the Arctic. The next moment you said that if we did so Russia would view that as being very worrying and they would escalate their activities from brigade to division level on the ground. Which is it? Are we annoying and taunting the Bear by increasing NATO activity in the north or are we merely demonstrating to the Bear that he cannot escape from the cage?

Dr Sutyagin: The problem is in the fact that NATO actions and increasing readiness to act in the north is a practical step, while the Russian reactions will be more in the field of feelings—the field of propaganda, effectively. That is a more psychological measure. The increased activity of the Russian defences and military in that area would not mean increased aggressiveness of the Russian military in that area. They will try to deter you from expanding more. Well, that is the contest of wills, and you need to take that in. It is not to attack NATO; it is to show, “Do not attack me; I am prepared.” That is why in undertaking actions to increase readiness and ability to act in the Arctic, NATO should and must be fully prepared that there would be higher tension on a psychological level. That is not exclusive measures. That would be the Russian reaction, but a Russian division raised there would not mean that a Russian division would immediately attack the West.

Q75 **Chair:** Let me give you a practical example, bearing in mind we are talking about what the Brits can do. Throughout the Cold War, we had brigade-level exercises in Norway throughout from January to April. That is currently running at more or less company level, thereabouts, plus helicopters. What do you think Moscow would say if we suddenly announced: “All right, we are going to have full-scale, brigade-level, all-arms exercises in the High North of Norway.”?

Dr Sutyagin: To be honest, I do not fully agree with the question about what Moscow will say—does it really matter what Moscow will say?—because Moscow will say whatever Moscow will feel necessary to promote or defend its national interest. If the United Kingdom sees that it is in the national interest of this nation to have that brigade ready to operate there



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and capable of getting there in time in case of challenge, it does not matter what Moscow would say.

Dr Ash: The Arctic is a theatre and it has always been a theatre: a theatre for nationalism and personal gain, if you look at the heroic era of exploration. It attracts public attention and is somewhere you can use quite readily for publicity. You should not discount the importance of domestic media within Russia in its behaviour. That is to say that it is quite capable simultaneously of behaving in one way diplomatically and an entirely different way in terms of the media in Russia.

At the same time, if I may remind the Committee of what I said about collaboration with Russia, if we are talking about those areas where we could collaborate at a military level, that would be difficult to exclude from Russian media. Under those circumstances, they could see that we were prepared to work with them very publicly on counter-terrorism, which is beneficial in providing a deterrent to terrorist organisations, search and rescue and anti-pollution. There is much that might be done in terms of soft power by our forces.

Q76 **Jack Lopresti:** As far as the Russian threat goes, are there any emerging technological advances, such as sub-sea drones, that could affect the balance of power and make things unstable and give the Russians an edge?

Dr Ash: Don't be too sold on drone technology at this time. In particular, do not automatically assume that drones are going to be the solution to anti-submarine warfare. My advice, in terms of drone technology, would be to have something proved before purchase. It may form part of anti-submarine warfare in due course—a beneficial part, quite possibly—but don't assume that it is necessarily going to be a complete solution.

So far as technology is concerned, the latest generation of submarines—noise-quietening submarines—is quite significant. It is already the case that they have very, very quiet platforms. It would be difficult to have assurance that you would get them all in an open conflict.

For other issues, they have proven themselves very adept at hybrid warfare, which is important when it comes to the kind of conflict that we are increasingly seeing in this century. I do not see any other major technological breakthroughs. For example, if you are looking at some of the issues that are of concern to us, like the development of laser technology to counter swarm attacks and those kinds of issues, I am unaware of any significant breakthrough that they have made in that regard. I think the key technologies already exist for a very destructive conflict to occur, but I do not see anything in particular, apart from what they already have.

Dr Sutyagin: If I may add to that, a very important consideration is the fact that it is very difficult for Russia now to have any breakthrough due to the current state of Russian science, which is influenced by the domestic policy of the Russian Government. The Russian Government tries to get rid



HOUSE OF COMMONS

of effectively anybody who has the ability to think independently. That is why Russia keeps borders open; instead of fighting these people domestically, they try just to push them away. You can understand that it is very difficult to make science not about thinking independently. That is one of the problems—a fundamental cultural problem.

The second problem is the current financial problem. The budget allocated for fundamental scientific research in Russia was just cut by 50% over the last three years. They just do not have enough funds to carry out the fundamental research to get any breakthrough. What is being implemented and fielded in the Russian military now is more than 80% or 90% derivative of designs that were developed in the Soviet time. It is very difficult to expect really revolutionary breakthroughs on the Russian side.

Q77 Chair: I fear we are out of time. Thank you very much to both Dr Sutyagin and Dr Ash for your very kind evidence; it will add greatly to the Committee's consideration of our report, which will come out later in the summer. Meanwhile, thank you very much indeed. I hope it has not been too challenging an hour for you.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Group Captain Blount, Nick Childs and Colonel Skuse.

Q78 Chair: May I welcome you all and thank you very much indeed for taking the time to come and give evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee's Sub-Committee on the subject of Defence in the High North, the Arctic and maybe the North Atlantic and its consequences for the future. For the sake of the record, can I ask you to identify yourselves?

Nick Childs: I am Nick Childs. I am the senior fellow for naval forces and maritime security at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, so basically I have overall responsibility for research undertakings within the institute on maritime affairs and lead, for example, on providing assessments of global maritime capabilities for our publications, chiefly the annual "The Military Balance" publication.

Chair: Before we go on, I should ask: is it Mr Childs or Dr Childs?

Nick Childs: Mister.

Colonel Skuse: I am Matt Skuse. I am a recently retired Royal Marine. I spent 25 years in the Royal Marine mountain leader branch as a cold-weather warfare specialist. I have also just completed four years as the UK defence attaché to Norway and Iceland.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Group Captain Blount: Hello. I am Clive Blount. Until a month ago, I was a Group Captain in the RAF. I have 37 years' service in many areas that impact on what we are going to talk about that I won't bore you with.

Q79 **Mrs Moon:** Mr Childs, perhaps I can start with you. Now that we know that we have nothing to worry about from the Russians, I wonder whether I could look back for just a moment and ask you about the nature of the strategic threat from the Russian northern fleet during the Cold War. Was there a threat, or were they as benign then as we apparently see them now?

Nick Childs: It was very much a primary element of Soviet and Warsaw Pact capabilities in terms of countering NATO. The northern fleet evolved over time from a chiefly submarine-based force that would operate out into the North Atlantic and across the North Atlantic to attempt to interdict NATO reinforcement forces—convoys—crossing the Atlantic. It evolved over time as strategy, doctrine and technologies evolved.

In terms of the deployment of strategic nuclear weapons on submarines, because of the range of missile systems at the time, there were initially forward deployments of strategic submarines across the Atlantic. But as the range of those weapons increased, so doctrine and practice changed, and there was the development of the bastion concept of protection of the strategic submarine forces in the northern waters, not least by the ice pack of the Arctic but also with northern fleet forces to provide cover for the long-range ballistic-missile submarines, which provided a capability to strike at the United States from pretty much near waters.

So there was that element of the northern fleet activities, but even then, in terms of the granularity of capabilities, there was also a very significant surface, submarine, missile-armed and also bomber-armed capability. That would have reached out into the North sea and the north-eastern Atlantic into the Greenland, Iceland, UK gap to attempt to take on UK and other NATO maritime forces directly with significant swarm attacks—that is we would call them today, I think—of missiles to try to deal with NATO naval formations.

That presented a very significant challenge in terms of the evolution of NATO maritime capabilities to try to deal with it. The Royal Navy in that time significantly refocused its capabilities on, essentially, providing an anti-submarine warfare force following the withdrawal from east of Suez, based on anti-submarine warfare taskforces. Issues were raised into the 1980s about whether those would be viable given the threat posed by these missile-armed forces out of the north.

There was also a significant evolution of initially US and then NATO maritime strategy, essentially to take on this challenge. There was what one could call a robust—it was certainly bold—forward maritime strategy to take on both the bastions and the threat posed to Atlantic resupply by the capabilities out of the northern fleet. That forward maritime presence essentially would have involved US-led carrier taskforces steaming right into the jaws of the enemy—the battle of the fjords, essentially—up into



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the northern waters. That was both promulgated and practised to a significant degree towards the end of the 1980s and was, one could argue, a significant factor in strategic calculations in the Kremlin at the time in terms of what challenge they were facing from NATO. I'm sorry; that was a long answer.

Chair: We might seek to constrain ourselves, including in questions. Have you finished, Madeleine?

Q80 **Mrs Moon:** I would like to pick up on that. I am not sure how much of the previous evidence you heard.

Nick Childs: I caught a bit towards the end, so not that much.

Q81 **Mrs Moon:** How much do you see the threat as having changed? Could you say a little bit more in particular about the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap?

Nick Childs: In terms of the situation now, there are two elements to the maritime situation in the north. I caught a bit of this. There is the evolution of the economic exploitation potential, with the receding ice cap, in terms of both transit and mineral exploitation. That raises a number of maritime security and safety issues. Russia has responded in a certain way. It has a military predominance, which it continues to reinforce. In the context of a co-operative environment, as far as that element of the question is concerned, it may be relatively benign now but there is the potential for concern.

Beyond that, in terms of the threat emanating from the north, the Russians have made little bones about the fact that in their maritime strategy, they see that northern flank and the ability to range out into the Atlantic as a counter to what they see as the NATO challenge. What has changed in some respects is that they are now benefiting, after the wilderness years in the aftermath of the Cold War, from a significant amount of investment in maritime capabilities, not least submarines. That is enabling them, given the change in the political context, to demonstrate a capability ranging out into the Atlantic that has not been seen for a considerable amount of time. It is still—I picked this up—relatively small in number, certainly compared with the Cold War, but in the context of Western and NATO capabilities having been focused elsewhere and having atrophied, that change itself represents a significant challenge.

Q82 **Chair:** So really you are saying that the bastion concept is, to some modest degree, resurrecting itself.

Nick Childs: I would say that that is part of the equation, as a bastion capability to protect the investment and capability that resides in their ballistic missile submarines, which are being re-modernised. It is a significant capability, but these things always have to be calibrated. What the northern fleet represents, as the most powerful Russian fleet now, presents a significant headache for NATO and maritime commanders generally. But whether it would present an unchallengeable bastion is open to question.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

In terms of the numbers, if you look back to the end of the Cold War in 1989, the northern fleet consisted of 171 submarines and 70 principal surface combatants. Now we are down at 32 submarines—how many of those can be forward deployed at any time is still open to some question—and 10 principal surface combatants. That is a much reduced force, so there would certainly be the potential to challenge that bastion concept, but there are also reduced forces on the NATO side.

Q83 Chair: Incidentally, I must say to our other two witnesses to please jump in. This particular section is pretty strategic stuff. I will probably stick with Mr Childs, but do feel free to jump in.

Colonel Skuse: I am entirely happy to contribute here. I think it comes into three simple buckets. One is the bastion defence of their well-invested strategic nuclear assets on the Kola peninsula. That mentality remains. Another is their ability to project into the North Atlantic and cut NATO's ability to reinforce itself in Europe with conventional might. The other one is some sort of hybrid, ungentlemanly act up in the north. That would probably begin somewhere else but may well vent itself in the north, either at sea or on land. In simple terms, those are the three.

Q84 Chair: Of which, bucket 1 has always been the case; it is a perfectly legitimate and sensible thing to do, in the same way that we defend our nuclear installations. There is nothing wrong with that. However, buckets 2 and 3 have been, shall we say, empty; I am trying to extend the metaphor here. Buckets 2 and 3 have not been used much since the Cold War, but is their use now increasing?

Colonel Skuse: You've got a new generation of submarines that are probably capable of making a good contribution to that battle for the Atlantic from the opposition side. That is new. There is arguably a change in will as well, but that is not for me to comment on, politically.

Q85 Chair: To what degree do we in Britain—we are talking about NATO, but this Committee is in the UK—have the capability to deal with any of that threat? If that threat is their bucket 2 or 3 threat, to what degree do we in Britain have some kind of adequate capability to deal with it, particularly bearing in mind that most of our High North activity has been land-based in recent years?

Colonel Skuse: We are going to stray horribly quickly into areas that are not unclassified in that conversation.

Chair: We don't want to do anything that is classified. This is a public session and our report will be dealing purely with public information.

Colonel Skuse: I will happily comment unclassified on the bucket 3 question—that of NATO's land capability, predominantly in Norway now. The Norwegians will tell you that the Russians respect strength and a continuity of messaging that we in the west are probably not normally familiar with; the Norwegians and their NATO allies need to deliver messaging consistently over decades or generations, rather than varying it year on year. We make a contribution to that with our small but very well



HOUSE OF COMMONS

respected contribution. I think there is the assumption among politicians in both Oslo and London that that package is coherent and strong for its size. I might challenge that slightly here today, if I get the opportunity.

Q86 Chair: Yes, let's challenge that. As you say, we are still there. We went to visit the Royal Marines in both places the week before last, and of course it is very good what they do, but it is tiny. It is company-strength compared with the brigade-strength that we just heard about during the Cold War.

Colonel Skuse: The British contribution to NATO exercising in Norway is very important to the Norwegians. Whether it is statistically true or not, they believe it to be the key to the NATO exercising. For them, NATO exercising is a fundamental and key part of their messaging of strength, which is part, in turn, of that sort of orchestrated communication between Norway and Russia. It is not, by any means, the be all and end all; it is just a little nugget there.

Our contribution is considered very important by the Norwegians, and that itself has a political mass because it is part of our relationship with them. Our exercise contribution actually varies from six to about nine separate exercises that come under a variety of different flag officers. It is quite a slippery beast to get your hand on to. 3 Commando Brigade's exercise looks like the flagship. I would argue that, in some years, it is not that that has the largest political mass, although it is probably the largest in terms of man days. The exercising that I think you have probably seen in Porsanger, which actually does not come under 3 Commando Brigade—it comes under flag officer sea training—is naval and is a different budget. Those are all important to the Norwegians.

Q87 Chair: They are not going to make Mr Putin quake in his boots though, are they?

Colonel Skuse: No but, if you combine that with the joint expeditionary force initiative, you have a picture of Russia being able to, for example, relatively easily anticipate the bilateral reaction from an ungentlemanly act and certainly able to come up with plenty of options under the threshold of a decision at 28 for NATO. The idea of JEF—JEF forces are on the ground some of the year and are certainly capable of arriving relatively quickly—complicates that Russian decision-making process. Could they use an element of military force as part of some sort of hybrid attack in order to undermine NATO's credibility, subsequent to an act somewhere else in the world? The JEF, having the credible ability—credible is the key word—to do something about that, complicates that decision and makes it more unlikely.

Q88 Chair: The JEF will not be operational for quite a long time; that is looking forward to the future. Let's leave aside land force for the moment. Should we not be doing more with regard to our Navy? Should we not be reinventing, for example, our under-ice capabilities, which we haven't used for 10 years? We haven't had an exercise for 10 years at least. The RAF once every two years used to send a C-17 or a Hercules



up to the High North.

Colonel Skuse: I think there is an enormous up arrow on the relationship between the RAF and the Norwegian Air Force, not least because they now share four common platforms, including some key platforms. We have seen those two services grow much closer.

Q89 **Chair:** F-35?

Colonel Skuse: The F-35, P-8 on the way, and potentially C-130J and our Merlins and their AW101s. There are four sets of pilot training, four sets of operational systems. They are getting closer but that's not my chosen specialist subject.

Q90 **Chair:** Joint Helicopter Command does have its operation there and has exercises up there every year.

Colonel Skuse: Bardufoss has been running for some 40 years. It is the only piece of estate that we maintain in Norway. It is a solid institution but it has spent the past 10 years or so mostly servicing itself, training pilots and aircrew in order to maintain a capability. It makes very little contribution to wider exercising and it does very little spillover into any of the other six, seven or eight exercises that are ongoing.

Q91 **Chair:** That is one thing we picked up last week. There seems to be some degree of question to be asked as to whether Joint Helicopter Command ought to be doing more with regard to the ordinary NATO exercises that occur in Norway. Merely using it as a training base may lead ultimately to Treasury officials saying, "Why go to Bardufoss to do it? Why don't we do it in Norfolk?"

Colonel Skuse: That said, the alternative to what they are doing—and I think that has been very commendable—is to do what the Americans have done, which is let the whole thing rot completely. There is some wonderful evidence of us giving that tactical competence level back—to the US Marine Corps in this instance, helping them regain that capability that they have lost.

Q92 **Chair:** And the UK Government plans: are we letting our capabilities wither?

Group Captain Blount: From an operating perspective, the capability is obviously a shadow of what we used to do. It has always been an air theatre of operations, but beyond just Norway. The issue with air is that it is about range. In the High North, we are talking massively long distances to have any sort of effect.

We have gradually become an increasingly short-range Air Force in my view. The F-35 variant we are selecting is not the longest range by a long means. The Norwegians have realised that in their selection of the F-35, which is a longer-range version, they are going to need tankers. I know that they have got this co-operative project for the MRTT to extend range.

I have a feeling that we have had a push towards a far more tactical range Air Force than we used to have, and that causes issues when we are



HOUSE OF COMMONS

operating in the High North, primarily because there is a paucity of basing and areas to operate.

When we looked at the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap—the Faroes gap—there was always a fairly strong American defence presence on Keflavík on Iceland. I think the Icelandics maintain it as a reinforcement base but there are no longer permanently based US aircraft in Iceland. Thule is on a care and maintenance basis.

Q93 **Chair:** It is rotational. Rotational means—

Group Captain Blount: They are rotational. Iceland maintains the base as its contribution to NATO effectively. If you look at the distances between bases, countering any sort of thrust down from the north, there are vast distances. Where our carrier is going to fit into that, I am not sure. We are buying the carrier primarily as a strike asset, as far as I can see, not necessarily as a defence asset—the F-35 variant is not really optimised for air defence. It depends on how you define the threat, but if we are not careful I think we are going to let our capability define the threat, rather than the other way around.

Q94 **Chair:** Quite a strong message there that we really have not got the air assets we need. What about under-ice capability? I got the impression that you were just about to say something, Mr Childs.

Nick Childs: You mentioned under-ice capability and submarines. On that score, it is the declared policy of the submarine arm of the Royal Navy that it is a top priority to reinvest in under-ice capability, as you say, having had a gap in submarine activities—certainly in terms of popping up spectacularly through the ice at the North Pole—for essentially a decade. One assumes that that means actually exercising with boats. The Astute has not been tested at all, as far as I am aware—at least, there has not been any public announcement on that score—but the legacy Trafalgars have shown their ability to operate in the north. The Astutes are untested, but their capabilities and specifications suggest that they would be at least as good. The issue is the training, experience and—

Q95 **Chair:** Okay. But surely you think that we should recreate that capability.

Nick Childs: I think that there should be a re-emphasis. The big problem is numbers, as with everything.

Q96 **Chair:** That is a different matter. What we are doing here is advising the Government what we think ought to happen. My question to you is whether you think that from a strategic standpoint—given what we have talked about in regard to the bastion concept, remilitarisation of the Arctic and all that—we should be encouraging the Government to recreate our under-ice capability of submarines.

Nick Childs: There should be a refocusing on that area and the ability to do that as part of a deterrent capability, yes.

Q97 **Chair:** Colonel Skuse, I think you were about to say something—you caught my eye—but it may have been answered.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Colonel Skuse: The other way of doing it, of course, is to avoid the under-ice and just make sure that the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap is secure, which allows the Russians to maintain their bastion capability perception but prevents them from getting into the big blue Atlantic in the event of a situation. I think that is also another one on the list.

Q98 **Chair:** Does that not involve some degree of strategic withdrawal?

Colonel Skuse: In some respects, that is where we have been going with the purchase of P-8 and the American reinvestment into Keflavík, which is actually quite impressive—in the last two years, they have been widening hangar doors and making wash-down points for P-8 aircraft, which are larger than the P-3s. There is quite a lot of activity in Keflavík now that was not there four years ago.

Q99 **Phil Wilson:** Mr Childs, should we be concerned about reports that none of the Royal Navy's attack submarines are currently available for operations?

Nick Childs: I have seen those reports. It is my understanding that there has been a continuous operational capability, but there is no question but that trying to keep the legacy Trafalgar submarines going, with the Astute submarines coming in late, has meant variations in the numbers in the overall force—between six and seven. On top of that, there are concerns about availability. When you prang one of the Astutes, as happened recently, that complicates juggling all those issues.

I believe there has been availability to deal with operational priorities, but the problem has been that the focus of submarine capabilities has been so broad. It has changed from being absolutely focused on taking on the Russian submarine fleet in the Cold War to a completely different power projection role, with the priority on use of Tomahawk cruise missiles and all the operational requirements around that, which are essentially spread around the globe.

The issue, then, is prioritisation. Clearly part of the conventional armed nuclear powered submarine force's priorities is supporting the deterrent. But on top of that, if the next priority becomes having to refocus on the Russian threat or at least the challenge represented by increased Russian submarine activity, that means other capabilities and operational commitments may have to go by the board in order to refocus on that.

Q100 **Phil Wilson:** Does NATO need to do more to address the maritime threat in the North Atlantic? For example, do we need to have a Supreme Allied Commander for the Atlantic?

Colonel Skuse: The Norwegians would like that. The Norwegians think that NATO, in the way it commands, under-invested in the maritime flank and that that is a vulnerability.

Group Captain Blount: The point is that it is not the maritime flank. Let's take the much-vaunted problem in the Baltic states, where we have some sort of crisis. It is not a maritime flank; it is resupply. We cannot operate without the Atlantic. We can get there, stop and do something, but

without the transatlantic supply route we have no chance, very quickly. We have forgotten how to do that. What SACLANT did was guarantee convoys coming across the Atlantic and guarantee reinforcement. There is no command in the NATO model to guarantee that.

Colonel Skuse: That, in turn, guarantees our conventional capability in Europe.

Q101 **Phil Wilson:** So the answer is yes.

Nick Childs: The responses so far from NATO in terms of the new situation with Russia have focused more on the air and the land. I absolutely agree with my colleagues that in the context of that reassurance and deterrence, the Atlantic has become more crucial again in terms of the credibility of the strategy and reinforcement. There is a general understanding that less has been done up to now on the maritime front and that that needs to be addressed, in terms of actual capabilities, and that command and control needs to be beefed up. There may be an interim position between where we are now, in terms of maritime command capability, and reinventing SACLANT, a beefed-up NATO MARCOM and a more—dare one say—federated approach that involves NATO availing itself more of national capabilities, whether they are UK or US, to do that. But generally, the maritime command and control and capability issues have been under-invested in and probably should be a priority.

Colonel Skuse: When we say “North Atlantic”, we need to include Iceland. The Americans have been investing hard in Iceland recently, and we have been neither leading, following or getting out of the way, frankly.

Q102 **Phil Wilson:** Can I ask a question of Colonel Skuse? You mentioned the Greenland, Iceland, UK Gap and said we should do more to defend that, rather than our goods. Would that not be a sign of retreat from doing more in the rest of the Arctic? Should we not be doing both? Is it the last line of defence?

Colonel Skuse: That is open to interpretation, but it is a tactical constriction that is defensible in a way that areas further north and further south are not.

Nick Childs: Arguably, you could say that it should not be a binary choice. You need, in a sense, to do both, and the Greenland, Iceland, UK Gap is a strategic asset as far as NATO is concerned. The extent to which you can not quite make that watertight but further reinforce that line is a question. The P8s help significantly in that. Certainly in a maritime context, as far as the UK is concerned, they cannot arrive soon enough. If you add those together with the Norwegians bringing those in as well and the Americans reinvesting and having a forward presence in Iceland, that is a significant boost. The issue in terms of surface and submarine capabilities in the Gap goes back to numbers. There are high-end platforms that can do anti-submarine warfare and high-end maritime, but numbers have been the trade-off in terms of maintaining that capability.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Group Captain Blount: Multi-roling, which has always been the holy grail, means that if you're trying to use one platform to project power, put marines ashore, put F-35s in a strike role, do anti-submarine and do defence, these platforms can only be in one place at one time. I think nearly every war game we run down to is that we just don't have enough platforms. They can all do the roles, but if you have only one platform doing three roles they have to be in the same place.

If I can butt in on your question slightly, this goes back to what Mrs Moon was saying in the first session and this much-vaunted anti-access, area denial strategy, which, as an old Cold War warrior, I have a real difficulty with seeing as anything new, frankly.

The point is that Russia knows—it has seen and watched and it is not stupid—that if it lets western forces into an operating area, the chances are that it will eventually lose, because we are better, we are more capable and we have some very good capabilities. We saw it in Crimea, which is a classic case, and we have seen it in Syria as well. The whole deal of everything from tactical anti-access right the way up to so-called hybrid warfare, which again I struggle with, is that it's all about denying the enemy a favourable method of operating, and why wouldn't you do that? It's what we call strategy, actually, and it goes a long way back.

The issue with a tactical retreat, or a strategic retreat if you want to call it that, is that it is fine if it suits our strategy, but we have to make those decisions for our reasons and not because we can't do something else, and that's my great worry.

What Russia is doing is what I think any nation or any adversary in the future will do, which is to look at what we are good at and, if it has any sense, prevent us from doing it. We can have the best forces in the world, we can have the biggest number of the forces in the world, but if our people don't allow us to deploy those forces because they don't believe in the cause or there are some other political constraints, the forces are useless.

That's where this hybrid piece comes in. Igor contradicted himself, but I think he meant to. The whole point is that this is a battle of wills and perceptions, and my worry about glib—not "glib"; that's unfair. My worry about saying that we'd need to retreat means that that opens up an area that can be used against us.

If something happens on Svalbard, say, for NATO to turn around and say, "Yeah, we don't care", might not be an acceptable answer in future. Militarily, it is the perfect answer—"Actually, we're only interested in protecting those reinforcements"—but from a hybrid perspective, if we want to call it that, or from a strategic perspective, it might not be the right answer.

My concern about the Arctic is that it is a capability we were never brilliant at it—stand fast, my friend on the right; we were world leaders—but at least most of us had some form of training and we had kit in the stores,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

we had the ability to practise and our platforms were cleared for an environmental range that allowed us to operate.

If, because of successive cuts and reductions in the amount of money available, we have taken risk in a lot of those areas, then we are abrogating an operating area to somebody else. We should choose not to operate—fine—but if we have actually got to a position where we can't operate, then we're screwed. I think that's the issue with the Arctic. There are technical issues, so that over the last 20 years or so most armed forces—writ large—have taken a step back from operating from outside particular narrow geographic areas.

Q103 Chair: What you are saying is quite interesting. Of course, you are absolutely right that anti-access, area denial strategies, the bastion strategy and all that are as old as the hills. I think the nature of our inquiry is whether or not that has increased in recent years, and whether or not some of the things that are happening in Kaliningrad, for example, or around the Kola peninsula—for example, with the northern fleet or with what are shortly to become division-sized land forces training in the Murmansk area—have increased. Whether or not those things are significantly increased from what they were—I think everyone would accept that they are—I think you are also right to say that we now have 19 frigates and destroyers, half of which don't work, and therefore do we really have the capability to deter? It is a two-pronged thing, isn't it? On the land front, Jack Lopresti.

Q104 Jack Lopresti: Colonel Skuse, could you describe the historical and current significance of the cold-weather training that you used to run as part of 3 Commando Brigade?

Colonel Skuse: I travelled from Oslo for this meeting to make two points and here we go.

Chair: I forgot to thank you. It is so kind of you to take the trouble to come from Oslo. We are much obliged to you.

Colonel Skuse: First off, we train in the winter for three reasons. It is nothing to do with environmental training—it is because it is the most likely. That is often overlooked. Once frozen, those rivers, lakes and fjords are a channel for movement. If there is going to be any movement of armoured or mobile land forces, it is far easier to do in the winter, so it is the most likely time for a hostile act. Secondly, it is the most demanding. Arguably, if you can do it in the winter, you can do it in the summer. Lastly, it is the most easy to administer. The land is frozen and you don't damage farmers' fields. The whole thing is cheaper to deliver and far more realistic.

For those three reasons, from the period of 1961 and 1963, when we were going fairly evenly summer and winter, over the decade of the sixties we gradually ended up refining it down into winter training. Initially, there were a number of Army units that used to go—the Grenadier Guards, the Parachute battalions—and then we had the AMF, which was an Army unit on a winter rotation.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We polished ourselves down to winter delivery for those three reasons—not because we wanted to conduct environmental training, but because there were reasons to do it only in winter. We were getting more return over the winter.

We are presently training in Norway rather than with the Norwegians. We have actually very little integration at the middle management level between the Norwegian ground forces and the British ground forces. The architecture of our relationship makes it difficult to have those conversations. Up in Main Building, they have just started a working group on winter deployment, to try to herd the cats and get some control over exactly what we are doing in the winter, which is a very positive sign.

My second point, which is key for me, is that we could get a lot more strategically or politically out of our land winter deployments than we presently do, at the same level of investment. At the moment there are a couple of quite awkward bureaucratic obstacles to those winter deployments, which are costing a lot. That we might get more effect out of it does not necessarily mean that we send a different message to the Russians; it simply means that our contribution is more coherent and those that orchestrate that relationship—NATO and Norway—have more levers in their hands.

The major bureaucratic obstacle here is the way we fund our winter deployments. Historically, it was the Navy. I think in this particular year it is the military capability team up in Main Building, who have continued to put the funding for our winter deployments on the table for an in-year saving each round. As a consequence, we have been coming to Norway since the '60s, every year, at 12-months' notice. As a result, the Norwegians have not been able to help us out with any infrastructure.

That is the reason we have not really sat down to have proper conversations about medium or long-term plans. We have almost surprised them by our presence each year, and it is costing us a lot more staff work than it should do, and that staff work is not going to useful things such as working out how our world-class light infantry meets their world-class cold-weather heavy forces. That synergy is presently not being exploited. Arguably, at a political level, the Norwegians, the Brits and the Russians assume that it is. It is not, and it won't be until we can start saying, "We will have a look at that next year." We can't do that as long as the finances are not in place. So if you could ring-fence that budget for winter training, it is a relatively small act, but it would grow through to become a very large consequence on the sort of five to 10-year timeline.

Q105 Jack Lopresti: You have said it is about the environment and it is the toughest place, but you have also alluded to the fact that it is a strategic deterrent. I am trying to get at how much of the deployment is training and how much of it is strategic deterrent?

Colonel Skuse: I deliberately hijacked your question, sir, for which I apologise.

Jack Lopresti: Did you know I was coming? I mean it is quite uncanny.

Colonel Skuse: At the moment, it is pretty much all about the environment, because of that 12-month timeline. A Royal Marine commander will turn up. He has not got links into any clever documents about how we work in synergy with the Norwegian forces. He simply tries to do what he expects to do in other places in the world in a cold-weather environment to overcome those frictions—the effect of snow and increased logistic challenges—that are a fact of life out there. If we had a more coherent plan he would actually be able to do some of that exercise and “train where you fight”, which was a key phrase during the Cold War. At the moment, it is simply the way we fund that package that stops him doing that.

There is also an important detail that is hidden in the fact that we are going out in smaller levels. When a brigade went out, a brigade commander and his staff went out. They generated staff work, made comment on the strategy and so on. When we go out at company commander level, the senior guy on the ground for the duration may be an OF-3 major. He is more likely to try to push efficiency into the package rather than long-term thinking. That is an ugly by-product of the fact that we have downscaled, because we are putting less thought into it. Arguably, the whole thing is now intellectually underinvested.

Q106 **Jack Lopresti:** Do the Norwegians see it in the same way you do?

Colonel Skuse: Yes, they do. At a political level, they like to think that we are working well together. There are a lot of bottom-up initiatives at troop level between the battalions out there, but there is this stripe of middle management, both on our side and theirs, that are not quite keeping up with the political game and not quite embracing the bottom-up initiatives. It is on both sides actually. We have made some attempts to have these conversations—“How do my light infantry work with your tanks?” At the first hurdle it fell. We need to do that again, and probably again.

Group Captain Blount: If I could add to that answer, whenever we do anything there is a deterrent factor and we need to get our head around that as a country. We were a lot better with this SDSR, but we missed the point with the SDSR 2010 that everything we publish goes into the enemy adversary capitals as well. SDSR 2010 sent a rather pathetic message—“We’re out to defend our part in the world.” SDSR 2015 has hopefully said a lot more. When we deploy, we deploy.

There is a point that I am sure Matt remembers. In 1998-2001, we were still involved in bi-MSC exercises in Norway, which were a matter of deploy the AMF(L) and train where you fight. They were massive, big involvement exercises. The one I did in Harstad was in 1998 and was the whole AMF(L) deployed and was pretty much divisional level when we added the Norwegian bits. That was to a NATO COMPLAN and was run by SACEUR and SACLANT effectively together. It was a major exercise. Every time we deploy we must realise that we are sending a message.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Colonel Skuse: I would gamble that we are not actually reading the NATO plan for the reinforcement of Norway when we do our exercise planning. We are not actually exercising that plan at all. We are not sending in refinements about the logistics. If we find an airport had changed its runway length, no one would report that to the international staff. We are simply not doing what we should be doing. We are not doing the basics. That is because we are going back at 12 months' notice each time at a very tactical level. Change the funding strategy.

Q107 Chair: The point that Group Captain Blount makes that every time you do anything, that is of course strategic, is correct, but that would apply if the Royal Marines were training in Norfolk. I keep using Norfolk as an example but it could be Salisbury plain. Colonel Skuse's approach is slightly different, which is to say that the purpose of the Royal Marines training in Norway is not only because it is a great place to train and challenging and all those things, but it is bucket No. 1, to come back to the bucket analogy, which is that it is a significant deterrent effect. Moscow is aware that we have that capability and that we are training Americans and doing other things.

It is not just that we have it but that we are doing it there. That is demonstrated by what you said a moment ago about effectively having division-level exercises in 1998, when there was not a threat from Russia. Russia was one of our best friends but none the less we had division strength. Colonel Skuse's point is an extremely interesting one: it is not just about training; it is about deterrence.

I would make one passing comment to feed in for the record that may encourage you. I had a private conversation with the Secretary of State for Defence that I certainly would not mind being put on the record in this manner. We came back from Norway last week. He said that subsequent to his visit to Bodø, which he did in the last six months, he is absolutely convinced that we must do a great deal more to integrate and co-operate between the UK and Norwegian forces. Given that that is his personal commitment, I thought you might like to—

Colonel Skuse: I think he said that before, and his predecessor may have said similar things, but the message has not been getting down to middle management.

Q108 Chair: No, but they'll read the account of this meeting, so it will do now.

Colonel Skuse: Thank you. The Norwegians are uncomfortable with the term deterrent for their relationship with Russia; they do not think that word is appropriate.

Q109 Chair: Why?

Colonel Skuse: Because that is something other countries on the NATO rim need, and is not something the Norwegians feel they need. They actually feel that they have a very good relationship with Russia, and there is a lot of evidence for that.

Q110 Jack Lopresti: Is that wishful thinking?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Colonel Skuse: It is not; they genuinely do have a good relationship with Russia. If you look historically, or even in relatively recent times, it works and is probably the best example of a small country's relationship with such a big neighbour. The Russians pulled out after the end of the Second World War, and they have good co-operation on a number of things. That relationship is, in fact, because of the military strength through NATO, with that final backstop of NATO's strategic nuclear deterrence. That does not mean our contribution is not necessary; it means our contribution has worked, and we need to continue doing it consistently if that message is going to continue to be effective.

Q111 Douglas Chapman: Just to follow on from that, what you just said was a strong message that we also got from our visit to Norway in terms of the relationship. One of the things we visited in Norway was the training of United States personnel. Can you put into the Committee's domain how valuable and significant that level of training is for United States personnel, especially given that it is the Royal Marines leading it? Is that the unique military capability that we can offer?

Colonel Skuse: There are two things going on there. First, you have got a little strategic message coming from the US to Norway of, "We are here for you and we are back in the game." That is because they did not really keep going through the years; they came back for some of the big exercises but they were never really particularly present. Now they are there—they are on the ground. In fact, it went through Parliament; there was a parliamentary debate about whether they should say yes to that form of basing, and they did—they have embraced it—so they are pleased with that.

The other one is that this is a wonderful—arguably, once in a generation—opportunity for the Royal Marines to give back to the US Marine Corps. We have begged and borrowed off them as long as I have been serving, and now we are giving back in terms of capacity and capability. That is wonderful for the relationship between the US Marine Corps and the Royal Marines, and is probably good for the relationship between the UK and the US. It is wonderful to see it happening. We have a skill set that they now feel they need, and we are generously giving it over. It is genuinely heart-warming. It is, however, going to be a hard battle. With the way they are rotating, it is going to take forever to get that capability really up and going.

Q112 Douglas Chapman: One of the things that we discovered was that the length of service for personnel in the Marine Corps is very short—five or six years and then they are moved on to something else.

Colonel Skuse: They are doing a six-month rotation; the guys who come out for the summer six months are going to get no winter training. They have got 100% rotation, so the guys who come out every winter will be there for the first time. With so many US Marines and a five-year average length of service, they will not come back more than once. So we are feeding a donkey strawberries, but none the less it is visible and it is good.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q113 Douglas Chapman: When we were out there on the visit we looked carefully at the level of equipment and quality. We found that there are some issues around contracting for kit. Do you want to comment on whether that could be improved and what we actually need to support our troops there?

Colonel Skuse: Yes. It should not be as hard as it is. Equipment is not bad at the moment, but the processes should not be as difficult as they are. It requires a little bit more intellectual investment—no revolution there, but a bit of refinement and polish of our processes for working out what we need and what works and then buying it in. There is no one thing—it is a lot of polish in small areas.

I will make one observation though. We do keep doing other people's homework again. The Norwegians, for example, put a lot of science into what underwear to be wearing in the Arctic, and then we go and do the same.

Q114 Chair: So it's a broader procurement problem that we have.

Colonel Skuse: Yes.

Q115 Douglas Chapman: Just on that, is the equipment that we have got designed for the long term? It's all very well going out for a winter exercise, but is the equipment designed to see us through a longer-term stay if that is required?

Colonel Skuse: Yes, there are a number of philosophies you can use on equipment. If you can buy something that costs a third as much and lasts half as long, that is actually an economy. Much of the kit the Americans have been using for deployment elsewhere in the world is designed to last for one tour length—six to 12 months. But the kit we have been buying in should be lasting for a number of tours; that is my perception. But it's always a balance, when you are making decisions about what to buy, between costs, how long it is going to stay hygienically usable for and how long it will be before it disintegrates. There is a science there that I think it would be unhelpful to go into just now.

Q116 Chair: I am keeping a careful eye on the clock because we are running out of time, but I want finally to touch again on aerial capabilities and the aerial strategic situation in the Arctic and High North. Is it coming back into strategic significance, and if so, will we be directing the carrier force F-35s up there? Is there more the F-35s can do together with the Norwegians? What about the P-8s? What about Keflavík? What is the aerial position—

Jack Lopresti: What about unmanned?

Group Captain Blount: A lot of it comes down to range. I would sound a caution. From an air perspective, obviously it has never not been a major theatre of operations. As far as going over the Pole, the nuclear strike, the triad and so on are concerned, it's there, so operating over the Pole is not that abnormal. The Americans have disinvested to a certain extent in their more defensive capabilities. There is also a large difference, from our



HOUSE OF COMMONS

perspective, between Norway, which is Arctic in that it's above 66° north, and operating in polar regions. Let's say you are getting up to 78° or 79° north—Thule, for instance. I went to Thule in July, and the temperature never got above minus 18°. That's in July, so there are some real challenges.

The Arctic or the Norwegian flank, compared with operating in some of these polar regions—there is a vast environmental change across the region, and we have to think about that when we are procuring equipment. In the past, we have, I think—I tried to get some evidence, but I haven't got that access anymore—saved money in reducing the environmental operating boundaries. Not so much when you are in the air, because obviously it's cold—it is minus 56° in the stratosphere. But it's things like fuel temperature—maintaining the fuel temperature and operating from somewhere like Thule.

The issue with unmanned, which is the answer to every maiden's prayer, is that we buy unmanned for dirty, dangerous and dull. It is dangerous, cold, horrible and dull, and they are big ranges. Fine, but again we are into that tyranny of distance. If you are going to operate current generations of unmanned systems out of somewhere like Thule, you have all the environmental constraints on actually operating out of Thule. You still have to have men there, or crews there, to be able to do the landing and take-off phases, and then you are into the communications range.

One thing I did not want to go away without saying—it sounds really geeky—is that the polar region provides some very interesting challenges from a communications and navigation perspective, particularly in the air. Take GPS, for instance. The highest inclination of a GPS orbit is about 56° or 57°, which means that if you are in the polar region, all the GPS satellites are south of you, essentially. So the geometry can be an issue.

The height channel becomes very wonky because of the low grazing angles, and then there are tremendous problems with ionospheric modelling, with ionospheric scintillation and so on. None of it is insurmountable if you are willing to pay the money, but the days of going and buying a Garmin GPS and putting it in your tank when you are on Gulf War 1 would not be appropriate in the Arctic. It just would not work. The single generation civilian GPS would not work.

I have GPS on my boat in Cowes. All the errors in GPS are taken out by a geostationary satellite that broadcasts corrections. You cannot see that in the Pole because it is geostationary. A lot of our comms is based on geostationary satellites, which are equatorial.

Then you have got the space weather issue. The north magnetic pole sits in north-eastern Canada. It is obviously where a lot of the magic happens in the ionosphere in terms of charged particles and so on. We get all sorts of issues with space weather. It is a lot harder up north, and I think it even affects tactical comms as well. It is not insurmountable, but it is something we have to practise. When we took Aries 94 to the Pole, most of the systems in 94 were only just capable of working.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Colonel Skuse: A lot of the lessons we learnt in Afghanistan will simply not work in the north because we are not training there with any commitment. We are not polishing them out of our systems at all. Ring-fence the finances and the problem grows out.

Q117 **Chair:** Mr Childs, you have the final word.

Nick Childs: You mentioned, in the air context, aircraft carriers. Clearly, the concept behind the aircraft carriers we are buying now was that they were not copies of the Invincible class that did north-east Atlantic operations—ASW sea control, essentially—and they were for power projection. However, in the current context, I hope that there are concepts being looked at for how you would potentially employ these aircraft carriers in the context of northern waters going north, whether it is for some kind of air defence or power projection capability into the polar peninsula, or as major ASW platforms with Merlin helicopters aboard, for example. There is also the potential context of the Americans returning to northern waters with an aircraft carrier. That would be a huge signal both to northern NATO members and to Russia about potential intent in terms of signalling and deterrence.

Chair: Gentlemen, the pleasures of PMQs beckon and we must not delay any further. I thank you all very much indeed. It has been an extremely interesting evidence session that will definitely inform our report. I am particularly grateful—I must not single him out, but he came from Oslo specially—to Colonel Skuse. I thank all three of you. It has been a really interesting evidence session. Many thanks indeed.