

Defence Sub-Committee

Oral evidence: Defence in the Arctic, HC 388

Wednesday 15 November 2017

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Members present: Mrs Madeleine Moon (Chair); Martin Docherty-Hughes; Mr Mark Francois; Gavin Robinson; Phil Wilson.

Questions 1-19

Witness

[I](#): James Gray MP.

Examination of witness

Witness: James Gray MP.

Q1 Chair: Good morning, James. Thank you for giving us your time. It must be extremely frustrating for you, having chaired this Committee for so long and having brought forward the suggestion that we complete this inquiry, suddenly to be on the other side of the table. Thank you for still being willing to share your expertise with us. Would you like to make an opening statement?

James Gray: Very briefly. Thank you very much, Madam Chairman. It is a great privilege and pleasure to be on this side of the table. I have never done it before. It is slightly frightening. I remember what I did to witnesses when I was sitting on that side of the table, and I am relying on my good friends not to do the same to me this morning.

I am delighted that the Defence Committee has decided to take forward the Arctic inquiry, which I think is very important. I feared that, with the election, it might just disappear, and I am very glad that it hasn't. I am grateful to you for doing it. I do not want to cut across anything that you might be planning to ask me in a moment. I used to find it very frustrating when I discovered that the opening statement actually answered the third question on the order paper.

Very briefly, I have been involved on a personal level with the Arctic—and, incidentally, the Antarctic—for very many years, entirely informally and entirely as an amateur. The first thing I would say is that I do not appear before you as any kind of expert, either in terms of defence matters—as you will know from my performance on the Defence Committee over the last umpteen years—or with regard to the Arctic. What I hope to be able to do is to stimulate a few questions in people's minds, rather than seeking to answer them from an expert standpoint. You have a great many experts advising the Committee, including, I am glad to say, Dr Duncan Depledge, who also works with me on the all-party parliamentary group for the polar regions. You have the experts; I am here to pose the tricky questions.

Chair: Thank you, and well done for not answering Phil's first question.

Q2 Phil Wilson: Which is, why did you suggest that the Defence Committee do this inquiry into the Arctic?

James Gray: I have been involved in the Arctic for a great many years. I am aware that during the cold war in particular, but also before that, in the second world war, the Arctic and the North Atlantic were an absolutely central part of Britain's strategic approach to the world. That continued, of course, through the cold war, when the Russians had their bastion concept, which they are now reinventing.



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Throughout the cold war, we had SACLANT—the Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic—who took a keen interest in the North Atlantic and the Arctic, of course. We had sub-ice capability in our submarines. We had significant quantities of training for our Royal Marines in the north of Norway. We had maritime patrol aircraft, which were constantly patrolling and watching what was happening, particularly to Russian submarine activity in the Arctic and the North Atlantic.

That has all disappeared in recent years. NATO have entirely refocused their interests on the hot and dusty bits in the south. Quite right too—that is where the wars are, so I am not complaining. But in doing that, they have of course closed down the North Atlantic Command, and they are no longer—routinely at least, as I understand it—carrying out sub-ice activity in submarines. They are even now downgrading the Royal Marines training in the High North, which the Committee visited earlier this year, and in a whole variety of other ways NATO have turned their attention away from the Arctic and the High North in favour of the hot bits in the south. I just think that that is a very significant strategic gap. If I were Putin, wrapping a cold towel around my head and wondering what to do next to upset NATO and the west, I would turn my attention to the Arctic and the North Atlantic.

Therefore, I think we are simply—well, let me put it a different way. We may be missing a trick here, and I felt at the time that it was important for the Committee to examine whether a trick was being missed. Of course, one possible outcome of the inquiry would be, “Everything’s fine. Everything’s tickety-boo. Nothing to worry about. Carry on the way you were before,” but I feel there is a risk, at least, that there are threats in the Arctic that NATO and the British Government are ignoring.

Q3 Phil Wilson: We know about climate change and we know that the environment is changing. How do you think the natural environment is changing in the Arctic, and what impact will that have on defence strategy?

James Gray: What is happening in the Arctic is, of course, quite extraordinary. You meet all kinds of climate change sceptics who say it is cyclical and all that, but whether it is cyclical and whatever caused it—I am not qualified to advise on that—there can be no question at all but that the ice is retreating very significantly in the Arctic and, to a lesser degree, in the south as well. That is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: the more the ice disappears, the more the sea soaks up heat, and it becomes worse and worse and worse.

Without getting into complicated discussions about why that is occurring, that it is occurring is without question. I took a little gang of members of the all-party group for the polar regions up to Svalbard this summer, and we were able to sail in RIBs right up into the fjords—areas that within living memory were absolutely solid ice that could be crossed by vehicles. My friend David Hempleman-Adams recently sailed a yacht around both the Northeast Passage and the Northwest Passage. In other words, he



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completed the circumnavigation of the Arctic—the first time that has ever been done in one Arctic season.

The fact that it is retreating is beyond question. That offers significant commercial opportunities for things like oil and gas, of course, although that is currently slightly on the back burner because of the oil price. None the less, for the future, of the order of—I forget the figures—a third or half of the world's oil is under the Arctic, so the commercial potential there is gigantic. There is shipping, of course; if you can take bulk carriers through the Northeast Passage and down into the Pacific, you cut the sailing time in half, from 60 days to 30 days. With a bulk carrier costing \$100,000 a day, cutting it by 30 days is a significant opportunity. When we were up in Svalbard during the summer, we saw large cod—warm-water fish—and mackerel right in the Arctic waters, so the potential for fishing is huge, and tourism is exploding.

The commercial opportunities in the High North are gigantic. Until reasonably recently, Britain was not paying all that much attention to it, and I think that it should do. Those commercial opportunities always bring with them some risk, at least, of military interest or hotspots.

Q4 Martin Docherty-Hughes: James, it is nice to see you. Thank you for coming in. Taking Phil's question a bit further, how do environmental changes affect the strategic and security environment of the Arctic?

James Gray: There was a time when the only military activity that could occur in the Arctic was sub-ice submarine activity, which of course the Russians were extremely good at throughout the cold war. We countered that very effectively using both our observation capabilities and our submarine capabilities. It is now possible for warm-weather troops to exercise and operate in the High North—the Arctic. It is alleged that the Russians have two brigades of troops operating near Murmansk. In the recent Zapad-17 exercise that occurred in the north of the Arctic, it is alleged—though denied by both the Russians and the Norwegians—that they carried out a simulated attack on the archipelago of Svalbard.

All sorts of things are now happening in the Arctic from a military standpoint that could not have happened if the ice were still there. There has always been an enormous quantity, on the Kola peninsula and elsewhere, of Russian Soviet nuclear missiles and ballistic missiles of one sort or another. A large part of the Russian fleet is now based in Murmansk and in the surrounding area. Every single Arctic nation—all eight of them—have increased their military activity in recent years. All those things come about because of the change in the environment and the commercial possibilities that arise as a result of it, and the need therefore to defend one's commercial interests as an Arctic nation.

That is the nice interpretation of what is happening. The alternative interpretation, and we will perhaps come on to this later, would be a more aggressive intent. At all events, military activity in the Arctic has increased exponentially over the last 10 or 20 years.



Q5 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Why are the Arctic and the High North important to UK defence historically and currently?

James Gray: There are a variety of different aspects to this. By far the biggest long-term strategic interest, of course, is in the North Atlantic. Right through the second world war and the cold war, western Europe's resupply lines to the USA came across the North Atlantic. They were threatened in the second world war. The Murmansk Arctic convoys were evidence of that. They were threatened by Russian submarine activity throughout the cold war.

Today, Russia is reinventing its concept of defence, which stretches right out into the Atlantic and includes, if you look at the map, a small part at the very top end of the Shetland Islands, which actually comes within the Russian bastion concept. It is a slightly technical and slightly academic point—I am not suggesting that the Shetland Islands are under threat—but none the less that shows the extent of Russia's ambition. The first thing, therefore, is the kind of strategic importance of the North Atlantic with regard to resupply.

Secondly, one of the very few—the two—capabilities we have had and have contributed to NATO over the last 40 or 50 years has been under-ice submarine capability, which we still have. Our submarines are still equipped to go under the ice. My understanding, and I don't think this is secret—I certainly wouldn't be sharing any secrets—is that we haven't exercised that capability for some years. It may therefore be getting a little rusty. It may be that the MOD or the Royal Navy have done; I might be wrong on that and I am not pretending to be privy to anything here. But my understanding is that we haven't done under-ice training for quite a long time, and we should be.

The other contribution we have made to NATO over the last many years is Arctic warfare capability. It has varied. The Royal Marines did a huge exercise back in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. More recently, it has been smaller scale. None the less, the fact that we are able to train our Royal Marines—and, therefore, ultimately the Army—in Arctic warfare is terribly important, both with regard to the Arctic but also to some degree with regard to the Baltic states, where the weather gets a bit chilly as well at the right time of the year.

That has also been a capability we have offered to NATO. It was quite interesting when we were there in the spring to see British Royal Marines training US Marines. It must be almost the only area where the US Marines were ready to say, "We've lost this expertise—please teach us," and the British Royal Marines were teaching the Americans, which is great.

A number of us are very concerned that it has been reported that that Royal Marine capability is now being downgraded, at least for this Arctic season—in other words, for next January to March. I think 42 Commando is being reduced, alongside the ships. I heard recently that that was only for one year and that the Royal Marine cold-weather training would increase again the following year, although my experience with the MOD is



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to distrust almost everything. It is not for me to suggest, but perhaps one of the Committee's recommendations might be to hold the MOD to the promise that it will get better next year.

- Q6 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** That said, have recent UK Governments done enough to secure the UK's interests in the region? You mention the sea lanes of communication, but in both the Warsaw and Wales NATO summits there was no mention of the High North or the Arctic.

James Gray: No mention at either summit. There was a mention, I think, but not a very substantial one. More important than that, in the 2010 SDSR there was nothing—in 2015 there might have been a sentence, but hardly anything—on the Arctic. It will be interesting to see whether the current mini-SDSR corrects that.

It is not just the MOD; it is slightly about Britain. It is interesting that we have very substantial interest in the Antarctic, because of the Antarctic treaty and all our interests down there, but until recently—when the ice started retreating really—we were not paying nearly the same attention to the Arctic, which is only 320 miles away from the top end of the Shetlands, so we are very near neighbours to the Arctic.

There is a very good department of the Foreign Office, led by a first-class civil servant called Jane Rumble, whose job it is to look after both ends—the north and the south. Traditionally, we have always done stuff for the south, but only now are we beginning to slightly revive our interest in the north. One of the things that the Foreign Office and the MOD ought to be doing is increasing their interest and capability with regard to the Arctic.

- Q7 **Gavin Robinson:** Good morning, James. I think that you have already dealt with the answer to the question of whether Russia is militarising the area. You mentioned the presence of two—what did you say?

James Gray: Brigades.

Gavin Robinson: Two brigades and the fleet in Murmansk. How would you categorise that activity? Would you say that it is defensive, offensive or benign?

James Gray: There is significantly more than that. The Russians have reopened at least eight—probably more—bases along the Arctic coast, right along to Wrangle Island at the Alaska end, and right across the north as far as the Kola peninsula. So it is a very significant increase in their military activity and interest in the Arctic. Of course, it is a coast of about 4,000 to 5,000 km or something of that order. It is a huge northern coast—by far the biggest Russian coast anywhere.

They would argue, perfectly reasonably, that their job is to defend their home territory. If I were speaking for the Russians, which I am not, I might well say, "American militarisation in the Arctic is a significant threat and we never know when NATO might choose to invade Murmansk". Of course, that is an absurd thing to suggest in this context, but none the less, that is what they might well say. They always talk about the



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encirclement of Russia, and therefore they would say, "We have anti-ballistic missile technology in the north; we have the fleet up there; we have all sorts of armaments and soldiers up there. That is to defend our homeland, just as you lot have the RAF, the Army and the Navy in Kent and we don't complain about that. You can do as you want to defend the United Kingdom; that is all we are doing in Russia."

They question then becomes quite philosophical. I have discussed with Russians many times, "Jolly good, what are you defending against?" They come up with things such as, "Repatriation of civilians who get lost in the north". So I say, "In that case, why do you have two brigades to do that? Why do you have umpteen nuclear weapons, and the rest of it?". They say, "Oh well, it is not only that, of course there could be other flashpoints". They find it hard to explain why they spend umpteen billions of dollars on military activity in the Arctic, to achieve nothing very much at all.

There are two sorts of schizophrenic approaches, both by NATO and by the Russians with regard to exactly what is happening out there. On the one hand, you could say that nothing is happening; there are very good deterrents and there is a very good balance. There has been no military activity whatsoever in the Arctic for many years. No one has shot anyone else and no one has invaded anyone else. The cyclists going across the border into Kirkenes a year or so ago—they were Syrians, in fact—was the nearest we came to a Russian invasion. So you could say that it is all working perfectly well. The Norwegians tend to say that. They tend to say, "We've lived in harmony with Russia now since the second world war. The only time we were invaded was by the Russians, and they withdrew perfectly happily after the second world war." We visited the border between the two up in the north—there is no border; it doesn't exist. There is just a piece of land with a couple of sticks in it, saying, "That's Russia, that's Norway." Therefore, if Russia wanted to do something, it could stroll across the border, cross the Atlantic without a single shot being fired. There are no Norwegian troops up there. In the whole Finnmark area, as it is called, the Norwegians are really doing nothing at all, by intention: they don't want to upset the great Russian bear.

There are two ways of looking at this, both on the Russian side but also on the NATO side. Are we in balance? Is there deterrence? Or—this is my thesis—has NATO allowed its interest to diminish at the same time as Russia is increasing its interest? In other words, is there now a significant imbalance in the deterrence? Why is that? Russia will say, "It's to defend the home shores." Some of us will say, "There is a risk, at least, that at a time of warfare elsewhere, Russian capabilities in the High North have become extremely significant."

Q8 **Gavin Robinson:** If we attempted to address the imbalance, would that have a further upscaling effect on the Russian side? If so, where do you see the potential hotspots for issues to arise?

James Gray: This is very much the debate that happened at the last NATO summit. By deploying troops forward—of course, we have sent a



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battalion to Estonia and others to Poland—do you, on the one hand, send a strong message to Mr Putin that we are not prepared to put up with any nonsense? Or, on the other hand, do you irritate him to the extent that you make him do something? That is a diplomatic balance; a discussion needs to be had.

I don't expect hotspots in the Arctic. I don't think there will be warfare. There has been none for many years, and it is very hard to imagine Russia actually breaching article 5 of the NATO treaty in the Arctic. I cannot imagine why they would do that; it would be a foolish thing for them to do.

However, I think we have not examined hybrid warfare, for example, in the High North. It is alleged that in the Zapad-17 exercises recently, at least part of it was a possible attack on Svalbard. Svalbard, you will know, is run by the Svalbard treaty of 1920. Its legal status is quietly disputed by the lawyers. Mr Putin has two very big bases in Svalbard: Pyramiden and Barentsburg. I visited both last year and they are both perfectly workmanlike military bases. If I was him—I am not giving him ideas here—I would put a battalion of maintenance staff into Pyramiden to make sure the whole place is kept nicely. The NATO lawyers—and indeed the British lawyers and everybody else—would take about six months before they decided what the nature of the Svalbard treaty was. Was it an occupying moment or wasn't it? Were they allowed to have maintenance soldiers in the bases or weren't they? And when the western lawyers decide that they should not have done it, Mr Putin will, no doubt, very happily withdraw.

The island of Gotland, the Swedish-owned island in the Baltics, has currently got, I think, a platoon of Swedish soldiers on it. Sweden is not a member of NATO. What if Mr Putin were to go from Kaliningrad and, as he did in Ukraine, send a platoon of funny people in green uniforms to Gotland, which is only 100 km or 200 km away, and cut off the Svalbard banking system or the national health service in the same way he did with regard to Estonia in, I think, 2012, if I remember rightly?

These hybrid activities are things we have not really given any thought to at all. If I was Putin and trying to test NATO and irritate NATO, doing something along one of those lines in the Arctic would be precisely what I would consider doing.

Q9 Gavin Robinson: Following the experience in Ukraine, is there fear among the surrounding nations of some sort of hybrid attack? Do you have a sense of their view on Russia and Russia's activities?

James Gray: Norway in particular is in two minds about this. They are very concerned about it indeed, and they are extremely vulnerable. If there were to be some form of international conflagration, Norway would be extremely vulnerable to Russia. They are very keen to do things jointly with us up there. Of course we are doing that in the expeditionary force thing—what's that thing called again? But I shouldn't be asking you, you should be asking me. Anyhow, we are doing things with them, but they



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are very concerned. They also constantly advance this argument that they do not want to upset the great bear, and there is a balance to be had there.

There is a debate at the moment as to whether or not Sweden should join NATO. If Sweden joined NATO—lots of people think they should do, and large parts of the Swedish Government and Parliament are considering it—would that have the effect of strengthening NATO or of annoying Russia? Theoretically though probably less likely, if even Finland was to join NATO, would Russia argue that it is entirely encircled by NATO nations? All of those things are debated.

One thing that I have not mentioned in diplomatic terms, incidentally, is the Arctic Council. The Arctic Council nations argue that they are behaving very sensibly and doing very useful things—they have protocols in place for oil spillages, and if a cruise ship sinks they know what to do about all that—but they are presumably precluded from considering anything to do with defence; they may not do so. Russia is of course a member of the Arctic Council, so it works fine but only goes so far. Some people say that we need to see a greater multinational consideration of defence than the Arctic Council. I have forgotten the question now. Was that the right answer?

Q10 Gavin Robinson: You have skipped on a little bit to the next one, but that is all right. I was just asking about the views of other countries in the region about Russian activity, but that does lead on to consideration of the Arctic being considered in terms of either security alone or foreign policy alone. Do they need to be more integrated?

James Gray: Yes, they probably do. What lies behind what I am saying is that I suspect that the Foreign Secretary and Sir Alan Duncan, who is the Minister responsible for the polar regions, spend very little time thinking about the High North, and I suspect that of MOD people too. I met the Norway MOD desk officer yesterday for lunch, and I think he spends very little time indeed thinking about it—I mustn't misrepresent his views, but as a nation we spend very little time thinking about these things.

My view is that we should spend a great deal more time, and devote a great deal more capability and money to it: we should have sub-ice capability for the submarines regularly tested out; we should have a significantly increased Royal Marines presence during the winter in north Norway; and a whole variety of other areas. The MPAs, the P-8, are coming online in 2019, but only eight of them. Is that sufficient to deter Russian submarine activity under the High North? So there is an awful lot more that we should be doing, and I am not certain that the body politic is currently addressing itself to those things.

A House of Lords Committee last year, or a couple of years back now, looked into the Arctic. They were of the view that we should appoint some kind of high representative—I believe they called for an “ambassador”, probably the wrong word—or a person who would take a strategic overview of events in the Arctic, working with the Foreign Office and the



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MOD. I think that is a very good idea, having somebody who will help to co-ordinate and raise the profile—the more often we get the issue into Foreign Secretary's head, the better it will be.

- Q11 **Phil Wilson:** On balance, do you think that they should join NATO? In your personal view, should they join NATO or should they not?

James Gray: Join?

Phil Wilson: NATO.

James Gray: What, Sweden?

Phil Wilson: Yes.

James Gray: Yes. The more people who are members of NATO the better it is—it strengthens the deterrence and defence aspect. The counter-argument is—I am not a good enough criminologist to know how Putin thinks—the question of whether or not, if Sweden and/or Finland became members of NATO, Putin would be driven to say, “Great Mother Russia is being encircled. I am now determined to drive”—for example—“a corridor to my own territory in Kaliningrad, or a nice corridor through Latvia, in precisely the same way as the Brits had a corridor through to Berlin throughout the cold war. Maybe that is something I would like to do to demonstrate that Mother Russia is still as strong as it is.”

I remember going out to Moscow with the Committee two or three years ago and having a meeting with an extraordinary bunch of retired generals. My goodness, they were hawkish to say the least. Their view was that if Sweden or Finland joined NATO, that would lead to military action against them. They were retired generals, they were very hawkish and they did not pretend to speak for Mr Putin. None the less, it shows that there is at least a line of thought in Russia that goes: “If these people encircle us, we must strike out against them.”

- Q12 **Phil Wilson:** But you believe that Sweden should become a member of NATO on balance, taking all the things that you have just said into consideration?

James Gray: Yes, I think it would be good for Sweden and for NATO. They are semi-detached members of NATO anyhow. They have an agreement with NATO, so they get some of the benefits, but do not make much of a contribution. The Swedish Army is now extremely large, and Sweden could be doing more in NATO operations, so I would have thought that it would be good for NATO and for Sweden, but bear in mind that careful handling with regard to Moscow would be necessary.

- Q13 **Chair:** Should NATO be playing a greater role in the Arctic and the High North, and if so, what should they be doing?

James Gray: There are two sides to that: one is thinking, and the other is acting. My criticism would be that they are not even thinking about it sufficiently. We have heard about the SDSR and about the outcomes of the NATO summits where they don't even mention it. The first stage ought



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to be that NATO and Britain should be thinking a great deal more about defence in the Arctic. It might be that the Committee's report will be a stimulus towards that occurring. First of all, we ought to be doing more thinking about it. We ought to be thinking about what would happen if Putin put a brigade of caretakers into Pyramiden and Svalbard. Perhaps there is thought going on about that—I don't know—but let's have more thought about it.

Action is harder, partly because my beloved Government and those that went before them have run the Army, Navy and Air Force down to such an extent that our skills do something else. I am conscious that there is a former Minister on the Committee and I must be careful about what I say, but the run-down to the bare minimum of 2% that we now have means that if we asked the Army, Navy and Air Force to do something else, such as to put a significant number of troops into Norway, or a division rather than a brigade into Estonia, to use an absurd exaggeration, I think they would say, "We can't do it."

The Committee watched the evidence given yesterday by General Sir Richard Barrons and others, which seemed quite plain that our defence capabilities are broken. Therefore, if one were to ask for significant military spending in the High North, which is not quite a niche interest, but is a minority interest, I think one would probably be rebuffed. There are, however, things that can be done, particularly with submarines and the Royal Marines, at reasonably marginal cost, so NATO should be doing a bit more within existing very limited budgets.

Q14 Chair: How important for the UK are the defence co-operation agreements that we have in the High North with the United States and Norway?

James Gray: They are absolutely central, and absolutely essential. America, of course, plays a totally central role in everything in the North Atlantic, and they would play an absolutely crucial role in resupplying Europe in the event of some kind of conflagration, which we all hope will never occur, but has occurred many times over the centuries. If there were to be some kind of—possibly accidental—conflagration in the middle east or elsewhere, American access to Europe across the North Atlantic would be absolutely essential. Therefore, our relationship with them, and indeed with Norway, must not be weakened under any circumstances.

NATO is a difficult organisation because it includes lots of countries that have no interest whatsoever in the north. Therefore, the Norwegian-British-American link is absolutely central to it, outside and beyond NATO. I can now be as rude as I like; I think NATO is a bit rusty and tired, and needs a bit of a shake-up. From the visits that we made to NATO, I don't believe that they are paying any attention to the High North at all. Fair enough, they have other things on their plate, but I would like to see them doing an awful lot more. They may not, in which case the American-Norwegian-British link becomes even more important.

Q15 Martin Docherty-Hughes: Just to follow up on that, I am glad you



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mentioned the sea lanes of communication, because I have a concern that we have allowed ourselves to be distracted in some sense. That has allowed the Russian Federation to steal some thunder. We have got rid of our Atlantic Command, and here we are again with NATO thinking about it. We might not have reached this situation if we had kept the Atlantic Command and put good investment into the North Atlantic. When it comes to NATO, it is in the name—North Atlantic. If we have secure lines of communication between the United States, Canada and continental Europe, we would not find ourselves in the situation we are in, in terms of Russian bastion expansion or the bastion theory at the moment.

James Gray: Yes, that is perfectly correct. It was done for a good reason at the time, with the end of the cold war and the refocusing on Islamic fundamentalist threats in the south. There was a perfectly good reason for it to occur.

SACLANT was abolished in 2001 or 2002, if I remember rightly, when the view was taken that there was no threat to the High North. As late as the 2010 SDSR, the view was taken that state-on-state warfare was a third-tier risk. No one believed that there could be state-on-state warfare. They had not yet heard of the Arab spring, ISIS or Daesh. The 2010 view was that there would be no state-on-state warfare, so abolishing SACLANT and the North Atlantic command seemed perfectly sensible at the time. We were cutting defence spending quite deeply at the time.

I very much welcome the reasonably recent announcement—it might have even been this month—that they are once again considering some kind of supreme allied commander in the North Atlantic. Exactly what that would be and exactly what it would command, I do not know. I hope it might be at Northwood, where we have the NATO maritime command in the UK. It would be nice if we had it in Northwood.

It seems to me that NATO must once again refocus attention away from the south and towards the north, and if they do not do that, something will happen 20 years from now and people will say, “Goodness me, why did those people back in 2017 not do something about it?” Now is the time when we can actually start to do that.

Chair: I am now going to give Mark Francois the opportunity to wreak his revenge for all those times when he was sitting in that seat and you were lobbing awkward questions at him. Mark, please make him uncomfortable.

Q16 **Mr Francois:** Thank you, Chair. It is good to see him there. Should we be more concerned about the threat to the Baltic states, where we have now got troops permanently deployed? What about the argument that the Arctic is a distraction from that?

James Gray: The Baltics, the Arctic and the North Atlantic are in a very real sense three entirely different things. It is quite right to say that to lump them all in together and say, “It is vaguely north of Edinburgh, so it must be the same thing,” is incorrect. The threat to the Baltics is completely different from the threat we have been discussing in the Arctic. There is a real threat to the Baltics, there is no question about it. They



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were Soviet nations. The Russians have often said how much they want them back. Some 40% of the population in Latvia have recently been given their Russian passports back. Russian broadcasters are there all the time. There was presumed Russian interference in the Estonian banking system relatively recently.

There are all sorts of indications of Russian threats against the three Baltics, but I sometimes think that they may have been somewhat exaggerated, because a Russian intervention of any kind—even a hybrid-type intervention—in any of the three Baltic countries would be a straightforward article 5 moment. They would by that means be declaring world war, and I am not certain that they are ready to do that, and I am not certain that there would be any purpose in doing it. At Kaliningrad, they have a nice position on the Baltic, so the notion of Russian tanks rolling into Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania seems to me probably to be unlikely.

It is right that we are there, and it is right that we are making it clear that Russia must not do that, but we have a smallish battalion of 800 British soldiers alongside other nations in Estonia, with similar numbers in Poland. If Mr Putin went bonkers and decided he wanted to invade Estonia, there would be absolutely nothing at all that any of us could do about it. We would then be into the third world war, so other things would happen. The notion that by positioning a few troops in Estonia we are somehow going to frighten off the great bear is foolish.

The north is entirely different, not least because the north is predominantly naval rather than army. There is obviously RAF—air—in both places. They are linked in the sense that they are no more than a few hundred or a few thousand miles apart, as it were. Of course, if there were to be a problem in the Baltics, that would very quickly flow over into the Russian supply lines up to Murmansk and through the Arctic. That is their way in. They would not go through the Baltic sea; they would go up through the Arctic. The Arctic is largely ice-free now—the Arctic coast—whereas, of course, the Baltic sea is not. The Baltic is iced up for quite a large part of the winter. Therefore, there is a link between the two.

You are right to some degree to say, “Let’s not muddle them up. Let’s not get them linked too much.” Certainly, let us not divert attention away from the threat to the Baltics, which is real. Let us merely look at the Arctic alongside it.

Q17 Mr Francois: You have touched on this briefly. Are you concerned that many of the UK’s dedicated assets for cold-weather warfare are under threat of cuts, such as the Royal Marines and the amphibious assault ships?

James Gray: Yes, I am. But then I am very much concerned that British military capabilities across the entire world are under threat of cuts, and I am determined that should not happen. I will be using my voice as best I can to prevent it happening.



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The current mini-SDSR is a very real threat in many respects. Everywhere one looks in the defence world, one sees all kinds of relatively insignificant cuts occurring. Still, of the five exercises that are supposed to occur in Kenya every year, I gather this year there are only two. Things like that are pretty small beer, but they are being cut.

Therefore, yes, I am extremely concerned particularly about the Royal Marine capability, which we saw as a Committee earlier this year. It is absolutely second to none. It is really superb—both the training and to some degree the equipment, although there are areas of equipment that need to be improved.

More than anything else, the thinking about the possibility of a cold-weather threat is something that we have had and have contributed to NATO for 40 years. This year, at least, we are downgrading it. I am told that the MOD are going to bring it back up again the following year, but I will believe that when I see it, quite frankly. I very much hope they will.

The same applies to maritime patrol aircraft, which are terribly important in all this. All right, we are getting them but only eight—the P-8s. Will they be enough really to monitor what is happening with Russian submarine activity in the North Atlantic?

Our under-ice capability previously was largely to monitor Russian SSBN activity out of Murmansk and elsewhere along the Arctic coast. Without that capability and regular patrols under the ice in the north, do we really know what the Russians are doing with their submarines? Are we allowing the bastion concept, which stretches on the map at least theoretically as far as the Shetland Islands—are we really able to check what is happening there?

I think we risk reducing our capability in the High North. Generals always fight the last war. Everyone is very fussed at the moment about terrorism, counter-insurgency, Syria, Iraq and all that, and quite rightly should be. I'm not knocking that. I just wonder whether we should start to focus our attention back to where the next war will be, or the next area of tension might be, namely the North Atlantic.

Q18 Mr Francois: Specifically, are you concerned about reduced readiness among our nuclear submarine fleet, as it affects the High North?

James Gray: I am very glad you asked that important question, which I intend to answer very straightforwardly. I haven't the faintest idea. Probably, almost certainly is the answer, but I claim no expertise on the readiness of our nuclear submarine fleet, so it would be wrong if I made any comment.

Mr Francois: On that point, Chair, I will hand back to you.

James Gray: He did bowl me a googly, didn't he?

Q19 Chair: I think you patted it back nicely. James, is there anything that we haven't asked you that you feel a burning desire to impart, before we end



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this session?

James Gray: No, I think we have covered the ground very thoroughly. I do think, and I thought at the time that I was on the Committee, that this Committee has the opportunity to make a very significant contribution to British military thinking. It is an area that has not really been looked at, although the NATO Parliamentary Assembly did produce a report recently that might be worth looking at. I am sure you are considering that. It is not an area that has been thought about in the defence world as much as it should be. It is on the up.

I do think that the Committee's report has the opportunity to be quite a significant stone thrown into the pond created by the melting ice. That is a rather good analogy. Therefore, I hope it will be as robust and outspoken as it can be. If the world is not looking at something, Select Committees have the opportunity to change that mental approach. Therefore, I very much hope you will be able to do that.

We should not overstate it. There is not going to be a war in the Arctic, but there are definite commercial capabilities and possibilities opening up there. That always means the risk of a war. There would never have been a war in the Arabian Gulf, had it not been for oil. Therefore, who knows with regard to the long-distant future?

We should not say there is just about to be a nuclear exchange in the Arctic—there isn't and that simply would not be the case—but there may be hybrid warfare of one sort or another and there may be tensions and difficulties. It is right that NATO and Britain should re-examine the risks up there and should be ready to put some of our diminishing capability into ensuring that, when it happens in 20 or 30 years' time, we are not caught wanting.

Chair: James, thank you very much for appearing before us today to give your evidence. We are very grateful to you. The session is now completed.