

Defence Committee

Defence in the High North

Second Report of Session 2026–27

HC 71

Defence Committee

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Summary

The High North, encompassing the Greater Arctic and parts of the North Atlantic, has become central to the UK's defence and security concerns in recent years. Climatic changes are increasing access to the region to exploit raw materials, such as oil, gas and critical minerals, but also offer China particularly a shorter maritime transit route between Asian and European markets. These factors are accelerating commercial rivalry in the region.

Melting ice sheets and sea ice are also exposing the previously largely inaccessible Russian bases in the High North, containing two-thirds of their strategic nuclear missiles, as well as the submarines, spy ships and underwater sabotage forces of their Northern Fleet. This is driving greater defence and security tensions, as Russia seeks to both protect its bases but also project its forces into the Atlantic and UK territorial waters. This threatens NATO supply lines from the US to Europe, but also undersea energy pipelines and data cables and onshore critical national infrastructure, including the nuclear deterrent.

Recently, the US has acted more unilaterally in the region, particularly regarding Canada's and Greenland's sovereignty. This means Canada and European NATO allies will need to take more responsibility for defence of their interests in the High North.

The UK has accepted it has a central role to play. It has taken over leadership of NATO's Joint Force Command Norfolk, responsible for defending the High North, and leads the 10-nation Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), which includes the Baltic and Nordic nations, plus The Netherlands. It also undertakes numerous national and bilateral exercises, including a recent aircraft carrier group deployment to the region.

In terms of the threat, in June 2026 the then Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer said "...it is our intelligence assessment, and the assessment of other countries in NATO, that there could be an attack by Russia on NATO as soon as 2030". The Ministry of Defence (MOD) is also developing its Atlantic Bastion strategy to counter these Russian threats through a transformation of the Royal Navy and is investing £1.3 billion up to 2030 in its Hybrid Navy concept – linking crewed and uncrewed vessels.

However, despite the MOD having a clear timeline, strategy and a Defence Investment Plan, current shortages of anti-submarine frigates and amphibious shipping, and poor availability of other naval vessels such as

destroyers and submarines, could undermine its approach. Further, along with other European NATO countries, the UK lacks some critical military capabilities that it has largely relied on the US to provide, such as ballistic missile defence, long range strike and intelligence and surveillance assets, which will take considerable investment and time to replicate.

If the UK is to lead an effective coalition, it must address glaring gaps in the availability of its current maritime forces and ensure it has an agreed plan, integrated with European allies in the region, to deter and, if necessary, defeat any aggression in the High North from 2030.

Introduction and scope

Background

1. The High North is ill-defined, but in its 2022 document The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) takes it to be "...the Greater Arctic, including parts of the North Atlantic, for the purposes of this Strategy...". This report accepts that definition and references in the report to the High North should be taken to include the Arctic and parts of the North Atlantic, except where they are referred to separately. Figure 1 shows the High North as depicted in the MOD's 2022 document The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North.

Figure 1: The High North, as visualised by the UK Ministry of Defence



Source: [The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North](#)

2. During the Cold War, the US Navy's 1980s Maritime Strategy's 'forward and barrier' anti-submarine warfare (ASW) operation's goal was to threaten or, if necessary, destroy Soviet nuclear deterrent (SSBN) submarines and their attack (SSN) submarine protection operating in their High North 'bastion' near the Kola Peninsula, east of northern Finland and Norway. The Strategy also sought to hunt any enemy submarines seeking to break out of the bastion to attack US reinforcements and resupply shipping in the North Atlantic heading to Europe.¹
3. After the Cold War, the High North appeared to lose its strategic importance as an area of possible conflict. There was no mention of the region in the MOD's 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR),² and only one paragraph on it in the 2015 edition.³ Similarly, the then Foreign & Commonwealth Office's 2013 Adapting To Change UK policy towards the Arctic document focused on commercial, scientific and governance issues, not security.⁴
4. Following Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014, and its continuing support for separatist groups in eastern Ukraine, our predecessor committee identified the High North as an area of growing strategic importance. In its 2018 report, *On Thin Ice: UK Defence in the Arctic*, it noted that "Russia has shown itself to be ready to use military force to secure political advantage and the disputed operation of a number of international legal norms in the Arctic is vulnerable to exploitation by a revisionist state".⁵
5. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the government published several new policy documents on the region, including the MOD's 2022 *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*,⁶ and the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office's (FCDO's) 2023 *Looking North: the UK and the Arctic—The United Kingdom's Arctic policy framework* document.⁷ Indeed, the Arctic and the High North are the only sub-regions that the UK has specific policy documents for.⁸ Our report continues this focus on the High North, including the Arctic.

1 U.S. Naval War College Newport Papers, [U.S. Naval Strategy in the 1980s](#), December 2008

2 Ministry of Defence, [Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review](#), 19 October 2010

3 Ministry of Defence, [National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015](#), p.31, 23 November 2015

4 Foreign & Commonwealth Office, [Adapting To Change UK policy towards the Arctic. pdf](#), 17 October 2013

5 Defence Committee, [On Thin Ice: UK Defence in the Arctic](#), p.3, 15 August 2018

6 Ministry of Defence, [The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North](#), 29 March 2022

7 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, [Looking North: the UK and the Arctic. The United Kingdom's Arctic policy framework](#), 2023

8 [Q2](#)

Inquiry scope

6. Having undertaken a preliminary evidence session on the High North in June 2025,⁹ we launched a full inquiry in January 2026, holding three oral evidence sessions between March and July 2026. During our inquiry we visited Norway, Denmark and Greenland, and met a wide range of military personnel, and central and local government staff. We would particularly like to thank those who hosted us during our visits. We are also grateful to those who provided evidence, all of which greatly enhanced our knowledge and understanding of the key issues involved.
7. This report draws on our published written and oral evidence, other publicly available material and information provided to us on a non-attributable basis. As a House of Commons select committee, our conclusions and recommendations are addressed to the UK Government, which is expected to respond within two months.

9 Defence Committee, [One-off session on Defence in the High North](#), 3 June 2025

Part One: Why the High North matters

Overview

8. This section will examine why the High North is becoming more important in defence and security terms. Firstly, melting ice is increasing access to the region, resulting in greater opportunities to extract minerals, oil and gas deposits. Polar sea routes are also becoming more accessible for longer periods during the year, which offer significantly shorter trade routes between Asia and Europe. The consequential jostling for access is raising commercial tensions between countries.
9. However, the High North is also home to much of Russia's strategic nuclear, naval and undersea sabotage capabilities, and Russia is using the region as a base to be able to project many of these military forces into adjacent regions. This includes UK territorial waters, where there has been a significant increase in hybrid threats to sub-sea critical infrastructure, such as energy pipelines and data cables, putting the UK's economy and security at risk.¹⁰ Finally, the US continues to threaten to pull significant numbers of personnel and equipment out of Europe. This could erode the security the Euro-Atlantic region has relied on since the formation of NATO in 1949, weakening the Alliance's deterrent effect and creating greater instability in the High North.

Melting ice, growing access

10. While estimates vary as to how rapidly the ice sheets and sea ice are melting in the High North,¹¹ that ever-greater access to the region is being permitted is not in doubt. The UK Government's 2025 Strategic Defence

¹⁰ Dr Anna Wieslander ([DHN0009](#)) para 4

¹¹ For example, NASA estimate that summer Arctic sea ice coverage is reducing by over 12% each year compared to average coverage between 1981 and 2010. See: [Arctic Sea Ice Minimum Extent - Earth Indicator](#), last updated 15 January 2026

Review (SDR) noted that the Arctic and High North are likely to be “ice-free” each summer by 2040, “providing access to more actors and creating a new site for competition within the UK’s wider neighbourhood”.¹²

11. Increasing access is permitting greater activity across several commercial sectors, including oil and gas drilling,¹³ mineral extraction,¹⁴ as well as opening up shipping routes from Asia to Europe.¹⁵ In terms of hydrocarbon drilling, a 2008 US Geological Study estimated that “...the total mean undiscovered conventional oil and gas resources of the Arctic are estimated to be approximately 90 billion barrels of oil, 1,669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids”.¹⁶ According to a recent UK Parliamentary paper, reserves in the Arctic equate to 13% of the world’s undiscovered oil resources and 30% of the world’s undiscovered gas resources.¹⁷ The Russian government has separately estimated that 22% of the world’s undiscovered hydrocarbon resources are in the Arctic.¹⁸
12. The High North also contains minerals important to modern industry, and Russia is relying on these, alongside hydrocarbon deposits, to support its future economy.¹⁹ Their significance should not be overstated, however.²⁰ A recent study found that only three critical minerals in the region—platinum, palladium, and nickel—are currently mined at levels exceeding 10% of global production. Extraction also remains costly and environmentally challenging.²¹

Russia

13. As the High North becomes more accessible, Russia is seeking both to exploit the region’s resources and to strengthen control over the Northern Sea Route between Asia and Europe.²² President Putin has referred to escalating “geopolitical competition and fighting for positions in this

12 Ministry of Defence, [Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad](#), p.26, 8 July 2025

13 [Q53](#)

14 Dr Anna Katila ([DHN0008](#)) para 2.

15 [Q1](#)

16 US Geological Survey, [Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle](#), 2008

17 House of Commons Library, [UK defence: Renewed interest in the Arctic](#), p.12, 2 March 2026

18 Mentioned in the House of Commons Library, [UK defence: Renewed interest in the Arctic](#), p.20, 2 March 2026

19 [Q53](#)

20 [Q1](#)

21 The Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, [Can the Arctic be a significant contributor of critical minerals for the global energy transition?](#), p.iii, February 2025

22 The Northern Sea Route is a roughly 5,600-kilometre maritime shipping lane running along Russia’s Arctic coast from the Kara Sea to the Bering Strait

region”.²³ Dr Marc De Vore, senior lecturer in international relations at the University of St Andrews, told us that Russia is seeking exclusive control over the passage:

If we do not act to contest Russia’s illegal efforts to territorialise the northern sea route—these are their laws of 2012, 2018 and 2022—we will find after 2030, when the northern sea route becomes navigable all year long, that the Russians have set up a de facto monopoly on transit. They will make money off that, but they could also use it as a form of leverage—for example, if they do not like the level of support that Denmark is providing to Ukraine, they can cut off Maersk ships from sailing the northern sea route. Failing to contest that through freedom of navigation operations will give Russia a tremendous amount of both wealth and geopolitical leverage.²⁴

14. Freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) are not unusual, and are actions taken by a country to sail or fly through contested international waters and airspaces to challenge maritime claims that break international law. The US has conducted them in the Gulf of Sirte and the South China Sea, and the UK has done so near the Sea of Azov.²⁵ Such operations carry inherent risks, however. In 2021, the Royal Navy’s Type 45 destroyer HMS Defender exercised its right of innocent passage through Ukrainian territorial waters off Crimea, which Russia had annexed in 2014. Russia claims to have fired warning shots and dropped bombs near the vessel.²⁶
15. In September 2018 the French Navy’s offshore support and assistance vessel Rhône transited the Northern Sea Route, from Tromsø, Norway, to Dutch Harbor, Alaska, without informing the Russian authorities. Russia subsequently stated that all foreign naval vessels would have to provide details of any proposed voyage at least 45 days in advance and carry a Russian maritime pilot. It also warned that, if a voyage did not comply with Russian regulations, it reserved the “right to take extraordinary measures including its forced halt, arrest and in extreme cases elimination”.²⁷

23 Mentioned in the House of Commons Library, [UK defence: Renewed interest in the Arctic](#), p.21, 2 March 2026

24 [Q14](#)

25 Institute for the Study of War and Strategy (ISWS) ([DHN0034](#)), p.7

26 BBC News, [HMS Defender: Russian jets and ships shadow British warship](#), 23 June 2021

27 The Barents Observer, [This is what awaits foreign military vessels on Northern Sea Route](#), 7 March 2019

16.

CONCLUSION

As the Northern Sea Route becomes more accessible, Russia may seek to turn its control of the route into a de facto monopoly. A transit by a UK state-owned vessel through international waters could help uphold freedom of navigation rights under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, but this action would need to be carefully assessed against the operational and escalatory risks.

17.

RECOMMENDATION

The government should prepare options for a UK state-owned vessel to transit the Northern Sea Route in support of international freedom of navigation rights, including an assessment of the legal basis, operational risks and potential Russian response.

Russian defence and security interests

18. Russia also perceives the opening up of the High North as a security threat to its northern flank, which until recently has been largely protected by the hostile and largely inaccessible climatic conditions.²⁸ Professor Blagden told us that “It is where (Russia’s) huge exposed maritime flank is, that can bring NATO capabilities right to its door”.²⁹ Professor Zysk told us that recent Russian foreign policy documents and its maritime doctrine have defined the Arctic as vital to its national interest and placed the region among Russia’s top national priorities,³⁰ and that

“...the Russian strategic deterrence force in the region continues to play a central role in performing some of the core missions that, again, go well beyond the region. This is about ensuring survival and freedom of operation of the SSBNs [nuclear deterrent submarines] and defending Arctic approaches to the Russian homeland, but also holding European targets and NATO naval forces at risk and denying NATO sea control to complicate transatlantic reinforcement”.³¹

19. Professor Zysk further added that some strategically significant military capabilities are located in the High North around Russia’s Kola Peninsula. These include the new Yasen submarines,³² which are “...one of the greatest anti-submarine warfare challenges to NATO”, and the base of the Main Directorate for Deep-Sea Research (GUGI), which has assets that are designed specifically to degrade or destroy critical infrastructures and

28 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, [Looking North: the UK and the Arctic. The United Kingdom’s Arctic policy framework](#), p.35, 9 February 2023

29 [Q53](#)

30 [Q49](#)

31 [Q49](#)

32 The Royal United Services Institute ([DHN0042](#)), p.2

technological networks (such as undersea energy pipelines and data cables) that “NATO’s warfighting...and western societies are built on”.³³ In April 2026 the UK announced an operation against the GUGI undertaking “nefarious activity near critical underwater infrastructure” around British waters which resulted in “[b]oth the GUGI units and the Akula class submarine... subsequently retreat(ing) home, having failed to complete their operation in secrecy”.³⁴

20. As well as interfering with sub-surface infrastructure, however, these hybrid or grey zone operations can also threaten targets on land. For example, swarms of drones flew over RAF Lakenheath and RAF Mildenhall in Suffolk and RAF Feltwell in Norfolk in November 2024.³⁵ The International Institute for Strategic Studies has recently said that it was “highly likely” these were launched from Russia’s shadow fleet of cargo ships from adjacent UK territorial waters.³⁶
21. In terms of more conventional military threats, during the Cold War the Soviet Union planned to use submarines based in the High North to attack NATO maritime reinforcements crossing the North Atlantic from the US to Europe. Russia could adopt similar tactics in a future conflict. Its submarines could also threaten UK civilian and military infrastructure, including nuclear deterrent facilities,³⁷ with little or no warning.

China

22. China defines itself as a ‘near-Arctic state’,³⁸ and its current involvement in the High North is largely scientific and economic, with a very limited military presence. It has a research station located on Norway’s Svalbard archipelago, and China is focused on utilising the Northern Sea Route along Russia’s northern border between Asia and Europe.
23. China’s interest in the route is commercially obvious (see Figure 2): the sailing distance between Shanghai to Rotterdam is approximately 25,500 kilometres via the Cape of Good Hope, 19,500 kilometres via the Suez Canal, and 14,900 kilometres via the Northern Sea Route.³⁹

33 [Q49](#)

34 Ministry of Defence, [UK exposes covert Russian submarine operation in and around UK waters](#), 9 April 2026

35 BBC News, [Mystery of UK air base drone sightings persist](#), 21 November 2025

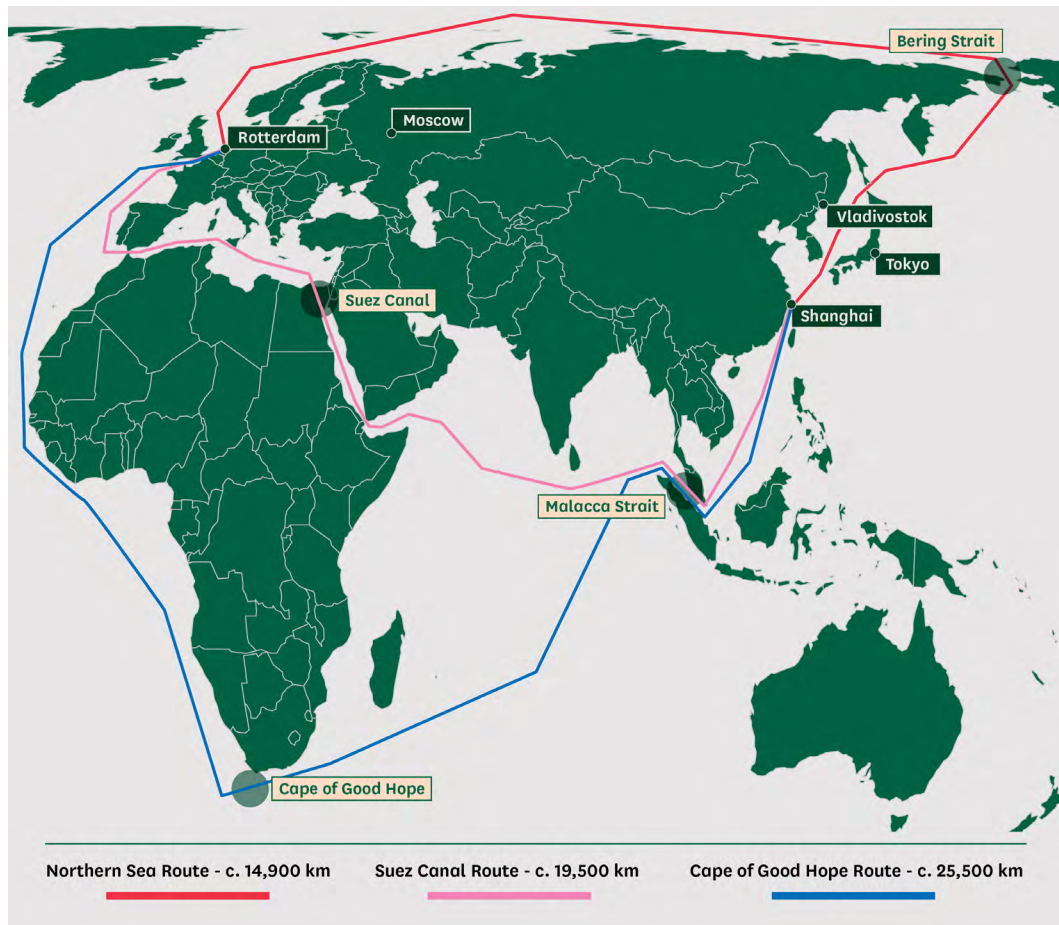
36 International institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), [Russia’s UAV Campaign Over Europe](#), 2 July 2026

37 Anduril Industries UK ([DHN0010](#)), para 1.1

38 Dr Anna Wieslander ([DHN0009](#)), para 11

39 Trans.info, [Northern sea route: why European carriers are still avoiding Suez Canal alternative](#), 8 May 2024

Figure 2: Asia to Europe via the Cape of Good Hope, Suez Canal, and Northern Sea Route



Source: [Adapted from Trans.info](#)

24. China has also been able to exploit Russia's current relative weakness due to the latter's ongoing military campaign in Ukraine. To help prosecute the war, Russia has made several concessions towards China to secure its continued support and co-operation. These include joint management of the Northern Sea Route. Professor Zysk noted that this easing of sovereignty and national control over the Route was "not necessarily something Russia would have done before 2022".⁴⁰ It seems unlikely that the end of the conflict in Ukraine will reverse China's gains, so its rising overall interest and involvement in the High North will be sustained.
25. As well as commercial activity, there are growing concerns about Chinese interest in the sensitive national security capabilities operated by NATO members in the High North. There have been arrests in Norway in 2026 for alleged Chinese spying, focusing particularly on satellite ground stations located in the country. A statement from Norway's PST (Police Security Service), the equivalent of the UK's MI5, reported activity that was an

“attempt to establish a receiver for satellite downloads from satellites in polar orbits suited for collecting data that could harm fundamental Norwegian interests if it becomes known to a foreign state”.⁴¹

26. Given its deepening engagement in the High North,⁴² and with Chinese coastguard vessels patrolling the region periodically, Dr De Vore predicted that eventually there will be a regular Chinese military presence in the region which could even result in a Chinese naval carrier group arriving in the High North around the 2040s.⁴³
27. Although Dr De Vore felt that China might back up its economic interests in the region with military displays of force, he noted that it does not have the same military objectives as Russia in the region.⁴⁴ When the Committee visited Greenland in September 2026, we were left with the impression that there was no immediate military threat from China to that country. Longer-term, Professor Kennedy-Pipe warned that “[w]e understand the tilt towards the Indo-Pacific in terms of trade and America’s own threat assessment, but the east coast [of the United States] will be extremely vulnerable to Chinese and Russian attacks in 20 years’ time”.⁴⁵

United States’ policy towards the High North

28. There has been considerable focus on President Trump’s claims regarding Canada and Greenland.⁴⁶ We heard evidence that he is interested in the broader security of the High North, including Chinese incursions near Alaska,⁴⁷ and he remarked in early 2026 (in direct contradiction to the evidence we heard in Greenland) that “[r]ight now, Greenland is covered with Russian and Chinese ships all over the place...”.⁴⁸ This is in contrast to recent years where the US was not interested in the region and “...it neglected the Arctic and its capabilities there”.⁴⁹

41 High North News, [Several Suspected Espionage Cases in Northern Norway](#), 8 June 2026

42 Dr Anna Wieslander, ([DHN0009](#)), para 11

43 [Q10](#)

44 [Q10](#)

45 [Q21](#)

46 [Q21](#)

47 [Q21](#)

48 New Statesman, [Trump claims Russian and Chinese ships are “all over” Greenland](#), 9 January 2026

49 [Q21](#)

29. However, despite the current Administration's interest in the High North, Europe cannot count on the US returning to the European Arctic as the security partner and ally that the UK and Europe previously counted on.⁵⁰ Indicatively, the US's 2026 National Defense Strategy outlined four 'Lines of Effort' to achieve its America First strategic approach:
- a. Defend the U.S. Homeland Effort
 - b. Deter China in the Indo-Pacific Through Strength, Not Confrontation
 - c. Increase Burden-Sharing with U.S. Allies and Partners
 - d. Supercharge the U.S. Defense Industrial Base⁵¹
30. None of these suggest a return to greater engagement in Europe's defence over the medium term, including the High North. Indeed, where the Arctic is mentioned in the Strategy it is in relation to US homeland defence rather than European security.⁵² We were told that "[e]ven if the next US President was a dyed in the wool Atlanticist—Eisenhower 2.0 or something—the US would not have the capacity to pivot back to playing the role it did in Europe and the High North".⁵³ To a large extent this is because the US perceives the maximum likelihood for conflict in East Asia is between 2027 to 2035, "although perhaps pushing that back as far as 2049 when they think that Xi Jinping has set an objective that Taiwan must be forcibly reunified with China by that date".⁵⁴
31. The US continues to participate in bilateral and multilateral NATO exercises, including in the High North, such as the recent deployment of thousands of US Marines to Norway as part of Exercise Cold Response 26.⁵⁵ The US has also discussed setting up its first permanent Army base in Poland.⁵⁶ Conversely, however, the most visual sign of possible US disengagement has been American troop and equipment reductions from Europe. This has included a reported plan to cut between 25,000 and 40,000 US troops⁵⁷ from the roughly 80,000 currently stationed there,⁵⁸ despite Congressional provisions in the FY2026 National Defense Authorization Act restricting

50 [Q22](#)

51 Department of War, [2026 National Defense Strategy](#), pp.3–5, 23 January 2026

52 Department of War, [2026 National Defense Strategy](#), p.16, 23 January 2026

53 [Q22](#)

54 [Q22](#)

55 [Q85](#)

56 Politico, [Trump floats setting up Army base in Poland](#), 17 September 2026

57 The Times, [US could pull 25,000 troops from Europe in military shake-up](#), 18 September 2026

58 LIGA.net, [The U.S. Is Preparing a Sharp Reduction in Its Troop Contingent in Europe](#), 18 September 2026

reductions below 76,000 personnel. Significant future reductions in fighter jets, strategic bombers, destroyers, submarines, tanker aircraft, and armed drones could also follow.⁵⁹

32. These developments potentially have profound implications for European security, and the principle of collective defence through NATO's Article 5.⁶⁰ Professor Blagden told us that "[w]e can talk about the formal aspects of withdrawal or not but, functionally, you would probably say Article 5 in the American sense is pretty much moribund at the moment now anyway. No one really believes that the Americans are riding to the rescue if there were some situation in the Baltic states".⁶¹

59 GLOBSEC, [US NATO Force Cuts: Implications for European Security](#), 23 June 2026

60 Article 5 refers to the collective defence clause of NATO, which states that an armed attack against one member country is considered an attack against all members

61 [Q85](#)

Part Two: High North policy challenges

Overview

- 33. Europe has primarily depended on NATO for the past three-quarters of a century for its security. However, to reflect changing US priorities in Europe, the Alliance is now adapting its command arrangements to ensure Europe takes greater responsibility for its own defence. This offers Europe a greater opportunity to play a leading role in shaping how NATO and northern European partners deter threats in the High North. The UK can play a significant role in that reassessment.
- 34. As well as NATO command, the UK leads the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), which frequently operates with regional partners in the High North and the Baltic. Canada has applied to join the organisation and could play a significant role in the High North given its experience of operating in its harsh environment and its intelligence capabilities in the region. However, inclusion of the North American Arctic within the JEF would significantly expand its High North operating area, making it more challenging to operate as frequently in the Baltic.
- 35. A further consequential policy challenge if the US's commitment to European security looks more ambiguous is the role of nuclear deterrence in the High North. Under France's new Forward Deterrence initiative it has recently signed nuclear deals with ten European allies, including Norway and Denmark, and the UK is purchasing twelve combat aircraft capable of carrying US-owned nuclear free-fall bombs. Both countries could offer extended nuclear deterrence guarantees to countries in the High North, although how this might work remains less clear.

UK leadership: JFC Norfolk and the Joint Expeditionary Force

36. In February 2026, NATO announced a reorganisation of its command structure. All three Joint Force Commands (JFCs), which lead at the operational level in crisis and conflict, would henceforth be led by European countries. Germany and Poland would share command of JFC Brunssum on a rotational basis; the UK would take over command of JFC Norfolk, and Italy will do the same with JFC Naples.⁶² This leaves the UK responsible for NATO's Regional Plan North West (formally, the Joint Operations Area—Northwest),⁶³ which has recently been expanded to include Denmark, Finland and Sweden to ensure the High North is under a single NATO Command.⁶⁴
37. The UK also permanently leads the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) consisting of the UK, The Netherlands, and the three Baltic and five Nordic countries.⁶⁵ Established in 2014,⁶⁶ the JEF is intended for rapid, scalable operations with like-minded northern European allies, primarily in the High North and the Baltic.⁶⁷ Its principal value lies below the Article 5 threshold, where it can respond to hybrid threats, protect undersea infrastructure and act more quickly than NATO's full consensus-based machinery.
38. Dr De Vore told us that “NATO is not fit for purpose when it comes to creating policy for very swiftly changing environments such as the High North”,⁶⁸ which makes the JEF a potentially useful capability, rapidly responding where threats can emerge quickly and fall short of open conflict. Pål Jonson, Sweden's defence minister, has said that the JEF can “...operate under the threshold of Article 5 ...and JEF can be quick and come into the Baltic Sea before the Alliance has made a decision”.⁶⁹

62 NATO News, [European Allies to take on new leadership roles in NATO's Command Structure](#), 6 February 2026

63 NATO JEF Norfolk, [2025 NATO JFC Norfolk Year in Review](#), 23 December 2025

64 High North News, [NATO Updates Command Structure, Integrating the Nordics under JFC Norfolk](#), 5 December 2025

65 The Joint Expeditionary Force, [A coalition of ten like-minded nations, sharing a common focus on security in the High North, Northern Europe and Baltic Region](#), accessed 14 August 2026

66 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [The Joint Expeditionary Force: Deterrent, Defender, or Distraction?](#), 6 December 2024

67 The United Kingdom is also part of the Northern Group. Launched by the UK in 2010 it is a multilateral grouping of likeminded nations which collaborates on security issues in Northern Europe. There are twelve member nations: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden and the UK

68 [Q18](#)

69 Lennart Meri Conference 2024, [Can We Turn the Baltic Sea into a NATO Lake?](#), One hour and 17 minutes in, 17 May 2024

39. The UK has therefore been able to deploy to the High North flexibly: unilaterally; with bilateral partners, such as Norway; or multilaterally, as part of the JEF or on NATO exercises. These include the recent deployment of an aircraft carrier strike group as part of NATO's Arctic Sentry activity and the UK's national Operation Firecrest.⁷⁰ The JEF is also an obvious multilateral organisation for the UK to offer European security leadership in the High North, operating with some or all JEF members as a 'coalition of the willing' tailored to the specific scenario's requirements.⁷¹
40. However, the JEF's role is not straightforward. It overlaps with NATO tasks,⁷² and has not always proved faster than NATO in practice.⁷³ It also lacks some major NATO powers, currently including Canada, so during any crisis JEF and non-JEF members might need to be rapidly integrated together—not something a force would want to do as it prepares for possible hostilities. Further, the JEF neither specialises in the shallow waters of the Baltic,⁷⁴ or on anti-submarine operations in the harshness of the High North environment.⁷⁵ During an overseas committee visit, one commentator referred to the JEF as a “jack of all trades” and therefore master of no military tasks.
41. Although it was originally conceived as capable of operating across the full spectrum of conflict, the JEF has become more focused on countering sub-threshold threats, relying on NATO to deter any further escalation. A JEF designed mainly for grey zone activity may therefore have a limited deterrent effect and could be exposed if a crisis escalated quickly into high-intensity conflict. The MOD told us that “[o]nce we transition into crisis, the chances are that the JEF will, in some way, fold into the regional plan north-west anyway. There is not a competition between the two; they are entirely complementary, and one supports the other”.⁷⁶

70 High North News, [HMS Prince of Wales launches F-35s in Arctic as NATO boosts High North operations](#), 19 June 2026

71 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [The Joint Expeditionary Force: Deterrent, Defender, or Distraction?](#), 6 December 2024

72 For example, the German Navy has hosted NATO's Commander Task Force (CTF) Baltic command since it was established in October 2024 - largely overlapping with the JEF's responsibilities in the Baltic

73 In October 2023 the JEF was apparently slower to deploy than NATO to a cable cutting incident in the Baltic, possibly due to a lack of forces to deploy. See: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [The Joint Expeditionary Force: Deterrent, Defender, or Distraction?](#), 6 December 2024

74 Lennart Meri Conference 2024, [Can We Turn the Baltic Sea into a NATO Lake?](#), One hour and 1 minute in, 17 May 2024

75 Arctic Research and Development Limited, ([DHN0021](#))

76 [Q104](#)

42. That creates a problem if US support becomes less certain and American military capabilities are not guaranteed to back up the JEF or Europe in a crisis. Ed Arnold told us therefore that “It is absolutely critical for Europeans that you can run that regional plan in the north-west with little to no US support, and now it effectively gives us that opportunity, if we resource it”.⁷⁷

Addressing the JEF’s weaknesses

43. The UK has recognised some of these weaknesses. The 2025 SDR emphasised the importance of using “[m]inilateral action with Allies—especially with the E3, E5, and the Joint Expeditionary Force... to bolster European security”.⁷⁸ The SDR also noted that Defence should continue working with its Allies to develop the JEF as a capable and willing coalition committed to improving NATO’s deterrence posture in Northern Europe and the High North. It said, ‘[t]he goal should be to generate and embed new approaches to collective deterrence within the Alliance’, thereby complementing NATO’s Article 5 commitments.⁷⁹
44. The First Sea Lord’s recent Northern Navies initiative and ‘maritime proposition’ was also about: “...shifting from periodic [JEF] cooperation to a truly integrated approach where our forces can combine at pace and fight immediately together when required to do so”.⁸⁰ The MOD is also investing significantly in Atlantic Bastion, designed to counter Russian undersea threats around UK waters, the North Atlantic and the High North.⁸¹ However, this focuses on anti-submarine capabilities, rather than addressing all military capability gaps that would arise if US forces were not engaged, so would not enhance the JEF’s air defence capabilities, for example. The JEF as currently configured, therefore, cannot hope to fully replace a US-led NATO taskforce—with all its military capabilities for fighting across the whole spectrum of conflict—without significant investment.

77 [Q20](#)

78 Ministry of Defence, [Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad](#) p.75, July 2025. The E3 are France, Germany and the UK, with Italy and Poland making up the E5

79 Ministry of Defence, [Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad](#) p.75, July 2025

80 Royal Navy, [Joint Expeditionary Force partnerships strengthened as all ten nations agree Maritime Proposition](#), 9 July 2026

81 The Royal United Services Institute, [The Atlantic Bastion](#), 16 December 2025

45.

CONCLUSION

UK leadership of the Joint Expeditionary Force and NATO's Joint Force Command Norfolk offers an opportunity to address any apparent overlap between these groups to ensure resources are effectively deployed to enhance deterrence and maximise warfighting capability. Although the Joint Expeditionary Force was originally intended to operate across the spectrum of conflict, it currently offers a quick response force to counter threats below the NATO Article 5 threshold, in the expectation that NATO would deter any escalation to warfighting. However, with less certainty around US commitment to collective NATO defence, the Joint Expeditionary Force's more minimal capabilities could be seen as less of a deterrent, leaving it potentially exposed if an incident threatens to escalate.

46.

RECOMMENDATION

Within a year of assuming leadership of NATO's Joint Force Command Norfolk, the government should reassess the added value the JEF brings to European security. Either it believes the JEF provides distinct value alongside NATO and should therefore strengthen and align the two more closely, or it does not, and should focus its finite resources on NATO.

A greater JEF focus on the High North?

47.

If the UK concludes that the JEF contributes to collective security without diluting finite defence resources and adding unnecessary complexity in command-and-control arrangements, then the JEF should consider specialising in what is probably its most demanding mission. This is defending the Greenland-Iceland-UK Gap and the Svalbard-Bear-Northern Norway Gap from Russian sub-surface activity threatening to break out from its bastion area beyond it—and where it also protects its own strategic nuclear submarines (Figure 3).

Figure 3: The Greenland-Iceland-UK Gap and the Bear Gap



Source: [Adapted from a RAND report adapted from Mikkola \(2019\)](#)

48. In the Baltic, with Sweden and Finland now in the Alliance and NATO's Commander Task Force (CTF) Baltic established since 2024, there may be less need for as frequent a JEF presence in the region. Further, Canada could add valuable experience and capabilities for JEF operations in the High North, particularly given its long experience of operating in the harsh regional conditions. It is also a member of the 5EYES intelligence group,⁸² and while this tightly held intelligence cannot be shared more widely, Canada will bring expertise in handling sensitive intelligence.
49. If the JEF accepts Canada's application to join it,⁸³ then the addition of the North American Arctic to the European High North could significantly increase the JEF's area of responsibility in the region, making it more difficult to operate as frequently in the Baltic as well. To offset this greater focus on the High North the UK may need to reassure Baltic members of

82 5EYES consists of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States

83 Reuters, [Canada applies to join UK-led military coalition](#), 16 September 2026

the JEF by reinforcing its commitment there in other ways; for example, by building up the current British Army force in Estonia to brigade-size, to match what Germany is already doing in Lithuania.

50. CONCLUSION

If the government believes that the JEF provides a valuable additional capability alongside NATO structures, and Canada is admitted into the JEF, then focusing more on the High North may well be the most effective use of resources. With Sweden and Finland having joined NATO, eight of the nine countries around the Baltic Sea are now members of the Alliance, offering significant capabilities of their own in that region.

51. RECOMMENDATION

The government should consider whether the JEF focuses on the High North, concentrating finite resources on maximising its ability to operate more frequently in the harsh climate there while undertaking the demanding anti-submarine mission, rather than operating as often in the Baltic as previously.

Nuclear deterrence in the High North

- 52.** The most glaring capability shortfall that could be exposed if the US did disengage, and the one that would require the greatest political will, expenditure and time to replicate, would be the US's extended nuclear deterrence guarantees over the rest of NATO territory as part of the Alliance's Article 5 commitment. Within NATO, France and the UK have around 300 nuclear warheads each,⁸⁴ whereas the US is thought to hold around 3,700 operational nuclear weapons.⁸⁵
- 53.** Since the current US Administration came into office, France and the UK have strengthened their nuclear cooperation. As part of the July 2025 Northwood Declaration they agreed to create a Nuclear Steering Group to provide political direction and coordinate across nuclear policy, capabilities and operations.⁸⁶ President Macron also announced in March 2026 changes to French nuclear doctrine which included moving towards "forward deterrence".⁸⁷

84 House of Commons Library, [Nuclear Weapons in Europe](#) pp.3–4, 21 April 2026

85 House of Commons Library, [Nuclear Weapons at a Glance: United States](#), p.4, 22 July 2022

86 Prime Minister's Office, [Northwood Declaration](#), 10 July 2025

87 Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, [How France's new nuclear doctrine strengthens NATO](#), 9 June 2026

54. This resulted in bilateral agreements with NATO countries, including those in the High North such as Denmark and Norway, to allow French nuclear aircraft to temporarily deploy to their territory for exercises, joint missions and to demonstrate its deterrence posture.⁸⁸ Although France will allow the temporary deployment of its nuclear-armed aircraft to allied European countries, its nuclear assets will not be shared, and French nuclear decision making will remain sovereign.⁸⁹
55. The UK government also announced its intention to strengthen its nuclear deterrence posture by agreeing in 2025 to purchase twelve F-35A fighter aircraft for the RAF.⁹⁰ These would have a sub-strategic (sometimes referred to as ‘tactical’) nuclear capability, joining NATO’s Dual Capable Aircraft programme. The 2026 Defence Investment Plan allocated £2.2 billion up to 2030 for the UK’s total F-35 fleet.⁹¹ However, while UK F-35A aircraft will be flown by RAF pilots, in any crisis approval to use the US nuclear weapons carried by those jets would remain under US control.⁹²
56. It remains unclear, however, how the UK will operate this new sub-strategic nuclear capability, including in the High North. For example, would UK F-35As deploy to allied countries during peacetime to practice undertaking their wartime nuclear role and demonstrate the deterrence effect of the capability? And if there is concern about the enduring level of US commitment to European security, how is this addressed by carrying a weapon that remains under US sovereign control during any crisis?
57. Furthermore, unlike France, the UK’s nuclear capabilities are already formally declared and committed to the collective defence of the NATO Alliance. During our inquiry into *The UK contribution to European Security*, we heard that the UK does not make enough of its nuclear contribution to NATO’s defence, and that “[t]he UK should probably just start every meeting that it is at by explaining that...”⁹³ According to the most recent MOD Annual Report & Accounts document, spending on nuclear capabilities accounts for over one-fifth (£14.45 billion) of the total defence budget of £69.61 billion.⁹⁴

88 Reuters, [Norway to join France’s nuclear deterrence initiative, says PM Stoere](#), 27 May 2026

89 Atlantic Council, [What Macron’s changes to French nuclear policy mean for European security](#), 4 March 2026

90 Prime Minister’s Office, [UK to purchase F-35As and join NATO nuclear mission as Government steps up national security and delivers defence dividend](#), 24 June 2025

91 Ministry of Defence, [The Defence Investment Plan.pdf](#), Table 7, p.44, 30 June 2026

92 Ministry of Defence, [The UK’s nuclear deterrent: the National Endeavour explained](#), updated 18 August 2026. Accessed 10 September 2026

93 The UK Contribution to European Security, [Q31](#)

94 Ministry of Defence, [Annual Report and Accounts 2025 – 26](#), Annex C, pp251–252, 15 July 2026.

58. Conversely, France has generated considerable publicity around its bilateral agreements to forward deploy its nuclear-capable aircraft, undoubtedly strengthening its international profile on security matters and offering a strong platform to engage on wider issues with countries, including on defence export sales.

59. **CONCLUSION**

The United Kingdom has committed to acquiring a sub-strategic nuclear capability to enhance deterrence, although how this aligns with the security of the High North is less clear. To ensure the capability is effective it will probably be necessary for the RAF to occasionally rehearse forward deploying the nuclear-capable F-35A aircraft to the High North. Recipient countries will, therefore, need to be fully aligned and supportive of Britain's extended deterrence strategy. Uniquely, the UK already declares its existing nuclear forces to NATO, but despite consuming over a fifth of the defence budget the MOD does not maximise the political and economic value of this considerable financial and military commitment.

60. **RECOMMENDATION**

Alongside its response to this report the Ministry of Defence should provide the Defence Committee with a classified briefing on how the Department intends to enhance nuclear deterrence through the acquisition of its new sub-strategic capability, including any discussions with regional allies on enhancing extended deterrence in the High North, including through the forward deployment of the capability. Furthermore, given the enormous financial burden of operating the deterrent, the MOD should remind Allies more frequently of the unique nuclear capability the UK declares to NATO in the defence of Europe.

Part Three: Royal Navy readiness for High North operations

Overview

61. The UK's High North policy depends on key military capabilities, and the Royal Navy has some areas of genuine strength, particularly the Royal Marines' Arctic experience. Extensive intelligence gathering also takes place in theatre, and the MOD set out deployments of the RAF's Rivet Joint electronic surveillance aircraft and P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft, plus A400M transport aircraft and Typhoon jets, and Royal Navy and RAF F-35B fighters.⁹⁵
62. However, as the greatest Russian threat currently comes from its submarines and maritime sabotage forces, the Royal Navy's anti-submarine warfare frigates and nuclear-powered submarines offer the greatest deterrent. Unfortunately, they are either ageing or too often unavailable due to maintenance issues. Although new frigates will eventually join the fleet in sufficient numbers, the current fleet readiness picture raises doubts about whether the UK could sustain the maritime tasks required in the High North by 2030.

Preparing for 2030

63. The then Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer, warned in June 2026 that "...it is our intelligence assessment, and the assessment of other countries in NATO, that there could be an attack by Russia on NATO as soon as 2030".⁹⁶ If the MOD is to maximise the effectiveness of its armed forces by the end of the decade for operations in the High North—one of the highest priority theatres to defend—then as well as investing in new defence capabilities long-term it needs to enhance the readiness of its existing military assets.

95 Ministry of Defence, [\(DHN0043\)](#), p.2

96 The Times, [How Nato is preparing for European conflict with Russia in 2030](#), 10 July 2026. These underlined similar comments made previously by the Secretary General of NATO, Mark Rutte, and other European leaders

64. In the same month, the government published its long-awaited Defence Investment Plan, which split funding into two parts: investing £298 billion in the four years to 2029–30 to reach 2.7% of gross domestic product (GDP) spent on defence; and the period up to 2035 by when all NATO allies, including the UK, have committed to spending 3.5% of GDP on defence. The near £300 billion investment over the next four years, therefore, represents the bedrock on which any UK contribution to deterring or, if necessary, defeating any Russian hostility against NATO from 2030 rests.
65. However, the current reality could hardly be bleaker. According to an internal document apparently drawn up by NATO to measure how effectively members are meeting their rearmament promises, the UK is number 31 out of 32 Alliance countries. Only Iceland, a country with no military capability, is lower on the table. Ed Arnold, of the Royal United Services Institute, told us “[s]o that’s a pretty poor position to be in... [a]nd the only way that you can increase that really is through cash because it’s all about fleet availability, it’s all about readiness to be out of the door as soon as possible and as soon as needed”.⁹⁷

The looming Frigate and Destroyer gap

66. The MOD has said that anti-submarine warfare remains a ‘core strength’ of the UK’s Armed Forces.⁹⁸ It also recognises that some of the key capabilities in delivering the UK’s Atlantic Bastion strategy and undertaking operations in the High North are the Royal Navy’s frigates and destroyers. The ASW frigates are critical for helping locate Russian submarines in both the High North and around UK waters, including protecting the nuclear deterrent when it enters or leaves its base at Faslane; and the destroyers provide an air defence capability against aircraft, missiles and drones. The current in-service vessels are the Type 23 Frigates and Type 45 Destroyers.
67. The Royal Navy has had a requirement for 19 frigates (FFs) and destroyers (DDs),⁹⁹ made up of 13 FFs and six DDs, since the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR).¹⁰⁰ However, the Royal Navy has struggled to meet this requirement. In 2021, the then First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, provided the Defence Committee with written evidence stating that

97 BFBS Forces News, [The poor man of Nato? UK second to last in alliance league table, defence expert warns](#), 12 June 2026

98 Ministry of Defence, [\(DHN0043\)](#), p.4

99 UK Defence Journal, [MoD confirm plans for 19 frigates and destroyers](#), 26 September 2023

100 Ministry of Defence, [Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review](#), p.21, 19 October 2010

“...whilst FF/DD hull numbers will dip to 17 by the end of 2023... [w]e anticipate returning above 19 FF/DD by the end of 2026 as new ships are brought into service”.¹⁰¹

68. Currently, there are 11 FF/DDs in service—five Type 23 frigates and six Type 45 destroyers—just over half (58%) of the requirement for 19 vessels. Particularly critical to the capabilities needed in the High North is the requirement for eight of the 13 frigates to be fitted with the Sonar 2087 towed array to undertake ASW operations.¹⁰² Currently this is on all the remaining five Type 23s.¹⁰³
69. Eight new Type 26 frigates will take over the ASW role in future, with five Type 31 general purpose ships making up the remaining frigate requirement. Since the 2015 SDSR the reported in-service date for these new frigates was the “mid-2020s”.¹⁰⁴ There has been slippage to that in-service date, but the main reason for the gap is the ageing Type 23s being unable to continue in service to cover what has been described as the ‘extraordinarily leisurely build schedule’ of the Type 26 ships;¹⁰⁵ up to ten years between laying down the first ship and its expected acceptance into service date.¹⁰⁶

The Royal Navy is short of critical anti-submarine capabilities

70. Although the Royal Navy has only five Type 23 frigates, until mid-2026 it had seven. HMS Richmond and HMS Iron Duke were decommissioned in mid-2026, despite the latter going through a five-year, £103 million refit less than three years previously.¹⁰⁷ The MOD had also planned to fit HMS Iron Duke with the Sonar 2087 towed array,¹⁰⁸ which was also fitted to HMS Richmond. If the two vessels had stayed in service, the Royal Navy would now have seven frigates equipped with the towed array sonar.

101 Ministry of Defence evidence, [Temporary reduction in FFDD numbers](#), 23 November 2021

102 Marine Link, [Eighth And Final Royal Navy Frigate Upgraded With Sonar](#), 10 April 2013

103 DefenceSynergia, (DHN0006), para 4c1(ii)

104 Navy Lookout, [Why will the Royal Navy not have its first Type 26 frigate operational until 2027?](#), 26 April 2018

105 Navy Lookout, [Why will the Royal Navy not have its first Type 26 frigate operational until 2027?](#), 26 April 2018

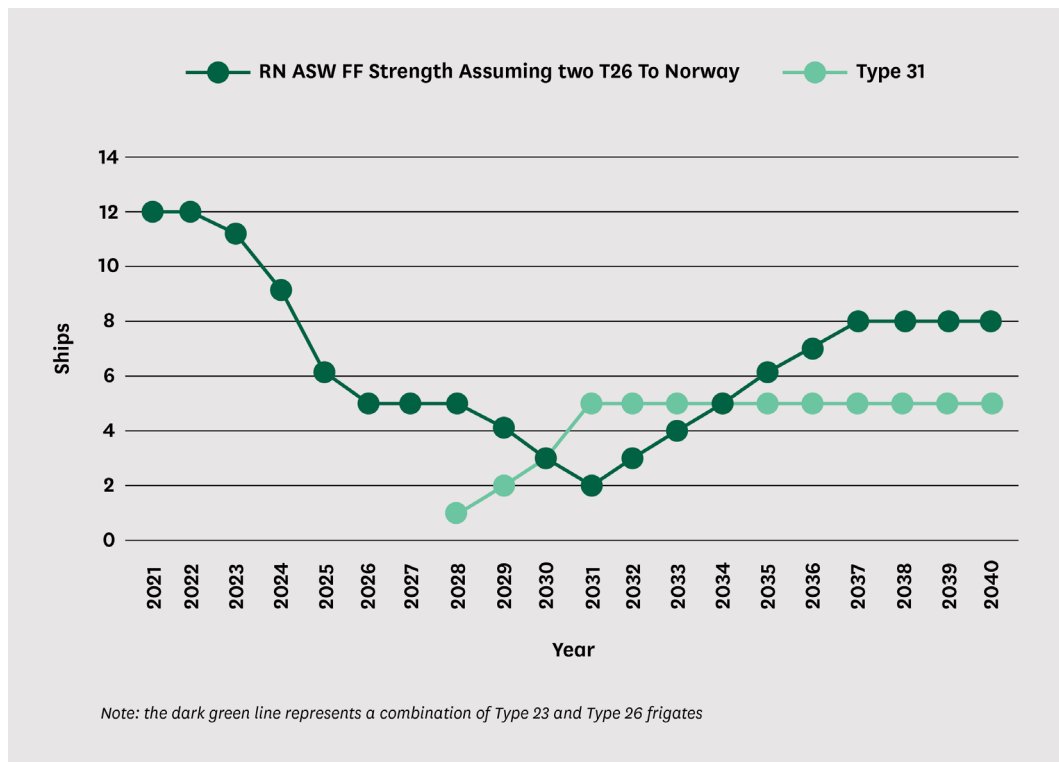
106 Navy Technology, [Early Type 26 frigates mirror timelines ahead of late-2020s entry](#), 22 April 2025

107 Navy Lookout, [Another warship quietly withdrawn – Royal Navy now down to just 5 frigates](#), 4 May 2026

108 Navy Lookout, [Sunk costs – MoD accounts reveal cancelled Royal Navy projects](#), 6 November 2025

71. Analysis suggests (Figure 4) Sonar 2087-towed array equipped frigate numbers could remain as low as five vessels for the next three years.¹⁰⁹ This assumes two Type 26 frigates being built for the Royal Navy are sold to Norway, as the latter has ordered at least five Type 26s for £10 billion—which the government says will sustain 4,000 UK jobs.¹¹⁰ This reinforces the government’s goal to use defence exports to contribute to its Plan for Change, based around its three foundations of good government: economic stability, secure borders and national security.¹¹¹ However, Norway wants its first ship in service by 2029–30.¹¹² Based on this scenario the Royal Navy will take until 2037 to meet its requirement for eight frigates to be equipped with the Sonar 2087 towed array sensor.¹¹³ In this case the government seems to have taken a conscious decision to prioritise defence exports over sovereign capability.

Figure 4: Royal Navy Frigate numbers: 2021–2040



Source: Defence Analysis, *Type 26 Production/Delivery Issues*, Vol 29 No3 p.11, March 2026.

- 109 Defence Analysis, Royal Navy surface ship numbers, Vol 29 No7 p.3, July 2026
- 110 Ministry of Defence, [Boost for UK Growth and Security as Norway Selects UK Warships in £10 billion partnership](#), 31 August 2025
- 111 HM Government, [Plan for Change – Milestones for mission-led government](#), 5 December 2024
- 112 Navy Lookout, [How will the Type 26 frigates be shared between the Norwegian Navy and Royal Navy?](#), 8 February 2026
- 113 Defence Analysis, *Type 26 Production/Delivery Issues*, Vol 29 No3 p11, March 2026

72. The Royal Navy now has only five ships with the towed array, against a requirement for eight, weakening its critical anti-submarine warfare mission in the High North before the Type 26 replacement fleet is ready. As well as capability gaps, the decision also raises questions about the value for money and coherence of recent investment in ageing ships that were then rapidly withdrawn from service.

73. **CONCLUSION**

Measured against its own military requirements, the Ministry of Defence has a serious anti-submarine warfare gap. Towed array sonar-equipped frigates are central to detecting and tracking hostile submarines in the High North, the North Atlantic and UK waters, including around the UK's nuclear deterrent bases. Reducing the fleet to five such vessels against a requirement for eight weakens the UK's ability to respond to the Russian submarine and underwater sabotage threat and raises questions about whether the transition from the Type 23 to the Type 26 frigate capability has been properly managed.

74. **RECOMMENDATION**

Given the critical role of anti-submarine operations in the High North, the government should ensure no further towed array-equipped Type 23 Frigates leave service until they are replaced on a one-for-one basis by the new Type 26 vessels.

The availability of the wider Royal Navy for High North operations

75. In addition to frigate numbers, the Royal Navy has faced challenges in maintaining its destroyers, aircraft carriers, amphibious ships and submarines, all of which can provide military capabilities useful for High North operations. In evidence, MOD said that all capabilities are held at "...varying levels of readiness, and every platform will need to go through a cycle of deployment, maintenance...training and preparation and exercises like that..." and that the Department holds equipment "...at different readiness depending on the capability they are required to meet for NATO".¹¹⁴
76. However, recent events have identified areas where military capabilities are not available for operations. For example, on 1 March 2026, a drone hit RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus, and two further drones were intercepted on their way to the island the following day.¹¹⁵ In response, on 3 March, HMS *Dragon* was

114 [Qs117-118](#)

115 BBC News, [Two drones intercepted heading for RAF base, Cyprus says](#), 2 March 2026

pulled out of maintenance and, according to the MOD, its crew completed work in six days that would normally take six weeks.¹¹⁶ However, HMS *Dragon* then took until 24 March to arrive in the Eastern Mediterranean,¹¹⁷ having suffered from a series of faults.¹¹⁸ Although such issues might be expected from a ship pulled out of maintenance, the fact that no other destroyer was ready to deploy from the fleet of Type 45 vessels may reflect the lack of deployable ships. As these platforms provide air defence, they would be equally important in any High North operation.

- 77.** In terms of other naval capabilities, the Royal Navy aircraft carriers broke down when deployed in 2022 and 2024 with propellor shaft issues, and again in June 2026 while on exercise in Norway.¹¹⁹ Both specialist amphibious ships, HMS *Albion* and HMS *Bulwark*, were decommissioned in November 2024 ahead of their planned out of service dates of 2033 and 2034.¹²⁰ £72.1 million was spent between 2022–2024 on refitting HMS *Bulwark* before it was scrapped.¹²¹ The UK and The Netherlands have now signed a contract to procure a fleet of four amphibious vessels each, but these are unlikely to be in service until the 2030s.¹²²
- 78.** According to several media sources, all five Astute Class nuclear attack submarines have recently all been tied up in dockyards at the same time, with none deployed.¹²³ Professor Blagden told the Committee that: “[i]t was reported in the media quite recently that a French SSN [attack submarine] had been seen in Faslane around the time that one of [our] SSBNs sailed on its patrol... [i]s this the French now doing ‘delousing’ for a UK nuclear deterrent submarine going on patrol?¹²⁴ Is that great alliance solidarity or is it, ‘Oh my god, we can’t get one of our own SSNs to sea to do one of the highest missions?’”¹²⁵ The Rt. Hon. the Lord Case, Chair of Team Barrow, told

116 *The Guardian*, [HMS Dragon docks in eastern Mediterranean](#), 7 April 2026

117 Royal Navy, [Royal Navy destroyer arrives in Eastern Mediterranean](#), 24 March 2026

118 *Navy Lookout*, [Why has HMS Dragon spent the last two weeks in Crete?](#), 22 April 2026

119 *The Guardian*, [MoD reports ‘minor technical issue’ with aircraft carrier docked in Norway](#), 6 June 2026

120 Naval Technology, [Royal Navy finished as full-spectrum force as Albion and Bulwark axed](#), 20 November 2024

121 [HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark: Decommissioning](#), UIN32953, 18 March 2025

122 Naval News, [UK and Netherlands Sign £2.4 Billion Deal for Next-Gen Amphibious Ships](#), 7 July 2026

123 *The Daily Telegraph*, [Navy submarine fleet stuck in dock while awaiting maintenance](#), 7 June 2026

124 ‘Delousing’ is an activity where an attack submarine (SSN) sanitises the surrounding waters to ensure a strategic ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) is not being tracked or tailed by an adversary as it departs on or returns from a nuclear deterrent patrol

125 [Q85](#)

us in November 2025 that the government is saying to the defence industry “[p]lease, how quickly can you build our nuclear submarines for us? We are having to make up for decades of neglect”.¹²⁶

79. Retired Rear Admiral Philip Mathias, former Director of Nuclear Policy at the MOD, said in December 2025 that one consequence of a lack of investment in the submarine fleet was that the duration of patrols for crews for the Vanguard Class—which were 70 days during the Cold War—were now more than 200 days, and there was a shockingly low availability of submarines to counter the Russian threat in the High North.¹²⁷

Royal Marine capability for High North operations

80. Despite the recent disappearance of the Royal Navy’s littoral manoeuvre capability with the early retirement of the Albion and Bulwark amphibious ships,¹²⁸ evidence we took identified the excellent capabilities proved by the Royal Marines. Professor Blagden noted that the UK had “...some capabilities that few can match, including the Royal Marines in terms of their Arctic training, accreditation and capabilities”.¹²⁹ They deploy regularly to northern Norway,¹³⁰ and the government has decided that the number of British troops deployed annually to Norway will double over the next three years from 1,000 to 2,000 personnel.¹³¹
81. This effectiveness is in part because the Royal Marines have been training in the region for years, but also due to the logistic support behind it and the Commando Helicopter Squadron there, “...because the logistics are just as important as the combat capabilities”.¹³² Consequently, “[t]he Russians are terribly impressed with the Arctic capabilities of our Royal Marines...and they [Russia] comment on that”.¹³³

126 Oral evidence taken by the Defence Committee on 26 November 2025, HC 841, [Q178](#)

127 The Naval Review, [Naval Bulletin 012](#), 14 December 2025

128 Wavell Room, [The Challenges Of Littoral Warfare For The UK: A Critical Perspective](#), 17 October 2025

129 [Q64](#)

130 [Q25](#)

131 Ministry of Defence, [UK steps up defence of Arctic and High North from rising Russian threats](#), 11 February 2026

132 [Q34](#)

133 [Q41](#)

82.

CONCLUSION

The Royal Marines' Arctic expertise is a significant national strength, but it cannot compensate for shortfalls in the naval platforms needed to deploy, protect and sustain operations in the region. The UK's ability to deter and respond to threats in the High North depends not only on future programmes, but also on the readiness of the Royal Navy's existing ships, submarines and specialist forces. Russian submarine and seabed warfare capabilities based in the High North pose direct risks to the North Atlantic, UK waters and the nuclear deterrent. Evidence of low availability among destroyers, frigates and attack submarines therefore raises serious questions about whether the UK can meet its High North commitments before new capabilities enter service.

83.

RECOMMENDATION

When responding to this report the government should provide the Defence Committee with a plan setting out how the Ministry of Defence will improve the availability of the Royal Navy's frigates, destroyers and attack submarines before 2030. This update might be presented at a classified level, but the Committee will expect a version to be subsequently publicly available.

Submarine under-ice capability

84. A key attack submarine capability in the High North is to be able to operate 'under-ice', which requires specific training and modified equipment such as a hardened sail structure for breaching ice when surfacing. In response to the question as to how important the capability was in the High North, the Minister told us it was a sensitive subject "...but absolutely we need to be able to operate where we need to operate".¹³⁴
85. A recent Royal United Services Institute paper pointed out that "[a] lack of under-ice currency or capability, and fewer platforms, means that NATO's forward maritime strategy of the 1980s is no longer realistically replicable, limiting the ability to force Russia into a defensive position by threatening its SSBNs" in their bastion.¹³⁵ Lacking an under-ice capability allows Russia in any potential conflict to leave its SSBNs safe under the ice in the bastion, while its attack submarines surge forward to disrupt UK critical infrastructure, NATO sea lanes and allied SSBNs, automatically putting the UK and NATO on the defensive. Conversely, having such a capability allows NATO submarines to challenge Russia under the ice, forcing the latter more onto the defensive.

134 [Q184](#)

135 The Royal United Services Institute, [The Atlantic Bastion](#), p.12, December 2025

86. The MOD recognises that an under-ice capability is key for submarines operating in the High North. In March 2026 the then Minister for the Armed Forces, Al Carns, said MOD was certifying the new Astute Class submarines to replace the under-ice capability previously provided by the Trafalgar Class boats.¹³⁶ This implies the capability is currently in abeyance, as the last Trafalgar Class boat was retired in 2025.
87. The then Minister also confirmed that the most recent Arctic Ice Exercise conducted by a Royal Navy submarine took place in 2018.¹³⁷ Dr De Vore noted that UK submarines between the late 1990s and 2018 did not operate under the ice pack, meaning that a lot of the human skills, such as knowing the unique acoustic qualities of operating under-ice, had been lost,¹³⁸ and it would take time to reconstitute the capability.

88. **CONCLUSION**

The UK has allowed its under-ice submarine capability to lapse at a time when the High North has become strategically more important. Without a credible under-ice capability, the UK is less able to contest Russian freedom of action in the High North and risks being forced into a more defensive posture. Russia can then use the ice to conceal and protect its own submarines, while threatening NATO sea lanes, UK critical infrastructure and the nuclear deterrent.

89. **RECOMMENDATION**

Alongside its response to this report the government should brief the Defence Committee on progress it is making to re-establish as rapidly as possible an under-ice capability for at least some of the Astute Class submarines so they can operate effectively in the High North and regularly exercise there to maintain that capability.

136 [Arctic: Navy](#), UIN115087, 23 February 2026

137 UK Defence Journal, [Royal Navy certifying Astute for under-ice operations](#), 4 March 2026

138 [Q33](#)

Part Four: High North capability investment in the longer-term

Overview

90. High North operations depend on some US-held capabilities that Europe currently does not have and cannot quickly replicate. Access to those capabilities ultimately depends on US political decisions that could be limited, or even denied, during some future crisis. The UK, along with European allies, needs to decide which dependencies are acceptable, which need mitigation, and which require sovereign or European alternatives.

The capability challenge

91. Routine operations in the High North depend heavily on US capabilities, including anti-submarine sonar data, intelligence feeds and access to satellite imagery. During any military conflict, European allies would also be heavily reliant on other US military capabilities, such as long-range strike assets, electronic warfare equipment, and anti-aircraft, ballistic and drone defences. These are difficult and expensive for European allies to replicate and will take long-term investment to do so. They are also capabilities to which access depends on US political decisions. Recent experience in Ukraine has shown that US intelligence-sharing and other assistance can be paused,¹³⁹ restricted or resumed as Washington chooses.¹⁴⁰
92. This creates a strategic risk for the UK. The MOD told us that, in relation to satellite intelligence, “at the moment, the decision has been made that we have access to US-supplied data and therefore the value for money line [of developing a UK sovereign capability] has not quite been reached”.¹⁴¹ That may be a reasonable judgement while US support is assured. It is less

139 [Q86](#)

140 Politico, [US intel sharing rebounds with Ukraine](#), 5 August 2026

141 [Q153](#)

convincing if UK and European defence planning must now take account of the possibility that at any critical point of crisis in the High North in future US support could be reduced or unavailable.

93. The July 2026 NATO Ankara Summit Declaration summarising the Alliance's conclusions consisted of only six paragraphs. Pointedly, one of those sections focused on those capability areas where European NATO countries and Canada are militarily lacking compared to the US, and will take a considerable period to replicate the latter's capabilities. The Declaration stated:

“We are building the future: a stronger Europe in a stronger NATO – a modernised Alliance. European Allies and Canada, working with the United States, are assuming greater responsibility for the Alliance's defence... We are investing in our ability to deploy, enable and sustain our armed forces and deliver our capability targets in all domains, including in deep precision strike, integrated air and missile defence, uncrewed systems, cutting edge technologies, and intelligence capabilities. We are developing an interoperable transatlantic warfighting cloud and adopting powerful AI models”.¹⁴²

94. The Kiel Institute recently calculated that replacing US military capabilities with European weapons would cost an extra €50 billion each year over the next decade.¹⁴³ Deciding which capabilities Europe and the UK should prioritise will therefore be extremely important in ensuring that Europe can take greater responsibility for its own security, including in the High North.
95. The actual capabilities that non-US NATO countries presently do not have (or lack in sufficient numbers) to deter or defeat an aggressor in the High North include, but are not limited to:
- a. surveillance and target acquisition platforms: crewed, uncrewed, and space-based;
 - b. intelligence networks to rival the current 5EYES agreement between Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States;
 - c. robust space- and land-based navigation networks;
 - d. robust offensive and defensive cyber capabilities;
 - e. conventional deep-strike capabilities (aircraft; cruise, ballistic, hypersonic missiles);

142 North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, [The Ankara Summit Declaration](#), 8 July 2026

143 The Kiel Institut, [European defense autonomy is technologically feasible, fiscally viable, and politically achievable](#), 7 May 2026

- f. anti-strike capabilities for shooting down ballistic, hypersonic, cruise missiles and drones; and,
 - g. other general munition stocks.
96. MOD witnesses suggested there was a distinction between ‘US capabilities’ and ‘US commitments’ when discussing America’s commitment to the defence of the High North.¹⁴⁴ On the former, the MOD said that the US is making it known to the rest of NATO that “[h]ere are the capabilities we [America] intend not to offer in the future. That is what we think a more European NATO looks like...”¹⁴⁵ On commitments, Brigadier Lamb, Head of Euro-Atlantic Security at the MOD told us that “[w]hat they are talking about, though, is basing; it is not necessarily what they will make available to the SACEUR (Supreme Allied Commander Europe) in a crisis”.¹⁴⁶
97. The logic is that although US forces might physically be withdrawn from Europe, the strategic commitment to its defence, primarily through NATO’s Article 5 responsibilities, remains. This assumption may well create both a dangerous ‘credibility gap’ and a ‘capability gap’. A credibility gap, in that without the sophisticated military equipment and relatively deep munition magazines of the US,¹⁴⁷ the ability of European NATO forces to deter any escalation into full scale warfighting in the High North could be weakened. And a capability gap, in that if warfighting against Russia did break out in the High North, Europe’s lack of these critical defence capabilities would put it at a military disadvantage in any conflict—especially if Russia were still running a wartime economy producing large quantities of ballistic and cruise missiles and drones.
98. Professor Blagden pointed out that “[t]he caveat, though, to all that glass-half-full stuff is that the UK, for years and years, has been generating SDSR-type documents in which we talk about how far we lean on allies. It has ultimately reached the point where the greatest of those allies has suddenly become unreliable... [w]e cannot just say, ‘We lean on an ally for this. We lean on an ally for that.’ When it comes to the High North, the UK is the major power now. The American cavalry is not about to ride over the horizon and save our fecklessness”.¹⁴⁸

144 [Q110](#)

145 [Q110](#)

146 [Q96](#)

147 Recent conflict with Iran has revealed how finite US munition stocks are, but they are still relatively plentiful compared to European arsenals. However, it has resulted in the US stockpiling critical munitions and not providing them to allies. See: Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) [Last Rounds? Status of Key Munitions at the Iran War Ceasefire](#), April 2026

148 [Q81](#)

99. A recent RUSI article applied the ‘protection curse’ framework to European defence generally, contending that the US’s security guarantees over decades have fostered complacency and weakened European military capabilities. This has resulted in NATO’s European members maintaining forces that appear formidable on paper while “...allowing the sinews of real military power to atrophy... yet the unglamorous enablers of genuine warfighting capacity—logistics networks, ammunition stockpiles, deployable ground forces, strategic lift and sustainable readiness—have withered through decades of underinvestment”.¹⁴⁹

100. **CONCLUSION**

To offer as credible a deterrent as possible to dissuade Russian aggression in the High North, NATO needs effective military capabilities. Evidence suggests there would be critical military gaps if the United States were not involved in countering such aggression. Given the uncertainty around the latter’s commitment during any future crisis, the UK can play a significant role within NATO by helping identify these capability gaps, and then ensuring these deficiencies are addressed.

101. **RECOMMENDATION**

Alongside its response to this report the Ministry of Defence should provide the Committee with a classified assessment of the capability gaps that would arise in a 2030 High North conflict scenario in which the UK and regional allies had to operate without US support. This assessment should identify the most serious gaps in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, satellite data, anti-submarine warfare, command and control, deep strike, air and missile defence, cyber resilience, logistics and munitions; assess their operational impact; and set out which gaps can be mitigated by 2030 through UK, bilateral, European or NATO action.

Delivering the Hybrid Navy

102. One initiative to enhance UK military capabilities in the High North is the Hybrid Navy. This is the MOD’s overarching strategic and structural framework that combines traditional crewed platforms (like warships and aircraft) with uncrewed systems, AI, and digital networks. The Hybrid Navy fleet appears to represent a doctrinally unique and high-risk leap compared to other global naval programmes. The Minister told us, “a really ambitious vision has been set out about combining crewed and uncrewed and

149 The Royal United Services Institute, [How Security Guarantees Hollowed Out European Defence](#), 8 July 2026

autonomous drone systems”.¹⁵⁰ Professor Blagden said, “[w]hat is interesting with the UK [Hybrid Navy] model is that its thinking is currently much more ambitious than pretty much any other developed-world navy”.¹⁵¹

- 103.** The direction of travel has been increasingly apparent since December 2025 when the MOD announced the Atlantic Bastion strategy, and the related Atlantic Shield and Atlantic Strike concepts. Atlantic Bastion is the specific, operational initiative to apply the Hybrid Navy approach to countering a resurgence in Russian submarine and underwater activity, including the recent activities of the Russian spy ship Yantar around UK waters.¹⁵²
- 104.** The First Sea Lord recently set out a goal for the JEF and the Northern Navies’ agreement to “...move us beyond episodic activity to a persistent, integrated maritime force”, something that the current numbers of crewed Royal Navy ships cannot provide.¹⁵³ Uncrewed systems are attractive because they can be produced more affordably and therefore in greater numbers compared to crewed platforms and offer greater persistence and lower risks to personnel. Uncrewed systems could be particularly useful for sustained anti-submarine operations; protection of undersea infrastructure; operating in dangerous or remote waters; or by adding missile, radar or sensor platforms without requiring scarce personnel.
- 105.** Uncrewed systems could also offer considerable financial savings. Reducing crew costs and the associated habitation spaces and protection systems required to accommodate personnel, could accrue further savings. Reducing personnel numbers would be of particular benefit to navies that have struggled to recruit and retain sufficient crews, such as Denmark’s navy where it has been reported that nearly a fifth of enlisted naval personnel posts are currently vacant.¹⁵⁴
- 106.** Up to 2030 the UK will invest at least £1.3 billion in the Hybrid Navy, the vast majority on uncrewed missile platforms (Type 91), uncrewed sloop with underwater sensors (Type 92), extra-large uncrewed underwater vessels (XLUUVs, the Type 93), uncrewed radar platforms (Type 94) and a future class of crewed Common Combat Vessels (CCV) to replace the current Type 45 destroyers. The Royal Navy aims to bring the first large autonomous vessels into service by 2030, including a prototype uncrewed missile platform and XLUUVs,¹⁵⁵ although most are expected to enter

150 [Q135](#)

151 [Q72](#)

152 Royal Navy, [New Royal Navy undersea warfare technology unveiled to counter threat from Russia](#), 8 December 2025

153 Ministry of Defence, [Battle for the Atlantic](#), 17 September 2026

154 Militarnyi, [Danish Navy Personnel Outflow Leaves Every Fifth Post Vacant](#), 29 April 2026

155 Ministry of Defence, [The Defence Investment Plan](#), para 46, 30 June 2026

service between 2030–35.¹⁵⁶ The allocation must fund the development, procurement and integration of all five classes at a time when other major programmes are placing substantial pressure on the defence equipment budget and defence procurement has frequently been subject to delay and cost growth.

- 107.** The UK has some experience of developing autonomous naval platforms, having worked with Norway since 2023 leading the Maritime Capability Coalition for Ukraine.¹⁵⁷ While much of this activity is classified, UK-designed MV7 kamikaze sea drones have been used by Ukraine to attack Russian shipping in the Black Sea.¹⁵⁸

108. RECOMMENDATION

We are not yet persuaded that the £1.3 billion allocated to the Hybrid Navy programme will be sufficient to develop, procure and integrate its five planned classes of maritime platform: four uncrewed classes and the crewed Common Combat Vessel. The government should set out in its response to this report the basis on which it judges the current funding allocation to be adequate.

Challenges in operating uncrewed vessels in the High North

- 109.** The High North is not a permissive environment. Uncrewed systems must operate effectively in the High North over extremely long distances with degraded satellite coverage and communications and despite extreme cold and icing, which also leads to increased battery degradation. The Ukraine war has also demonstrated Russia's ability to bombard the electronic spectrum with interference, jamming and spoofing, potentially disabling uncrewed vessels.¹⁵⁹ Having bought 20 K3 Scout drone boats under the £12.3 million Project Beehive, the Royal Navy recently had to remove all internet connectivity from cameras fitted to them after discovering that data could be sent to China.¹⁶⁰

156 Lowry Institute, [Uncrewed and untested: The wrong lessons for a hybrid navy](#), 24 July 2026

157 Naval Technology, [UK, Norway lead new Maritime Capability Coalition for Ukraine](#), 11 December 2023

158 The Times, [Ukrainian drone boats launched in Britain to help Navy fight Russians](#), 4 August 2026

159 RAND, [Electromagnetic Warfare: NATO's Blind Spot Could Decide the Next Conflict](#), 24 November 2025

160 The Times, [Navy drone boats 'were sending data to China'](#), 10 August 2026

110. The MOD also continues to test capabilities. Recently, the Royal Navy fired a torpedo from an uncrewed underwater vessel.¹⁶¹ However, there is a risk that the MOD rushes to deploy uncrewed systems before adequate testing of the technology and concepts takes place to supplement the poor availability and numbers of the current crewed platforms.
111. As uncrewed vessels lack personnel and space, they would also be less flexible and more tailored to specific missions, rather than being general purpose ships that could undertake disaster evacuation or constabulary tasks in any emergency.¹⁶² Professor Blagden pointed out that if Russia is faced with the Atlantic Bastion composed of many uncrewed ships, “... the thing you do is hire some merchant ships and drive around the North Atlantic trying to run them down... Anything that you put on them that is really secret or sensitive, you can expect to pretty quickly be nicked and reverse-engineered...”.¹⁶³
112. Uncrewed platforms may, therefore, have a reduced deterrent effect compared to crewed ships. Professor Blagden told us that “[i]f you go out and destroy them but no people die, it has far less escalatory implication. We have seen this with both Russia and Iran, even before Iran was at war with the US.¹⁶⁴ That means there is likely to be far less Russian reticence about going out and destroying these uncrewed platforms”.¹⁶⁵ To avoid technology being stolen, to ensure platforms work in the face of electronic interference and to increase their deterrent effect, the Royal Navy may decide to fit small habitation bays in the larger autonomous platforms so they can occasionally be crewed if the need arises.

113. **CONCLUSION**

Uncrewed systems could help the Royal Navy generate the mass and persistence needed for sustained operations in the High North, the North Atlantic and around critical undersea infrastructure. They could be especially valuable for surveillance, anti-submarine sensing and seabed protection, where crewed platforms are scarce and expensive. However, the High North is an exceptionally demanding environment for autonomous systems. Cold, ice, long ranges, degraded communications, poor satellite geometry and electronic interference could all reduce their effectiveness. We are concerned that the MOD’s Hybrid Navy concept must not become a substitute for crewed capability before uncrewed systems have been proven in the specific conditions of the High North.

161 Defense News, [Royal Navy successfully launches US Mk 48 torpedo from uncrewed submersible](#), 22 September 2026

162 [Q73](#)

163 [Q73](#)

164 US Central Command Statement, [Iranians shoot down U.S. drone](#), 20 June 2019.

165 [Q73](#)

114.

RECOMMENDATION

Within a year the government should set out how it will robustly test and validate the Hybrid Navy's principal uncrewed systems in High North conditions before they are relied upon for Atlantic Bastion or other operational tasks. This should include cold-weather performance, endurance, communications resilience, resistance to jamming and spoofing, protection against capture or reverse engineering, and integration with crewed ships, submarines and allied forces.

Integrating allied capabilities and partnering defence industry

115. Defence exports are not only an economic opportunity for the UK. In the High North, they can also strengthen deterrence by helping close allies acquire capabilities that are interoperable with the UK Armed Forces and suited to the same operating environment. Where allies buy the same platforms, sensors or uncrewed systems, they can share training, maintenance, upgrades, infrastructure and operational concepts. This can create more usable military capability than a series of separate national procurement programmes.
116. The 2025 Lunna House agreement with Norway,¹⁶⁶ and the purchase of the Type 26 frigate, is therefore strategically more significant than a conventional defence export. Norway is one of the UK's most closely aligned High North partners and faces the same Russian undersea threat. A joint class of British and Norwegian ASW frigates should improve NATO's ability to detect and track Russian submarines moving from the High North into the North Atlantic.
117. It will also allow the two countries to share training, maintenance, upgrades, infrastructure and operational experience over the life of the vessels. The test for the MOD is whether this integration increases usable allied capability without worsening the Royal Navy's own short-term ASW frigate gap. More broadly, other military and industrial collaborations—such as the procurement of amphibious ships with The Netherlands and the possibility of Type 31 sales to Denmark—should further integrate and maximise the military capabilities of NATO allies operating in the High North.
118. Close cooperation between Canadian, Norwegian and UK P8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft also increases operational effectiveness, and the Trinity House defence agreement with Germany allows its P8s to operate

166 Ministry of Defence, [UK-Norway Lunna House Agreement on Defence](#), 6 August 2026

from Scotland into the GIUK Gap.¹⁶⁷ The recent decision by Denmark to buy two aircraft should also give the country access to a common operating and intelligence picture in the High North which Europe will need to build if it is unable to guarantee access to advanced US satellite and other surveillance systems operating in the region.

- 119. However, export success also creates a capacity question. If British shipyards, suppliers and specialist workforces cannot expand quickly enough, export orders could compete with Royal Navy requirements rather than reinforce them. The Government should therefore explain how major naval exports, including Type 26 and any future uncrewed systems, will increase industrial capacity rather than delay delivery of capabilities needed by the UK.
- 120. If the Hybrid Navy proves effective, uncrewed systems could become a significant export opportunity, particularly for northern European allies that face similar problems of scale, distance, crew shortages and critical undersea infrastructure protection. However, adapted correctly, the MOD believes these capabilities are ‘inherently portable’,¹⁶⁸ relevant on global operations and for international partners; for example, for long-duration missions in the South Atlantic or the Indo-Pacific.
- 121. The most relevant systems for the High North are likely to be underwater sensors, XLUUVs, seabed surveillance platforms and uncrewed surface vessels able to contribute to ASW, infrastructure protection and persistent monitoring. The export value of these systems will depend less on novelty than on whether they can operate reliably in whatever climatic, geographic or electronically contested conditions exist in the theatre into which they are deployed.

122. CONCLUSION

Defence exports can strengthen the UK’s position in the High North when they help closely aligned allies field capabilities that are interoperable with the Royal Navy and are suited to northern operations. The Norway Type 26 agreement is a clear example: if delivered well, it could expand NATO’s ASW capacity on the northern flank and deepen UK-Norwegian operational and industrial integration. However, export success must not come at the expense of the Royal Navy’s own Type 26 frigate delivery timelines. The government must ensure that naval exports expand industrial capacity and allied capability, rather than competing with UK requirements for scarce ships, systems and skilled labour.

167 Ministry of Defence, [Landmark UK-Germany defence agreement to strengthen our security and prosperity](#), 22 October 2024

168 Ministry of Defence, [\(DHN0043\)](#), p.5

123.

RECOMMENDATION

In its response to this report the government should set out how major naval export programmes, including the Norway Type 26 agreement and any future uncrewed maritime systems, will support High North deterrence while protecting Royal Navy capabilities. This should include an assessment of their effect on UK delivery timelines, industrial capacity, shared training, sustainment, interoperability and the availability of critical anti-submarine warfare and uncrewed capabilities.

Conclusion

124. CONCLUSION

The MOD has recognised that the gradual opening of the High North in recent years has made the defence and security of the region a high priority. Failure to deter Russia in the region, particularly from underwater threats, puts at particular risk sub-sea data cables and energy pipes in adjacent UK waters during peacetime. Failure to counter Russia in the High North during hostilities would also threaten the UK population and entire military and civilian critical national infrastructure, including the nuclear deterrent and Atlantic resupply routes from the US.

125. CONCLUSION

Government is already investing in the Hybrid Navy and Atlantic Bastion concepts to deter and, if necessary, defeat those threats in the High North. However, Royal Navy equipment readiness and platform numbers in particular are currently far worse than the government's stated requirements. With 2030 identified as a key date by which to be ready to deter or defeat any Russian threat, dramatic progress is required before the end of the decade to improve the availability and capabilities of the UK's Armed Forces for operations in the High North.

Conclusions and recommendations

Why the High North matters

1. As the Northern Sea Route becomes more accessible, Russia may seek to turn its control of the route into a de facto monopoly. A transit by a UK state-owned vessel through international waters could help uphold freedom of navigation rights under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, but this action would need to be carefully assessed against the operational and escalatory risks. (Conclusion, Paragraph 16)
2. The government should prepare options for a UK state-owned vessel to transit the Northern Sea Route in support of international freedom of navigation rights, including an assessment of the legal basis, operational risks and potential Russian response. (Recommendation, Paragraph 17)

High North policy challenges

3. UK leadership of the Joint Expeditionary Force and NATO's Joint Force Command Norfolk offers an opportunity to address any apparent overlap between these groups to ensure resources are effectively deployed to enhance deterrence and maximise warfighting capability. Although the Joint Expeditionary Force was originally intended to operate across the spectrum of conflict, it currently offers a quick response force to counter threats below the NATO Article 5 threshold, in the expectation that NATO would deter any escalation to warfighting. However, with less certainty around US commitment to collective NATO defence, the Joint Expeditionary Force's more minimal capabilities could be seen as less of a deterrent, leaving it potentially exposed if an incident threatens to escalate. (Conclusion, Paragraph 45)
4. Within a year of assuming leadership of NATO's Joint Force Command Norfolk, the government should reassess the added value the JEF brings to European security. Either it believes the JEF provides distinct value alongside NATO and should therefore strengthen and align the two more closely, or it does not, and should focus its finite resources on NATO. (Recommendation, Paragraph 46)

5. If the government believes that the JEF provides a valuable additional capability alongside NATO structures, and Canada is admitted into the JEF, then focusing more on the High North may well be the most effective use of resources. With Sweden and Finland having joined NATO, eight of the nine countries around the Baltic Sea are now members of the Alliance, offering significant capabilities of their own in that region. (Conclusion, Paragraph 50)
6. The government should consider whether the JEF focuses on the High North, concentrating finite resources on maximising its ability to operate more frequently in the harsh climate there while undertaking the demanding anti-submarine mission, rather than operating as often in the Baltic as previously. (Recommendation, Paragraph 51)
7. The United Kingdom has committed to acquiring a sub-strategic nuclear capability to enhance deterrence, although how this aligns with the security of the High North is less clear. To ensure the capability is effective it will probably be necessary for the RAF to occasionally rehearse forward deploying the nuclear-capable F-35A aircraft to the High North. Recipient countries will, therefore, need to be fully aligned and supportive of Britain's extended deterrence strategy. Uniquely, the UK already declares its existing nuclear forces to NATO, but despite consuming over a fifth of the defence budget the MOD does not maximise the political and economic value of this considerable financial and military commitment. (Conclusion, Paragraph 59)
8. Alongside its response to this report the Ministry of Defence should provide the Defence Committee with a classified briefing on how the Department intends to enhance nuclear deterrence through the acquisition of its new sub-strategic capability, including any discussions with regional allies on enhancing extended deterrence in the High North, including through the forward deployment of the capability. Furthermore, given the enormous financial burden of operating the deterrent, the MOD should remind Allies more frequently of the unique nuclear capability the UK declares to NATO in the defence of Europe. (Recommendation, Paragraph 60)

Royal Navy readiness for High North operations

9. Measured against its own military requirements, the Ministry of Defence has a serious anti-submarine warfare gap. Towed array sonar-equipped frigates are central to detecting and tracking hostile submarines in the High North, the North Atlantic and UK waters, including around the UK's nuclear deterrent bases. Reducing the fleet to five such vessels against a requirement for eight weakens the UK's ability to respond to the Russian

submarine and underwater sabotage threat and raises questions about whether the transition from the Type 23 to the Type 26 frigate capability has been properly managed. (Conclusion, Paragraph 73)

10. Given the critical role of anti-submarine operations in the High North, the government should ensure no further towed array-equipped Type 23 Frigates leave service until they are replaced on a one-for-one basis by the new Type 26 vessels. (Recommendation, Paragraph 74)
11. The Royal Marines' Arctic expertise is a significant national strength, but it cannot compensate for shortfalls in the naval platforms needed to deploy, protect and sustain operations in the region. The UK's ability to deter and respond to threats in the High North depends not only on future programmes, but also on the readiness of the Royal Navy's existing ships, submarines and specialist forces. Russian submarine and seabed warfare capabilities based in the High North pose direct risks to the North Atlantic, UK waters and the nuclear deterrent. Evidence of low availability among destroyers, frigates and attack submarines therefore raises serious questions about whether the UK can meet its High North commitments before new capabilities enter service. (Conclusion, Paragraph 82)
12. When responding to this report the government should provide the Defence Committee with a plan setting out how the Ministry of Defence will improve the availability of the Royal Navy's frigates, destroyers and attack submarines before 2030. This update might be presented at a classified level, but the Committee will expect a version to be subsequently publicly available. (Recommendation, Paragraph 83)
13. The UK has allowed its under-ice submarine capability to lapse at a time when the High North has become strategically more important. Without a credible under-ice capability, the UK is less able to contest Russian freedom of action in the High North and risks being forced into a more defensive posture. Russia can then use the ice to conceal and protect its own submarines, while threatening NATO sea lanes, UK critical infrastructure and the nuclear deterrent. (Conclusion, Paragraph 88)
14. Alongside its response to this report the government should brief the Defence Committee on progress it is making to re-establish as rapidly as possible an under-ice capability for at least some of the Astute Class submarines so they can operate effectively in the High North and regularly exercise there to maintain that capability. (Recommendation, Paragraph 89)

High North capability investment in the longer-term

15. To offer as credible a deterrent as possible to dissuade Russian aggression in the High North, NATO needs effective military capabilities. Evidence suggests there would be critical military gaps if the United States were not involved in countering such aggression. Given the uncertainty around the latter's commitment during any future crisis, the UK can play a significant role within NATO by helping identify these capability gaps, and then ensuring these deficiencies are addressed. (Conclusion, Paragraph 100)
16. Alongside its response to this report the Ministry of Defence should provide the Committee with a classified assessment of the capability gaps that would arise in a 2030 High North conflict scenario in which the UK and regional allies had to operate without US support. This assessment should identify the most serious gaps in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, satellite data, anti-submarine warfare, command and control, deep strike, air and missile defence, cyber resilience, logistics and munitions; assess their operational impact; and set out which gaps can be mitigated by 2030 through UK, bilateral, European or NATO action. (Recommendation, Paragraph 101)
17. We are not yet persuaded that the £1.3 billion allocated to the Hybrid Navy programme will be sufficient to develop, procure and integrate its five planned classes of maritime platform: four uncrewed classes and the crewed Common Combat Vessel. The government should set out in its response to this report the basis on which it judges the current funding allocation to be adequate. (Recommendation, Paragraph 108)
18. Uncrewed systems could help the Royal Navy generate the mass and persistence needed for sustained operations in the High North, the North Atlantic and around critical undersea infrastructure. They could be especially valuable for surveillance, anti-submarine sensing and seabed protection, where crewed platforms are scarce and expensive. However, the High North is an exceptionally demanding environment for autonomous systems. Cold, ice, long ranges, degraded communications, poor satellite geometry and electronic interference could all reduce their effectiveness. We are concerned that the MOD's Hybrid Navy concept must not become a substitute for crewed capability before uncrewed systems have been proven in the specific conditions of the High North. (Conclusion, Paragraph 113)
19. Within a year the government should set out how it will robustly test and validate the Hybrid Navy's principal uncrewed systems in High North conditions before they are relied upon for Atlantic Bastion or other operational tasks. This should include cold-weather performance,

endurance, communications resilience, resistance to jamming and spoofing, protection against capture or reverse engineering, and integration with crewed ships, submarines and allied forces. (Recommendation, Paragraph 114)

20. Defence exports can strengthen the UK's position in the High North when they help closely aligned allies field capabilities that are interoperable with the Royal Navy and are suited to northern operations. The Norway Type 26 agreement is a clear example: if delivered well, it could expand NATO's ASW capacity on the northern flank and deepen UK-Norwegian operational and industrial integration. However, export success must not come at the expense of the Royal Navy's own Type 26 frigate delivery timelines. The government must ensure that naval exports expand industrial capacity and allied capability, rather than competing with UK requirements for scarce ships, systems and skilled labour. (Conclusion, Paragraph 122)
21. In its response to this report the government should set out how major naval export programmes, including the Norway Type 26 agreement and any future uncrewed maritime systems, will support High North deterrence while protecting Royal Navy capabilities. This should include an assessment of their effect on UK delivery timelines, industrial capacity, shared training, sustainment, interoperability and the availability of critical anti-submarine warfare and uncrewed capabilities. (Recommendation, Paragraph 123)

Conclusion

22. The MOD has recognised that the gradual opening of the High North in recent years has made the defence and security of the region a high priority. Failure to deter Russia in the region, particularly from underwater threats, puts at particular risk sub-sea data cables and energy pipes in adjacent UK waters during peacetime. Failure to counter Russia in the High North during hostilities would also threaten the UK population and entire military and civilian critical national infrastructure, including the nuclear deterrent and Atlantic resupply routes from the US. (Conclusion, Paragraph 124)
23. Government is already investing in the Hybrid Navy and Atlantic Bastion concepts to deter and, if necessary, defeat those threats in the High North. However, Royal Navy equipment readiness and platform numbers in particular are currently far worse than the government's stated requirements. With 2030 identified as a key date by which to be ready to deter or defeat any Russian threat, dramatic progress is required before the end of the decade to improve the availability and capabilities of the UK's Armed Forces for operations in the High North. (Conclusion, Paragraph 125)

Formal minutes

Tuesday 13 October 2026

Members present

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi, in the Chair

Lincoln Jopp

Mike Martin

Ian Roome

Michelle Scrogham

Derek Twigg

Defence in the High North

Draft Report (*Defence in the High North*), proposed by Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 125 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Second Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134)

Adjournment

Adjourned till Tuesday 13 October 2026 at 2.45pm.

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 3 March 2026

Professor Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, Professor of War Studies, Loughborough University; **Dr Marc De Vore**, Senior Lecturer at the School of International Relations, University of St Andrews; **Ed Arnold**, Senior Research Fellow, European Security, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) [Q1–48](#)

Tuesday 28 April 2026

Professor Katarzyna Zysk, Professor of International Relations and Contemporary History, Norwegian Institute For Defence Studies; **Professor David Blagden**, Professor of International Security & Strategy, The University of Exeter [Q49–92](#)

Wednesday 15 July 2026

Louise Sandher-Jones MP, Minister for the Armed Forces, Ministry of Defence; **Brigadier Jeremy Lamb MC**, Head, Euro-Atlantic Security, Ministry of Defence; **Chris Keay**, Deputy Director, Euro-Atlantic Security, Ministry of Defence [Q93–190](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

DHN numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

1	ARX Robotics	DHN0026
2	Anduril Industries UK	DHN0010
3	Arctic Research and Development Limited	DHN0021
4	Avioniq AB	DHN0028
5	BAE Systems	DHN0032
6	Babcock International Group	DHN0017
7	Bennett, Dr Mia (Associate Professor, University of Washington)	DHN0030
8	Bittium	DHN0029
9	Brunel University London- Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies; and Nord University, Norway - Nord Arctic	DHN0040
10	Buxton, Dr Carol (Space Policy Consultant, Challenger Research)	DHN0038
11	Buziuk, Hleb (Independent public policy and governance researcher, FairGo CIC)	DHN0001
12	DefenceSynergia	DHN0006
13	DeltaQuad	DHN0035
14	DeVore, Dr. Marc (Senior Lecturer, University of St. Andrews); Harkness, Professor Kristen (Professor, University of St. Andrews); Young, Dr. Tun Jan (Lecturer, University of St. Andrews); and Rice, Dr. Haley (Fellow, University of St. Andrews)	DHN0034
15	Graeme Downie MP	DHN0023
16	ECAPS AB	DHN0016
17	Cyrus Rowshangohar	DHN0005
18	Freeman Air & Space Institute, King's College London; and Air & Space Power Association	DHN0037

19	Heron, Mr Anthony (Research Associate, The Arctic Institute)	DHN0002
20	KBR	DHN0007
21	Katila, Dr Anna (Presidential Fellow in International Politics, City St George's, University of London)	DHN0008
22	Kennedy-Pipe, Professor Caroline (Professor, Loughborough University); Dodds, Professor Klaus (Faculty Dean, Middlesex University); and Depledge, Dr Duncan (Senior Lecturer, Loughborough University)	DHN0015
23	Kraken Technology Group	DHN0039
24	Lentzos, Dr Filippa (Reader in Science and International Security, King's College London); Bowsher, Dr Gemma (Senior Research Associate, King's College London); and Fall, Dr Fawzia (Research Fellow, King's College London)	DHN0020
25	Lockheed Martin UK	DHN0041
26	Lydon, Mr Andrew (Not specifically relevant to defence)	DHN0014
27	Ministry of Defence	DHN0044
28	Ministry of Defence	DHN0043
29	New Eurasian Strategies Centre (NEST Centre)	DHN0027
30	Overton Advisory	DHN0011
31	PentenAmio	DHN0024
32	Planet	DHN0036
33	Powell, Professor Richard C. (Director of the Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge)	DHN0031
34	Royal Aeronautical Society	DHN0022
35	Shearwater Aerospace	DHN0012
36	Shield AI UK	DHN0025
37	Stark Defence UK	DHN0033
38	The Council on Geostrategy	DHN0018
39	The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)	DHN0042
40	Thornton, Dr Rod (Reader in Russian Defence and Security Studies, King's College London)	DHN0019
41	Wieslander, Dr Anna (Director for Northern Europe, Atlantic Council)	DHN0009
42	Windracers Limited	DHN0013

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

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1st Special	AUKUS: Government Response	HC 520

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Number	Title	Reference
8th	AUKUS	HC 841
7th	Pre-Appointment Hearing: Armed Forces Commissioner	HC 1428
6th	The UK contribution to European Security	HC 520
5th	Defence in the Grey Zone	HC 405
4th	The Armed Forces Covenant	HC 572
3rd	The Global Combat Air Programme	HC 598
2nd	Developing AI capacity and expertise in UK defence	HC 590
1st	Service Accommodation	HC 406
6th Special	The UK contribution to European Security: Government Response	HC 1658
5th Special	Defence in the Grey Zone: Government Response	HC 1326
4th Special	Government response to The Armed Forces Covenant report	HC 1034

Number	Title	Reference
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2nd Special	The Global Combat Air Programme: Government Response	HC 799
1st Special	Service Accommodation: Government Response	HC 751