

Written evidence submitted by Dr Peter Hough (DIS0041)

Written submission for the Scottish Affairs Committee inquiry Defence in Scotland: The North Atlantic and the High North 2022-23

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The Arctic has grown in geopolitical significance over recent decades largely as a consequence of the profound effects climate change has had on the region. Retreating ice sheets have revealed potential economic opportunities for extracting fuels and minerals, as well as opening up new sea lanes previously abandoned as infeasible, awakening the interest of governments and businesses from within and outside of the High North. However, to date, an Arctic landscape has not prompted the resource wars widely predicted in the 2000s as the region's governments have looked more to cooperative solutions than confrontation. However, as with many facets of international relations, the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine threatens to undo decades of fruitful co-management of the High North and usher in a new kind of literal Cold War.

Geopolitical tensions have heightened but the Arctic is still not a likely arena for war to break out. With Finland and Sweden poised to join NATO all non-Russian territory north of the Arctic Circle will be firmly within the Western alliance and realistically beyond the reach of any northward adventurism from Putin. At the same time, Russia already has a firm foothold in the Arctic and would stand to lose more in terms of disrupting business than it could gain by stoking conflict over territories or sea regions of contention, such as Svalbard or the Lomonosov Ridge. Nevertheless, Russian military activity in the High North has intensified in the last few years and it is obvious that the region will return to something of a Cold War arena with revived East-West divisions diluting the promising trans-Arctic cooperation of the past thirty years centred on the Arctic Council.

The UK has played a modest role in that trans-Arctic cooperation since the 1990s, as an observer state at the Arctic Council and a close ally of most of the Arctic states. It is in the interest of both the UK and those northern allies that this role is expanded in response to the heightening of tensions, as well as in the cause of safeguarding commercial interests in the region. This was acknowledged by the UK government back in 2018 in the welcome launch of the Arctic Policy Framework and the deterioration in relations with Moscow since then makes this all the more apparent.

An enhanced military and diplomatic presence for the UK in the High North is in the British national interest and something that would also be welcomed by all but one of the eight Arctic states. In security terms the UK has 'credit in the bank' with its northern allies from recent defence developments and initiatives in the Arctic and wider northern domain. British leadership of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), since it became fully operational in 2018, has put the country at the centre of security cooperation in the European Arctic arena, extending its importance beyond that of being a NATO member. The Ukraine War has accentuated the importance of this regional role. British military support for Estonia, bilateral security guarantees to Finland and Sweden in advance of those countries NATO accession and prominent participation in NATO exercises, such as Cold Response in 2022, have served to illustrate this. Beyond the JEF, the relatively strong British stance against Russia over Ukraine compared to Germany or France, for example, has also been reassuring for the Nordic states who are more pressingly threatened by Putin's adventurism.

Diplomatically, the UK has already carved out a useful role in Arctic diplomacy and a development of this would be welcomed by its Northern allies. In a 2000 interview I conducted with a Foreign and Commonwealth Office official it was noted that the British observer role at the Arctic Council was generally viewed by member-state delegations as a constructive one, which was not always the case with other observers (Kelly 2020). Arctic diplomacy represents one dimension of foreign affairs at least where 'Brexit' has opened up new opportunities. The EU has never had observer status at the Arctic Council since Arctic indigenous group representations (who also have observer status) have had reservations about the European stance on matters such as seal hunting. The current negotiation of a UK-Greenland Free Trade Area, whilst unlikely to yield major British economic returns, is hence illustrative of new post-Brexit opportunities in a soft power sense. The Inuit home rule administration in Nuuk welcome engaging in commercial foreign policy ventures such as this, independent of Copenhagen. Being free of EU associations (unlike Denmark, Sweden and Finland) and not carrying the baggage of its imperialist legacy that it does in most parts of the world- and that many of the Arctic states have in the High North- gives Britain unique opportunities in the Arctic. The future of the Arctic Council is obviously now in doubt but it is inevitable that new fora for diplomatic cooperation for the non-Russian states of the region will emerge and the UK should strive to be involved in this.

Scotland has an important role to play in an expanded UK security and diplomatic presence in the High North. In addition to the likely expanded presence for the navy and RAF in their Scots bases, the Arctic represents a logical arena for devolved diplomacy from Edinburgh to be exercised. The publication of the policy document Arctic Connections by the Scottish government in 2019 made it plain that developing deeper cultural connections with their northern neighbours was seen as serving their interests (Scotland 2019). Scottish and UK interests would be served in looking to develop new initiatives linking up with Arctic cultural and diplomatic events. For example, The Arctic Circle Assembly- which links politicians, scientists, businesses, NGOs and indigenous groups with an interest in the High North- hosts city forums outside of the region. Abu Dhabi, Tokyo and Berlin are hosting the next of these events. Could Edinburgh, Glasgow or Aberdeen be proposed as future hosts?

The evident increase in interest in the Arctic from outside powers is sometimes portrayed as problematic and contrary to British interests but, in my view, this is not necessarily the case.

One point of departure I have from the MoD's latest policy statement on Arctic Policy is the assertion that a growing Chinese presence in the region constitutes a threat to peace and British interests (MoD). The Ukraine War fallout pushing Russia and China closer together is an obvious Western anxiety, but this should not have any great bearing on Arctic diplomacy. Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic will likely increase with Western energy companies pulling out of cooperative Arctic ventures in Siberia and Beijing keen to reap the rewards of opening up the Northern Sea route above Russia. However, most Chinese interest in the Arctic thus far has been in fostering economic ties with Greenland and Iceland and they have to tread carefully since their role in the region is essentially by invitation. Beijing's Polar Silk Road policy envisions maintaining open sea routes through the Arctic, building cooperative commercial relationships with the Arctic states and indigenous peoples and advancing polar scientific cooperation. None of these aims are contrary to British interests. Russian estrangement from Arctic diplomacy is now perhaps inevitable (though circumstances could change) but the overall lesson from the politics of the High North in recent decades is that cooperation is in the mutual and global interest. A prominent, though cooperative diplomatic and security role in the Arctic is in the British and wider interest.

Recommendations:

- Continue to build the UK's defence presence and leadership in the High North.
- Further develop the UK's presence in Arctic diplomacy.
- Develop Scotland as a key hub for UK Arctic diplomacy
- Engage constructively with China in Arctic diplomacy and commerce

Kelly, C. (2020) Personal communication with Arctic Policy Officer, Polar Regions Department of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, February 13th

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