

## **Written evidence submitted by Professor Caroline Kennedy-Pipe (DIS0047)**

### **Scotland and the High North**

#### **(1) Background.**

During the Cold War, the Arctic was the site of intense nuclear competition between the Soviet Union and the Western alliance. Under the ice, nuclear submarines played cat and mouse while the landmass was home to strategic sites such as the American base at Thule in Greenland and the Soviet naval base in Murmansk. During the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and a decade after the collapse of Communism though that rivalry seemed but a distant memory: attention had turned to the events and challenges posed by 9/11. The campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq meant that war had become the business of the arid desert not of ice. In comparison the frozen (albeit thawing) Arctic region seemed peaceable, a zone of cooperation and a place apart from international politics. The establishment of the Arctic Council in 1996 signified that the eight Arctic states including Russia were intent on peaceful activities concentrating on the links between coast guards, the welfare of the indigenous peoples and a growing awareness of the damage that climate change was inflicting on the Arctic. Notably, the Council expressly avoided discussion of hard security. Yet the Arctic although unique in terms of its flora and fauna is not a place apart. Climate change, the melting of sea ice, demand for resources, and the war in Ukraine means that the Arctic is a space of geopolitical competition and rising tension.

#### **(2) Climate Change.**

The Arctic is melting. Sea ice is eroding, oceans are rising, and the ice sheet over Greenland is disappearing more parts of the Arctic may be ice free for longer periods by 2040. Northern high latitudes play an integral role in the earth's systems. They drive the oceanic and atmospheric currents that shape weather patterns, influence sea levels and maintain the productivity of the oceans, rainforests, and agricultural lands. This is the very life blood which sustains communities and livelihoods around the world.. Because of warming, the Arctic is literally 'opening-up' to the wider world (noting of course that the Arctic has been 'open' to indigenous peoples for thousands of years). The prospect of trade routes and resources have long tantalised and attracted governments and businesses into the region, with the opening of maritime passageways and strategic corridors, as well as the prospect of access to valuable energy resources on the seabed, the idea of the Arctic as a refuge from global politics, is fanciful; non- Arctic states, including the UK – and within that Scotland - with pretensions to engage with both climate and Polar resources have proliferated.

China has been steadily affirming over many years now a non-military presence in Arctic affairs, declaring in January 2018 that it was a 'near Arctic state'. Also in 2018, the Turkish Ministry of Science, Industry and Technology devised the country's first Arctic strategy. Greece too has more recently asserted its historic ties with the High North. It is commonplace to hear from these newer players that the Arctic rather than being the province of the Arctic 8 alone, should be regarded as a 'global commons', a space for all states to traverse. From this view, the claim is that proximity to the Arctic is less relevant than the connections made by climate, by trade and by science. Scotland stands partially outside of these debates as of course it is proximate to the Arctic as a near neighbour and in terms of these debates is bound to its Arctic neighbours by geography but of course by cultural, social and historic links.

### **(3) The Russia Question.**

The war in Ukraine has transformed the shape of geopolitics in the High North. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, but with the recent 2022 invasion, Western states believe that President Putin's ambitions are not limited to Donbass or even Ukraine but extend further to the north and east. Such concerns are valid. The Arctic has always occupied a special place in terms of Russian history and geopolitics. The idea of a Russian Eurasia as espoused by the geographer and philosopher Alexander Dugin (until recently close to Vladimir Putin) placed Moscow firmly at the centre – the very heartland of Europe and Asia. 'Russia Eurasia' extends into the European Arctic with an emphasis on the North and East Atlantic approaches which provide naval access from Murmansk into a wider world. Note here that Ukraine territory is also vital for Russian control of the heartland.

These security challenges have meant that the United States after years of relative disinterest in the region, or what has been termed 'polar apathy' is now reinforcing its Arctic credentials. After the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, and a concentration on the primacy of Indo-Pacific, during the summer of 2022, the US Senate, announced substantive initiatives for the Arctic: A Senate bill -the 'Arctic Commitment Act' called for significant investment in both Arctic research and infrastructure: this envisaged the development of deep-water ports in Alaska as well as scientific cooperation with other Arctic states but of course excluding Russia. This takes US investment a step further than increased participation in military training and exercises in the European Arctic (and the return to Keflavik) witnessed since c.2014. The US challenges Russian absolutist control of the Northern Sea Route, (NSR) a vital route along the Arctic coastal rim above Russia which runs from the Bering Straits to the Barents. Over the longer term the NSR will for longer periods increasingly ice free. While the prospect of a bustling commercial route may be some years away, the NSR provides Russia with the ability to export raw materials to China and sustain the economic relationship with Beijing as Western sanctions bite. (Russian assertiveness over the NSR raises the issue of the right of freedom of navigation across Arctic waters: this is a question not just for Moscow but one that also

preoccupies Canada and the US over the current and future management of the Northwest Passage (NWP)). Beijing also has an interest in these debates.

Because of the strategic importance of parts of the Arctic, President Trump in 2019 famously offered to 'buy' Greenland from Denmark at the time causing much offence although President Truman had much earlier made a similar offer. My Loughborough colleague Dr Duncan Depledge has in his work analysed how NATO countries, together with Sweden and Finland, have responded to Russian militarism detailing the uptick in the number of military exercises both in the Arctic and within the Baltic region to demonstrate collective resolve. (Operation Trident Juncture in 2018 was NATO's biggest war game taking place in Norway). So, even before the Spring of 2022 we had witnessed stronger US diplomacy in Arctic affairs. There will be more change which will strengthen NATO in the Arctic. There is the suggestion that the US should finally ratify the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS): this after years of prevarication and argument on the issue of whether the US would benefit from joining UNCLOS. Once again, this debate has been overtaken by the effects of climate change which as critics of UNCLOS point out means that oceans and boundaries are in constant flux. More pertinently Article 234 of UNCLOS created a special status for ice-covered waters which permits coastal states to adopt and enforce non-discriminatory laws for vessels moving across ice covered areas. Just what will constitute 'ice-covered waters' in a melting Arctic will inspire debate (at present, it means waters covered for "most of the year"). There is also the issue of capabilities. Icebreakers even in melting waters are indispensable in inhospitable Arctic waters. The US currently possesses just two icebreakers. This number is dwarfed by the Russian icebreaker fleet which stands at fifty-three, eleven of which are nuclear powered. China has indicated that it will construct the world's largest icebreaker signifying its obvious appetite for polar politics.

Beijing has sought to use its considerable soft power to pursue an 'Arctic silk road' or 'Arctic Belt and Road.' This includes attempting to purchase or build infrastructure in Greenland, a country rich in raw minerals. In 2016, the Chinese mining company, General Nice Group tried to buy an abandoned

naval base in Greenland. This venture like others such as the offer to build and renew the airport outside of Nuuk were blocked by the Danish Government and in the case of the airport construction also denied by American pressure on Copenhagen.

The relationship between China and Iceland (a founding member of NATO) is illustrative of how Beijing had gained greater influence. Indeed, the politics of a small state like Iceland is an example that an independent Greenland or an independent Scotland might emulate. Just after the monetary crisis of 2008, Chinese investment rescued the fragile Icelandic economy. This was followed by a series of initiatives such as the establishment of a Chinese Northern Lights research facility in 2016. In 2018 both countries signed a \$250 million deal to provide Beijing with valuable geothermal expertise. Despite this, Iceland has permitted the military build-up at its Keflavik base and signalled its solidarity with NATO allies. Given that the US Air Force has announced a new Arctic strategy, Iceland is important in terms of its geopolitical position at the 'entrance' to the European Arctic. Scotland too is crucial to the defence of the entrance to this part of the Arctic.

#### **(4) Science.**

It is the scientific credentials of a state that permit entry into the Arctic Council. Science and research are of course crucial to any understanding of the changing worlds at both poles. In this respect the sanctions regime placed on Russia has had repercussions. After the invasion of Ukraine, there has been a collapse in funding for research collaboration with Russian scientists and social scientists. In this age of climate change, it will be difficult to say the least to work on polar affairs without the state (and its experts) which holds more than fifty per cent of the Arctic coastline. Long-term monitoring of permafrost for example depends upon access to Russian-based data. A knowledge gap has thus been created for scientists and those engaged for example in UK science. Given the leading role of Scottish institutions and groups in Arctic science this deficiency in knowledge needs to be addressed in terms of how knowledge can be harvested without the

expertise of Russian colleagues and think tanks. We should note here the growing closeness in Arctic research between Russia and China. Beijing can only benefit from such cooperation in terms of its Arctic credentials. This points to an urgent need for funding in terms of University research in terms of Arctic science and social science. See attached paper by Siegert et al.

**(5) Defence: England, Scotland, the UK and the Arctic.**

Because of its geographic position the UK is the 'Arctic's nearest neighbour.' Historically the UK has multiple connections in the Arctic. In scientific terms engagement with the North Pole has a well-documented lineage and today the UK produces more Arctic science outputs than any other non-Arctic state. The Royal Navy has played a significant role supporting both exploration and exploitation of the Arctic. British forces fought in the Arctic during the Napoleonic wars, the Crimean War and two World Wars. By the end of the 1960s, Royal Marines rotating through Norway for cold weather warfare training and SSNs on patrol in Arctic waters were a near-permanent fixture of competition with the USSR. Meanwhile at home, a network of airbases, radar and early warning installations were established to keep a watch on threats from the north. Indeed, the UK has been, and remains, the most significant non-Arctic military power in the region.

UK claims to the Northern polar connection rest at least in part on its geopolitical position as well as its long history of engagement with the Arctic. The UK forms the closest landfall south of the Arctic and it is the closest neighbour at just 400 km south. The issue which has emerged in recent times is that of course it is Scotland not England which provides the proximity to the North Pole. Scotland is affected by climate change; it has recorded warming seas of 1oC over the last twenty years resulting in changing ecosystems with impact on Scottish fisheries and declining Puffin populations. It has reason to be closely engaged in what happens in and around the Arctic.

Since the Scottish referendum and the 'nearly' vote for devolution, those at Holyrood have mounted a spirited and successful campaign to present Scotland as a key 'near Arctic' marine transport and logistics partner. Stressing cultural, economic and energy synergies, the SNP has effectively

pressed a campaign of affinity with its Arctic neighbours. As the Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon likes to quip, 'the nation of Scotland is geographically closer to the Arctic than it is to London.' The prospect of Scottish independence raises a host of issues. The first and most obvious is where the independent nuclear deterrent system – Trident- would be based. Since 1962, British Governments have presented the nuclear capability as a significant contribution to the overall security of NATO. It is a key military asset which alongside its seat on the UN Security Council enables Britain to be regarded as, if not a great power, then certainly a significant defence power. Should the Scots vote against remaining within the Union, Trident would have to find a new home and Westminster would have to place its claim to be a near friend not on proximity but on its other credentials of history, exploration and trade. That is not impossible with consideration of other 'homes' for the fleet including the US or France. It could also be that some form of lease-back arrangement could be negotiated for continuation of the Scottish nuclear base. This will depend on who governs Scotland and what the future of Scottish defence may be or may be negotiated. Given Mr Putin's recent threats to cross the nuclear threshold in Ukraine and given the upscaling of nuclear tensions in the Arctic region careful thought would need to be given to where a non-nuclear Scotland would sit in terms of deterrence and alliance cohesion vis-à-vis Russian threats. As noted above the UK contribution to NATO as a full spectrum military power raises a question over where an independent Scotland would sit outside of NATO.

This could be highly problematic and swim against the geostrategic tide. Only very recently the UK announced its forthcoming 'third' Arctic Policy Framework to demonstrate solidarity with allies and partners in the High North and on the Eastern flank. The accession to NATO of the traditionally neutral states (but latterly NATO partner states) Finland and Sweden has both expanded the alliance in terms of numbers but also extended the reach of the alliance right up to Russian borders. This has meant that the geopolitical situation in Europe has been transformed. NATO has grown in number and demonstrated a cohesion that has surprised many commentators: this despite the very recent controversies over the supply of German tanks to the defence of Ukraine. It seems evidence that

small states such as Finland or states less advanced in terms of defence infrastructure remain open to Russian mischief making whether in terms of cyber attack or political manipulation as we recently witnessed with the unmasking of a Russian spy in a Norwegian University.

In a defence and security sense Scotland and England are tied together. When announcing the DAS, the then Defence Secretary, Gavin Williamson highlighted the central role that Britain's new fleet of P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft, based out of RAF Lossiemouth (with a brand new £132 million facility to house the personnel who will operate the aircraft ) in Scotland, would play in the High North. The RAF received initially aircraft, with a further five due to be delivered by the close of 2021.<sup>1</sup> All the aircraft were delivered by January 2022 (see RUSI paper). In the summer of 2021, the UK Government announced an additional £233 million for the upkeep of the Poseidon fleet with the signing of a new contract with Boeing, thus paving the way for new jobs at Lossiemouth. Scottish shipyards also gained contracts for 3 Type 26 Frigates, 5 Type 31 Frigates and 5 River Batch 2 OPVs and were slated to receive contracts for a further 5 Type 26s and potentially as of today an unknown number of Type 32 Frigates as well. This had the added political benefit of allowing Westminster to point to the benefits for the Scottish workforce of the lucrative defence contracts providing skilled employment in the country.

#### (5) Technology.

The Arctic remains a vast inhospitable place in which to operate: swathes of dangerous and uncharted spaces render military activity both dangerous and expensive. While investment in maritime capabilities continues in the UK there are also key questions over how technology will transform this melting military and political environment. The UK Armed Forces (like many modern

militaries) is placing a greater focus on the development of high-tech capabilities especially those

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/news/moray/3124807/sixth-raf-lossiemouth-poseidon-plane-is-christened-guernseys-reply-to-continue-historic-link-to-channel-island/> and <https://www.raf.mod.uk/news/articles/fifth-raf-poseidon-arrives-at-lossiemouth/>



that seek to exploit recent advances in remotely operated systems and AI. Military drones, are already deployed in parts of the Arctic and across the Wider North. Russia has in the region led the way with drone deployments, but the US military recently began operating Global Hawks from Alaska. Iceland's leasing of Israeli Hermes UAS and the Danish military's experimentation with surveillance UAS to secure Greenland are also representative of a shift towards autonomous drone systems.

In line with these developments, the RAF is expected to deploy its new fleet of advanced Protector military drones to fulfil Arctic missions (for example, for surveillance in the GIUK-N Gap) in partnership with key allies, such as Norway. These drones could be flown from RAF Lossiemouth in Scotland, Keflavik in Iceland, Bodø in Norway, or perhaps even Thule in Greenland to ensure the UK fulfils its security obligations, and strengthens defence cooperation with its regional allies in the High North. Scotland is of course far more than just a pragmatic choice for bases but key to the defence of the UK-Greenland- Iceland gap. Although drones can in theory be controlled from thousands of miles away, they do need to be located in the geographic vicinity.

#### Reflections.

The High North (or what might be termed the 'Broader North'<sup>i</sup> to include the Baltic states is in a period of transformation. This is because of climate change and the ambitions of Putin's Russia. Necessarily the region has become a focus of interest. There are though other trends. There are 'secessionist' politics in parts of the Arctic such as the rising tide of Greenlandic assertiveness and a desire to moderate its historic tutelage to Copenhagen. Any break away would be important not least because Denmark would no longer be an Arctic state. Post Brexit politics throughout the British Isles has also thrown up an array of challenges – not least that of independence for Scotland and a different future for the island of Ireland. These matters are ultimately for the people to decide: a serious business given the weighing of hard economic factors and defence politics against the allure

of nationalist and historic politics. Geopolitics dictates the centrality of Scotland to defence not just of the UK but the sea lanes across to the Atlantic and the lines of communications to friends in the north. Scotland has much to offer the debates about the rights of indigenous peoples, the ownership of valuable resources under the sea and the issue of human capital and agency – a conversation to continue.

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This term was developed by Depledge, D and Kennedy-Pipe, C.