

Scottish Affairs Committee: Scotland's role in UK Defence of the North Atlantic and Arctic amid rising geopolitical tensions

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Background

This written evidence was produced by Nicolas Jouan, defence and security analyst at RAND Europe – part of the RAND Corporation, a non-profit and non-partisan research institute – with the support of his colleagues James Black and Theodora Ogden. This evidence is an original analysis drawing on the 2021 RAND research on a UK Strategy for the High North conducted by Jouan, Black and Ogden¹ as well as on a series of other relevant RAND studies on Arctic governance² and on great power competition in the region³. The aim of this evidence is to analyse the UK's national security priorities in the North Atlantic and the High North and how to develop Scotland's role as an asset in the pursuit of these priorities. Following the terms of references of the inquiry, this written evidence will therefore primarily address these two topics:

- What are the UK's national security priorities in the North Atlantic and the High North?
- What role do Scottish-based defence capabilities have in achieving defence and security objectives in the North Atlantic and the High North?

Context

As the UK contemplates growing geopolitical competition in the High North, it must reflect on what it means for its direct neighbourhood in the North Atlantic and for its northernmost territory: Scotland. The main driver of competition in the Arctic is Russia's increasing military presence along its northern coastline, the Kola Peninsula and the Barents Sea threatening sea lines of communication between North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies. The ongoing invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops has also negatively impacted cooperation among Arctic countries⁴ while Sweden and Finland have expressed their intention to join NATO, which would reinforce the Alliance's footprint in the Arctic⁵. Russia is also testing the limits of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

¹ Nicolas Jouan, Theodora Ogden, James Black, Corine Wood-Donnelly & Stephen Coulson. *UK Strategy for the High North. Policy Levers to Influence Developments out to 2050*. RAND Corporation. Santa Monica: 2021. As of 28/02/2023: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1091-1.html

² Benjamin J. Sacks, Scott R. Stephenson, Stephanie Pezard, Abbie Tingstad, Camilla T. N. Sørensen. *Exploring Gaps in Arctic Governance*. RAND Corporation. Santa Monica: 2021. As of 28/02/2023: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1007-1.html

³ Stephanie Pezard, Stephen J. Flanagan, Scott W. Harold, Irina A. Chindea, Benjamin J. Sacks, Abbie Tingstad, Tristan Finazzo, Soo Kim. *China's Strategy and Activities in the Arctic. Implications for North American and Transatlantic Security*. RAND Corporation. Santa Monica: 2022. As of 28/02/2023: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1282-1-v2.html

⁴ Malte Humpert. 'Cooperation with Russia in the Arctic is Virtually Impossible Says US Official.' *High North News*. 2023. As of 28/02/2023: <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/cooperation-russia-arctic-virtually-impossible-says-us-official>

⁵ Nima Khorrami. 'Pending Finnish and Swedish NATO Membership and the Future Relevance of ASFR and

(UNCLOS) with a proposed law that would impose stringent control on navigation within its territorial waters in the Northern Sea Route⁶. Besides Russia, China is investing in shipping, infrastructure and plans for an increased presence in the Arctic⁷ while the United States is rolling out a new Arctic Policy with regional military command structures and capabilities to defend its own interests⁸. The incremental presence of multiple rival heavyweights in the region put the High North at risk of becoming a grey zone prone to sub-threshold frictions⁹.

The UK has declared itself the ‘nearest neighbour to the Arctic region’ in its 2021 Integrated Review, a singularity that it uses to justify its rightful involvement in the High North and its interest in fostering peace, stability and prosperity in the region¹⁰. These aspirations might prove more difficult to achieve than expected considering the evolution of the European security landscape since the invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless, the geographic proximity claimed by the UK is the product of Scotland being one of its constituent parts and therefore having reasonable claims to share concerns and interests with Arctic countries. It is therefore important for the UK to acknowledge Scotland both as a physical and moral asset for its strategy in the North Atlantic and the High North. Consequently, this contribution to the Scottish Affairs Committee inquiry into the role of Scotland for UK Defence in the North Atlantic and the High North will articulate the different aspects of Scotland as an asset for the UK strategy and will suggest ways to develop synergies around this.

The UK’s national security priorities in the North Atlantic and the High North

The UK’s strategic interests in the North Atlantic and the High North start with its geography. Although the UK is not an Arctic country, it is one of the main contributors to the securitisation of the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap giving access to the North Atlantic. Since the Cold War, the GIUK gap has been an important chokepoint for submarine traffic and therefore saw intense anti-submarine warfare (ASW) activities, especially with the development of the Forward Maritime Strategy later in the war¹¹. To this day, the UK is still an active partner of the United States in the High North to deter Russia’s military build-up around the Kola peninsula and monitor NATO’s northern flank¹². Growing Chinese ambitions in the region could also raise tensions at NATO’s border¹³ especially as Greenland’s uncertain political future vis-à-vis its relation to Denmark could make it a weak link in the GIUK gap¹⁴. The UK’s commitment to securing this border is in line with NATO’s

CHOD.’ *The Arctic Institute*. 2022. As of 28/02/2023: <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/pending-finnish-swedish-nato-membership-future-relevance-asfr-chod/>

⁶ Cornell Overfield. ‘Wrangling Warships: Russia’s Proposed Law on Northern Sea Route Navigation.’ *Lawfare*. 2022. As of 28/02/2023: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/wrangling-warships-russias-proposed-law-northern-sea-route-navigation>

⁷ Rush Doshi, Alexis Dale-Huang & Gaoqi Zhang. *Northern Expedition. China’s Arctic Activities and Ambition*. Brookings Institutions. 2021. As of 28/02/2023: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/northern-expedition-chinas-arctic-activities-and-ambitions/>

⁸ Marie-Anne Coninx. ‘The New US Arctic Strategy. Welcome back, America!’ Royal Institute for International Relations. 2022. As of 28/02/2023: <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/the-new-us-arctic-strategy-welcome-back-america>

⁹ Benjamin J. Sacks, Scott R. Stephenson, Stephanie Pezard, Abbie Tingstad, Camilla T. N. Sørensen. *Exploring Gaps in Arctic Governance*. RAND Corporation. Santa Monica: 2021. As of 28/02/2023: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1007-1.html

¹⁰ HM Government. *Global Britain in a Competitive Age. The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. 2021.

¹¹ House of Commons Defence Committee. *On Thin Ice: UK Defence in the Arctic*. 2018.

¹² James G. Foggo III & Rachael Gosnell. ‘U.S. Maritime Strategy in the Arctic—Past, Present, and Future.’ *Naval War College Review* 75 (3). 2022. As of 28/02/2023: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8290&context=nwc-review>

¹³ Rush Doshi, Alexis Dale-Huang & Gaoqi Zhang. *Northern Expedition. China’s Arctic Activities and Ambition*. Brookings Institutions. 2021. As of 28/02/2023: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/northern-expedition-chinas-arctic-activities-and-ambitions/>

¹⁴ Benjamin J. Sacks, Scott R. Stephenson, Stephanie Pezard, Abbie Tingstad, Camilla T. N. Sørensen.

‘360-degree approach’ which entails a leadership role for the UK in helping secure and cover the Alliance’s northern flank against possible attack or interdiction from Russia or other parties¹⁵.

To the military threat posed by an increasingly assertive Russia and China in the High North must be added the threat of environmental changes, ice melting and, as a result, a potentially destabilising opening of the region to shipping and resource exploitation. Such development would create competition between countries wanting access to sea lanes and resources, thereby creating pollution and stress on local ecosystems and communities¹⁶. These would have ripple effects on the ecosystem of the British Isles with coastal erosion due to ice melting and the disruption of the halocline, and with the reduction of the Albedo effect and extra emissions of carbon dioxide and methane due to the disappearance of permafrost¹⁷. In its 2021 Integrated Review, the UK government rightly insisted on science ‘focused on understanding the implication of climate change’ as a major contribution area for the UK in the Arctic¹⁸. The UK therefore has reasonable arguments for wanting to play a role in the High North, since the stability and ecological health of the region, or lack thereof, has a direct impact on its own security.

Scotland’s role and interest in the North Atlantic and the High North

Scotland, like the rest of the UK, has a role to play in the Arctic and the North Atlantic by virtue of its geographical position. Scotland’s territory is the closest area of the UK to the Arctic. It is almost entirely located north of the 55th Parallel, a situation shared with all the Arctic countries¹⁹. Therefore, all the arguments developed to justify the UK’s interests in the High North are also valid for Scotland, arguably with a multiplier effect caused by its proximity to the region. Climate change and ice melting in the Arctic could accelerate erosion and coastal retreat, modify rainfall patterns, affect marine ecosystems and the productivity of agriculture to the detriment of local Scottish communities and infrastructures²⁰. Freshwater released into the ocean with ice melting is set to modify weather patterns and increase the likelihood of storm and extreme winters in the region, including in Scotland²¹. Consequently, Scotland has a direct interest in investing in marine science and research, an area where Scottish institutions are already considered world leading²².

The militarisation of the Arctic is also a direct threat to Scotland. Scottish territorial waters and airspace are within range of Russian military assets active in the region and the protection of the

Exploring Gaps in Arctic Governance. RAND Corporation. Santa Monica: 2021. As of 28/02/2023: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1007-1.html

¹⁵ Nicolas Jouan, Theodora Ogden, James Black, Corine Wood-Donnelly & Stephen Coulson. *UK Strategy for the High North. Policy Levers to Influence Developments out to 2050*. RAND Corporation. Santa Monica: 2021. As of 28/02/2023: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1091-1.html

¹⁶ Rebecca Lindsey & Michon Scott. *Climate Change: Arctic Sea Ice Summer Minimum*. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. 2022. As of 28/02/2023: <https://www.climate.gov/news-features/understanding-climate/climate-change-arctic-sea-ice-summer-minimum>

¹⁷ Nicolas Jouan, Theodora Ogden, James Black, Corine Wood-Donnelly & Stephen Coulson. *UK Strategy for the High North. Policy Levers to Influence Developments out to 2050*. RAND Corporation. Santa Monica: 2021. As of 28/02/2023: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1091-1.html

¹⁸ HM Government. *Global Britain in a Competitive Age. The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. 2021.

¹⁹ Scottish Government. *Arctic Connections. Scotland’s Arctic Policy Framework*. 2019.

²⁰ Scottish Climate Change Adaptation Programme. *Impacts in Scotland*. As of 28/02/2023: <https://www.adaptationscotland.org.uk/why-adapt/impacts-scotland>

²¹ Hannah Grit. ‘The More the Arctic Melts – The More it Rains in Scotland.’ *Journal of the North Atlantic and Arctic*. 2021. As of 28/02/2023: <https://www.jonaa.org/content/because-the-arctic-is-melting-scotland-has-more-rain>

²² According to different university rankings, the universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Dundee are among the top 100 worldwide in biological sciences (THE World University Ranking 2023) and the universities of Edinburgh and St Andrews among the top 100 worldwide in earth and marine sciences (QS World University Ranking 2022).

GIUK gap necessarily goes through Scotland's position at the northern tip of the UK. As tensions with Russia increase, more intimidating tactics from the Russian armed forces, such as submarine incursions^{23,24} and aircraft flyovers²⁵ near Scotland's coastlines, should be expected. Pressures from Russia in the Arctic and North Atlantic provide all the more reasons for the UK to assert the securitisation of the GIUK gap with monitoring and physical presence at sea, air and space. The build-up of capabilities at RAF Lossiemouth is therefore a welcome development with the completed acquisition of nine P-8A Poseidon aircraft for anti-submarine warfare and the upcoming acquisition of three E-7A Wedgetail aircraft for airborne early warning and control (AEW&C)²⁶. HMNB Clyde is also home to Astute and Trafalgar class submarines, mine countermeasure vessels and a patrol boat squadron²⁷. These platforms are the backbone of the ocean monitoring and rapid interception capabilities the UK must deliver to ensure the security of NATO's northern flank.

Opportunities to develop Scotland's role in the North Atlantic and the High North

The UK has undeniable interests in developing the role of Scotland to support its strategy in the North Atlantic and the High North. For the UK, Scotland is both a physical and a moral asset. It is a physical asset because it is a convenient launching platform for planes and ships, commercial or military, active in the region. It is also a moral asset because it shares with the Arctic the need to carefully manage climate change, mitigate military build-up and monitor the increasing interest for the region from the rest of the world. For these reasons, the UK would benefit from maximising the role of Scotland in the conduct of its North Atlantic and High North strategy. Opportunities to develop this role exist in at least three domains: economic, scientific, and military.

On the economic front, Scotland's developing role as a space launch hub could be propelled by the increasing need for satellite communication coverage in the High North, both for navigation at sea and in the air and for general economic activities²⁸. Other countries like Norway are also investing in putting into orbit more satellites²⁹ but overlapping networks would be beneficial to everyone to ensure redundancies and communication resilience. Since Scotland released an ambitious plan to develop its space industry³⁰, the UK could use its proximity with the High North and well-connected transport hubs to take the lead on satellite coverage in the region. The development of wind farms in Scotland could also become an example for Arctic communities as well as a way to invest in deep-sea ports that could in return help Scotland, and the UK in general, tap into the growth of shipping trade in the Arctic³¹. At the scientific level, the UK could help tie Scottish and UK climate and marine research in a more efficient way with a national-level scientific research programme devoted to the High North³².

²³ Navy Lookout. 'HMS Northumberland gets up close with a Russian submarine.' 2022. As of 28/02/2023: <https://www.navylookout.com/hms-northumberland-gets-up-close-with-a-russian-submarine/>

²⁴ Jimmy Nsubuga. 'Russian submarine that could attack pipelines 'tracked near Shetlands'.' *Yahoo News*. 2022. As of 28/02/2023: <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/russian-submarine-cable-shetlands-194537103.html>

²⁵ Gabriel McKay. 'Russia flies nuclear bombers over sea north of Scotland.' *The Herald*. 2023. As of 28/02/2023: <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/23325597.russia-flies-nuclear-bombers-sea-north-scotland/>

²⁶ Craig Hoyle. 'RAF completes Poseidon fleet, as ninth P-8A arrives in UK.' *Flight Global*. 2022. As of 28/02/2023: <https://www.flightglobal.com/defence/raf-completes-poseidon-fleet-as-ninth-p-8a-arrives-in-uk/147074.article>

²⁷ UK Government. *The Royal Navy in Scotland*. As of 28/02/2023: <https://www.deliveringforscotland.gov.uk/security/the-royal-navy-in-scotland/>

²⁸ Jason Rainbow. 'Arctic connectivity competition is heating up.' *Space News*. 2022. As of 28/02/2023: <https://spacenews.com/arctic-connectivity-competition-is-heating-up/>

²⁹ Astri Edvardsen. 'Taking Network Coverage in the Arctic to New Heights.' *High North News*. 2022. As of 28/02/2023: <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/taking-network-coverage-arctic-new-heights>

³⁰ Scottish Government. *A Strategy for Space in Scotland*. 2021.

³¹ Shepherd & Wedderburn. 'Scotland's ports are the gateways to good fortune.' *The Herald*. 2023. As of 28/02/2023: https://www.heraldscotland.com/business_hq/23281976.scotlands-ports-gateways-good-fortune/

³² Nicolas Jouan, Theodora Ogden, James Black, Corine Wood-Donnelly & Stephen Coulson. *UK Strategy for the High North. Policy Levers to Influence Developments out to 2050*. RAND Corporation. Santa Monica: 2021. As of 28/02/2023: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1091-1.html

Finally, at the military level, the UK could invest further in AEW&C capabilities and reinforce ASW capabilities at HMNB Clyde by transferring Type 23 and/or future Type 31 frigates to consolidate the defence of the GIUK gap.

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