

GLOBAL BRITAIN'S ARCTIC SECURITY POLICY

GOING FORWARD WHILE LOOKING BACK

Agne Cepinskyte



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- Britain's Arctic security policy has been shifting from abandoning the region after the Cold War to developing a non-military security approach, to reintroducing the military defence dimension, most notably by the announcement of the UK Defence Arctic Strategy (DAS).
- These changes are both reactive to regional factors, namely the increasing geostrategic importance of the Arctic and Russia's military expansion in the North, and reflective of the UK's redefined post-Brexit identity as Global Britain.
- The focus on expanding the naval presence in the Arctic is consistent with the Global Britain vision, which underlies the UK's broader foreign and security policy direction and emphasises the reassertion of naval strength and global maritime influence.
- While Britain's ambition to restore the naval power in the Arctic and the North Atlantic is currently constrained by a lack of resources in the defence budget, it indicates an aspiration to strengthen historically rooted naval defence relations with the Arctic states.



AGNE CEPINSKYTE

Visiting Senior Fellow

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INTRODUCTION

A day after Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's comment describing the then British Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson as 'the minister of war' at the Munich Security Conference 2019, the latter proclaimed that the UK would expand its naval presence in the Arctic. This would include a ten-year cold-weather training programme for the Royal Marines and the deployment of maritime patrol aircraft to monitor Russia's submarine activity. The unveiled developments are part of the UK Defence Arctic Strategy (DAS), which was announced in late September 2018 and is expected to be published this year.¹

The DAS would be the first such document produced by the British Ministry of Defence (MoD). As such, it would consistently follow the direction of Britain's Arctic policy that has been observable in the last few years – a gradual shift from an almost exclusively non-military security approach to paying increasing attention to military defence. This shift might be seen as a response to the growing geostrategic importance of the Arctic and Russia's military expansion in the region. However, the focus on establishing a more prominent naval power position in the North is also connected to the UK's vision of Global Britain, a concept popularised in British political discourse shortly after the Brexit referendum in 2016.

This Briefing Paper argues that a major goal of Global Britain's international security policy is the reassertion of naval strength. Expanding its naval presence in the Arctic is a significant part of this policy direction. Despite the currently scarce resources in the naval defence budget, it would allow the UK to ensure access to the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and reinforce its seapower identity, which could prevent further defence budget cuts and eventually secure a way for a non-circumpolar state to become an Arctic player.

The paper starts by overviewing the shifting UK Arctic policy from neglecting the region following the end of the Cold War to expressing concern over climate change and environmental issues, to an attempt at reviving its naval power position. It then discusses the UK's envisioned naval role in the North and potential

implications for relations with the Arctic states. The Briefing Paper concludes that Global Britain is moving forward by reacting to regional developments and adding the military security dimension to its Arctic security policy, while at the same time looking back at its historical seapower role in the Northern waters and beyond.

SHIFTING UK ARCTIC SECURITY POLICY

Britain's relationship with the Arctic spans several centuries at least, dating back to the voyages of discovery and polar expeditions. It developed through engagement in exploration, commerce, scientific research and protection of regional security. The UK's role in the latter intensified, especially during the Cold War, due to its military contribution to the territorial defence of Norway and to sustaining anti-submarine warfare capability in the strategically important Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap and the wider North Atlantic. In the 1990s, Britain's military shifted its focus southwards, primarily to the Middle East, leaving the Arctic region virtually out in the cold.

It was nearly two decades later that British security policy-makers expressed a renewed interest in the Arctic and acknowledged the need for a coherent policy, largely due to climate change and environmental concerns. In 2009, the then Defence Minister Baroness Ann Taylor highlighted the economic, environmental and political aspects of Arctic security, leaving the military aspect out. The MoD's initiative in 2010 to launch the Northern Group – a political consultation forum for the Nordic, Baltic, Polish, UK, German and Dutch defence ministers – demonstrated a further step in revitalising the UK's interest in the North.² Nonetheless, it was non-military Arctic security dimensions, including not just environmental and economic, but also human and energy security, that prevailed in British political debates preceding the adoption of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) Arctic policy paper in 2013.³

1 In July, Minister of State for the Armed Forces Mark Lancaster specified that the Strategy would be titled 'The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North'.

2 Powell, R. C., Dodds, K. (2014). *Polar Geopolitics? Knowledges, Resources and Legal Regimes* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing), p. 193.

3 FCO (2013). 'Adapting to Change: UK Policy towards the Arctic'. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adapting-to-change-uk-policy-towards-the-arctic>.

This document became the UK government's first Arctic policy framework and reflected the non-military security approach. It set out a goal of preserving safety, security and stability in the Arctic and explicitly distinguished three policy dimensions: human, environmental and commercial. The policy paper did not mention military security and only briefly referred to defence engagement through NATO, the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (a twelve-nation forum on Arctic security issues, particularly in the maritime domain) and bilateral cooperation in cold-weather training exercises. The most substantial part of the document was devoted to promoting Britain's leadership in science, commerce and tackling the causes and effects of climate change.

In 2015, the House of Lords Arctic Select Committee urged the government to revise its 'too hesitant and cautious' Arctic policy in light of emerging threats, opportunities and the increased international interest in the Arctic. Its report concluded that the 'scramble for the Arctic' was an overly dramatic narrative but it drew attention to Russia's military infrastructure developments on the Kola Peninsula and unpredictable foreign policy in other parts of the world. While emphasising the importance of insulating Arctic cooperation from geopolitical tensions, the committee called for a bolder Arctic policy with an increased focus on military security.⁴ A year later, the House of Commons Defence Committee expressed a similar view: it considered Russia's military expansion in the Arctic a matter of significant concern and requested that the UK government assess its implications for British security.⁵

In 2018, the FCO launched a revised version of the 2013 Arctic policy paper.⁶ While the new document reiterated the human, environmental and commercial policy facets of the UK Arctic policy, it also added a new one: 'protecting global influence'. It thereby responded to parliament's concerns that growing international interest and commercial activity in the Arctic as well as a military build-up in several circumpolar states could lead to heightened tensions, and that Britain might be 'outmanoeuvred' by less experienced but more driven states. Therefore, the FCO provided reassurance that the UK would remain vigilant

in monitoring developments in the region and work with its partners and allies to ensure peace, stability and good governance. Unlike its predecessor document, the revised policy paper contained a separate section, albeit a brief one, on Britain's defence engagement in the Arctic through bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

The House of Commons Defence Committee commended the FCO for recognising the threat potential to Arctic stability but pushed for an even stronger focus on military security. It challenged Arctic exceptionalism – an approach to the region as unique and unsusceptible to great-power competition and geopolitical tensions – warning that such a view risks leaving the Arctic particularly vulnerable to states that had already failed to observe international norms elsewhere in the world. Considering the possibly offensive nature of Russia's Arctic militarisation and naval activity in the High North and the entrances to the North Atlantic, the committee expressed a concern about Britain's preparedness, in terms of both ambition and resources, to match this potential threat and reassume the leadership it had historically shown in the Arctic.⁷

Shortly after the publication of the defence committee's report, the then Defence Secretary, Gavin Williamson, announced the DAS. Prior to then, the MoD had largely neglected the Arctic in defence policy papers: the region was not featured within the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review, the 2018 Modernising Defence Programme or the 2018 National Security Capability Review, and only mentioned in passing in the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review. However, as the FCO has refrained from discussing hard power capabilities, and has continued instead to promote a 'benign image' of the UK in the Arctic, including in relation to Russia, it provided an opportunity for the MoD to produce its own strategy with a clearly expressed military dimension.⁸

Policy documents justify the expanded focus on military security in the UK Arctic policy mainly as being responsive to external factors, notably Russia's intensified military activity in the region. The announcement of the DAS in 2018, the same year that the Sergei Skripal poisoning incident strained UK–Russia relations, also indicates that the broadening rift between the two states might have contributed to Britain's

4 House of Lords (2015). 'Responding to a Changing Arctic'. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldselect/ldarctic/118/118.pdf>.

5 House of Commons (2016). 'Report on Russia: Implications for UK defence and security'. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmdfence/107/107.pdf>.

6 FCO (2018). 'Beyond the Ice: UK Policy towards the Arctic'. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/beyond-the-ice-uk-policy-towards-the-arctic>.

7 House of Commons (2018). 'On Thin Ice: UK Defence in the Arctic'. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmdfence/388/388.pdf>.

8 Depledge, D., Dodds, K. and Kennedy-Pipe, C. (2019). 'The UK's Defence Arctic Strategy: Negotiating the Slippery Geopolitics of the UK and the Arctic'. *The RUSI Journal*, 164:1, p. 37.

Arctic policy change. Nonetheless, the shift towards military defence is also contextualised within the domestically produced narrative of Global Britain, in which the state's maritime identity and the restoration of naval power are central. The change in British Arctic policy is thus not only reactive to regional developments but also reflective of the UK's redefined vision of the state, which draws on historical experience of Britain's sea power and underlies the new foreign and security policy direction.

GLOBAL BRITAIN'S SEAPOWER AMBITION

British political leaders championed the Global Britain concept as a policy direction in 2016 to provide reassurance that the UK's withdrawal from the EU would not signal its disengagement from global affairs. On the contrary, Global Britain is an aspiration for the UK to assume leadership in addressing transnational challenges by promoting cooperation, advancing science and supporting investment, all while ensuring protection of the environment and the rules-based international system. When launching the FCO 2018 Arctic policy paper, Minister for the Polar Regions Sir Alan Duncan noted that the UK's role in the Arctic comprises all of the aforementioned policy priorities and "reflects the very best of what Global Britain has to offer". Envisioning the post-Brexit UK as a state that advances prosperity and security in the world, the FCO introduced protection of global influence as a new Arctic policy dimension.⁹

Historically, Britain advanced its global influence by relying on the navy in guaranteeing free trade and protecting national security. For an island nation, the focus on the sea was arguably the only way to maximise the asymmetric advantage and join the ranks of great powers. Significantly, Britain's rise to a seapower empire was a consequence of a consciously constructed national and cultural identity, which was fundamentally linked to the sea. It was a deliberate political choice to gain strategic and economic advantages by building navies and naval bases to control the sea. For that to happen, political leaders had to first create a strong link between the nation and the sea in order to ensure popular support, which ultimately translated into securing resources to sustain the navy fleet.¹⁰

The navy and naval defence became fundamental elements of Britain's global status and national prestige. However, from the Second World War onwards, the relevance of naval security has been steadily decreasing because of multiple factors, including technological advancement in defence, the development of nuclear weapons and the UK's strengthening ties with Europe since the 1960s, especially following its accession to the EU in 1973. The EU's primarily continental concerns weakened Britain's naval position further and spurred the disengagement from the naval aspects of British global influence.¹¹ The centrality of the navy in Britain's national identity has also eroded. Therefore, as the UK prepares for the departure from the EU and redefines its identity as Global Britain, the ambition to increase its global naval presence is unsurprising.

In February 2019, a week before Williamson announced that the UK was to strengthen its naval role in the Arctic by launching a ten-year cold-weather training programme in Norway for around 1,000 Royal Marines annually, and deploying maritime patrol aircraft to protect NATO's Northern Flank from Russian submarines, he gave a speech on the future of the UK Armed Forces. In this speech, entitled 'Defence in Global Britain', the minister proclaimed that Global Britain should not just be an empty slogan but a strategic vision supported by action led by the armed forces. Williamson then declared that to make Global Britain a reality, the UK would send naval vessels to the Gulf, the Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Pacific.¹²

In the last few years, references to a growing Royal Navy have proliferated in British political statements and policy documents. The Henry Jackson Society's report 'Global Britain' encouraged the UK to strengthen the Royal Navy in the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific to maintain free and open seas and thereby ensure free trade.¹³ Britain has indeed expanded its global naval presence in recent years, notably by strengthening defence engagement between the Royal Navy and the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force, participating in joint UK-US-Japan naval exercises in the Pacific, opening naval bases in Bahrain and Oman and returning submarine service to the Arctic. Nevertheless, the ambition to restore naval power does not match

9 'Beyond the Ice', p. 2.

10 Lambert, A. (2018). *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict that Made the Modern World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), pp. 17–44.

11 Redford, D. (2009). 'Does the Royal Navy Matter?'. <https://rusi.org/commentary/does-royal-navy-matter-aspects-national-identity-and-navy-%E2%80%99s-vulnerability-future-budget>.

12 Williamson, G. 'Defence in Global Britain' (11 February 2019). <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/defence-in-global-britain>.

13 Seely, B., Rogers, J. (2019). 'Global Britain: A Twenty-First Century Vision'. HJS. <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/global-britain-a-twenty-first-century-vision/>.



A Merlin Mk3 helicopter of 845 Naval Air Squadron deployed to conduct essential Arctic environmental qualification training in Norway 2017.
Source: MoD/Crown copyright 2017, CC BY 4.0.

current defence budget resources. Over the last decade, the navy fleet has declined due to constant defence budget cuts, and Brexit would likely have further dire economic implications. Policy-makers have acknowledged that the UK's insufficient resources might temper its willingness to increase its naval presence in the Arctic.

Regardless of financial constraints, the political ambition to strengthen the navy in British global policy is signalling the aspiration to overcome 'sea blindness' (a neglect of the navy's central role in protecting security and promoting economic prosperity) and to restore Britain's seapower identity and maritime influence. As in the past, it is a political choice to re-create the link between national identity and naval power by mobilising political discourse to stimulate popular interest and gain public and political support for a naval defence posture, which could prevent further cuts to the navy's budget and eventually allow the building up of capabilities. This has already yielded some results, as was demonstrated by the MoD's order of P-8 Poseidon

maritime patrol aircraft in 2016 and their planned deployment in the Arctic in 2019, which effectively reversed the government's decision to discard the UK's maritime patrol aircraft capability in 2010.¹⁴

A NEW (OLD) ROLE IN ARCTIC SECURITY

In Britain's quest for reassuming global influence by strengthening its navy, the Arctic region plays a significant role. First, one of the primary tasks of the navy is protecting and ensuring access to key shipping and trade routes. As the ice melts, Arctic trading routes, such as the Northern Sea Route along Russia's northern coastline and the Central Arctic Route stretching from Iceland through the Arctic Circle to the Bering Strait (expected to be navigable by around 2050) are opening up. Second, to demonstrate the potential of becoming one of the leading defence nations, Britain should be

¹⁴ Bronk, J. (2016). 'The P-8 Poseidon for the UK'. *RUSI Commentary*. <https://rusi.org/commentary/p-8-poseidon-uk>.

able to deploy its forces anywhere in the world. The British military's capacity to perform in cold-weather climates has decreased since the end of the Cold War due to engagement in the South. Therefore, it now seeks to improve its operational skills in the sub-zero conditions of the Arctic.

Since the UK lacks resources to restore naval power, it is likely to aim at maximising individual capabilities in which it has the most experience. Anti-submarine warfare is one such capability and the MoD's announced deployment of the P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft to the Arctic to monitor Russia's submarine activity is an indication of the said policy direction. Over the last few years, British policy-makers have made multiple references to the UK's leadership in planning and conducting anti-submarine warfare in the GIUK Gap and the North Atlantic during the Cold War. Acknowledging that the threats in the Arctic are not yet of the same scale today as they were prior to the 1990s, British policy-makers nevertheless decided that a comprehensive Arctic defence strategy with the Royal Navy at its forefront was necessary to counter Russia's potential power projection from the Arctic into the North Atlantic.

In August, the Russian Northern Fleet conducted a submarine detection exercise between the Barents and the Norwegian seas. The exercise signified the southward expansion of the Northern Fleet's activity – from the Arctic towards the North Atlantic. The focus on Russia's increased submarine activity in the North accompanied by references to the UK's Cold War role in anti-submarine warfare in the North Atlantic allows Britain to justify the strengthening of its capabilities in this field. Earlier this year, Gavin Williamson announced that Britain would invest an additional 33 million GBP in improving anti-submarine warfare capabilities in response to Russia's actions in the North.

Russian officials have warned that the UK's renewed military interest in the Arctic would complicate their bilateral relations further, create tensions and possibly escalate the military-political situation in the region. However, for Britain, the rebuilding of its anti-submarine capability carries primarily political significance in its quest for reassuming global influence by protecting the SLOCs, which are crucial for trade, logistics and power projection. The UK has neither the resources nor the ambition to militarily confront Russia in the Arctic beyond its commitments to NATO allies.

British policy-makers have underlined that NATO is the main route and the central plank for the UK to

develop security and defence partnerships with the five Arctic states that are NATO members. While London has maintained that NATO Arctic policy should be led by the Arctic member states, Britain will likely aim to revive its Cold War role in the naval defence of NATO's Northern Flank, particularly through increased cooperation with the US and Norway. The cold-weather training with Norwegian and American personnel in Norway, the trilateral UK-US-Norway capability agreement regarding maritime patrol aircraft and cooperation between the Royal Marines and the US Marine Corps in training remain Britain's key Arctic security partnerships and are likely to be strengthened in the years to come. The UK will also contribute to the development of NATO Atlantic Command, which was created in 2018 in response to the proliferation of Russia's submarines in the North Atlantic.

Furthermore, Britain collaborates with three Arctic states (Denmark, Sweden and Finland) through the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) – a UK-led high-readiness force that was established in 2014 and became fully operational in 2018. In May 2019, JEF launched its first large-scale maritime-focused exercise, Baltic Protector, and deployed Royal Navy ships and marines to conduct amphibious drills, maritime security patrols and naval manoeuvres in the Baltic Sea. It could be expected that similar navy-focused exercises involving Arctic partner troops would take place in the High North in the future, especially as both Finland and Sweden enhanced their military partnership with Britain by signing defence cooperation agreements in 2016. The Northern Group and the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable forums provide additional venues for the UK's military engagement with the Arctic states.

While the post-Brexit EU-UK relationship is uncertain and Arctic security issues will likely remain marginal in the withdrawal negotiations, the EU and Britain's interests align in maritime security. The EU's first maritime strategy, released in 2014, referred to the Arctic waters as one of the global maritime domains in which it should take a particular interest. Furthermore, in the revised version of the document, published in 2018, the EU encouraged a renewed commitment to maritime security in shared maritime spaces, such as the Arctic.¹⁵ Given the British navy's experience in protecting maritime security in

15 The EU Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS), 2014; The EU Council's Conclusions on the Revision of EUMSS, 2018. https://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs/policy/maritime-security_en.

the Northern waters, this could be a potential area for EU-UK cooperation.

All in all, Britain's role in Arctic security will likely increase and will be spearheaded by the navy. Defining itself as a 'near Arctic' state, the UK aims to resume its Cold War principal task of protecting access to the North Atlantic and the GIUK Gap chokepoints. In an effort to reinstate the leadership that it had previously shown in defence of the North, particularly the defence of Norway, Iceland and the Norwegian Sea, the UK will continue to strengthen its historically rooted military relations with the regional partners.

CONCLUSION

The UK's increased focus on military security in its Arctic policy is not only a response to the growing geostrategic importance of the region and Russia's military deployments in the North, but also a reflection of Britain's redefined national identity and aspired global role. The emphasis on internationalism rather than isolationism in its foreign policy is a signal to both allies and rivals

that the UK would aim to preserve and potentially expand its influence in the world. While Global Britain's bolder geostrategic approach and envisioned naval defence role in the Arctic is currently not adequately resourced through military spending, the shifting policy direction is an attempt to counter the notion of the UK's national decline amid its withdrawal from the EU.

The DAS would expressly add the military security dimension to British Arctic security policy, thereby reassuring allies and partners of the ability to deploy its forces anywhere in the world, including in the challenging cold-weather environments. Persistent references in the policy documents and political rhetoric to Britain's historically leading role in naval defence in the Arctic and the North Atlantic is a reminder not only to other states but also to the British nation of the UK's potential to reassume its seapower position. Despite current financial constraints in the defence budget, Britain's renewed military interest in the Arctic should not be dismissed as mere defence posturing – reviving the maritime mindset in the national consciousness could eventually secure public and political support for resource allocation to the strengthening of the navy fleet.