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Identity and Alliance:

Iceland's Role in International Defence Cooperation

2006 - 2023

By

Cadet Jan Getz Jóhannsson

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This thesis represents the author's opinions and does not represent the Royal Norwegian armed forces or the Royal Norwegian Airforce Academy.

This thesis is dedicated to the personnel of Landhelgisgæslan, the Icelandic Coast Guard, who demonstrate an unwavering commitment to their duties every day of the year, 24/7.

Preface

As the idea of a Nordic Air Force came closer to reality late in 2022, issue 3/2022 of the Norwegian Air Power journal *Luftled* arrived in my mailbox. The theme of the edition was “Nordic Defence”. The main topic was Nordic collaboration in NATO, and four Nordic Air defence Chiefs expressed their views regarding the future. The first thought that came to my mind was that there are five Nordic nations - not four. I wondered, what is Iceland’s role in all this, if any?

I am half Icelandic, half Norwegian, having grown up in Iceland until and during my early teenage years before moving to Norway. I served my conscription in the Artillery battalion of the Norwegian Army before joining the Royal Norwegian Air Force Academy. The Role of Iceland in NATO has always fascinated me, as Iceland does not possess a conventional military, but harbored a large U.S. base at Keflavik airport until 2006. However, I have hardly come across in-depth media coverage or public debate regarding Iceland’s defence policy or role in international defence collaboration in my relatively frequent visits to Iceland during previous years.

Given the international tension related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Nordic nations aiming to assemble under the NATO umbrella, and Russia expressing intent to withdraw from Arctic collaboration, many questions arise regarding the role and contribution of Iceland in future defence collaboration. Love for my childhood home, my native understanding of the Icelandic language, combined with my interest in Nordic collaboration, made me choose the topic for my bachelor’s thesis.

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I want to thank the Royal Norwegian Air Force Academy for supporting this work, academically and practically, enabling me to travel to Iceland to gain access to local libraries and individuals with expertise. I want to thank the Reykjavik City Library (Borgarbókasafnið) for their help with literature. I also thank my informants in Iceland for deepening my insight into current perspectives and operations. Special thanks to: Þorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir, Njáll Trausti Friðbertsson, Vilhjálmur Bjarnason and Marvin Ingólfsson. Finally, sincere thanks to my supervisor, Professor Lieutenant Colonel Dag Henriksen, for enthusiastically receiving my suggested thesis topic and sharing his knowledge.

Summary

This thesis outlines and discusses the development of the defence strategy and military alliances of Iceland, a small Nordic nation in the North Atlantic, between 2006 and 2023. Iceland is a founding member of NATO since 1949, yet without a standing army. This makes Iceland's situation quite unique. The chosen timespan starts with the U.S. departure from the Keflavik airbase in 2006. It ends in April 2023 when Finland has just joined NATO, Sweden aspires to NATO membership, and visions for Nordic defence cooperation, including a vision for a Nordic Air Force, attract considerable interest. Basic knowledge of Iceland's history, culture and mentality can greatly help to gain insight into the past, present and future of Iceland's role and ambitions regarding defence matters and international alliances. Therefore, the thesis starts with historical and cultural background notes relevant to these topics.

Sammendrag

Målet med denne bacheloroppgaven er å beskrive og diskutere utviklingen av Islands forsvarsstrategi og militære allianser i tidsperioden 2006-2023. Island har vært NATO-medlem siden organisasjonen ble etablert i 1949, samtidig som landet ikke har noe eget forsvar. Dette gjør landets situasjon unik. Tidsspennet denne oppgaven dekker starter i 2006 da USA formelt forlot den militære flybasen i Keflavik. Det ender i april 2023 idet Finland nettopp har blitt medlem av NATO, Sverige has sendt søknad om inngang i NATO og det er raskt økende interesse for å realisere visjonene om et samlet nordisk luftforsvar. Grunnleggende innsikt i Islands historie, kultur og mentalitet kan gjøre det lettere å forstå både utviklingen og framtidsmulighetene for Islands forsvarsstrategi og allianser. Oppgavens første del omtaler derfor relevante aspekter ved landets historie og kultur.

Samantekt

Markmiðið þessarar ritgerðar er að lýsa og ræða þróunina á Íslandi varðandi varnarmálastefnu og þátttöku landsins í hernaðarbandalögum á árunum 2006-2023. Ísland var eitt af 12 stofnríkjum hernaðarbandalags Norður Atlantshafsríkja (NATO) árið 1949 og eina ríkið án eigin hers, en það skapaði landinu ákveðna sérstöðu. Upphaf ofannefnds tímabils markast af því að bandaríski herinn hvarf frá herstöð sinni á Keflavíkurlflugvelli 2006 og endar í apríl 2023, þegar Finnland fékk formlega inngöngu í NATO og Svíþjóð á biðlista eftir inngöngu. Þar með endurvakna gamlar hugmyndir um Norræna hernaðarsamvinnu. Afstaða Íslendinga, hlutverk þjóðarinnar og metnaður varðandi varnarmál og hernaðarbandalög í nútíð og framtíð, markast eðlilega af sögu þjóðarinnar, menningu og viðhorfum. Til þess að auðvelda skilning á núverandi ástandi og framtíðarviðhorfum, er í upphafi ritgerðarinnar gerð grein fyrir sögulegum og menningarlegum bakgrunni sem skiptir máli varðandi umfjöllunarefnið. Sérstök áhersla er lögð á hlutverk Íslands í norrænu loftvarnarsamstarfi.

Definitions of terms used in this thesis

Air Policing- Air policing is conducted by military aircraft, usually fighters or interceptors, to uphold and enforce a state's territorial airspace and sovereignty by ensuring that a nation's airspace is not violated.

Arctic – The Arctic region is the region of the earth north of the Arctic/Polar circle.

Army - Military land forces

Defence – Defence in state matters encompasses a nation's strategies, policies, actions and military capabilities to deter or counteract potential threats, invasions, or hostile actions from external forces. The term in the context of this thesis is a subcategory of security. In this thesis, the words are often used interchangeably, often depending on the source material for the chapter.

Détente – The relaxation of strained political relations. Wikipedia contributors. (2023). Détente. Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C3%A9tenteList>

Early Warning - In the context of this thesis, early warning refers to the use of primary radars and military radar installations for monitoring and surveillance of airspace.

Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA)- Maritime patrol aircraft are specialized aircraft used for conducting surveillance, reconnaissance, and patrol missions in the maritime domain. These aircraft are equipped with advanced sensors and systems to detect, track, and monitor surface and subsurface vessels, also known as ships and submarines.

Military- A military encompasses all branches of armed forces tasked with defending a nation. These include, Land forces (Army), naval forces (Navy), Air force, and military political institutions such as the U.S. Department of Defense or similar.

Safety- Safety in state matters refers to the policies and regulations implemented by a government to protect its citizens, infrastructure, and environment from accidents, natural disasters, or public health risks. The nature of safety is more internally oriented compared to security.

Security – Security in state matters regards the measures a government takes to safeguard its citizens, institutions, and national interests from threats such as foreign aggression, terrorism, or crime. For the topic of this thesis, it mostly is related to external actors and influence.

Abbreviations

ASW – Anti-Submarine Warfare

AWACS - Airborne Warning And Control System, In this context a E-3 Sentry aircraft.

CAOC- Combined Air Operations Centre in NATO, one step above CRCs in the command-and-control hierarchy and is responsible for coordinating operations between various CRC's which tend to be under national command.

CRC- Control and Reporting Centre. A Military installation responsible for the command and control of military aviation, airspace monitoring, and airspace coordination, through sensors, usually ground based radar installations.

GIUK- Greenland, Iceland, United Kingdom gap

IAP- Iceland Air Policing

NAP- Nordic Air Policing

NATINAMDS -NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defense System

NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization

PfP- Partnership for Peace- Partnership for Peace is a program run by NATO with countries outside of NATO interested in cooperating with NATO on security and cooperation.

WW2 - World War 2, or the Second World War

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1. Introduction

During my time as a cadet in the Norwegian Air Force Academy (2020-23), the international scene has changed dramatically. In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, questions of defence and military alliances moved from backstage to the front scene, engaging authorities and populations alike, especially in Russia's surrounding states and the Nordic nations. The role and ambitions of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have also become hot topics.

The five Nordic nations have a long history together. For centuries, their relations were marked with conflicts and wars, but throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, things gradually settled. The idea of a common Nordic identity has grown and given rise to substantial collaboration. After the second world war, a Nordic Defense Alliance was proposed, but was never materialized¹ (Saxi, H. L. 2011). On the cultural side, however, collaboration grew as exemplified with the establishment of the Nordic Council in 1952. The Nordic countries have some joint and collaborative military projects and exercises, but there have not been solid premises for formalized Nordic military cooperation.

When NATO was established in 1949, Denmark, Iceland and Norway were among the 12 founding members, together with the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and six other European countries. Finland and Sweden made deliberate choices to remain outside NATO. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Finland and Sweden have applied to NATO. The scene may thereby be set for increased Nordic military collaboration.

In contrast to the other Nordic countries, Iceland has no standing army. However, the airport of Keflavik has been a strategic hot-spot and the scene for major military operations and training members since the Second World War for U.S. and NATO forces.

Approaching Iceland in defence matters is not straight-forward. Questions of military activities are rarely subjected to in-depth analysis in Icelandic media. Icelandic documents regarding defense matters are often classified, there is little military academic research, and the Icelandic language

¹ The vision for of Nordic Unity became strong in the mid-19th century. However, the idea that geopolitics can naturally pull the Nordic states in the same direction has not been self-evident (Saxi, H. L. 2011). However, in the current geopolitical climate (2023) and expansion of NATO, the Nordic nations have increasingly common interests and a strong motivation for collaboration.

represents a barrier to outsiders. Together, these factors have motivated me, as both an Icelandic and Norwegian Citizen, to choose the following topic for my thesis:

How has Iceland's defence strategy evolved since the Second World War, with particular emphasis on the period after 2006, and what factors have contributed to this development?

This is evidently a vast topic. To demarcate it, the following four research questions have guided the study:

RQ 1 What factors concerning Iceland's geographical location, history and culture are key to understanding the development of military matters in Iceland?

RQ 2 Which foreign actors have influenced the development Iceland's defence strategy, and how?

RQ 3 What major military activities have taken place in Iceland?

RQ 4 How has Iceland's role in Nordic defense cooperation developed?

2. Outline of thesis, method and material

The thesis aims to clarify four research questions, three regarding Iceland's defence policy and one about how Iceland's defence matters might be better understood in view of Iceland's location, history and culture. The historical and cultural background notes are placed at the start. The four questions specifically concerning defence are not addressed in separate chapters. They are woven into a chronological presentation in the second part of the thesis and will be picked up again in the discussion chapter.

2.1 Methodological approach

The tradition for academic military studies in Norway is relatively young (Høybak og Ydersbø, 2012) and remains relatively flexible regarding methodological approaches. This thesis is inspired by various disciplines, including historical methodology (Texas State University. n.d.), international relations discipline studies (Baylis, J., Owens, P., & Smith, S.2020) and strategic studies (Duyvesteyn, I., & Worrall, J. (2017). It builds on previously published works, primarily comprising existing literature and articles, and thus employs a literature analysis methodology (Jacobsen, D. 2015). Interviews with four experts and stakeholders in Iceland are used as a supplement.

In dialogue with my supervisor, it was decided that the thesis would span the time-period 2006-23. Furthermore, this time span would be split into four chapters, defined by relevant factors. They are further described in Chapter 4.

The thesis ends with a discussion of the main findings and some future perspectives. Due to the expansive scope of the topic, several aspects are only briefly covered, and others entirely omitted. In a few instances, footnotes have been used to illustrate points of interest.

2.2 Sources of information and notes on information quality

This thesis rests heavily on written, unclassified sources in English, Icelandic and Norwegian. These encompass books and a few prior academic studies. Due to a scarcity of recent academic literature on military activity in Iceland, the material also includes numerous open journalistic articles.

Icelandic media coverage of military activity is limited and relatively superficial, potentially due to limited public interest. The journalistic sources have been critically assessed. In addition, political documents such as proposals, reports and summaries gave valuable insight into the political agenda. These sources generally lacked comprehensive information on physical military activity. It became evident that openly accessible sources cannot provide a comprehensive understanding of Iceland's day-to-day operations, political initiatives, and processes concerning NATO, Nordic cooperation, and security policy. I have done my best to provide a valid and factually correct picture. When Icelandic texts are directly quoted, the translations are mostly my own. Examples are media entries and laws passed by the Icelandic Parliament.

In my research, I had personal meetings with Icelandic stakeholders and experts. These included three former and current politicians, active Coast Guard members, and one historian connected to political sciences. Especially important was my visit to the Keflavik Security Zone, where I got a personal look into the day-to-day operations of the Icelandic Coast Guard. When contacting potential informants in Iceland, I realized that I would gain more valid and valuable insight by engaging in a mutual dialogue where my informants could freely offer relevant unclassified knowledge supplemented by personal reflections and opinions. I chose not to cite these conversations. Opinions on military issues can be sensitive in Iceland where “everyone knows each other,” and experts are few and easily recognizable. Retaining confidentiality appeared methodologically acceptable as the dialogues were meant to supplement written sources.

3. Identity and alliance: historical and cultural background notes

It may be easier to understand Iceland's approach to defence matters with insight in some historical and cultural facts.

3.1 A Brief History of Icelandic Sovereignty

Iceland is a remote nation with ca. 350 000 inhabitants, situated in the North Atlantic between the Eurasian and American continents. It has desolate landscapes and harsh weather conditions. Its main resources have been fishery and natural hot springs. Nordic and Celtic people began settling in Iceland during the 9th and 10th centuries, spurred by political instability in Norway that motivated many to seek freedom and private land ownership away from the rule of Norwegian kings. This new population established one of the world's earliest democratic forums, the "Althing." Iceland's independence persisted until the late 13th century when it became part of the Norwegian Kingdom, later joining the Kalmar Union. Following the union's collapse, Iceland transitioned to Danish rule and remained under Danish control. During the Danish trade monopoly period, Iceland's political autonomy was severely curtailed, with limited self-governance and restrictions on travel and certain professions without Danish approval. In return, Denmark would be the main provider of defence of Iceland from foreign actors. The exploitation of Iceland's natural resources for Danish profit, contributed to a growing nationalist movement in the late 19th century. Gradually, Icelandic wishes were headed, Iceland became a semi-independent state and relations improved. This would later turn into a union with Denmark in 1918, with the Danish monarch serving as head of state for both nations, retaining control of Icelandic foreign policy (Bergmann, E. 2014).

Life in Iceland was over the centuries marked by struggle for survival, independence and self-sufficiency. Historically, the country held little significance in European geopolitics, militarily and commercially. As the nation gradually moved towards independence, gaining "equal" status in union with Denmark in 1918, Iceland proclaimed a promise of "perpetual neutrality". An unknown author wrote in the newspaper *Vísir*: "The nation may lose its independence and sovereignty again (...) and it is the most sacred duty of all Icelanders to prevent that from happening, because if the nation gives up its independence again, then it will be lost forever." (*Vísir*. 1918) (Hálfðanarson, G. 2021). This expression of pride and vulnerability has echoed through recent Icelandic history. When Nazi Germany occupied Denmark in 1940, Iceland moved towards independence. However, this shift was short-lived. In 1940, the United Kingdom occupied Iceland as a preventive measure to secure allied maritime access to the North Atlantic and prevent the Axis powers from doing the

same (Herz, N. 2004). In Iceland, emotions were mixed. A week after the British occupation of Iceland, the editor of Iceland's main newspaper Morgunblaðið stated: "Our declaration of Neutrality has been our Maginot-Line" (Morgunblaðið, 1940). The Icelandic population protested the British occupation, desiring to remain neutral, but no hostilities arose between the Icelandic population and British soldiers. The United States assumed control of the occupation in 1941, deploying thousands of troops in Iceland (Herz, N. 2004).

During the Second World War (WW2), Iceland played a crucial role as base for various military activities², including anti-submarine warfare missions using aircraft to detect and sink German U-boats pestering allied convoys en-route to Europe from the American continent. In 1944, Germany's defeat became increasingly evident, and Iceland pursued complete independence to the regret of the Danish king³ (Bergmann, E. 2014). The U.S. was the first nation to recognize Icelandic sovereignty in 1944 (Division of Northern European Affairs. 1944).

Following the end of WW2, the U.S. maintained substantial military presence in Iceland. As the Cold War intensified, Iceland's strategic importance grew, particularly for military aviation, including intercepting Soviet aircraft in the North Atlantic. Consequently, Iceland earned a nickname as "an unsinkable aircraft carrier" (Eydal, F. 2006).

Many Icelanders have, since WW2, been ambivalent to the nation's strategic military role and the idea of defence alliances. The vision of perpetual neutrality has fueled significant commitment to multilateralism, international law and human rights. Iceland's has also participated in international peacekeeping operations such as in Afghanistan and Kosovo.

² "The military occupation of Iceland by the forces of the United States is an event of first-rate political and strategic importance; in fact, it is one of the most important things that has happened since the war began... The seizure of Iceland by Hitler would be of great advantage to him in bringing pressure to bear both on Great Britain and the United States." Sir Winston Churchill, 1941 (Erlendsson, M. 2021)

³ Danish-Icelandic relations would start to improve throughout the 19th and 20th century as Iceland gained more sovereignty. Details surrounding that evolution is beyond the scope of this thesis.

3.2 A Viking culture, with no interest in a standing army

Iceland is one of the largest sovereign nations that does not maintain a military⁴, only an armed Coast Guard. This can partly be explained by the country's history and location, for centuries beyond significant military and commercial interest (Marcus, G. J. 1957). Cultural factors also contributed to Iceland's choice not to create a military after its independence in 1944. One essential factor may have been centuries of experience with foreign subjugation. Like in many other nations, popular nationalism set its mark on Iceland during the 19th Century. The Icelandic Sagas were revisited with their strong characters, family histories, clan conflicts, explorers and poets. Icelandic nationalism never became militaristic, unlike many other forms of European nationalism. Iceland has pursued an identity as a peaceful, unarmed sovereign nation. It took strong motivation in self-sufficiency and individual workmanship⁵, understandable considering the rough conditions of living in Iceland (Bergmann, E. 2014). Iceland has mobilized only when it came to fishery; the country proved ready to fight profusely for sole control of resources during the so-called Cod Wars with Britain between 1958 and 1976⁶.

In some respects, Iceland's "self-sufficient" form of nationalism in the 19th and especially 20th century can be seen as a form of isolationism comparable to that of the U.S. during the inter-war period. Iceland wished not to concern itself with matters of European nations and wished to pursue free trade. These ideals remain prevalent even into the 21st century (Björnsdóttir, B. D. 2019).

One explanation why Iceland could develop the way it did has recently been termed "Shelter Theory" (Thorhallsson, Baldur & Joensen, Tomas. 2015). The idea is that Iceland, without much

⁴ Wikipedia provides a good overview of countries with limited or no armed forces Wikipedia contributors. (2023, April 8). List of countries without armed forces. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List_of_countries_without_armed_forces&oldid=1148834781

⁵ As an illustration of this, one of the key novels by the Icelandic Nobel Laureate in Literature Halldór Laxness is entitled *Sjálfstætt fólk* (Independent people), written in 1934.

⁶ Iceland had long been concerned with the deterioration of fishing stocks and decided to expand their exclusive economic zone. Initially, to 50 nautical miles, then 100 and finally 200 nautical miles. This represented an unprecedented move on the international stage. Iceland even threatened to pull out of NATO and strengthen relations with the Soviet Union if its wishes were not respected. The United States supported Iceland against the U.K., and images were posted of U.K. warships harassing the "pacifist" nation with only a coast guard to support its sovereignty claims. Public opinion turned in favor of the Icelandic claims. The three Cod Wars have had lasting influence on international law. Sources Steinsson, Sverrir. (2016). The Cod Wars: a re-analysis. *European Security*. 1-20. 10.1080/09662839.2016.1160376. and Anand, R. P. (1976). THE "COD WAR" BETWEEN THE U.K. AND ICELAND. *India Quarterly*, 32(2), 215–220. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45070410>.

active engagement, for centuries enjoyed de facto protection, initially from Denmark and later from the United Kingdom, the major naval power in the North Atlantic from the 17th Century. The U.K. had little interest in Iceland besides fishing and did not attempt to influence Icelandic matters much. However, its powerful presence near Iceland is likely to have put off potential raiders and invaders. Consequently, considerations regarding defence alliances never came to engage the average Icelander. After WW2, however, the question became a question of national importance. Iceland had to make up its mind regarding allied military presence on land, in the air and in surrounding waters.

3.3 Icelandic ambivalence towards foreign troops during WW2

During the un-violent British-U.S. occupation of WW2, Icelanders generally did not hold particularly positive views towards foreign military troops. To many citizens, even friendly troops symbolized foreign involvement in the nation's affairs and sovereignty. Such a view is not unique to Icelanders, although it has been culturally defining for Iceland (Jónasdóttir, A. 2016). Skepticism towards foreign troops emerged in various ways, for instance a specific word highly indicative of ambivalence:

"Ástandið."

"Ástandið," best translated as "the Situation" or "the current circumstances," was widely used to describe the situation of occupation and interaction between foreign soldiers and the Icelandic population during WW2, lasting even until 2006 when the U.S. forces departed. The term could alternatively have been "the occupation" or "the protection," for that matter. The meaning of the word "Ástandið" seems to lie somewhere in between. In this context, the "situation" balances both good and bad. However, to many Icelanders, the term expressed explicit negativity about the occupation and the changes to daily life that it entailed.

The reasons for negativity could be complex. Foreign troops were wealthier than the average Icelander, a potential source of envy, revitalizing historical images of subjugation. Furthermore, during WW2, foreign troops surpassed the local male population (Borgarsögusafn Reykjavíkur. 2015): deployed troops counted about fifty thousand, while approximately 40.000 males lived in the Reykjavik area (Statistica, 2020) (Borgarsögusafn Reykjavíkur. 2015). Females who interacted with foreign troops were sometimes shunned as prostitutes or traitors. Children of foreign soldiers and Icelandic women could be stigmatized as "Ástandsbörn" ("Children of the situation") (Jónasdóttir, A. 2016). The Icelandic government was tasked to find ways to reduce native interaction with foreign

soldiers to a minimum. In practice, however, this proved difficult. The military presence was culturally and economically evident, and the military often contracted Icelanders for various work. After the Second World War, Iceland imposed a secret ban on U.S. African American soldiers until the 1960s (Björnsdóttir, B. D. 2019).

3.4 Iceland joins NATO as a founding member

Due to the experiences of WW2, having seen its neighboring countries invaded despite wanting to remain neutral, Iceland reluctantly but decisively signed the North Atlantic Treaty on 4. April 1949, joining the defensive alliance as one of the twelve founding members. A peculiar aspects of Iceland was that the nation did not have a standing army, and no plans to create national armed forces either. To this day, Iceland remains the only NATO member not to have an army.

It can be argued that Iceland had already taken a first step away from total neutrality with the Keflavik deal of 1946 that granted the U.S. use of the Keflavik airbase (Dagblaðið Vísir - DV. 1984). Like other nations, Iceland had been closely following Europe's political situation. Fear of the Soviet Union motivated the Icelandic government to make decisive decisions regarding defence policy. However, joining a military alliance would break Iceland's promise of perpetual neutrality from 1918 (Hálfdanarson, G. 2021). Consequently, the government faced a highly controversial decision (Loftsson, B. 2022). Comments made by Bjarni Benediktsson, the foreign minister of Iceland as the North Atlantic treaty was signed, summarize the dilemma:

“My people are unarmed and have been unarmed since the days of our Viking forefathers. We neither have nor can have an army... but our country is, under certain circumstances, of vital importance for the safety of the North Atlantic area.”

- Bjarni Benediktsson, 4th of April 1949, Washington D.C. (NATO. n.d.)

As could be expected, the government's decision to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization caused substantial upheaval in Iceland that would mark the population for years to come⁷. A massive riot broke out in front of the Parliament building in Reykjavik. Every window of the parliament's

⁷ The Icelandic novel *Englar Alheimsins* (Angels of the Universe) by Einar Már Guðmundsson was awarded the Nordic Literature Prize in 1995. The novel's protagonist, later to be admitted to psychiatric hospital with schizophrenia, is born on the day Iceland enters NATO, and the author's choice of date was hardly a coincidence.

front side was broken. “Perpetual neutrality” was equivalent to complete sovereignty in the eyes of the average Icelander. Any military alliance would force Iceland’s foreign policy, trade, and politics into situations favorable to the larger party in any alliance. In short, people felt Iceland would have little control over its foreign policy and future (Björnsdóttir, B. D. 2019).

3.5 The 1951 Bilateral US-Icelandic Defence Agreement and the Cold War

As a continuation of Icelandic defence policy, a defensive alliance was signed with the United States in 1951. This agreement permitted the U.S. to station their military assets from all three branches, i.e., air force, navy and army in Iceland and gave the U.S. ownership over multiple areas in Iceland to be used for military bases infrastructure (*Defence of Iceland*. 1951). The most important location in this agreement was Keflavik Air station on the Reykjanes peninsula, approx. 35 km. southwest of Reykjavik.

At its peak, Keflavik Air station was one of Europe's largest military airbases (Eydal, 2006). During the Cold War, many sorties were flown daily, including aerial early warning aircraft, fighter aircraft and maritime patrol aircraft. Between 1962 and 1991, the 57th Fighter Interceptor Squadron intercepted about three thousand Soviet aircraft in the Icelandic Military Air Defence Identification Zone, representing one of the highest interceptions of any U.S. squadron at that period. The airbase also gained the nickname “Anti-Submarine Capital of the World” (Eydal, 2006). Much of the reasoning for the large deployment of military aviation in Iceland was the GIUK gap (Greenland, Iceland, U.K.). Iceland is centrally located in this “gap,” enabling improved ability to monitor and, if necessary, use of force to prevent Soviet submarines from operating in the area south of the gap.

3.6 The Post Cold War period and the U.S. departure from Keflavik

With the end of the Cold War in 1991, Iceland's importance as a militarily strategic location diminished. Russian military aircraft no longer operated extensively in the North Atlantic. The prevalent view within the U.S. military-strategic establishment was that the economic cost of maintaining a large airbase in Iceland significantly outweighed its value in providing a "credible" defence against the Soviet Union, which no longer existed. At this time Russia seemed not to pose any significant threat. Arctic cooperation was on the rise, with a wide range of collaborative projects.

One of these was The Arctic Council⁸ with the aim to cooperate on matters related to the arctic, including security. Here, Iceland became quite prominent (Arctic Council. n.d.).

In 1993, the U.S. State Department informed Icelandic authorities that its presence at Keflavik would be reduced by a third (Jóhannesson, G. Th., 2004). Icelandic politicians were dissatisfied with this shift in U.S. security strategy, and political tension arose. Despite Iceland's usual dedicated support of and belief in international institutions at this time, politicians were unwilling to leave the nation's defence solely in the hands of international institutions such as the U.N. and NATO. They had gradually come to see the U.S. airbase as vital. This view gained the support of U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, who extended Keflavik operations until at least 2001 when the situation was to be re-evaluated. Discussions had not concluded when the September 11th attacks happened in the US. These events significantly impacted U.S. strategic thinking. Many within U.S. defence circles wanted fighter aircraft defending U.S. cities. Keflavik airbase did not fit in this picture (Jóhannesson, G. Th., 2004).

In May 2003, The U.S. decided to relocate the last remaining fighter aircraft in Iceland to the U.S. within the month. This decision was again met with opposition in Iceland. Prime Minister Davíð Oddsson threatened that removing the credible defence element, namely the fighter jets, would be met with the closure of the airbase and most likely lead to the termination of the bilateral security agreement, a development not in the interest of the United States (Jóhannesson, G. Th., 2004). In an interview with Morgunblaðið 5. May 2005, Davíð Oddsson stated: "There should be no military base if it only serves as an observation and early warning post for the U.S., and not serve as what we define as the defence of Iceland."

The final decision was made in May 2006, as the U.S. decided to terminate its permanent military presence in Iceland within six months. Iceland's following response did not go as far as Davíð Oddsson had previously threatened. Iceland did not withdraw from the bilateral defence agreement (Ingimundarson, V. 2007), rather an amendment to the 1951 security agreement with the U.S. was made, updating it to reflect Icelandic ownership of Keflavik Air Station. The Amendment was signed

⁸ The Arctic Council was founded in 1996, consisting of members of Arctic Nations, Canada, The U.S., Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland and Russia (Arctic Council. n.d.).

on May 5, 2006. The stationing of U.S. armed forces in Iceland would now have to be approved by Icelandic authorities, except for situations defined by the U.S. as emergencies or crisis (Stjórnarráð Íslands. 2006).

In the general public, reactions to the U.S. departure were mixed. Some were concerned about the significant economic impact, as the airbase and related jobs had provided livelihoods for many and contributed greatly to the Icelandic economy (Jóhannesson, G. Th., 2004). Others viewed the closure as a positive step towards increased sovereignty, marking the end of foreign military presence since WW2 (Ingimundarson, V. 2007).

4. Iceland's role in International Defence Cooperation 2006-2023

I will now embark on the Thesis' second part and examine the development of Iceland's defence strategy and military alliances between 2006 and 2023, a period that has not been extensively researched. Special emphasis will be placed on Iceland's relation to the Nordic Air Defence collaboration within NORDEFECO. The chosen time span covers the U.S. formal departure from the Keflavik airbase in 2006 and ends in Spring 2023. As explained in the methods section, it is into four chapters, based on defining events in the evolution of Icelandic Defence Policy.

The first time-period spans the years 2006-2008, covering how Iceland responded to the U.S. military departing. The second period covers 2008-14, outlining the formalization of Icelandic foreign policy and the wish to initiate security cooperation with other nations, most notably the Nordic countries. The third period 2014-17 covers the implications of the Initial crisis in Ukraine and the increasing U.S. interest in the Arctic region. The final period spans the years 2017-23. It covers the effect of increasing military activity in the Arctic, the Invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and subsequent processes affecting NATO, the Nordic countries and Iceland up till the submission of the thesis.

4.1 The period 2006-2008: Iceland seeks a new security policy

When the Keflavik Naval Air Station was shut down on September 30, 2006, a 55-year military operational history ended (Ingimundarson, V. 2007). This left Iceland as the only NATO member without a permanent military presence, apart from its Coast Guard. It was time for Iceland to rethink the country's security policy. A complicating factor now entered the picture: the 2008 financial crisis.

The financial crisis⁹ struck Iceland immensely hard and has been described as “Iceland’s financial meltdown.” Iceland’s identity as a bold, idealistic and autonomous nation had received yet another blow. Not only was the country vulnerable from a military perspective, it was also highly exposed in an unstable global economy.

4.1.1 Keflavik Air Station under Icelandic ownership

Following the base closure, questions arose regarding the future of military infrastructure in Iceland, particularly its operation and maintenance. Under Icelandic ownership, the Keflavik Air Station's capacity to support NATO operations without U.S. support was uncertain. The Icelandic government explored various options, from total privatization to state takeover. Much of the airport's infrastructure had been owned by the U.S. directly or by NATO. During discussions with the U.S., a substantial portion of infrastructure was transferred to the Icelandic government although some infrastructure, including many barracks, were sold to private actors. The handover task proved challenging due to the limited workforce and experience on the Icelandic side, which quickly became overwhelmed with responsibilities regarding the management of Keflavik Air Station. The newly formed staff delivered a comprehensive list of equipment needed for operating the airport, including the civilian portion, which was rapidly becoming a major hub for tourism (Pétursson, 2020).

4.1.2 The Post U.S. exit period, Iceland’s “Security Zones”

As the Keflavik Air station and other military locations in Iceland were transferred from the U.S. to Icelandic ownership, the question arose of how to define these areas legally. They contained critical infrastructure of strategic importance to Iceland and NATO, associated with the bilateral U.S. agreement from 1951 amended in 2006. Consequently, access to these areas had to be restricted to authorized personnel only. The Icelandic government designed five distinct locations of vital defense infrastructure as “Security zones,” i.e., parts of Keflavik airport and surrounding areas, as well as four strategically located radar stations (see 4.1.4) (Sveinsson, G. B., & Jóhannesson, S. H. 2015 and Oddsdóttir, G. S. 2022). NATO resources were allocated to bolster the maintenance of the Security

⁹ For more reading regarding the Icelandic Financial Crisis, an event that resulted in mass riots and great political upheaval, see: Bibler, J. (2022, September 2). The untold story of Iceland’s financial meltdown. World Finance. <https://www.worldfinance.com/strategy/the-untold-story-of-icelands-financial-meltdown>

zones and other infrastructure. As a nation, Iceland had no allocated budget for the costly maintenance of the Security zones' infrastructure at the time (Utanríkisráðuneytið. 2022).

4.1.3 The expanded role of the Icelandic Coast guard

Although Iceland does not have a standing army, it possesses a semi-militarized Coast Guard. Its Icelandic name, *Landhelgisgæslan*¹⁰, refers by tradition to the defence of sovereignty in Icelandic territorial waters. Of major importance for this thesis is the fact that one branch of the Icelandic Coast Guard of Iceland fulfills many of the roles a conventional military force is usually tasked to serve. These include maintaining and operating airspace monitoring and surveillance, conducting search and rescue operations, explosive ordinance disposal, counter-terrorism training and hosting various military exercises in cooperation with other NATO members and allies. Allied partners are invited to train in Iceland for various operations, including anti-submarine warfare, explosive ordinance disposal, amphibious assault, and forward deployment of troops overseas (Landhelgisgæsla Íslands. n.d.).

4.1.4. The Control and Reporting Centre LOKI

Located at Keflavik air station, within one of five Icelandic security zones, The Control and Reporting Centre "Loki," named after the Norse Æsir (gods),¹¹ has been operated by Icelandic personnel since 2006. CRC Loki serves four Radar installations, each located at their respective "corner" of Iceland: The North-West, South-West, North-East, and South-East. The radars monitor Iceland's airspace and beyond, providing radar data from between Europe and the American continent. This provides a substantial amount of data concerning flights in the North Atlantic (Utanríkisráðuneytið 2022). CRC Loki is the central location for the operation of the Icelandic Air Defence System, an integral part of the NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defence System (NATINAMDS). It shares and receives data through various datalinks with other member nations in NATO (Oddsdóttir, G. S. 2022).

¹⁰ From a linguistic perspective, the name (literally translated as Land-Sovereignty-Guard) could theoretically encompass the entirety of land, surrounding territorial waters and airspace.

¹¹ In Norse mythology, Loki was foster Æsir, commonly depicted with Thor and Odin. He was a clever, deceptive and playful trickster.

4.2 The transition period 2008-2014: formalization of Icelandic security strategy

4.2.1 The Defence Act of 2008

A significant milestone in Iceland's security policy was passed with the ratification of the Defence act of 2008 (Icelandic: "Varnarmálalög," Alþingi 2008). This represented a major step, as the policy was passed without much U.S. input. The Defence Act defined political and legal responsibility for the operation of Iceland's security infrastructure, plans, and current operations. Through this legislation, Iceland established a set of laws governing the previously mentioned Security zones related to state defence. Concretely, the legislature aims to define four distinct elements of security policy:

- To ratify in law what political authority the Icelandic government has regarding security and relevant tasks.
- To emphasize the legal difference between national security in external affairs, including defence and security, and internal affairs such as policing and safety.
- To distinguish between strategy and implementation in the field of defence.
- to facilitate democratic control of defence-related activities.

While the 2008 Act was being created and debated, significant Icelandic political effort was made to investigate the possibility of further defence cooperation with the Nordic nations (Alþingi 2008). One possibility was the future establishment of Nordic defence cooperation. To my knowledge, this was the first time since the formation of NATO that this idea was seriously considered.

4.2.2 The Stoltenberg Report: A vision for Nordic defence cooperation?

In 2009, the renowned Norwegian diplomat Thorvald Stoltenberg was responsible for a report on Nordic security cooperation on behalf of the Nordic foreign ministers. Commonly referred to as the "Stoltenberg Report," this document focused on various areas, including maritime monitoring, peacebuilding, cyber-security, air-policing (specifically for Iceland), and other security-related topics (Stoltenberg, T. 2009). The report presents a plan for the Nordic nations to engage in Iceland Air Policing, divided into three phases. The first phase would establish joint surveillance arrangements between the Nordic nations, allowing them to share radar data and other information with their Nordic neighbors to enhance their collective defence. The second phase would entail the deployment of Nordic personnel to Keflavik Airbase during regular military exercises, such as Northern Viking. Of particular interest, deployment of Nordic personnel to Keflavik on a more permanent basis was also suggested. In the third phase, the Nordic nations should strive to fill at

least one of the three yearly slots for Iceland Air Policing from 2010 onwards or form a separate Nordic Air Policing (NAP) deployment, which will be discussed later. Iceland's Department of Foreign Relations regards the Stoltenberg report as crucial for Nordic cooperation, asserting that it would be natural for these nations to collaborate "in a spirit of solidarity". As the Nordic countries share values, history and geography, their cooperation is relevant to ongoing events (Government of Iceland | National Security, n.d.). In conjunction with the Stoltenberg report, the Nordic defense ministers¹² signed a memorandum of understanding, establishing the Nordic Defence Cooperation project (NORDEFECO) that handled defense cooperation and shares many of the key points presented in the Stoltenberg report (NORDEFECO, 2009). NORDEFECO comprises the five Nordic countries including Iceland. Initially, it was established to reduce joint operational costs, among other collaborations on military strategy and defence (Saxi, H. L. 2011). NORDEFECO will be further discussed in chapter 4.4.4.

4.2.3 Iceland Air Policing

Following the departure of U.S. fighter/interceptor aircraft from Iceland in 2006, Russian military aviation, including bomber aircraft, continued to operate near Icelandic airspace, purposefully circling the island but staying outside the 12-nautical mile territorial airspace limit. These events got media coverage in Iceland, as the country no longer had any means to intercept these flights (Bases, D. 2008). Iceland subsequently requested assistance from NATO to operate Air Policing missions. These missions would demonstrate that the island was not left without military assistance, should it be required. NATO authorized the request and initiated the Iceland Air Policing (IAP) mission in 2008 to meet Iceland's Peacetime preparedness needs, as part of a broader NATO mission (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe. n.d.). NATO members were encouraged to contribute to the IAP missions with intermittent deployments of fighter aircraft and other necessary materials, showcasing their capability and willingness to defend NATO territory, as well as enabling training in Arctic conditions. This mission has continued on a rotational basis since 2008 (Iceland Air Policing, Norwegian Armed Forces. n.d.). France was the first nation to operate Iceland Air Policing missions, and other NATO members, including Denmark and Norway, have contributed to and still support IAP missions.

¹ Interestingly, Iceland does not have a ministry of defense. The Icelandic ministry of foreign affairs handles defense related matters.

In October 2012, it was proposed that Sweden and Finland join Iceland Air Policing in 2014, despite not being NATO members. The move was controversial, particularly in Finland, where many saw it as not aligning with their stated neutrality (Kinnunen, T. & Reuters, 2012). In November 2012, Finnish Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen stated that the upcoming deployment would not be part of Iceland Air Policing, but rather a separate deployment involving peacetime training exercises and patrols without participating in interception scrambles. The deployment was instead to become a part of a proposed Nordic Air Policing (Malcom & Icenews, 2012). The Nordic Air Policing project did not materialize, most likely due to reservations from neutral Finland and Sweden, despite their participation in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program (Simon, J. 2004). Formal Air Policing missions enforce a nation's airspace and require a credible option for the use of force. Another argument was probably high economical mission costs.

4.2.4 Iceland Air Meet 2014

Swedish and Finnish aircraft flew to Iceland to participate in a military exercise called Iceland Air Meet in 2014. This event could be seen as a stop-gap measure demonstrating Nordic cooperation in defence matters. Iceland Air Meet 2014 included Norwegian, Finnish, Swedish, Icelandic, Dutch and U.S. personnel and aircraft, engaging in air defence exercises while Norway concurrently conducted Iceland Air Policing. The Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) coordinated the event in CAOC Uedem, Germany, the primary NATO CRC for Northern Europe (NATO. Media Advisory on Iceland Air Meet 2014. n.d.).

Iceland Air Meet was a milestone event. Although the exercise did not live up to the Stoltenberg Report's vision of full-fledged Nordic cooperation, this early work laid an important foundation for the Nordic air force cooperation project that emerged in 2023, which will be discussed later.

4.3 The period 2014-2017: Renewed U.S. Arctic Interest

Following the Ukraine Crisis of 2014, the U.S. military strategy emphasized the possibility of conventional conflict rather than counterinsurgency operations, as was common throughout the early 21st century. This change has been accompanied by a renewed focus on the Arctic region from multiple actors. Concurrently, diminishing polar ice has and will continue to increase the Arctic's accessibility, creating potential international shipping routes that bypass the Panama and Suez Canals and access previously unavailable natural resources. The heightened military interest in the area can be attributed to concerns surrounding Russian military activity and ambitions in the region

as well as China's growing interest in the Arctic as an alternative to its existing shipping lanes (Department of Defense (U.S.). 2016).

4.3.1 National Security Policy for Iceland 2016

In 2016, a complete Icelandic security policy was ratified by a law (Alþingi. 2016a). The law was followed by a policy report explaining how Iceland was to work towards future security cooperation (Alþingi. 2016b). The policy report had four main points of relevance to this thesis. The first point describes continued cooperation with NATO as a key factor in Icelandic security policy. The second point: "To ensure that the 1951 defence agreement between Iceland and the United States continues to provide for Iceland's defence". In this sense, the U.S. was to remain the main defence benefactor of Iceland. The third point regards increased Nordic cooperation, striving to strengthen and increase cooperation in Nordic security and defence matters. The last point regards Iceland's own role in defence cooperation, to ensure that Iceland has the infrastructure, capacity, equipment, and expertise necessary to honor its international commitments (Alþingi. 2016b).

To sum up, the 2016 security policy indicates clear and specific interest in U.S. and Nordic security cooperation, with NATO remaining a vital factor in the overall Icelandic defence strategy. Iceland upholds other bilateral agreements as well, among these with Canada and the U.K., where the Royal Air force has expressed interest in further security collaboration, especially regarding maritime monitoring and search and rescue (Ministry for Foreign Affairs. n.d.).

4.3.2 Revitalization of the Keflavik Airbase concept and new U.S. Investment

Following the occupation of Crimea and other parts of Ukraine in 2014, and the broader geopolitical situation, cooperation with Russia became increasingly challenging. Russia was willing to use military force to undermine a fellow European nation, albeit attempting to maintain plausible deniability. The occupation came as a surprise to many, elevating tensions in Europe comparable to the late 1990s and early 2000s. With Russia as a credible threat to European stability, the U.S interest in the Arctic regions and Europe was renewed, as evidenced by the numerous reports and strategies released by the U.S that cover arctic defense matters since 2016 (Department of Defense. 2016).

In 2017, the United States invested over \$22 million in infrastructure at Keflavik Air Station, mainly directed to upgrades of existing hangars at Keflavik for P-8 maritime patrol aircraft (Beardsley, S. 2016), with the U.S. Air Force investing an additional \$38 million to improve airfield infrastructure

(Woody, C. 2021). While this budget is modest compared to many military projects, some argue that U.S. military activity in Iceland has effectively resumed following its 2006 hiatus. However, this activity is far smaller in scale than the previous naval air station at Keflavik, which housed multiple squadrons of aircraft and approximately 2,500 personnel from the U.S. Navy and Air Force. Presently, Keflavik Naval Air Station primarily consists of rotational deployments of P-8 Maritime Patrol Aircraft, with the squadron stationed in Florida but operating some aircraft from Keflavik as a forward operating location. The P-8 aircraft can monitor Russian submarine activity from Murmansk, where many Russian strategic submarines have their home bases (Beardsley, S. 2016). Interestingly, the frequent presence of U.S. Navy personnel at Keflavik is largely unknown to the average Icelander. Many people appear unaware of the investments or the increased presence of U.S. military aircraft and personnel after 2017.

When doing research for this thesis in March 2023, I was welcomed to visit the previously mentioned Keflavik Security zone and the location of CRC-Loki. The Air Station supports a developed host nation support capability, including living quarters, a mess hall, a shooting range, and more. These are all things that might be expected when operating from another NATO country's airbase but perhaps not expected from a nation without an airforce. Among the more critical infrastructure at the Air Station are various telecommunications systems, including NATO-compatible data links. These allow NATO member forces to deploy military assets to Iceland without the need for cumbersome equipment that can take days or weeks to set up. Keflavik Air Station also features hardened shelters for fighter aircraft, hangars for AWACS, P-3 and P-8 surveillance aircraft, and various hardpoints for storing other aircraft deployed to the base. In short, Keflavik Air Station is an updated and sophisticated airbase under Icelandic operation since 2006.

4.4 The period 2017-2023: Rising Tensions and Arctic cooperation

The period 2017-2023 is hard to encapsulate. Much has happened during the past few years, with many previously discussed topics in this thesis still ongoing. This section will therefore discuss a selection of topics relevant to Icelandic security and Nordic cooperation in defence matters.

4.4.1 A brief overview of military activity involving Iceland

Iceland has recently contributed to various NATO operations¹³ and military exercises. For example Iceland participated in recent conflicts during the 21st century. Icelandic Coast Guard personnel, some Explosive Ordnance Disposal specialists and others part of the Icelandic Crisis Response Unit joined coalition forces in operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, representing the few Icelanders with direct military experience abroad. Furthermore, Icelandic political personnel and experts within fields such as public relations have contributed to NATO operations across Europe and elsewhere.

Iceland contributes to and hosts some NATO military exercises such as Northern Viking, a major Naval exercise between Iceland, U.S., and other allies such as Norway and Denmark. Another military exercise is Dynamic Mongoose. The exercise is held in the Norwegian sea between Iceland and Norway. It is one of NATO's more extensive anti-submarine exercises, highlighting Iceland's strategic importance in Anti-Submarine Warfare operations in the North Atlantic. As of the completion of this thesis, Dynamic Mongoose 2023 is currently ongoing, with Iceland acting as a Host Nation (Utanríkisráðuneytið. 2023).

4.4.2 U.S. strategic airpower in Iceland

In 2021, the U.S. deployed three B-2 Spirit stealth bombers and two hundred airmen to Keflavik for an extended deployment (Hommel, V. 2021). This event marked a first for Iceland, which had not previously hosted the B-2, except for a brief refuel stop in 2019. The B-2 aircraft operated from the airbase for about three weeks. According to the U.S. Air Force, the deployment was a significant step towards the U.S. military's greater goal of expanding its presence in the North Atlantic, demonstrating intent to continue cooperation with Iceland and other Nordic nations, particularly in the Arctic (Woody, C. 2021).

While Icelandic media did show interest in the B-2 deployment to Iceland, the event was relatively uncontroversial (Unnarsson, K. M. 2021). In comparison, the deployment of B-1 Lancers to Norway in 2021 was a significant event in Norwegian security policy (Forsvaret, 2021). It was met with extensive media coverage and some controversy. When comparing the two events and the aircraft

¹³ The United States built a hydrophone system in the GIUK gap during the cold war. This system comprises a permanent underwater surveillance system for detecting surface and subsurface vessels in the GIUK gap. It is an important piece of infrastructure but outside the scope of this thesis.

involved, the B-1 Lancer is no longer capable of delivering nuclear weapons due to a disarmament treaty with Russia but remains a potent strategic bomber (Påsche, E. S. 2021). In contrast, the B-2 Spirit is a sophisticated and secretive aircraft that retains its nuclear capability and stealth characteristics. B-2 aircraft has to my knowledge not operated from Norway. This might be due to the platform's aggressive nature, which could be seen as contradicting Norway's long-standing security strategy of deterrence and détente (Folland, R. 2022) or perhaps Norway's foreign base policy (Store norske leksikon, n.d. and Örvik, N. 1967). One might have expected more Icelandic media coverage and public discussion of the implications of the B-2 deployment for Iceland's security and foreign policy, as Iceland maintains a strict anti-nuclear policy and is a strong proponent of de-nuclearization (Aotearoa Lawyers for Peace et al. 2021). This policy will be revisited in chapter 4.4.6.

4.4.3 Impact of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine

The Invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is a dramatic and complicated event with tremendous impact on defence matters within Europe and NATO. It cannot be covered in depth in this thesis. However, some perspective is necessary.

In Iceland, the public debate regarding security and defence stemming from the invasion markedly intensified. This is mirrored in a quote from Iceland's foreign minister Thórdís Kolbrún Reykfjörð Gylfadóttir at the Wilson center in Washington DC in April 2022. Discussing Iceland's security situation, including the importance of NATO and the U.S. as providers of defence for Iceland in view of the invasion of Ukraine, she stated: "Everything has changed now, we actually have a discussion regarding foreign policy, something that we sometimes do not do in years" (Grady, J. 2022).

Based on Iceland's commitment to the Arctic council since the late 1990s, it is relevant to note Russia's recent expression that the country no longer intends to cooperate on Arctic security, which could undermine Arctic collaboration (Humpert, M. 2023). The implications of Russia's potential withdrawal concerning security and defense matters are hard to foresee at this point.

4.4.4 Towards realization of a Nordic Air Force Alliance?

Since the establishment of NORDEF and the Stoltenberg report in 2009, a clear vision has existed for Nordic Air Force collaboration. The idea has subsequently been kept alive, but it has been hampered by Sweden and Finland not being NATO members. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 the concept regained momentum. This can be exemplified by a Norwegian Broadcast Corporation (NRK) interview with Professor Lieutenant-Colonel Dag Henriksen from the Royal Norwegian Air Force Academy in 2022 who presented the idea of a unified Nordic airforce as a realistic future scenario (Rørslett, K., & Eliassen, H. Ø. 2022). As Finland entered NATO on April 4, 2023, and Sweden applied for membership in 2022, the vision of an operative Nordic Air Force alliance has become even more realistic.

On 16 March 2023 at Ramstein Germany, an essential step towards the realization of the Stoltenberg report vision was made. The Chiefs of Air forces from four Nordic nations signed a memorandum of intent that would work towards combining their air forces into a single entity (Nordic Air Commanders' Intent. 2023). There was no Icelandic representative present for the signing. That is hardly surprising as Iceland does not have a chief of Air force, or an Air Force for that matter.

The Nordic Air Force memorandum contains four main suggestions. The first is integrating Nordic Air Command and Control, the second is flexible and resilient basing for aircraft, the third is a shared air situational awareness, and the fourth is a common education, training, and exercise system. The one-page public Memorandum does not detail the envisaged roles and responsibilities of individual nations. Consequently, no publicly available reports discuss the potential role of Iceland in the envisaged Nordic Air Force. Irrespective of this, the memorandum is a crucial step to establishing a Nordic Air Force comprising about 250 military aircraft. This fleet would be comparable to the air forces of larger European countries such as France and Germany (O'Dwyer, G. 2023).

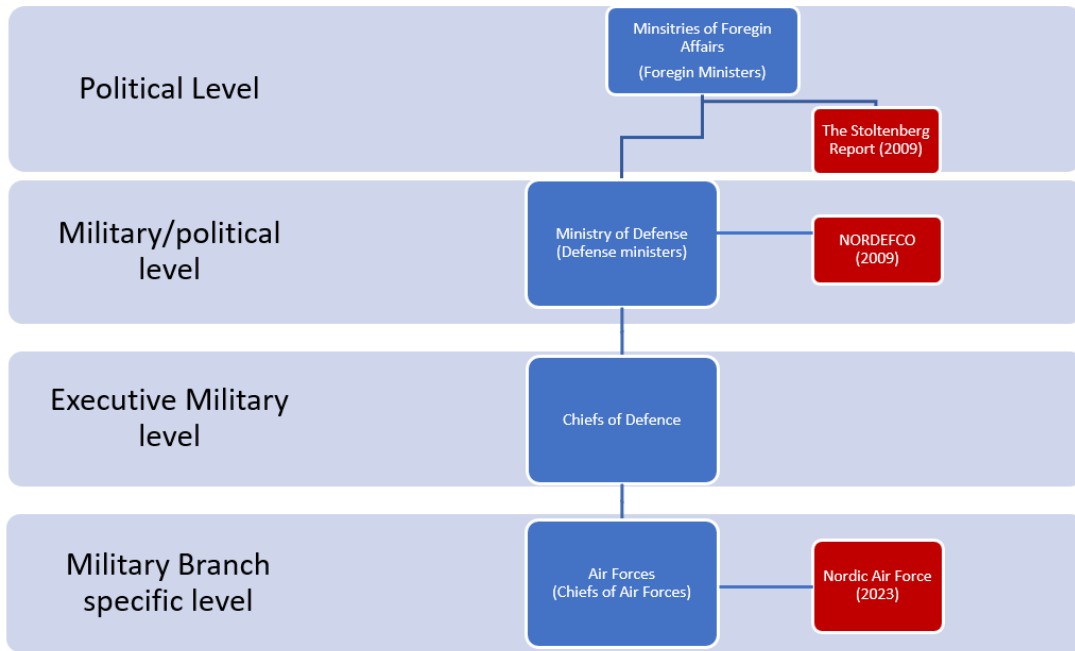


Figure 1. key actors and documents in the evolution of Nordic Air Defence collaboration.

4.4.5 No plans for a permanent military presence in Iceland

During a NATO summit held on June 17th, 2023, Icelandic Foreign Minister Þórdís Kolbrún Reykfjörð Gylfadóttir was interviewed by the Icelandic national broadcaster Ríkisútvarpið (RÚV). She was asked whether there are plans for permanently stationing foreign troops in Iceland. She stated that there were no plans or intent to do so at this time. Instead, the current Icelandic policy is to continue cooperation with NATO, along with considering an increase to the frequency of Iceland Air Policing missions (Malmquist, B., & Magnúsdóttir, Á. H. 2023). The question of permanent military presence will be revisited in 5.3.

4.4.6 A significant shift: U.S. Nuclear submarines permitted to sail in Icelandic waters

In April 2023, Icelandic authorities gave written permission to the U.S. Government, allowing the United States Navy to service nuclear-powered submarines in Iceland in Icelandic territorial waters. The visit was authorized as part of Iceland's changing policy to increase monitoring and response capacity of Allied countries in the North Atlantic (Ministry for Foreign Affairs. 2023). Iceland has long maintained a strict anti-nuclear policy, which forbids any vessel that is nuclear-powered or nuclear-armed to traverse in Icelandic territorial waters or dock in Icelandic ports. Of specific interest is a statement from the Icelandic expert on security Friðrik Jónsson (former military representative to NATO), who in an interview with RÚV, states that not only is the decision to permit nuclear vessels in

Icelandic territorial waters historical, it also showcases that Iceland takes security cooperation with allied nations seriously (Birgisdóttir, G. K. 2023). Jónsson said:

“I consider it positive that we, as cofounders of the North Atlantic Treaty, demonstrate in a tangible, visible, and concrete way that we participate in fulfilling our obligations as best we can (...) “We are members of NATO and have a bilateral defence treaty with the United States. This simply entails obligations we have to fulfill....” (Birgisdóttir, G. K. 2023).

5 Discussion

5.1 Main Results

This thesis aimed to explore the following overarching topic: How has Iceland’s defence strategy evolved since the Second World War, with particular emphasis on the period after 2006, and what factors have contributed to this development? Here follows a brief summary of the main findings:

Iceland’s defense strategy is inspired by an amalgamation of geographical, historical and cultural factors. The island is physically isolated but strategically important in an increasingly globalized world. As a nation, Iceland is historically committed to democracy and human rights. Icelanders look back at a subjugated past; centuries of disempowerment during “the Danish monopoly period” and later a history of surrender to benevolent occupation during the Second World War (“Ástandið”). After WW2, Iceland’s defence strategy has gradually shifted from an old ideal of perpetual neutrality to becoming a somewhat reluctant member of NATO with a bilateral defense treaty with the U.S. After the departure of U.S. troops in 2006, Iceland had to reevaluate its situation. It sought to broaden its security and defense cooperation with increased cooperation with NATO and, to an increasing extent, the Nordic nations. With rising tensions in Europe, especially after the Invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Icelandic security policy appears to move more decisively towards international cooperation. In light of recent political documents and collaborative projects, the prospect of Iceland joining the recently founded Nordic Air Force appears likely but has yet to be signed. Based on its strategic location and developed Keflavik Airbase, Iceland might clearly contribute to realizing the vision of the Nordic Air Force. What Iceland’s contribution to the strategy of this Nordic Alliance will become is a question for the near future.

As previously explained, four research questions were formulated to underpin the main topic. In the following, some selected, particularly interesting key points relating to these questions will be highlighted.

5.2 Discussion of research questions

5.2.1 What factors concerning Iceland's geographical location, history and culture are key to understanding the development of military matters in Iceland?

Considering Iceland's history, one may understand the nation's strong desire for full ownership of foreign policy in the name of sovereignty, including military alliances. In some respects, this has complicated U.S.-Icelandic cooperation as the vast power differential in these nations might lead to a certain antipathy on the Icelandic side. In contrast, Iceland shares a lot of cultural and historical relations and identity with the Nordic nations. On this basis, Iceland might be inclined to cooperate closely with the Nordic Nations in military matters, seeing them as equal partners rather than a direct benefactor.

A fascinating expression of Iceland's somewhat ambivalent attitude to their powerful military allies, in particular the U.S., is reflected in the language. Both the Icelandic government and the general population appear to prefer a vague narrative regarding military presence and defence infrastructure, with wording chosen to minimize connotations with the presence of armed forces. The most striking example encountered in this thesis is the term "Ástandið" (the Situation), which arose during WW2 to describe the benevolent but unwelcome occupation by foreign (U.K. and U.S.) troops that nevertheless is likely to have provided shelter from occupation or disruption by Nazi Germany (Herz, N. 2004). The next example is how U.S. personnel refer to "The Keflavik airbase" (U.S. Strategic Command. n.d.), while Icelandic authorities refer to the "Security zone" (Landhelgisgæsla Íslands. n.d.). The same can be said concerning the "Icelandic Coast Guard," which can be described as a de facto military branch, fulfilling many requirements such as having navy ranks, insignia, and a set hierarchy. Along the same lines one may interpret the importance for Icelandic authorities to emphasize that there are "no plans for permanent military presence in Iceland." (Malmquist, B., & Magnúsdóttir, Á. H. 2023). It is worth noting that this is similar to Norwegian base policy, which does not permit foreign bases in Norway but allows rotational deployments of foreign troops (*Store norske leksikon*, n.d. and Örvik, N. 1967).

5.2.2 Which foreign actors have influenced the development Iceland's defence strategy, and how?

Since WW2, Icelandic authorities have faced a challenge in carefully balancing its relationship with the U.S. and NATO while attempting to maintain sovereignty and independence through specific rules regarding deployments and operations from Iceland. Concomitantly, Iceland has cultivated its identity as a Nordic nation and pursued cooperation through organizations such as the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) and the Arctic Council. The U.S. nevertheless remains the hard security guarantee of Icelandic defence strategy, anchored in the 1951 bilateral defense treaty. This is evidenced through joint military exercises and substantial recent investment to Keflavik Airbase (Beardsley, S. 2016). NATO also contributes through direct economic support, operational plans, current and future missions, joint exercises, and intelligence sharing with the most important one being the treaty's collective defense promise (Utanríkisráðuneytið. 2022).

A third significant "actor" in Icelandic defense strategy are the Nordic countries. Nordic interest in defence cooperation has been increasing, as highlighted by the Stoltenberg report and NORDEF (see 4.2.2). Further plans for Nordic cooperation are likely under construction, especially regarding the Nordic Air Force project of 2023.¹⁴

5.2.3 What major military activities have taken place in Iceland?

The described collaborative military activities involving Iceland from 2006 to 2023 can be categorized as: rotational deployments, joint military exercises, and other military activity.

Rotational deployments in Iceland have included Iceland Air Policing (IAP) and U.S. P-8 maritime patrol operations. Since 2016, the magnitude of rotational operations has escalated, especially U.S. maritime patrol operations. Given Iceland's strategic location for monitoring the North Atlantic, it is probable that activities from Iceland will continue to expand. The current geopolitical climate involves resurgence of Russian military activity and dismissal of Arctic cooperation (Humpert, M. 2023) and China's growing interest in the Arctic region (Beardsley, S. 2016).

¹⁴ Several other relevant actors have not been addressed or are only briefly mentioned in the thesis. These include the United Kingdom, Canada, and the European Union.

As for Iceland's role as host nation, Iceland has actively participated in a range of multinational military exercises. These joint exercises aim to bolster Iceland's capacity to host other nations while showcasing its commitment to NATO and other participating countries.

Regarding other military activity, there has been an increasing deployment of military forces to Iceland, especially military aviation. These operations are often more temporary compared to IAP and maritime patrol operations. The deployment of B-2 Spirit strategic bomber to Iceland in 2021 was one major move, as deployments outside of home bases for these aircraft are quite rare. Another event is when U.S. nuclear submarines were permitted to enter Icelandic territorial waters in 2023. This was previously prohibited by Iceland's anti-nuclear policy, however the permission did not go so far as to allow nuclear-powered or nuclear-armed vessels to dock (Gunnarsson, F. G., & Birgisdóttir, G. K. 2023). These three events suggest a diverse spectrum of military activity and interest in Iceland, as well as increasing flexibility in Icelandic security policy.

5.2.4 How has Iceland's role in Nordic defence cooperation developed?

Iceland's contribution to NATO is documented in the foreign ministry's annual report (Utánríkisráðuneytið. 2022). In contrast, Iceland's current role in Nordic defence cooperation is difficult to assess based on available unclassified sources. As outlined above, several reports and policy papers indicate that Iceland's interest in Nordic cooperation has risen.

Icelandic early warning infrastructure provides important data regarding aerospace traffic in the North Atlantic to NATO and, subsequently the Nordic countries in NATO. Such information provides valuable situational awareness and is currently one of the larger contributions to NATO.

Once Sweden becomes a NATO member, Nordic cooperation might become easier under the NATO umbrella (Rørslett, K., & Eliassen, H. Ø. 2022 and Malcom & Icenews. 2012). However, many questions surrounding Iceland's present and future role in a Nordic Air Force remain unanswered. Icelandic contribution might not even be on the table. Firstly, as shown before, no Icelandic representatives were present for the signing of the 2023 memorandum as far as I could tell. Iceland is located far away from the other Nordic nations, making logistics difficult and very costly. The Nordic nations might not want to stretch their Air Forces to Iceland, as perhaps the United States might already have concrete plans regarding operating from Iceland in times of crisis or war, and

there might not be “space” for other actors such as a Nordic Air Force. This discussion will be continued in 5.3 Future perspectives.

5.3 Future perspectives and unanswered questions

From this point, the discussion moves from past, documented events and strategies to future scenarios and possibilities. These are characterized by uncertainty, at least based on the accessible open sources. I have chosen to address the following topics:

5.3.1 Nordic collaboration within NATO: What can Iceland contribute from a military perspective

Although Iceland lacks aircraft to contribute to a Nordic Air Force, the nation might become a vital part of a broader Nordic Air defence strategy, its strategic location and developed airbase infrastructure being its main asset, in addition to radar data. Iceland could thereby contribute to the four common goals shared by the Nordic Air Force concept (Nordic Air Commanders’ Intent. 2023). The Icelandic CRC could easily be integrated into the envisaged joint Nordic command and control structure. Regarding decreased vulnerability, Keflavik’s location might be utilized for operating aircraft from a less predictable location with broader control of the North Atlantic, contributing to the security of any allied maritime activity in the region. In this regard, open lines of naval communication are vital to NATO strategy and the Norwegian defence strategy of receiving support from allied nations (Norwegian Ministry of Defence. 2020). If a common Nordic air force education center were to be established, Icelandic personnel might receive education as part of a common Nordic military education program. The expertise currently residing in the CRC Loki branch of the Icelandic Coast Guard might benefit the Nordic nations, and the Coast Guard could gain experience from their Nordic allies. Nordic Air Force collaboration could also lead to increasing Nordic military presence at Keflavik Air Base, encompassing joint exercises and perhaps a permanent Nordic presence in Iceland, should Iceland desire it. By actively participating in NORDEFCO and the Nordic Air Force, Iceland could gain more influence in future Nordic defence strategies. This could reduce the reliance on U.S. interests to maintain a credible defence of Iceland.

5.3.2 From strategical vagueness to clarity: ways to involve the Icelandic population

As previously discussed, Iceland’s favored identity used to be a neutral, self-sufficient nation, peacefully engaged in international collaboration and trade. After almost 75 years in NATO and in

view of the Ukraine war, many Icelanders seem to have adopted a more realist and cynical outlook. The question then arises of whether and how the traditional, collective Icelandic cultural and narrative identity might be reconciled with more explicit involvement in military alliances. In this context, the prospect of close *Nordic cooperation under the NATO umbrella* may prove to be a game-changer.

Education of military academics would be a strength for Iceland. The country features experts in international relations, political science, and history. However, it does not harbor a critical mass of academics with military insight or experience. To become an influential ally on equal terms, Iceland should be able to address military matters from a native academic perspective, as we have witnessed in Norway almost daily since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This might contribute to more transparency and explicit debates in Iceland, thereby creating a better basis for democratic policy development, as opposed to the somewhat subdued atmosphere surrounding defence that has dominated the public discourse in Iceland for decades. A further spin-off of a more informed and receptive public could be a higher and more inquisitive standard of coverage in Icelandic media.

5.3.3 A permanent, rotational presence of foreign troops?

Official data for military personnel located in Iceland at any given time is unavailable to the public. As stated before, officially, there is no permanent presence (Malmquist, B., & Magnúsdóttir, Á. H. 2023). However, the 2021 report from the Icelandic Ministry of foreign affairs states that allied soldiers had over 92.000 overnight stays in Iceland (Utanríkisráðuneytið. 2022). That equals 250 soldiers per night for 365 days. In comparison, the Icelandic Coast Guard has only around 250 employees (Utanríkisráðuneytið. 2022). The presence of some foreign military activity in Iceland for most of the year can thereby be assumed, as activities encompassing thousands of troops would almost certainly be covered in media. The high reported number of foreign soldiers in Iceland does not necessarily contradict the statement of "no permanent military presence". The presence of troops may be more or less permanent, while the soldiers rotate. The answer to the question of whether there is in fact a permanent presence of foreign troops in Iceland may in other words prove to be a matter of definition.

6. Conclusion

Iceland's defense strategy is best understood in view of the country's geographical, historical and cultural characteristics. After the Second World War, its defence strategy gradually shifted from a

traditional ideal of perpetual neutrality to becoming a somewhat reluctant member of NATO with a bilateral defense treaty with the U.S. After the departure of U.S. troops from Keflavik in 2006. Iceland has gradually broadened its security and defense cooperation, both with NATO and, to an increasing extent, the Nordic countries. With rising tensions in Europe after the Invasion of Ukraine, Icelandic security is likely to move decisively towards cooperation with the Nordic countries under the NATO umbrella. This possibility may help to resolve Iceland's historic ambivalence in defense cooperation, perceiving itself as a resourceful contributor on equal terms. Iceland's potential role in a future Nordic Air Force remains undefined.

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External tools for writing assistance

All arguments in this thesis have been collected and presented by me. During the writing process I received help from members of my family. In addition, I have used the following digital resources for spelling and structural/ linguistic suggestions: Words- Proofing tools, Word-Editor feature, Microsoft Co-Pilot, Grammarly, Microsoft Bard and Open AI's ChatGBT.