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# Arctic security and the United Kingdom

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## SUMMARY

Over the past decade, rapid and profound change in the Arctic has been accompanied by a sense of global unease about the future of the region. This paper provides a short overview of the role the United Kingdom (UK), as the Arctic's 'closest neighbour' – and increasingly close partner of Norway – might be expected to play in the security architecture of the Arctic. Specifically, the focus is on challenges relating to the changing environment, emerging economic opportunities and geopolitical shifts among Arctic stakeholders. The paper argues that the UK could address two factors in particular, those of credibility and presence, in order to participate effectively in the emerging Arctic security architecture.



## ARCTIC SECURITY AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

While the UK has no sovereign territory to defend in the Arctic, it sees itself as the Arctic's "closest neighbour", a proximity which creates both challenges and opportunities, especially given the potential for the Greenland-Iceland-UK Gap (GIUK) to become a gateway for traffic traversing newly accessible Arctic sea routes. At the same time, the UK is also a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a leading member of NATO, and the

country with the fourth highest spending on defence in the world (SIPRI 2012). The UK has tended to adopt a global perspective when it comes to national and international security; a perspective which the Arctic is undoubtedly increasingly part of. This article provides an overview of some of the UK's more recent defence and security interests in the Arctic, and considers how the UK might contribute to the future security of the region as a whole.

### REVITALISED INTEREST

Since at least 2008, the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) has been increasingly attentive to the environmental, economic and geopolitical changes taking place in the Arctic. Although the Arctic was not mentioned in either the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) or the National Security Strategy (both of which were published in 2010), the MOD has been actively scoping out the kinds of opportunities, risks and capability challenges that could emerge in the Arctic in the future. At the same time, through continuing participation in multinational military exercises and (albeit reduced) 'Cold Weather Training' for Royal Marine Commandos, the MOD has been testing its capacity to perform military tasks in and around the waters of Norway's 'High North' (Depledge and Dodds 2012).

The UK government has declared a range of interests in the Arctic:

- The protection of the Arctic environment and ecosystem.
- Supporting and encouraging continued co-operation among the Arctic states.
- The effects of climate change on the Arctic and the Arctic as a barometer of climate change.

- The potential of the Arctic to strengthen energy security and the sustainable use and safe extraction of resources.
- The opening up of the Arctic to increased shipping and related issues, including the new Polar Shipping Code.
- The sustainable management of any new fishing grounds in the Arctic.
- The study of the region by UK scientists.

Alongside these specific interests, the UK also has a number of more general concerns which are likely to become more relevant in the Arctic, most notably the maintenance of global norms such as the Freedom of Navigation and the application of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Clearly, not all of these interests are directly relevant to defence and security. From an MOD perspective, the principal challenges are:

*Environmental:* relating to the natural challenges specific to operating in the Arctic including the extreme cold, extended days and nights and magnetic inter-

ference, as well as to the environmental standards that MOD equipment must adhere to;

*Economic:* relating to emerging economic opportunities in the Arctic (resource development, shipping, tourism) which could increase the need for a military presence in the region to provide security and assistance to assets, infrastructure and citizens;

*Geopolitical:* relating to shifts in the strategic postures of, and relations between, Arctic and other interested states which may (re)mobilise antagonisms and alliances.

The drive towards developing a greater understanding of these challenges has coincided with a broader resurgence of MOD interest in the UK's potential role in what one commentator has referred to as the 'Wider North' (Rogers 2012). In 2010, the then-UK Defence Secretary, Liam Fox, took the initiative to establish a Northern Group of Defence Ministers which continues to meet on an annual basis to discuss the shared security concerns of northern European nations including the Nordic and Baltic countries. The UK has also sought specifically to strengthen its relationship with Norway, a key supplier of UK energy, through a range of high-level agreements on defence, oil and gas exploration, re-

newable energy, biotechnology and cooperation in both the Arctic and Antarctica (Depledge 2012).

The impetus for these activities is not tied to any sense of an 'imminent' threat to the security of the UK or its allies (NATO's collective defence agreement covers the Atlantic side of the Arctic all the way to the North Pole). Instead, the MOD's priority has been to attempt to anticipate the types of threat (if any) that could emerge in the future, and establish what kinds of capabilities are needed to minimise the risks to UK interests should any of these threats be realised. The imperative for doing so is tied to the uncertainty which characterises ongoing environmental, economic and geopolitical change in the Arctic. The kinds of security concerns that have been postulated are generally associated with the disruption of energy supplies or shipping activities. Paul Beaver, for example, has sketched out a series of security challenges for the UK, principally linked to a lack of capabilities to monitor and intervene in the newly emerging Arctic maritime domain, and (linked to this) a lack of military presence to offer assurances to the UK's Nordic allies that the UK can still make a credible contribution to the defence of the 'High North' (Beaver 2011). However, while it seems certain that hydrocarbon and maritime-related activities will increase in the Arctic, the scale and extent of potential developments, as well as the key stakeholders, remains uncertain, and, therefore, so does their strategic importance.

## CONTRIBUTING TO ARCTIC SECURITY

A number of the UK's concerns about the present and future security of the Arctic are shared by Arctic states, especially the UK's NATO allies (the US, Canada, Norway and Denmark). These include issues surrounding search and rescue, environmental remediation, piracy, terrorism, natural and man-made disaster response and border protection outlined by the Center of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in 2012 (Conley et al. 2012). In 2009, the UK's then-Minister for International Defence and Security, Baroness Ann Taylor, spoke about Arctic security at a joint NATO-Iceland conference on 'Security Prospects in the High North'.

In particular, she emphasised a need for consensus between interested parties on territorial rights, resource rights, access to shipping straits, scientific exploration, environmental protection and cooperation on security and military activity in the region.<sup>2</sup> None of these things contradict the various strategies outlined by the Arctic states, or the agendas of existing institutional structures for international and regional cooperation.

What is questionable is the extent to which the Arctic states are interested in involving the UK in Arctic security affairs. Canada has declared that it sees

no role for NATO in the Canadian Arctic, and given Canada's security relationship with the US, there is little need to further involve the UK at a bilateral level.<sup>3</sup> Russia is also firmly against a NATO presence in the Arctic. The Nordic countries on the other hand, especially Norway, do see a role for NATO, largely to provide reassurance that the alliance's security commitments to Northern Europe are not forgotten. The UK, as a key member of NATO and as a geographically proximate state, is therefore still regarded as an important ally of the Nordics when it comes to the security of the north. However, as the Arctic states continue to develop and upgrade their own military capabilities, while at the same time bolstering their collective claim of responsibility for the Arctic, the support of countries such as the UK could diminish. While the UK attends the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, greater security cooperation between the Arctic states could mean there will be less interest in involving non-Arctic states as anything more than observers to the process. One might look to the recent example of how negotiations of the Arctic Search and Rescue Treaty and the Oil Spill Prepar-

edness Response Treaty were conducted among the Arctic states – the UK's offer to provide input into these negotiations was rejected.

However, another dynamic that should be taken into account concerns the expectations of the British public. At present, it is probably fair to suggest that the broader public is largely unaware about potential security challenges in the Arctic. This is likely to change quickly if there is an incident, even if we consider 'softer' security issues such as a cruise ship accident involving British citizens, a major oil spill involving a UK-based company (consider the fallout from the Macondo catastrophe which BP was implicated in) or an attack on infrastructure owned by UK-based companies. In any of these situations, the public is likely to want to know both how such an incident was possible in the first place and what the UK government is doing to assist. Thus while international expectations of the UK might not be very high, domestic pressure for the UK to increase its engagement with Arctic security issues could grow rapidly.

## CREDIBILITY AND PRESENCE

With regard to both the level of international and domestic expectations about the UK's role in any emerging security architecture for the Arctic, and given the uncertainty which characterises the changes taking place in the Arctic, the biggest challenge for the UK will be to establish where the Arctic sits relative to the UK's other strategic interests and how this is balanced with investment in the UK's defence requirements elsewhere in the world. Arctic operations "are likely to be a force driver, requiring additional capabilities, suitably designed for the conditions, with appropriate support" (Murgatroyd 2009, p. 85). However, in 2010, the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) and the National Security Strategy both focused attention on out-of-area operations in the Middle East and East Africa rather than Northern Europe. North Africa has also been rising up the strategic agenda since 2011. To meet these challenges, the SDSR has prioritised capabilities that meet the requirements for an *adaptable*

defence posture, as well as reducing overall defence costs which may soon dip below 2 per cent of GDP. This will make it challenging for the UK to justify investment for the kinds of Arctic-specific capabilities that are likely to be required, especially where they cannot easily be adapted or retrofitted to work with existing capabilities. The capability challenge may be further complicated by the development of international environmental regulations regarding the kinds of technologies that can be deployed on vessels operating in Arctic waters (for example, the Polar Code which is still being negotiated by the International Maritime Organisation). The long lead-times involved in developing new capabilities means that these issues need to be resolved as soon as possible if the UK is to maintain a role for itself in the Arctic security architecture in the coming years.

In the meantime, the UK's naval capabilities are thinly stretched, and at least in the short term are

likely to struggle to respond to contingencies in the Arctic. As others have noted, the 2010 SDSR decision to cancel the Nimrod Maritime Patrol Aircraft programme has for the time being deprived the UK of valuable surveillance capabilities for support anti-submarine warfare, maritime situation awareness and search and rescue (Beaver 2011; Willett 2011). The SDSR also reduced the size of the UK's surface fleet from 23 to 19, meaning the UK also has very few vessels spare for contributing to any potential operations in Arctic waters, whether for the purpose of military operations, policing (e.g. monitoring compliance with any international environmental regulations which may emerge) or offering support for search and rescue or oil spill response. Until the UK economy is on a path of sustainable recovery, it is highly unlikely that these capabilities will be expanded at least in the next five-ten years, especially since the UK is already struggling to fund key successor programmes (such as the Type 26 frigates, Joint Strike Fighters and deterrence replacement). This lack of material military capacity is likely to generate further apprehension on behalf of the Arctic states about relying on the UK to provide support to any emerging Arctic security structure.

One response from the UK Government could be to at least maintain and, where possible, increase its focus, on two factors in the Arctic: credibility and presence. This includes for example, increasing ef-

forts to map the changes underway in the Arctic, whether physical, political, social or economic. This knowledge will provide the basis for future-facing judgements about the scale of risks and opportunities in the Arctic, especially when it comes to developing capabilities (Depledge 2012). The UK can also continue participating in multilateral exercises involving Arctic partners to show Arctic states that it still has equipment for operating in the Arctic, as well as personnel who embody the knowledge, skills and experience necessary for acting in extreme cold weather environments (Depledge and Dodds, 2012). Without maintaining these capabilities (even at the current minimal level), the UK will struggle to make itself relevant to the Arctic security community. However, a degree of expectation management is also likely to be needed. While interest in the Arctic is high, activity is still relatively low (and starting from a very low base). As such, the Arctic remains a low priority concern for UK defence planners with a global perspective of national and international security, despite the increasing attention it is receiving. While the continuing stability of the region is vital, the UK might even be hopeful that the security architecture can be managed by the Arctic states themselves, particularly through the strengthening of new fora such as the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable with which all of the Arctic states are currently engaged.

## NOTES

- 1 For a review of UK Arctic interests see Depledge and Dodds, 2011.
- 2 For the full text of Baroness Ann Taylor's speech visit <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/AboutDefence/People/Speeches/MinISD/20090129JointNatoicelandicGovernmentConferencesecurityProspectsInHighNorthReykjavicIceland.htm>.
- 3 It is worth noting that the UK military already participates in numerous training programmes in Canada. <http://ukincanada.fco.gov.uk/en/about-us/working-with-canada/defence/uk-military-training-in-canada>.



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