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The United Kingdom in the Arctic

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Summary

This paper examines the key Arctic defence and security interests and priorities of the United Kingdom (UK) provided in its recent Arctic Policy Framework and Ministry of Defence (MoD) paper. This policy is congruent with Canada's own Arctic defence and security interests and priorities. Since the UK first published an Arctic policy in 2013, the focus has shifted from human security concerns towards confronting Russian air and maritime forces in the High North and North Atlantic. Despite Canada and the UK already have an extensive defence relationship in the Arctic and British policy emphasizing the European High North, there are multiple opportunities for further bilateral and multilateral cooperation. This includes British training in the Canadian Arctic and Canadian deployments to the European High North for exercises, exchanges, and gaining operational experience in this region of the Arctic. However, UK language around freedom of navigation and UNCLOS differs from Canada's. Canada should be attentive to its possible application to the Northwest Passage in ways that could undermine its sovereignty over historic waters.

Key Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Priorities

On 9 February 2023, the UK Government released *Looking North: The UK and the Arctic*. This Arctic Policy Framework messages the UK's whole-of-government approach to the region. This approach includes drawing on the UK's "diplomatic excellence," defence capabilities, and "world-class scientific expertise of the UK Arctic research community," to work with international partners to help keep the Arctic "safe, secure, peaceful, and well governed."¹

The *Looking North* is organized around four priority areas:

1. Partnering and collaborating: The UK, as a State Observer, remains committed to the Arctic Council. It will reinforce its participation in multilateral fora and strengthen its bilateral relationships with Arctic partners and Allies, exploring opportunities for achieving shared objectives.
2. Protecting the climate, people and environment: The UK will continue to work to address the impacts of climate change, and will work with partners on environmental issues, including on Arctic science and research. It will continue to protect the rights, views and interests of the people of the Arctic.

3. Preserving security and stability: The UK will uphold the international order and freedom of navigation. It will protect its critical infrastructure in the High North and other national interests, and that of its Allies. It will continue to support the existing legal framework and constructive international cooperation. It will promote safe and responsible activity in the region.
4. Promoting shared prosperity: The UK will promote prosperity in the Arctic through sustainable and responsible economic development.²

The Framework acknowledges that Canada and the UK “already enjoy close cooperation on Arctic issues,” building upon the countries’ 2008 and 2017 bilateral Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) on Arctic science and research oriented around climate change.³ The UK continues to emphasize improving bilateral science and technology cooperation, with new projects that put the needs and skills of Indigenous communities “front and centre” to support Indigenous decision-making. Projects of interest include climate adaptation and mitigation, economics of climate change, resilience, sustainability, and Inuit community health and wellbeing.⁴

The Framework builds on *The UK’s Defence Contribution in the High North*, a MoD paper published in March 2022. Defining the High North as encompassing the Arctic and parts of the North Atlantic, the paper marks this region as “important to the UK’s environment, prosperity, energy supply, and security.”⁵ Citing Russian militarization of and Chinese interests in the Arctic, the paper also posits that the region could suffer from threats “spilling over” from elsewhere.⁶ On the possibility that the Arctic could become a region of high tension, the paper seeks to enable the UK to “respond appropriately,”⁷ explaining that:

The UK has strong relationships with almost all Arctic states and has a responsibility to support our [the UK’s] Allies and partners to preserve the stability and security of the region; we [the UK] have been operating there for many years. We will continue to support the existing legal framework and constructive international co-operation in the region. We will protect and, where appropriate, assert our rights against those who wish to challenge the rules-based international system and freedom of navigation or threaten the stability of the region in other ways. As a leading European NATO Ally, the UK is prepared to defend our Arctic Allies and respond to aggression. We will contest malign and destabilising behaviours and activity in the region which threaten our interests, the safety of the inhabitants of the Arctic, and the stability of the region.⁸

The MoD intends to pursue the following four objectives for the High North:

1. Protect Critical National Infrastructure and other national interests, and those of Allies.
2. Ensure freedom to navigate and operate across the wider region.
3. Reinforce the rules-based international system, particularly UNCLOS.
4. Contest malign and destabilising behaviours.⁹

The MoD paper lays out four methods to accomplish these goals. These include improving the UK’s understanding of the region, working with Allies and partners to align policy, activity, and capability where possible across all domains, and maintaining a coherent defence posture in the region. The UK also aims to develop a sustainable, modern, and “proportionate Defence capability” in the region, including through investment in research and development.¹⁰

Context: Literature Review

Looking North: The UK and the Arctic is the UK's third Arctic Policy Framework, updating 2018's *Beyond the Ice: UK Policy towards the Arctic* which had updated an earlier 2013 framework. 2013's *Adapting to Change: UK Policy Towards the Arctic* is notable for being the first Arctic white paper published by a non-Arctic government.¹¹ Focusing on human security and climate change,¹² the document also began the process of socializing the UK as the "Arctic's nearest neighbour."¹³

Subsequent reports such as the *National Strategy for Maritime Security* (2014) introduced into British policy the narrative that climate change will open new shipping routes through the Arctic, bringing new maritime security threats.¹⁴ The House of Lords' report *Responding to a Changing Arctic* (2015) elaborated on this theme, explaining that the "MoD is aware of the importance of anti-submarine operations in this area and will need to keep this issue under constant review" recommending that the military develop its cold-weather capabilities and renew its maritime patrol capability.¹⁵ *Russia: Implications for UK Defence and Security* (2016) emphasized Russian military expansion in the Arctic and the waters and airspace of the High North – effectively the space between the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap and the Arctic Ocean – and recommended further study.¹⁶

The UK Defence Committee's 2017 report *On Thin Ice: UK Defence in the Arctic* wove these narratives together, concluding that the UK "sustains a range of capabilities which could play decisive roles"¹⁷ in the Arctic. In particular, the Royal Navy's nuclear-powered submarines, aircraft carriers, and maritime patrol aircraft represent a formidable anti-submarine warfare capability with which to confront Russia.¹⁸ This policy development was influenced by Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine as well as substantial UK defence contact with Norway and the United States (who form a "Northern Triangle") focusing on maritime patrol, anti-submarine warfare, and joint Arctic warfare training and exercises.¹⁹ Scholars have observed that a "considerable Cold War legacy continues to influence British thinking regarding the security of its northern maritime area," with an emphasis on Russian submarine activity near the GIUK Gap.²⁰

Despite these developments, the UK Polar Region Department's 2018 report *Beyond the Ice* did not specify Russia as a threat nor the types of operations the MoD foresaw itself undertaking there. The "Defence" section of the document does note that while the Arctic Council's mandate precludes it from engaging in military security, the forum is important for promoting cooperation and collaboration that builds confidence between Arctic States and their international partners. The Arctic Coast Guard Forum was also flagged as supplementing this role. In response to increased military activity in the region, the document notes UK cold-weather exercising and its participation in the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable. It also states that "NATO also remains a central plank for cooperation among its Arctic State members."²¹ The report made no references to maritime security issues such as freedom of navigation, instead stating that the UK should take advantage of new trade routes from climate change should they arise.

Increasing international strategic competition and the UK's decision to leave the EU underpinned the 2021 national security policy *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*. Integrating security, defence, development, and foreign policy, the Arctic makes a brief appearance as the last region of interest to the UK. Aiming for the region to become one of high cooperation and low tension, the policy states that the UK will work with Arctic partners to ensure future "access to the region and its resources is managed safely, sustainably and responsibly."²² The new framework, *Looking North: The UK and the Arctic*, is a result of the national security policy.

From 2013-2021, scholars observed that the premise for UK Arctic security shifted from climate change and soft security issues championed by the Foreign Office (FO) to the more traditional defence concerns of the MoD. Climate change originally drove both approaches to UK Arctic security before the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine superseded this for the MoD.²³ Another theme running through British scholarship is the notion of using the Arctic as a means to distinguish the UK from other polities. Scotland has demonstrated an interest over time in the Arctic, partially as a way to differentiate itself from a Brexit Britain.²⁴ The articulation of the UK's security concerns in the High North must also be situated in the process of differentiating Britain from its former partners in the European Union.²⁵

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interests

The recent Looking North policy framework notes that the UK "already enjoy close cooperation on Arctic issues"²⁶ with Canada and wishes to enhance this collaboration. The document contains a section on Canada -- along with the other seven Arctic states -- outlining existing areas of cooperation (Arctic science and research, defence, and security) and potential areas for deeper collaboration (climate adaptation and mitigation, collaboration with Inuit communities, and cold weather training.²⁷ The section ends noting that the UK "will continue to strengthen our cooperation with Canada in the Arctic to contribute to achieving shared objectives, allowing the UK to learn from Canada's expertise as an Arctic nation."²⁸ This is congruent with Canadian defence policy in *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (SSE) and Canada's *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* (ANPF).

Pursuing new opportunities and areas of common interests are complicated by three issues. First, Canada and the UK have different interpretations of what constitutes "the Arctic." Canada's interpretation of the Arctic is centred on its own Arctic and the surrounding "North American" Arctic. In comparison, the UK does not have territory in the Circumpolar North on which to centre its notions of "Arctic." Its policy documents focus on the GUK Gap and the surrounding European "High North." The Arctic is adjacent to these North Atlantic waters.²⁹ While Canadian policy is beginning to integrate this "European Arctic" into its planning,³⁰ the North American Arctic is largely absent from UK policy.

Second, Canada and the UK interpret NATO's role in the Arctic differently. Both the UK framework and MoD paper focus on the role of NATO in the High North. Looking North explains that "the UK will advocate for NATO to take a more proactive long-term approach to the High North, acknowledging the leadership and expertise of our Arctic Allies"³¹ which reflects the language used in The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North.³² By comparison, Canada focuses on the role of NATO across the larger Arctic as opposed to the European High North.³³

Third, a robust defence relationship already exists between Canada and the UK in the Arctic limiting new opportunities for cooperation. The UK has agreements with Canada, the USA, and Norway on enhancing cooperation in “the Arctic and High North.”³⁴ Canada regularly invites the UK to participate in Operation NANOOK and Canada routinely contributes troops to NATO exercises in the High North. UK documents note the 2021 MOU signed between the Royal Navy and Canadian Coast Guard to train British sailors in icy waters,³⁵ while focusing on deepening interoperability with its Arctic Allies (including Canada) on anti-submarine warfare (ASW).³⁶ Additional defence cooperation will be built on this strong foundation.

Canada and UK Arctic defence policy agree as to where and what types of additional defence cooperation would be beneficial to both countries. The *ANPF* states that while “Canada sees no immediate threat in the Arctic,” the region is increasing in strategic importance with “both Arctic and non-Arctic states expressing a variety of economic and military interests in the region.”³⁷ *SSE* is more specific:

NATO has also increased its attention to Russia’s ability to project force from its Arctic territory into the North Atlantic, and its potential to challenge NATO’s collective defence posture. Canada and its NATO Allies have been clear that the Alliance will be ready to deter and defend against any potential threats, including against sea lines of communication and maritime approaches to Allied territory in the North Atlantic.³⁸

UK policy also places the centre of strategic competition in the High North, orienting its Arctic defence policy to contribution there. By contrast, UK policy posits the Canadian Arctic as a place to train,³⁹ while Canadian policy stresses the need to project presence in its Arctic.⁴⁰ This creates a dichotomy of bilateral training in the Canadian Arctic and deploying to the High North.

Looking North specifically mentions that the UK will “seek additional opportunities to undertake UK cold weather training in Canada.”⁴¹ The MoD paper elaborates this is to “bolster its cold weather capability to ensure that Arctic-appropriate equipment, activity, environmental support, and infrastructure are all developed and maintained.”⁴² This aligns with Canadian policy that “seek[s] opportunities to incorporate key Arctic and non-Arctic allies and partners in joint activities in Canada’s Arctic.”⁴³ Additional training or exchange cooperation could involve British Army and Royal Marine elements working with Canadian Rangers. This would help ensure the appropriateness of British kit in conditions harsher than the European High North while also working to satisfy *SSE* initiative #108: “Enhance and expand the training and effectiveness of the Canadian Rangers.” The involvement of Canadian troops would also work towards initiative #106: “Enhance the mobility, reach and footprint of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) in Canada’s North to support operations, exercises, and the Canadian Armed Forces’ ability to project force into the region.”⁴⁴ Both *SSE* and the *ANPF* reference the Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships (AOPS) and new all-terrain vehicles optimized for Arctic use.⁴⁵ Training or exchange opportunities with these platforms could also help satisfy the policy goals of both countries.

The UK policy documents suggest several opportunities for personnel exchanges, exercises, and deployments to the European High North. The UK leads both the Joint Expeditionary Force (including Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) as well as the Northern Group (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland,

Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, and Sweden).⁴⁶ While Canada is neither a Nordic nor Northern European state, arrangements to participate in or observe these activities in some capacity could improve Canadian understandings of the European defence perspective on the High North, helping with the goal of situating NATO within the larger Arctic. Exercising with the Joint Expeditionary Force also could help advance “common plans” and improve “interoperability” with NATO Allies.⁴⁷

More bilateral opportunities outlined in the UK documents include P-8A Maritime Patrol Aircraft and the dedicated Littoral Response Group (North) of the Royal Navy.⁴⁸ Joint deployments, exercises, and personnel exchanges between British and Canadian maritime patrol aircraft in the High North could also help with the proposed Canadian acquisition of the P-8A. The UK has also committed to establishing a standing response force built around the Littoral Response Group,⁴⁹ generating an opportunity for the CAF to exercise or temporarily deploy with this force. All of these options would contribute to *SSE* initiative #110: “Conduct joint exercises with Arctic allies and partners and support the strengthening of situational awareness and information sharing in the Arctic, including with NATO.”⁵⁰

Issues of Divergence or Concern

UK language around freedom of navigation is a concern for Canada. Both The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North and Looking North repeatedly reference freedom to navigation and the “centrality and integrity of”⁵¹ the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS). The MoD paper states:

Coastal States reactions to the expected gradual increase in maritime traffic, such as the adoption of national regulations, which are not in-keeping with UNCLOS, and which attempt exert influence over both international and national waters, risk undermining UNCLOS in the region. The right to free and unfettered passage on the high seas must be safeguarded, as must the right of innocent passage and freedom of navigation through territorial seas and Exclusive Economic Zones, and transit passage through straits. The UK will not accept navigation terms which contravene UNCLOS and will remain vigilant to the undermining of UNCLOS by any actor, and is prepared to respond if needed.⁵²

Looking North moderates this language, explaining that “UNCLOS provides the legal framework for the exercise of the rights and responsibilities of coastal states, including in the Arctic, and for regulating the various uses of Arctic waters. It is a critical part of the international system, and the UK will continue to work with the international community to uphold it.”⁵³ However, *Looking North* elaborates that the UK needs “to be prepared to protect and, where appropriate, assert [its] rights against those who wish to challenge the international order and freedom of navigation, or threaten the stability of the region in other ways.”⁵⁴ This statement immediately follows text on China and Russia, implying that the statement is aimed at them. The MoD is more explicit in this linkage, stating that “we will continue to monitor closely and assess the approach adopted by both Arctic and non-Arctic states, including Russia, not least their military postures and any activity that violates international norms and agreements such as UNCLOS.”⁵⁵ The paper explicitly lays out the “particular role” the UK plays within NATO of “protecting underwater critical national infrastructure and ensuring freedom to operate in the North Atlantic, especially in the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap.”⁵⁶ However, this language can be interpreted as a criticism of Canada’s longstanding position that its Arctic Archipelago constitutes historic, internal waters.

Both *Looking North* and *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North* focus exclusively on the statutory law of UNCLOS without any reference to customary law – which may be central to Canada's arguments to the larger international community. Canada maintains that UNCLOS neither covers all of the rights of coastal states nor does it trump customary law. The MoD paper notes that the UK intends to focus on deep interoperability with the US, Canada, Denmark, and Norway. Cross-referencing this with the *Looking North* framework finds the passage: "The UK seeks to work with our partners and Allies in the region to reinforce international rights to freedom of access and navigation in the Arctic. To this end, Royal Navy ships recommenced activity in the Arctic in 2020, alongside Arctic Allies such as Denmark, Norway, and the US, including to protect the centrality and integrity of UNCLOS."⁵⁷ Canada is conspicuously absent here.

Looking North also references the opening of new trade routes through the Arctic,⁵⁸ which implies the Northwest Passage. While UNCLOS is not mentioned in this block of text, it does reference growing UK interest in utilizing these potential new waterways. This sets up a scenario where the UK's presence and lack of recognition of Canada's internal waters could generate future bilateral friction.

A potential avenue around the above scenario lies in the framework document statement that the UK will "continue to respect the rights, views, and interests of the people of the Arctic, including of the region's Indigenous people through increased engagement on issues affecting Arctic indigenous communities."⁵⁹ This indirectly reintroduces customary law into the UK's position. It engages with Canada's historic title to the waters of the Northwest Passage and its duties of protecting the rights of Indigenous peoples across its Arctic.

Overall, *Looking North* is less belligerent in tone than the MoD paper released a year before. However, both documents obliquely engage Canada on the status of the waters of the Arctic Archipelago, implying divergence on the issue. Accordingly, Canada should continue to monitor the UK's interpretation of freedom of navigation and how it might apply to Canada's historic internal waters.

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¹ Polar Regions Department, *Looking North: The UK and the Arctic* (London: UK Government, 2023), 8.

² *Looking North*, 10.

³ *Looking North*, 13.

⁴ *Looking North*, 14, 25.

⁵ Ministry of Defence, *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North* (London, Ministry of Defence, 2022),

⁶ *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, 2.

⁷ *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, 2.

⁸ *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, 7.

⁹ *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, 8.

- ¹⁰ *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, 8.
- ¹¹ Marc Lanteigne, "Inside, Outside, Upside Down? Non-Arctic States in Emerging Arctic Security Discourses," in Kristina Spohr, Daniel S. Hamilton, and Jason C. Moyer (eds.) *The Arctic and World Order* (Washington DC: Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, 2020), 391.
- ¹² Duncan Depledge, Klaus Dodds & Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, "The UK's Defence Arctic Strategy: Negotiating the Slippery Geopolitics of the UK and the Arctic," *The RUSI Journal* 164, no.1 (2019): 33-4.
- ¹³ Alyson Bailes, "The Arctic's Nearest Neighbour?" *Arctic Yearbook* (2014): 5.
- ¹⁴ Secretary of State for Defence, *National Strategy for Maritime Security* (London: HM Government, 2014), 25.
- ¹⁵ Select Committee on the Arctic, *Responding to a changing Arctic* (Westminster: House of Lords, 2015), 108-9.
- ¹⁶ Defence Committee, *Russia: Implications for UK defence and security* (Westminster: House of Commons, 2016).
- ¹⁷ Defence Committee, *On Thin Ice: UK Defence in the Arctic* (Westminster: House of Commons, 2017), 51.
- ¹⁸ *On Thin Ice*, 51-6.
- ¹⁹ Depledge, Dodds & Kennedy-Pipe, "The UK's Defence Arctic Strategy," 36.
- ²⁰ Lanteigne, "Inside, Outside, Upside Down?" 390.
- ²¹ Polar Regions Department, *Beyond The Ice: UK Policy Towards the Arctic* (London: UK Government, 2018), 21.
- ²² PMO, *Global Britain in a competitive age* (London: HM Government, 2021), 64.
- ²³ Depledge, Dodds & Kennedy-Pipe, "The UK's Defence Arctic Strategy," 33-4.
- ²⁴ Depledge, Dodds & Kennedy-Pipe, "The UK's Defence Arctic Strategy," 30.
- ²⁵ Marc Lanteigne, "Inside, Outside, Upside Down? Non-Arctic States in Emerging Arctic Security Discourses," in Kristina Spohr, Daniel S. Hamilton, and Jason C. Moyer (eds.) *The Arctic and World Order* (Washington DC: Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, 2020), 391.
- ²⁶ *Looking North*, 13.
- ²⁷ See *Looking North*, 13-4.
- ²⁸ *Looking North*, 14.
- ²⁹ MoD, *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, 4.
- ³⁰ See, for example, *Strong, Secured, Engage (SSE)* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2017), 79-80.
- ³¹ *Looking North*, 20.
- ³² *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, 10.
- ³³ See, for example, *Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (ANPF)* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2019), 77.
- ³⁴ MoD, *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, 11.
- ³⁵ *Looking North*, 14.
- ³⁶ MoD, *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, 11.
- ³⁷ ANPF, 74.
- ³⁸ SSE, 79-80.
- ³⁹ *Looking North*, 14 and MoD, *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, 12.
- ⁴⁰ ANPF, 75 and SSE, 79-80.
- ⁴¹ *Looking North*, 14.
- ⁴² MoD, *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, 12.
- ⁴³ ANPF, 77. See also SSE, 80.
- ⁴⁴ SSE, 80.
- ⁴⁵ ANPF, 78 and SSE, 80.
- ⁴⁶ *Looking North*, 15, 35 and MoD, *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, 10.
- ⁴⁷ *Looking North*, 21.
- ⁴⁸ MoD, *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, 2.
- ⁴⁹ *Looking North*, 36, MoD, *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, 11.
- ⁵⁰ SSE, 113.
- ⁵¹ *Looking North*, 20.
- ⁵² *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, 4-5.
- ⁵³ *Looking North*, 20.
- ⁵⁴ *Looking North*, 35.

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⁵⁵ *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, 10.

⁵⁶ *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, 7.

⁵⁷ *Looking North*, 20.

⁵⁸ *Looking North*, 39.

⁵⁹ *Looking North*, 10.