



Policy Brief

April 5, 2026

Troubled Waters: NATO, the GIUK Gap & where next for the UK in the Arctic?

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Over the past decade, there has been a growing recognition of the strategic importance of the Arctic. British government policy papers from 2013 and 2018 reflected the long-held 'High North, Low Tension' paradigm of a collaborative space for research and environmental protection. However, a notable step change in government policy unsurprisingly occurred following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Policy papers from the Ministry of Defence began to highlight the evolving threat to Europe from Russia, with significant investment in frigates, acoustic sensors, and autonomous underwater vehicles to enhance the UK's role in the Atlantic Bastion. While the UK has made some significant strides in its approach to tackling the Russian threat, the Greenland crisis marred the start of 2026 and showed signs of splintering the NATO alliance. Government energy and focus was pointed towards the East with Russia and China, but a threat from within the alliance had not been anticipated. There are several conclusions that can be drawn from recent government actions, developments and media statements. Firstly, the expectation is that the UK will continue to view Russia as the primary threat in the Arctic and sees a tightening operational relationship with Norway and the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) as the key to their Atlantic Bastion plan and securing the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap. Secondly, strategic bilateral agreements between the UK and Norway, Sweden and Finland have proven successful in improving capabilities; further bilateral agreements should be anticipated, with Canada being considered a prime candidate should the political will exist. Thirdly, with the UK pushing for an 'Arctic Sentry' project, technical similarities between the British Type-26 Frigates and Canadian River-Class Destroyers present opportunities for interoperability and potential industrial collaboration. Finally, the UK prizes its close operational relationship with the United States and would be largely unwilling to jeopardise that, even if refusing to push back against the White House came at great domestic political cost.

Policy Background

Pre-2022: No Longer Worth The Paper They Were Printed On

The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office released papers in 2013 and 2018 titled ‘Adapting to Change’¹ and ‘Beyond the Ice,’² respectively. These papers reflected the ‘High North, Low Tension’ paradigm for the Arctic, as a place for collaboration, research and environmental protection rather than an area for militaristic competition. The UK was positioning itself as the ‘Arctic’s Nearest Neighbour,’ emphasising its position as a state observer to the Arctic Council, expressing its optimism that the low-tension state may persist and looking at the potential opportunities and costs that climate change may create. At this juncture, Russia was a scientific and environmental governance partner first and geostrategic threat second. Operationally, the Arctic was a low priority theatre, with occasional Royal Marines training with the Norwegians and intermittent maritime patrol support. However, such is the current rate of change in the Arctic that policy papers written less than a decade ago are no longer relevant. While these papers predicted the evolution of the climate would bring changes, particularly to shipping lanes and natural ecosystems, few anticipated just how quickly this geopolitical status quo would be shattered.

2022-2025: Tackling the Threat in Front of Us

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 radically changed the security dynamics in the region, particularly causing Finland and Sweden to join NATO. There has also been a significant reduction in circumpolar cooperation, including in areas such as climate science research, environmental protection, and maritime accident response. The future of the Arctic Council has also been called into question, as it serves as the premier regional forum for discussing these issues and Russia is a member. The Arctic Council continues to hold scientific and Working Group meetings, but almost all engagement on a political level ceased in 2022.³ Where previously the Arctic Council served as a focus point for traditional large-scale diplomatic meetings, the absence of those events makes it perhaps the clearest benchmark for just how much the region’s political landscape has changed.

These developments brought significant change in the British approach to the Arctic. Both the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) released several notable policy papers which demonstrated a clear shift in approach from those that came before. These papers recognised the growing importance of the Russian threat, focusing on hard security, preparedness, and the UK’s role in patrolling the GIUK gap. The first of these key papers was the MoD’s 2022 ‘The UK’s Defence Contribution in the High North.’⁴ This paper highlights changing regional dynamics, declaring the nuclear-powered Russian Northern Fleet a threat to critical infrastructure in the European High North and stresses the growing ambitions of the

Chinese in the region. This was quickly followed by the FCDO's 5-year update to its 2018 paper, 2023 'Looking North: The UK and the Arctic.'⁵ This paper included robust language on 'asserting rights' against challengers to the rules-based order and reaffirmed the UK's commitment to returning the High North to a state of low-tension.

The House of Lords also released its 2023 report on UK strategy towards the Arctic titled, 'Our Friends in the North: UK Strategy Towards the Arctic.'⁶ This report notes the lack of preparedness to deal with rising threats, particularly that the lack of dedicated resources for Arctic operations could compromise the ability of the UK to be a meaningful presence in the High North. These three strategy papers recognise that the Arctic's political landscape had changed and that there was a growing need for stronger military capabilities. However, these papers lacked the critical edge of how exactly the UK would enact its toughening stance, raising alarms at the lack of dedicated Arctic capabilities and recommending a renewed emphasis on the Arctic region, but lacking the teeth to make it happen.

The final, and arguably most important, paper in the post-2022 period was the 2025 Strategic Defence Review (SDR),⁷ a comprehensive and independent 'root and branch' review of the UK's armed forces. This was the most direct confirmation of the UK's shift away from the Indo-Pacific towards the Arctic-Atlantic, acknowledging the Arctic region as 'within the UK's wider neighbourhood' and as a site of increasing competition. The foreword from the Secretary of State for Defence, John Healey, explicitly stated 'The SDR signifies a landmark shift in our deterrence and defence: moving to warfighting readiness to deter threats and strengthen security in the Euro-Atlantic.' It also outlined the Royal Navy's 'Atlantic Bastion' plan for securing the North Atlantic against the persistent and growing underwater threat from a modernising Russian submarine force, through a network of autonomous capabilities working alongside warships and aircraft. With the modernisation of Russia's Northern Fleet, particularly the ice-breaking ability of the Yasen-class submarines,⁸ the UK will need to play an increasingly important role in securing the GIUK gap and NATO's northern flank. The SDR was a pivotal demonstration of the UK's recognition of the increasing security importance of the Arctic and signalled major investment in anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and autonomous capabilities to contain the growing Russian threat. Unlike the other papers, this went beyond merely recognition and suggestion, outlining major investment and capability improvements in line with the increasing defence budget.

All four of these key papers shared several key elements. The first is the recognition that climate change is reshaping the geography and accessibility of the region. Secondly, while the Arctic used to be a relatively neutral space, the increasing militarisation of the region, particularly by Russia, requires firm deterrence. The UK should expect to see increasing hybrid/grey-zone activities to test NATO below the threshold of military response. Thirdly, that critical national infrastructure is increasingly vulnerable and the partnership between the UK and Norway will be crucial in countering these shared undersea threats. In less than a decade, the UK has gone from emphasising 'nearest neighbour' diplomacy and environmental protection to focusing on hard security and war fighting.

2025-2026: The Crisis Behind Us

While the UK and NATO allies have been trained east on the looming threat of Russia and China, Trump's desire to annex Greenland threatened the fabric of the alliance in a way not seen before. Since its founding in 1949, careful planning, investment and co-ordination efforts had been underway in addressing threats external to the alliance; however, when a threat emerged from within the alliance, the European allies were left scrambling. NATO's founding principle of collective defence has been called into question when the most powerful member state has been making direct and persistent threats against two other member states, through the rhetoric around the annexation of Greenland targeted at Denmark and '51st State' moniker against Canada. It is unlikely that Russia or China see this fragmentation and in-fighting as a signal of a strong and credible alliance.

Greenland particularly holds special significance as a symbol of successful Euro-American collaboration. Greenland is historically important, playing a crucial role as a ferry stop for aircraft travelling between the continents during the Second World War. The Americans have had a continuous security presence on the island for the past 85 years. The Danes and the Americans have long been partners, signing key treaties in the 1940s and 1950s which allowed the Americans to establish military bases on the island, particularly focused on surveillance and early-warning systems during and after the Cold War.⁹ Given this history of collaboration, it is all the more shocking that threats would be made against it, particularly when the justification given by the Americans that they needed to annex it for their "national security"¹⁰ was paper thin given existing agreements.

The scrambled response from Europe was the deployment of a veritable 'tripwire force' of troops to Greenland as part of 'Operation Arctic Endurance.' The extent of the UK's participation in the operation was the deployment of a single UK military officer in an observational and planning capacity.¹¹ While a token presence, it allowed the UK to signal its support for Denmark and increase the potential political cost of military invasion for the US without also jeopardising the precious 'special relationship' the UK seeks to protect. On the 19th January 2026, the Foreign Secretary, Yvette Cooper, was clearly trying to downplay the involvement so as not to invoke the wrath of the Americans, stating "these sorts of visits are a regular part of military planning ahead of exercises and operations."¹²

However, we can use this to predict the policy direction from the UK. This kind of pragmatism in relations with the US will likely persist. While there has been a toughening of statements about respecting sovereignty and responding to 'disruptors in the region,' given the UK's unwillingness to push back against the US when they were clearly violating international norms and the spirit of NATO, we should not expect the UK to suddenly develop backbone if it jeopardises their relationship with the US. Domestically, the government faced a lot of criticism for not taking a principled stance against the US. Trump is a near-universally disliked figure in Europe with just 13% of British and French respondents, 10% of German respondents and 3% of Danish respondents holding a favourable view of him.¹³ UK opposition parties have been freely bashing the government for not

standing up against Trump and rolling over in the face of his efforts to rip NATO apart. Thus, the government's decision to sit back and take the domestic political beating shows just how concerned they are at the prospect of deteriorating security relations with the US.

Important Developments and Considerations

Growing Recognition of the Importance of the GIUK Gap

Recent events have only served to heighten the spotlight on the UK's role in the High North. Government statements have increasingly highlighted the greater role the UK will be expected to play in securing the GIUK gap with its allies against a resurgent Russian force. The UK Foreign Secretary, Yvette Cooper, declared the "Greenland-Iceland-UK gap as being crucial to maintaining the security of the Atlantic and as the basis for a lot of Arctic security issues. That is exactly why the UK and Norway are now jointly building new frigates as part of a major investment programme."¹⁴ The GIUK Gap is the gateway through which the Russian Northern Fleet can access the North Atlantic and the Russian bases in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, therefore denial of that sea route can ensure NATO can contain the increasingly belligerent Russian Northern and 'Shadow' fleets. In a discussion of the 2023-2024 House of Lords report it was noted that in 2019, 10 Russian submarines tested their ability to breach the GIUK gap without detection.¹⁵ Yvette Cooper also proposed NATO create a new 'Arctic Sentry', modelled after the Baltic and Eastern Sentry operations, to co-ordinate defence of the region and cover threats from the Russian northern fleet.¹⁶

Atlantic Bastion

In addition to the Sentry operations, there are plans for the 'Atlantic Bastion', a hybrid force in which crewed frigates communicate with the 'Atlantic Net' - a network of acoustic sensors, ASW detectors, and autonomous underwater vehicles that will line the GIUK Gap. Current plans are for this to be a public-private partnership under a 'Contractor Owned, Contractor Operated' (COCONO) model. £40 million is expected to be invested in total for the development of anti-submarine sonobuoys and the Atlantic Bastion's defence of subsea cables.¹⁷

Lunna House Agreement

One of the most significant recent developments for NATO's northern flank is the reshaping of Anglo-Norwegian relations. In December 2025, the UK and Norway signed the Lunna House Agreement to operate together against the growing threat from Russia.¹⁸ The crux of the agreement is that the Royal Navy and Royal Norwegian Navy will operate a combined fleet of 13 ASW Type-26 Frigates (8 British and 5 Norwegian). This fleet will operate together to patrol the GIUK gap, monitor Russian naval activity, and defend critical national infrastructure (CNI) including undersea infrastructure. By operating and training together, sharing technology and equipment, and sharing maintenance facilities, this will create a degree of interoperability that should

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enhance capability. Further to this agreement, the UK will join the Norwegian programme to develop offshore support vessels, leading NATO's adoption of autonomous systems in the High North. Current plans for the Atlantic Bastion necessitate the Type-26 frigates operating as motherships, connecting networks of undersea warfare systems ranging from acoustic anti-submarine sonars to uncrewed underwater vehicles. Finally, the Royal Marines will be establishing a permanent, year-round presence in Øverbygd called 'Camp Viking.' The result will be enhanced arctic training and preparation for the 1,500 commandos that will be stationed on NATO's northern flank, able to operate as a quick reaction force (QRF).¹⁹

The Future of the JEF

A final note should be made regarding the future of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). The JEF is a UK-led joint security coalition of 10 northern European countries, focusing on stability and security in the North Atlantic, Baltic Sea and High North.²⁰ A distinct entity from NATO, but is intended to serve as a complement. When initially conceived in 2014, its role was for humanitarian and peacekeeping operations but its remit has evolved drastically. Since 2022, it has significantly ramped up its deterrence role. In 2024, damage was reported to a major undersea cable in the Baltic that connects Finland and Estonia as the result of a suspected attack by a Russian vessel. In response, the JEF announced 'Operation Nordic Warden' which would track potential threats to critical national infrastructure, including the close monitoring of Russia's shadow fleet. In 2025, the JEF conducted Operation Tarassis, the largest live exercise the force has completed to date. It involved 1,700 British personnel and thousands across the partner nations, demonstrating readiness and interoperability and strengthening deterrence. Further large exercises are being planned for 2026 which will deploy hundreds of air, land, and naval assets across the High North.

Future Outlook

2026 - The Latest Update: Words Move Faster Than Legislation

Since the Greenland crisis at the turn of the new year, the only government publication thus far has been a research briefing from the House of Commons Library which is informative rather than policy deriving.¹⁶ The lack of policy updates in light of recent developments means we can only turn to statements from members of parliament, the government, think tanks, or the media to get a sense of how the government's approach has shifted. It is in this sense that an inherent policy gap is identified and proactive policy making and coordination is necessary giving the evolving dynamics within NATO and geopolitically.

Several key government figures have made statements since Trump's Greenland annexation rhetoric, which can provide an indication of how the recent crisis has shifted the government's approach, including recent statements from four key officials. The Minister for the Armed Forces, Al Carns, spoke before the Commons on the 13th January 2026.²¹ In this appearance he discussed the growing importance of the JEF and its upcoming

exercises including Exercise Cold Response, the largest military exercise in Norway and Finland in 2026, coordinating assets across branches and domains. He also referenced the success of Operation Tarassis and the upcoming Lion Protector exercises in the High North as evidence of the UK's commitment to collective defence in the Arctic and upholding the principles of the United Nations charter on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the inviolability of borders. He further lauded the increased cooperation and interoperability with the Norwegians and the importance of the Atlantic Bastion. While the JEF's operational importance is growing, that has not necessarily been mirrored yet by policy papers, though that will likely be the direction policy moves towards. His comments about the success of the Lunna House agreement may also suggest the UK will seek strategic bilateral agreements with other allied, NATO, and CANZUK nations in efforts to increase capability.

The Foreign Secretary, Yvette Cooper, on the 19th January 2026 repeated the same principles of respecting sovereignty and seeking to strengthen collective defence but made particularly firm comments about the threat from the Russian Northern and Shadow Fleets. She highlighted the threat posed to the UK, western Europe, the US and Canada by allowing the Russians unfettered access through the GIUK Gap, reinforcing her desire for the Arctic Sentry initiative:

The Arctic is the gateway for the Russian northern fleet to be able to threaten the UK, western Europe, the US and Canada. That is why this is a shared threat and requires a shared response. That is why, as part of the discussions in Norway and Finland last week, I proposed that NATO should establish an Arctic sentry, similar to the approach that NATO has taken to the Baltic Sentry and the Eastern Sentry, with co-ordination that brings together and looks in a strategic way at all the issues around security across the Arctic. We believe that it is through those partnerships and alliances that we can best strengthen our shared security against the threats that should concern us most.²²

Canadian policymakers should expect the UK to be pushing NATO towards Arctic Sentry, and should be cognisant that Canada would undoubtedly have to shoulder key responsibility for it alongside the European Arctic nations.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer addressed Parliament on the 21st January 2026, focusing on British principles and values. He reiterated his condemnation of external threats and specifically the use of tariffs to pressure allies into capitulation or coercion.

“Engaging constructively on international security matters hugely, particularly when it comes to security in the Arctic, and that is the context in which this discussion about Greenland is going on. As we engage constructively, I have made my position clear on our principles and values. The first of those is that the future of Greenland is for the people of Greenland and the Kingdom of Denmark alone. The second is that threats of tariffs to pressurise allies are completely wrong.”²³

However, his refusal to speak at length on the issue again reinforces that the present government is seeking to keep its head down to avoid stoking the ire of the Americans.

Finally, the Secretary of State for Defence, John Healey, on the 2nd of February,²⁴ emphasised the growing importance of the JEF allies, with Royal Marines training in Norway and Ranger exercises in Sweden and Finland. In 2022, British Troops took part in Exercise Vigilant Knife alongside Finnish and Swedish units. Comprising over 2,000 troops, they practiced delivering and receiving international assistance, as well as enhancing tactical and technical interoperability. British personnel were primarily involved in both offensive and defensive actions to test the readiness of the Finnish forces alongside the Swedish unit. In 2022, the UK signed declarations with Sweden and Finland²⁵ that would see intensifying intelligence sharing, accelerating joint military training, exercising and deployments, and bolstering security across all three countries and northern Europe. Considering recent developments, and with Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO, further exercises and interoperability should be expected.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the UK has shifted its focus post-2022 towards the growing threat posed by the Russians and is beginning to seriously invest in both its ASW capabilities and relationships with other European Arctic nations. The UK still fears a security landscape without the support of the US, but its efforts to strike new European focused partnerships shows that efforts are being made to plan for a less US-reliant future. With projects like Arctic Sentry and Atlantic Bastion in the pipeline, increasing operational collaboration and coordination between the UK and Canada would be mutually beneficial.

There are three key takeaways for a Canadian policy audience. Firstly, Canada's River-Class Destroyers are based on the Type-26 frigate design.²⁶ This creates potential opportunities for interoperability with the British and Norwegians, which will help NATO to provide capable deterrence and enhanced vigilance to defend the sea lanes of communication in the High North. While not to go so far as to suggest a truly 'interchangeable fleet' dynamic like the Lunna House Agreement, the prospect remains that sharing training, technology, and expertise together could improve capability. Conducting more joint operations and training with the UK and Norwegians would help to secure NATO's northern flank, improving interoperability and providing a capable deterrence posture. With projects like Arctic Sentry on the horizon, Canada and the UK will have an increasing number of shared duties where close co-ordination will be mutually beneficial, so a tightening of operational and technical relationships should be encouraged. The Brits are looking at more strategic bilateral agreements with the success of their agreements with Norway, Sweden and Finland. Given pre-existing historical ties, intelligence sharing and the prospect of Arctic Sentry necessitating increased coordination and collaboration, Canada would be a prime candidate with which to strike such an agreement.

Secondly, in the event the White House refocuses back on its ambitions for Greenland, the UK should not be expected to offer any serious military pushback, resorting only to diplomatic channels. Even then, given the unpredictability that has characterised the current US administration, making any kind of public statement carries a certain risk. The UK's participation in 'Operation Arctic Endurance' was token²⁷ and it is unlikely that the UK would want to jeopardise its operational and military relationship with the US. The UK's operational partnership with the US continued throughout the Greenland crisis, with RAF and RFA assets involved in the seizing of the *Bella 1/Marinera*.²⁸ While this caused domestic political disgruntlement, it would be unlikely that the government would shift away. The best defence against the fickle whim of the current White House seems to be collective action to avoid being singled out, and should other countries including Canada take a strong stance against a potentially threatening United States, it would allow other countries including the UK to take their own strong stance without fearing possible repercussions.

Finally, several Canadian companies are industrial partners for the Atlantic Net/Atlantic Bastion projects. BAE Systems has a successful 10-year agreement with the Canadian company Cellula Robotics on their Herne XLAUV (Extra-Large Autonomous Underwater Vehicle) system.²⁹ Platforms like the XLAUV integrate advanced capabilities for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) operations which will underpin the 'shepherd' role the Type-26 frigates play. These kinds of industrial partnerships should be encouraged for both economic and operational reasons. Greater interoperability will only help with future initiatives like Arctic Sentry as well as improved manufacturing and technical performance for both the United Kingdom and Canada.

Notes

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