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**CHECKS AND BALANCES IN
THE HIGH NORTH: THE BRITISH
VISION OF THE ARCTIC**

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Introduction

In the biting cold of the Arctic, where ice and water blur the horizon, a quiet but determined race unfolds. The region, once dismissed as a frozen periphery, has become a centre of power calculations and strategic ambitions. This transformation was not sudden, it crept in as icebergs melted and sea routes emerged, revealing not just new pathways but vast deposits of untapped resources. For nations like the United Kingdom, the Arctic's thaw is more than a natural phenomenon; it is a call to recalibrate their position in a world growing increasingly entangled in the High North.

The Arctic has long been a stage for silent competition, but the pace of geopolitical manoeuvring quickened with an unexpected proposition: in 2019, Donald Trump's desire to purchase Greenland from Denmark sparked global attention. Dismissed by some as a whimsical idea, the suggestion highlighted the growing importance of the Arctic. 6 years later, this idea has resurfaced once again louder than ever. The UK, alongside other Arctic stakeholders, observed this episode not as an anomaly but as a signal of how the region is becoming a stage for high-stakes ambitions. The UK's involvement in Arctic politics is not driven by territorial claims or proximity. Instead, it is a strategic response to the challenges and opportunities posed by a shifting geopolitical landscape. The Arctic's icy waters hold promises of faster trade routes, lucrative energy reserves, and scientific frontiers, but they also bring risks: growing military postures, environmental fragility, and the spectre of competition between global powers.

Among its neighbours and allies, the United Kingdom treads a careful path. Norway stands as a seasoned Arctic gatekeeper, deeply intertwined with NATO's northern strategies. Canada, vast and richly Arctic, guards its sovereignty with quiet determination. Iceland, an island without military power, navigates the complexities of alliances and influence in this contested region. Greenland, meanwhile, emerges as both an ally and a prize, its strategic location and potential resources attracting the gaze of nations far beyond the Arctic circle. The UK must carve out its role within this constellation of Arctic actors, balancing old ties with new realities.

As the ice recedes, questions emerge: Can Britain, post-Brexit and geographically distant, secure influence in the Arctic? Will its High North policy withstand the weight of Russian militarisation, Chinese economic ambitions, and the environmental costs of Arctic exploration? And in this new era, does Greenland hold the key to Arctic geopolitics, or is it a fleeting symbol of wider ambitions? Through the lens of Britain's Arctic strategy, this article seeks to illuminate the broader dynamics of Arctic geopolitics by looking at how the British Army is reshaping its doctrine and reinforcing the existing alliances. The paper will discuss the UK's existing mission and goals in the Arctic region, joint efforts for advancement and

what challenges await this strategy.

1. The Arctic: From Frozen Frontier to Geopolitical Crossroads

For most of modern history, the Arctic was a realm of quiet isolation. Its frozen waters and unyielding landscapes belonged to the hardy few explorers, indigenous communities, and military patrols that came and went with the seasons. But as the ice retreats, so does the illusion of remoteness. What was once a distant periphery is now a crossroads of power, a contested space where nations project influence in the name of security, commerce, and survival. The Arctic's significance is multifaceted, encompassing security, economic, and environmental concerns. The region's estimated 13% of the world's undiscovered oil and 30% of undiscovered natural gas (Bird et al., 2008) has intensified resource-driven rivalries. Additionally, the Arctic's strategic location provides access to emerging trade routes, with the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the Northwest Passage (NWP) reducing travel distances between Asia and Europe (Humpert, 2011). As a result, Arctic governance has become a key issue among states with vested interests.

2. Britain in the High North: A Peripheral Player or a Rising Force?

Where does the United Kingdom stand in this evolving Arctic chess game? Lacking natural Arctic borders, the UK is often seen as an external player present but not central (British Antarctic Survey, n.d.). Yet this perception underestimates Britain's long-standing maritime expertise, deep ties with Arctic allies, and growing investment in the region's security framework (UK Government, 2023).

The UK has long operated in the Arctic through NATO, conducting joint exercises with Norway, deploying Royal Navy assets to Arctic waters, and contributing to intelligence-sharing networks that monitor Russian activity in the High North (UK Parliament, 2018). The earliest Arctic military strategy dates back to the 1983 Able Archer drills, where the GIUK (Greenland-Iceland-The UK) gap served as a naval blockade against possible Soviet submarine positioning (Fischer, 1997). London has also positioned itself as a champion of Arctic governance, advocating for environmental sustainability while maintaining a pragmatic stance on economic opportunities (Thorsson, 2024). Unlike the US, whose Arctic ambitions often fluctuate with political and geostrategic ambitions, or China, whose presence is viewed mostly with economic gains, Britain navigates Arctic politics with multi-directional goals (Department of Defense, 2024; UK Government, 2023).

However, presence alone does not guarantee influence. As the Arctic's strategic landscape becomes increasingly contested, Britain's ambitions face critical questions. Can the UK carve

out a meaningful role in Arctic security without territorial stakes? Will its post-Brexit foreign policy allow deeper integration with Arctic allies, or will it struggle to find a footing amid shifting alliances? These questions form the foundation of the UK's latest High North strategy, an agenda that seeks to define Britain's place in the Arctic's future. Published in 2023, "Looking North: The UK and the Arctic" defines the UK's latest Arctic strategy. As a foundational policy document, this document serves as the UK government's official framework for Arctic engagement, aligning national interests with evolving regional dynamics.

As outlined in the document, the UK's Arctic engagement is based on diplomacy and cooperation rather than territorial claims or strategic goals (UK Government, 2023). As a state with Arctic Council observer status since 1998, the UK participates in multilateral discussions, focusing on military cooperation, sustainable development, and scientific research (Jouan et al., 2022). British research institutions, such as the British Antarctic Survey, play a crucial role in Arctic climate studies, reinforcing the UK's position as a knowledge-driven stakeholder (Łuszczuk, 2020).

Security remains a critical aspect of the UK's Arctic policy (Thorsson, 2024). Increased Russian military activities in the High North, including the modernisation of Arctic bases and submarine patrols, have raised concerns among NATO allies (Wall and Wegge, 2023). The UK, in collaboration with Norway, Canada, and the United States, has enhanced its military presence in the region through joint exercises and intelligence-sharing initiatives (Government of Canada, 2024; West, 2025). The UK's Royal Navy has also engaged in Arctic training to ensure operational readiness in extreme conditions (Army Recognition, 2024). While the UK does not have direct Arctic energy assets, its financial sector plays a key role in Arctic investments. London-based energy firms and insurance companies are involved in Arctic resource projects, including offshore drilling and shipping infrastructure (Khorrami, 2021). However, the UK maintains a cautious stance on Arctic oil and gas development, emphasising the need for strict environmental regulations in alignment with its climate commitments (UK Parliament, 2018).

The UK has also positioned itself as an advocate for Arctic environmental protection. The High North's warming at four times the global average has led the UK to support climate adaptation policies and research on ice-sheet dynamics (Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme, 2021). As part of its commitment to the environment, the UK pushes for stronger international commitments to reducing black carbon emissions, a major contributor to Arctic ice loss (Environmental Audit Committee, 2023). These environmental policies are central to the UK's Arctic engagement, differentiating it from resource-driven strategies pursued by Russia and China.

3. Defensive Measurements in the Arctic

The militarisation of the Arctic has accelerated in recent years, with Russia significantly expanding its military infrastructure, modernising Arctic bases, and increasing naval and air patrols (Wezeman, 2016). In response, NATO and its allied partners have intensified their Arctic-focused defence strategies, with the UK playing an active role. As a key NATO member, the UK contributes to collective deterrence through joint military exercises, maritime patrols, and intelligence-sharing with other Arctic allies such as Norway, Canada, and the United States (Army Recognition, 2024). The UK's naval presence in the Arctic has expanded, particularly through the deployment of Royal Navy vessels for Arctic operations (Royal Navy, 2025). The UK regularly participates in Exercise Cold Response, a NATO-led military drill focused on high-intensity warfare in extreme cold conditions, hosted by Norway (UK Ministry of Defence, 2022a). Additionally, the Royal Marines' training in Arctic warfare emphasises the UK's commitment to maintaining operational readiness in extreme environments (UK Government, 2023, p. 24).

Over the years, the UK has strengthened its defence cooperation with key Arctic stakeholders, particularly Norway, Iceland, and Canada. The UK and Norway maintain close military ties through the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), a high-readiness military coalition designed to operate in Northern Europe, including the Arctic region (UK Ministry of Defence, 2022a). This partnership enhances rapid deployment capabilities and reinforces the UK's role in Arctic security (Knighton, 2024). In addition to bilateral military partnerships, the UK actively supports NATO's Arctic strategy, which includes enhanced surveillance and strategic deterrence (NATO, 2023). The UK's participation in the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, a forum for discussing military security issues in the region, further highlights its commitment to regional stability (UK Government, 2023, p. 17).

Canada shares a long-standing strategic partnership with the UK in the Arctic that is built on mutual interests in regional security, environmental sustainability, and indigenous rights (Government of Canada, 2024). Previously, the Royal Navy participated in ice-breaking submarine mission Ice Exercise 18 (ICEX) (Royal Navy, 2018). Since 2021, both countries acknowledge the need for an increased defence cooperation (Brewster, 2021). Canada's extensive Arctic territory and its military experience in the region closely aligns with the UK's ambitions. The two nations regularly participate in joint Arctic training exercises, including Operation NANOOK, which strengthens their ability to operate in extreme conditions and respond to potential security threats the High North (UK Ministry of Defence, 2022c).

Last but not least, Iceland, while smaller in scale, plays a strategically significant role due to its geographical location that serves as the linchpin of the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap

(UK Government, 2023). Iceland's national values centre on safeguarding freedom of navigation and maintaining transparent, democratic processes (Government of Iceland, 2021). Its modest military posture is complemented by robust participation in NATO-led air policing missions, in which the UK actively collaborates (Royal Air Force, 2024).

4. Geopolitical Alignment and Military Cooperation in the Arctic

The UK has adopted a multifaceted approach to military cooperation in the Arctic in order to align with NATO and regional allies to ensure strategic stability and deterrence. The UK's Arctic defence strategy includes key programs such as Project Heimdall, the F-35 Lightning II program, the Littoral Response Group (North), and advancements in space-based defence technology under the Defence Space Strategy (UK Government, 2023).

Project Heimdall and Arctic Readiness

Project Heimdall is a cornerstone initiative aimed at enhancing UK-Norwegian military cooperation in the High North (UK Government, 2023, p. 36). This project is designed to improve joint operational readiness in Arctic conditions, focusing on cold-weather warfare training and integrated command structures. The Royal Marines, in collaboration with Norwegian forces, conduct rigorous winter exercises to ensure interoperability and enhance rapid response capabilities in Arctic scenarios (UK Government, 2023, p. 36). Norway remains a key partner in cold-weather operations, with British forces regularly training alongside Norwegian troops in snow-covered terrains to enhance their ability to respond to potential threats from adversarial states.

F-35 Lightning II and Aerial Superiority

The UK's acquisition and deployment of the F-35 Lightning II further strengthen its Arctic defence posture. As part of a broader NATO strategy, the F-35 program enhances the UK's capability for joint aerial operations with Norway, Denmark, and the United States (UK Government, 2023, p.35). These advanced aircraft are critical for securing airspace over the Arctic, supporting reconnaissance missions, and reinforcing rapid deployment capabilities. Regular training and data-sharing with Norwegian and US air forces ensures seamless integration of the F-35 fleet into NATO's Arctic defence framework (Edwardsen and Hansen, 2024). Additionally, the Royal Navy interoperates alongside the F-35 policing with P8A Poseidon Maritime Patrol Aircraft and the Queen Elizabeth Class Aircraft Carriers (West, 2025).

Littoral Response Group (North) and Maritime Security

The Littoral Response Group (North) (LRG-N) is a specialised task force designed to maintain a persistent UK naval presence in the Arctic (UK Government, 2023, p. 36). Composed of Royal Navy assets, amphibious forces, and rapid-response elements, the LRG-N operates in the High North to conduct joint exercises, safeguard Iceland's airspace and support NATO's collective security efforts (Allison, 2025; Royal Navy, 2024). This force plays a crucial role in countering potential maritime threats posed by Russian military expansion in the Arctic (UK Government, 2023, p. 35).

Defence Space Strategy and Arctic Surveillance

Recognising the growing role of space-based technology in Arctic defence, the UK has integrated space surveillance and intelligence into its Arctic strategy. The Defence Space Strategy emphasises the development of satellite-based reconnaissance systems to monitor Arctic activity, enhance communication networks, and improve situational awareness (UK Government, 2023, p. 33). Defence space mission includes the Arctic region in order to integrate and operate global space capabilities (UK Government, 2023, p. 36). Investments in responsive space launch capabilities will allow the UK to rapidly deploy surveillance assets, ensuring continuous monitoring of military movements in the region (UK Ministry of Defence, 2022b).

5. Emerging Threats and Future Considerations

The Arctic's increasing geopolitical significance is being shaped by the expanding presence of Russia's Arctic fleet and China's aspirations to integrate the region into its Polar Silk Road initiative (UK Government, 2023, p. 35; Andersson, 2024). Russia has bolstered its military footprint in the Arctic by modernising the old naval bases, increasing submarine activity, and deploying advanced missile systems (Boulègue, 2024). Simultaneously, China has intensified its investment in Arctic infrastructure, seeking to establish trade dominance in the region while securing access to natural resources, a move that has led to increased Chinese visibility in the Arctic (Chinese State Council, 2018). Beyond military and economic concerns, the Arctic's evolving geopolitical landscape raises ethical and humanitarian issue regarding the rights of Indigenous communities (NATO, 2021, p. 37). The expansion of commercial and defence activities has led to environmental degradation, disrupting traditional ways of life for Arctic minorities such as the Sámi and Inuit (Larsen & Fohndahl, 2015). Addressing these ethical considerations while balancing security imperatives remains a critical challenge for Arctic governance.

Looking ahead, the UK's Arctic strategy will need to account for these emerging threats. Strengthening NATO cooperation, enhancing intelligence operations, and addressing

environmental and humanitarian concerns will be pivotal to ensuring regional stability. While the UK does not seek to militarise the High North, its role as a strategic actor in countering Russian military expansion and China's economic influence is set to increase (UK Government, 2023). The integration of British forces into Nordic defence frameworks strengthens NATO's deterrence posture and ensures rapid response capabilities across Arctic and sub-Arctic regions (Edvardsen and Hansen, 2024). Moreover, the adaptation of UK land strategies to Arctic conditions includes investment in specialised equipment such as all-terrain vehicles, advanced winter gear, and improved logistics networks designed to support extended operations in extreme weather (Army Recognition, 2025).

The role of European land forces in Arctic security is also becoming increasingly relevant, as the UK aligns with Scandinavian partners to enhance operational readiness in the High North. The British Army, in collaboration with Norway, Sweden, and Finland, has increased participation in Arctic warfare training, focusing on power projection and combat effectiveness in subzero environments (Cepinskyte, 2019). Joint training initiatives such as Exercise Nordic Response reinforce tactical coordination and interoperability between British land forces and their Scandinavian counterparts (Royal Navy, 2024). Sweden and Finland, with their accession to NATO, further contribute to the collective Arctic defence structure, providing additional strategic depth and operational experience in land-based Arctic manoeuvres against Russia (Hodgson, 2025). The growing collaboration with Scandinavian allies signals a shift towards a more integrated approach in securing Arctic territories that requires balancing deterrence with sustainable presence and readiness.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the Arctic region will become the next frontier of geopolitical clashes. As is increasingly reflected in its policies, the UK places high importance on the securitisation of the status-quo in the Arctic. Now that NATO has expanded northwards to incorporate Finland and Sweden, the Arctic's growing strategic exposure brings many complexities. Environmental changes and Arctic warming also reveal the economic dimension of this competition. The growing volume of trade, resource extraction and tourism may exert pressure towards militarisation in the region. Simultaneously, Russia's rearming in the Arctic and full-scale invasion of Ukraine mean that more than half of the Arctic area is now hostile territory, blocking scientific research and information-sharing. However, steps can and should be taken to curb this militarisation which has not been fully effectuated.

For British policymakers, the High North comes with complex and multi-directional issues. On one hand, Sino-Russian cooperation and the transfer of Russian Navy assets puts the

rules-based, status-quo order in the Arctic at risk. On the other hand, NATO's expansion through Finland and Sweden means that Scandinavia is now completely under NATO control. This paper briefly analysed the current agenda of the UK in the Arctic region and how the British Army is preparing for the future, while emphasising the importance of the climate change, regional stability and the rights of the indigenous peoples.

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