

# Sovereign safeguarding: Iceland's maritime security

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**Iceland's national security policy sets out risks that the country must address. Dr Lee Willett discusses how national capabilities and international co-operation combine to overcome such risks at sea**

By any geopolitical yardstick Iceland occupies a significant strategic position. Sitting on the top of the North Atlantic and on the edge of the High North, the country's location makes it a central link to several strategic regions and issues.

Global political focus on High North/Arctic waters has been growing for some time, mostly due to climate change but now also because of security concerns. Political focus on the North Atlantic, however, has returned relatively recently: for Russia probably since about 2008, when it began sending Northern Fleet ships and submarines south again; and for NATO since 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and stepped up its naval activity.



*The US Navy Flight IIA Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Forrest Sherman sailing off Reykjavik, Iceland, in September. The ship is part of the Harry S Truman Carrier Strike Group, which deployed off southern Iceland before heading north for NATO's 'Trident Juncture' exercise. (US Navy)*

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Iceland is a vital node in the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap. Given the higher political temperature of North Atlantic waters today, the returning significance of the GIUK gap typifies the dynamics of great power competition. On one side the gap is a chokepoint through which NATO navies access High North waters from the North Atlantic, including to support member states such as Norway. On the other it provides a barrier behind which Russia may be attempting to inflate an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) 'bubble' at sea to block NATO access and create a secure strategic bastion.

Great powers are also showing renewed interest in Iceland. The US is conducting more military operations from there in continued support of a long-standing bi-lateral security arrangement. China, which has been reiterating strategic interest in the Arctic, has also been investing in Iceland's economy and infrastructure.

Regarding maritime security, Iceland is safeguarding its national borders and interests at sea. It may also be conscious of its strategic position in the overall international context.

The balance between national and international security factors is evident in Iceland's first national security policy, published by the country's Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) under a parliamentary resolution in April 2016. Alongside responsibility for delivering the strategy, the MFA covers defence matters (the minister for foreign affairs is also the defence minister) and represents Iceland's defence and security interests and its relationships with other countries, military authorities, and international organisations such as NATO.

The policy is designed to ensure Iceland's independence and sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security of its governmental system, social infrastructure, and people. According to the document Iceland "has neither the resources nor the desire" to possess armed forces and that instead Iceland "provides for [national] security and defence through active co-operation, both with other countries and within international organisations".

Broadly, the policy defined the following drivers, stressing "equal weight" on all:

- Ensure national security through international co-operation on the basis of international law, with peaceful conflict resolution, disarmament, and respect for human rights, equality, and the rule of law as guiding principles;
- Secure Iceland's environmental and security interests in the Arctic through international co-operation and domestic preparedness;
- Ensure NATO membership remains a vital national defence pillar and Iceland's main forum for participating in Western co-operation;
- Ensure Iceland's relations with the US, which were established under a 1951 bi-lateral defence agreement, continue to provide for national defence, with co-operation built around this agreement and assessments of military and other risks "where mutual defence and security interests are at stake";

- Strengthen regional and international defence and security co-operation, particularly among Nordic countries;
- Ensure Iceland has the necessary defence infrastructure, equipment, capacity, and expertise to meet national defence and security challenges and honour international commitments;
- Integrate civil protection with national security, including addressing risks such as climate change, natural disasters, epidemics and other health issues, as well as food safety and security; and address the full range of security threats including terrorism, organised crime, and financial/economic security risks;
- Augment cyber security capability through increased national capacity and improved international co-operation;
- Ensure Iceland and its territorial waters are declared free from nuclear weapons, subject to Iceland's international commitments;
- Establish a National Security Council, designed to assess defence and security issues and monitor and review policy within five years.

### **NATO relations**

Regarding co-operation with NATO, "It is the collective defence obligation of NATO, Article V, that is the most important part of that relationship" for Iceland, said Arnor Sigurjonsson, director-general of the MFA's defence directorate. Noting that Iceland-NATO relations have been reinvigorated since 2014, Sigurjonsson said, "The fact is that the North Atlantic alliance has refocused on the North Atlantic and the trans-Atlantic link."

Maritime matters have become significant in this context. "The sea lines of communication [SLOCs] and the issue of A2/AD [are topics] frequently discussed in the NATO fora, which was not the case three or four years ago," Sigurjonsson told *Jane's* .

Reflecting the SLOCs and A2/AD issues, Sigurjonsson added, "We frequently use the phrase 'the GIUK gap', which we haven't done for 25 years." He also referred to the augmentation of NATO's long-standing requirement to move personnel and materiel from North America to Europe routinely and on a large scale. For NATO's recent 'Trident Juncture' exercise, which took place in and around Norway and Iceland in October and November, he noted that "vessels sailed from the east coast of the United States via Iceland to Norway", which was "a very symbolic picture of the reality ... that the SLOCs between North America and Europe need to be secure". Without SLOC security, he said, "defence plans will fail and then deterrence will fail".

The only way to defend such SLOCs, Sigurjonsson continued, is to sail in such waters. Noting that the US Navy (USN) had not been present in Northern waters for some time, he said that its recent deployment of the Harry S Truman carrier strike group (CSG), which

operated south of Iceland before heading to Norway for 'Trident Juncture', was "really a new development".

**[Continued in full version...]**

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