

Heading North: UK operations in the Arctic

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UK focus on the Arctic region appears to be sharpening, with renewed military presence in northern waters. *Dr Lee Willett* considers developments at sea, ashore, and in the air

The returning strategic focus on the North Atlantic theatre is reflected in the United Kingdom's increased emphasis on maritime matters in the North Atlantic, in northern waters, and in the Arctic region.

The Arctic remains a region of high-level international interest. Although littoral Arctic states do not perceive the region's security balance to be shifting towards increased military risk, the geostrategic significance of the region, resource competition, access requirements, and potential debates about territorial issues mean that there are risks of security crises emerging. Such potential risks could carry a particularly sharp edge owing to the fact that four of the five littoral Arctic states are NATO members (Canada, Denmark, Norway, and the United States) with the fifth state being Russia. A number of non-littoral actors are also demonstrating high levels of interest in the region.

Although the risk of a crisis occurring remains low, the consequences of such an event would likely be very high because of the issues and actors involved.



Sailors on board the US Navy Virginia-class SSN USS New Mexico tie mooring lines after the boat had surfaced through the Arctic ice during 'ICEX' in 2014. USN Virginia-class SSNs have begun to have a prominent presence in northern waters. (US Navy)

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Western officials have sought to downplay the risks. Mark Lancaster, UK Minister of State for the Armed Forces, told a recent UK House of Commons Defence Committee (HCDC) hearing on Arctic defence matters that “there is low tension” in the region with “good co-operation”, meaning that “we have not seen some of the issues that perhaps we face elsewhere in the world”.

Russia considers its presence in the Arctic region to be a critical national priority, to secure borders, territories, resources, and access to sea lines of communication (SLOCs). Regarding Russia’s increasing military activity in the region, Lancaster noted, “Because we have seen the ice begin to retreat, that is exposing more of the Russian coastline.”

“It is worth remembering that nearly 30% of geographical Russia is within the Arctic Circle,” he added, arguing that the UK has assessed Russia’s military build-up along its Arctic coastline as being “nothing more than what would be deemed a reasonable defensive posture”.

Nonetheless, it is notable that Russia has tested a number of new naval platforms and weapon systems in the Arctic in recent years. Moreover, Moscow has long stated its intent to boost Russian presence under the Arctic ice, with permanent patrols involving its nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) and nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) to be increasingly present there.

Alongside the strategic importance of the Arctic and the need to protect national interests, the ability to conduct military operations in the region offers specific advantages. During the Cold War the Soviet Navy used the Arctic ice cap to help secure a bastion for its SSBNs, boosting its deterrent posture with the ability to reach US territory with submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) in a relatively short time. Conversely, the ability for NATO SSNs to operate effectively under the Arctic ice would help offset any strategic advantage for Moscow here. Today, the emphasis on achieving under-ice capability for these reasons appears to be returning for Russia and NATO.

As Arctic seaways open up due to climate change, submarine presence can help secure and threaten Arctic SLOCs, which are important for access to resources found within the region and transiting the region itself from east to west.

From the UK’s perspective Lancaster told the HCDC that the Arctic region “is of growing interest”, adding that “With the shrinking of the ice and by definition the greater use, potentially, of the northern seaways, of trade routes that will have an impact on the UK economy, the Arctic is moving up the agenda”.

Although there is no current concern about Russian intent to create a military confrontation, “there are other reasons why you would potentially want to have some level of military force in that area”, the minister suggested.

“If we are going to see an increase in global shipping going through those passages, it is probably natural, as we have seen elsewhere in the world where there are risks to shipping, that we should have a presence,” he continued, “firstly, in case anything goes wrong, and secondly, because nations are responsible for search and rescue and everything else”.

One issue that has not yet received quite so much coverage compared with other regions of the world is whether Russia will implement an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy around its areas of national interest in the Arctic region. Across the European and wider North Atlantic theatre, Russian A2/AD strategy is receiving much political and military attention. The West perceives that Moscow is attempting to implement such strategies in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea

around its Kaliningrad enclave, and to the eastern side of the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap to restrict Western military access and wider strategic influence on the other 'side' of these A2/AD 'bubbles'. If Russia is focused firmly on restricting Western access in these areas, it seems strategically logical that it could apply a similar strategy to the Arctic region.

Improved Russian military capabilities in terms of submarines and Kalibr cruise missiles fitted to surface ships and submarines are central components of its various A2/AD shields. Conversely, for NATO, improved submarine access from the North Atlantic into and around the Arctic region will be essential in negating Russian A2/AD strategies and supporting the interests of NATO member states in the High North.

The increase in NATO and Russian submarine activity in the North Atlantic region and into the Arctic underlines the strategic importance of the region and the role of submarines in supporting respective interests there.

The UK is not a littoral Arctic state, of course. However, the North Atlantic acts as a gateway to the Arctic region and, as a prominent military power in the North Atlantic and with an alliance commitment to support the interests of NATO member states in and around the Arctic region, the United Kingdom has a major strategic interest in military activity flowing across the seam between the Arctic and North Atlantic regions.

Talking to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) sea power conference in May, UK Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said that, under President Vladimir Putin, Russia's submarine activity "has increased ten-fold in the North Atlantic". Meanwhile, responding to a question regarding anti-submarine warfare (ASW) activity in the North Atlantic region, Lancaster told the HCDG that "it is fair to say that a significant part of my time is spent looking at the increased threat we are seeing in that North Atlantic area".

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