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UK Policy in the Arctic: Security as a New Priority

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Abstract. The article outlines the regulatory framework and military-political activities of the United Kingdom in the Arctic region. Particular attention is given to the state of the British Navy, which is analyzed as a key element underpinning the country's presence in the area. The study traces the evolution of the Arctic's role in strategic planning documents, reports issued by various parliamentary committees, and official statements by government representatives. The authors assess the frequency of references to Arctic issues within the UK's institutional structures and observe a shift in focus from environmental and climate concerns to matters of security. In particular, there is growing emphasis on cooperation with NATO allies and countering Russia's influence in the region. The study concludes that the UK's actual military presence in the Arctic remains limited, primarily due to insufficient naval funding and the challenges associated with establishing military infrastructure in the region. These limitations are reflected not only in official documents, but also in the rhetoric of government representatives. Nevertheless, the United Kingdom has gradually established a comprehensive system of cooperation agreements with Arctic nations, which serves as the primary mechanism for expanding its regional presence, especially given the technological and logistical challenges. Amid the general trend of increased military presence by Arctic states, the UK's military and political engagement is expected to grow. This will likely occur through deeper cooperation with Norway and other Nordic countries, participation in NATO military exercises, and the gradual establishment of a sustained armed forces presence in Northern Europe.

Keywords: Arctic, United Kingdom, security, Navy, military and political activities, NATO

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Introduction

The Arctic region is becoming increasingly important not only for the Arctic nations but also for European states, for geopolitical and military-tactical reasons. With the gradual formation of NATO's Arctic security architecture, the UK's role as a "near-Arctic" state is growing, both within the Alliance and in terms of its own policy.

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Unlike the early 21st century, when the key issues for cooperation in the region included environmental and scientific initiatives, the UK's approach to the Arctic is now defined by security concerns.

Evolution of conceptual approach

Documents from the 2010s were primarily aimed at justifying the reasons and importance of the British presence in the Far North. On the one hand, the history of Arctic exploration and resource exploitation, as well as Scotland's proximity to the Arctic Circle, provide natural arguments for London's interest in the region. On the other hand, the status of a "near-Arctic" state should be supported not only by geographic proximity and historical considerations, but also by contemporary contributions to the development and exploration of the Arctic (Gutenev, 2020).

Thus, the 2013 policy framework, "Adapting to Change: UK policy towards the Arctic"¹, as well as the subsequent report by the House of Lords², focused on economic, environmental, and scientific aspects of interest to the UK. Furthermore, one of the distinctive features of London's involvement in the Arctic has traditionally been its considerable scientific expertise and the volume of research dedicated to the region (Todorov, Lyzhin, 2019).

It is significant that the environmental component was the first aspect to be documented. In 2013, the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee prepared a report, "Protecting the Arctic"³, on the harm caused by oil and gas extraction, part of which formed the basis for the policy framework. The report's data was updated by the committee in 2018, demonstrating the continuity of the various governments⁴. London also actively utilized its observer status in the Arctic Council, participating in numerous working group projects related to environmental issues and biodiversity conservation, including joint work with Russian scientists⁵.

The need to reaffirm its interest in the Arctic became particularly evident following the initiation of the Brexit process, one of the consequences of which was a reduction in the country's opportunities in the region (Eremina, Mezhevich, 2020). The latest update of London's official approach to the Far North in 2023 — the document "Looking North: The UK and the Arctic. The Unit-

¹ Adapting to Change UK policy towards the Arctic. Polar Regions Department. FCO. 2013. URL: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/251216/Adapting_To_Change_UK_policy_towards_the_Arctic.pdf (accessed 15 April 2025).

² Responding to a changing Arctic / Select Committee on the Arctic — Report of Session 2014–15. HL paper 118. URL: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldselect/ldarctic/118/11802.html> (accessed 15 April 2025).

³ Protecting the Arctic. Environmental Audit Committee — Second Report. URL: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/environmental-audit-committee/inquiries/parliament-2010/protecting-the-arctic/> (accessed 15 April 2025).

⁴ UK support for oil and gas exploitation in the Arctic incompatible. UK Parliament, 28.11.2018. URL: <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/62/environmental-audit-committee/news/100295/changing-arctic-report-published-17-19/> (accessed 15 April 2025).

⁵ Working Groups. Arctic Council. URL: <https://arctic-council.org/ru/about/working-groups/> (accessed 15 April 2025).

ed Kingdom's Arctic Policy Framework"⁶ — served as a supplement to the overall structure of the country's post-EU strategy, defined in the "Global Britain" concept⁷.

Despite the extensive body of literature on global Arctic issues, particularly for a non-Arctic state, recent publications have increasingly focused on security challenges.

Until the 2020s, the Arctic received little attention in UK defense documents. For example, the region was not mentioned in the 2010 Strategic Defense and Security Review (SDSR)⁸, and the corresponding 2015 document contained just one reference to the Royal Marines' preparation for operations in the Arctic⁹. The 2018 National Security Capabilities Review also did not address the Arctic directly¹⁰.

The official continuation of the framework policy, the 2018 report by the Foreign Office Polar Regions Department, "Beyond the Ice: UK policy towards the Arctic"¹¹, included a military component, although it only briefly emphasized the need for cooperation with allies and the maintenance of stability in the region, prioritizing the traditional justifications for the UK's role in the region.

It is worth noting that the main factor driving the expansion of defense planning documents in the Arctic is Russia's activity and positioning. For the first time, the Arctic and the Far North were identified as an "area of concern" in the 2016 report "Russia: Implications for UK Defense and Security"¹².

The creation of a separate defense strategy was first announced in 2018, with Moscow's increased military activity cited as one of the direct reasons for its development. At the same time, the House of Commons Defense Committee prepared a specialized report, "On Thin Ice: UK

⁶ UK Government. Looking North: The UK and the Arctic. The United Kingdom's Arctic Policy Framework. UK Government. URL:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1135186/looking-north-the-uk-and-the-arctic-the-uks-arctic-policy-framework.pdf (accessed 15 April 2025).

⁷ UK Government. Global Britain in a competitive age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. UK Government. 2021. URL: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60df2338d3bf7f7c2acabdf6/03335-CO-Integrated-Review-Foreward-and-Overview-FINAL-RUSSIAN-WEB-DISPLAYABLE-PDF.pdf> (accessed 15 April 2025).

⁸ The strategic defense and security review. UK Government. 2010. URL: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/62482/strategic-defence-security-review.pdf (accessed 15 April 2025).

⁹ National security strategy and strategic defence and security review. UK Government. 2015. URL: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/478933/52309_Cm_9161_NSS_SD_Review_web_only.pdf (accessed 15 April 2025).

¹⁰ National security capability review. UK Government. 2015. URL: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/705347/6.4391_CO_National-Security-Review_web.pdf (accessed 15 April 2025).

¹¹ Beyond the Ice UK policy towards the Arctic. UK Government. 2018. URL: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/697251/beyond-the-ice-uk-policy-towards-the-arctic.pdf (accessed 15 April 2025).

¹² Russia: Implications for UK defence and security. UK Parliament. 2016. URL: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmdfence/107/10702.htm> (accessed 15 April 2025).

Defense in the Arctic”, according to which the prospect of “projecting Russian power from the Far North into the North Atlantic” had re-emerged, requiring a comprehensive approach to counter it¹³.

The Ministry of Defense’s strategy was officially published in April 2022 after several revisions due to the changing geopolitical environment¹⁴. The threat posed by Russia, particularly through its expanding partnership with China, is specifically mentioned in the 2023 document, “Looking North: The UK and the Arctic”¹⁵. The documents note that the challenge stems from Russia’s strategy to militarize the region, particularly through “the creation of the Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command, the resumption of Cold War-era bases, and the allocation of additional funds for specialized equipment”¹⁶.

The context of Sweden and Finland’s accession to NATO is examined: the United Kingdom views these actions as increasing stability in the region and as an opportunity to further advance British interests in the Arctic, given that the new status will allow both countries to routinely achieve the highest possible level of interoperability with NATO (Danilov, 2022). Furthermore, the documents declare the need to strengthen NATO’s presence in the region to protect trade routes and shipping, primarily from threats emanating from Russia¹⁷. In this regard, the key task is to justify London’s role in the Arctic not from a scientific perspective, but in terms of ensuring a presence in the region and contributing to the activities of the North Atlantic Alliance. In particular, Britain’s special role in patrolling the Faroe-Icelandic border is highlighted.

The updated policy framework places security issues alongside other traditional priorities, such as the environment and climate protection, cooperation and partnership with allies, the economy and the energy sector (Kotov, Lesnoy, 2023).

Scotland’s Arctic focus is particularly noteworthy, as it is crucial to the geographical justification of the UK’s proximity to the Arctic. The country’s first strategy, “Arctic Connections”, focused on cultural and economic aspects, as well as climate change and maritime transport infrastructure¹⁸. Although Scotland’s defense policy remains within the framework of the United Kingdom, the Scottish Government’s latest annual report, “Building a New Scotland”, included ideas about an

¹³ On thin ice: UK defence in the Arctic. UK Parliament. 2018. URL: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmdfence/388/388.pdf> (accessed 15 April 2025).

¹⁴ UK defence contribution to the High North. UK Government. 2022. URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/defence-secretary-announces-new-uk-defence-arctic-strategy-in-norway#:~:text=The%20strategy%20sets%20out%20the,Defence%20capability%20for%20the%20region> (accessed 15 April 2025).

¹⁵ UK Government. Looking North: The UK and the Arctic. The United Kingdom’s Arctic Policy Framework. UK Government. 2023. URL: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1135186/looking-north-the-uk-and-the-arctic-the-uks-arctic-policy-framework.pdf (accessed 15 April 2025).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ UK defence contribution to the High North. UK Government. 2022. URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/defence-secretary-announces-new-uk-defence-arctic-strategy-in-norway#:~:text=The%20strategy%20sets%20out%20the,Defence%20capability%20for%20the%20region> (accessed 15 April 2025).

¹⁸ Arctic connections: Scotland’s Arctic policy. Scottish government. 2019. URL: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/arctic-connections-scotlands-arctic-policy-framework/pages/4/> (accessed 15 April 2025).

independent Scotland joining NATO, suggesting a gradual shift toward defense, including in regional documents¹⁹.

The UK's increased focus on security is confirmed by the publication of the second report by the House of Lords²⁰, prepared by the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, as well as the debate on the document in Parliament in early 2025. It partially reiterates the conclusions of the 2015 report, but focuses more on the country's military and technical capabilities in the Arctic.

A distinctive feature of all the documents and statements mentioned is a cautious approach to the country's positioning in the region. Thus, the initial goal of the framework policy was to justify the UK's interests, without attempting to establish significant influence or control over the region. The use of the term "policy" instead of "strategy", adopted from the 2013 document into the 2023 formulation, indicates the continued caution of British policy due to the Arctic states' sensitivity to any attempts by external actors to establish control in the region (Gutenev, 2020). Furthermore, the Arctic is not mentioned as a key priority in the overall strategic defense planning documents of the last Conservative administration: the 2024 "Defending Britain" report briefly mentions the region only in the context of cooperation with the Nordic countries²¹. The main focus of the documents remains the Indo-Pacific region and cooperation, as well as London's position on the conflict in Ukraine.

Thus, respect for the special status of Arctic powers and their sovereignty has become part of the policy. Although London directly accuses Russia of escalating tensions in the Far North, some individual statements demonstrate a restrained approach. During discussions in the House of Lords in 2025, G. Ashton, chair of the committee that compiled the 2023 report, emphasized: "The resumption of formal engagement with Russia [within the Arctic Council] is taking place in an attempt to ensure the resumption of scientific cooperation. We considered it desirable not only for scientific purposes, but also as a bridge for strengthening mutual understanding and, most importantly, for reducing the risk of escalation in the event of a crisis."²²

Today, the country's role in the Arctic is increasingly dictated by geopolitical considerations, with Russia portrayed as the primary culprit in the escalation. Overall, the sharp deterioration in relations between Russia and the UK in the Arctic region correlates with general trends in contemporary discourse and policy, particularly in Western and Northern Europe. Unlike the reports of

¹⁹ Building a New Scotland: An independent Scotland's Place in the World. Scottish government. 2019. URL: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/building-new-scotland-independent-scotlands-place-world/> (accessed 15 April 2025); Heron A. Lessons from Kompani Linge: Scotland's role in shaping Arctic defense interoperability. The Arctic institute, 3 April 2025. URL: <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/lessons-kompani-linge-scotlands-role-shaping-arctic-defense-interoperability/> (accessed 15 April 2025).

²⁰ Our friends in the North. High North News, 08 December 2023. URL: <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/our-friends-north-uk-strategy-towards-arctic> (accessed 15 April 2025).

²¹ Defending Britain. UK Government. 2024. URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defending-britain> (accessed 15 April 2025).

²² UK strategy towards the Arctic (International relations and defence committee report). Vol. 842. UK Parliament. 2025. URL: [https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2025-01-09/debates/759F6046-C65A-4746-9A6C-7073E4CD2461/UKStrategyTowardsTheArctic\(InternationalRelationsAndDefenceCommitteeReport\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2025-01-09/debates/759F6046-C65A-4746-9A6C-7073E4CD2461/UKStrategyTowardsTheArctic(InternationalRelationsAndDefenceCommitteeReport)) (accessed 15 April 2025).

environmental committees in the 2010s, recent parliamentary assessments of the Arctic situation are being formed by specialized committees dealing with security issues. At the same time, a certain degree of caution persists in the approach to the sovereignty of Arctic states, and the region is not treated as a priority in general strategic planning documents.

The Arctic within institutional frameworks

As noted by Russian researchers, Britain lacks a single body regulating the comprehensive development of the Arctic (Todorov, Lyzhin, 2019). The Department of Polar Regions within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for the country's policy in the North and South Poles, which is why its remit is broad and does not include, in particular, security issues.

As a result of a 2023 report by the House of Lords, an inter-ministerial group on the polar regions was established, comprising ministers from nine other departments²³. The first meeting, however, took place two years after the announcement, in February 2025. Thus, coordination of efforts, especially in the current highly conflict-ridden environment, remains a significant challenge for London.

The need to appoint a "polar ambassador" was first officially announced in a House of Lords report in 2015. The existence of a post coordinating the actions of institutions and representing the country's position on the international stage was intended to shape an active, rather than reactive, direction for UK policy (Ananyeva, Antyushina, 2016). The proposal was repeatedly supported by individual experts and the subsequent House of Lords report, but was rejected by the government²⁴.

The topic of special representatives of countries in the Arctic has gained new relevance following Washington's official establishment of such a post in 2022 and the appointment, during the Biden administration, of M. Sfragi, a geographer and director of the Polar Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars²⁵. The "Arctic Foreign Policy" published by Canadian authorities at the end of 2024 also proposes appointing a representative for the northern region, whose work will focus on the issues of indigenous peoples and the preservation of the ecosystem. The office of the new ambassador is to be located in the country's northern territories²⁶.

Thus, the countries' diplomatic presence is gradually becoming more clearly defined, and the principles for its establishment coincide with the main justifications put forward by Britain at

²³ Following Committee calls, a Ministerial group for the Arctic will be established. UK Parliament. 2023. URL: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7323/the-uk-and-the-arctic-environment/news/199159/following-committee-calls-a-ministerial-group-for-the-arctic-will-be-established-to-discuss-and-coordinate-priorities-in-the-region/> (accessed 15 April 2025).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Dr. Michael Sfraga Officially Sworn In as First United States Ambassador-at-Large for Arctic Affairs. L. Murkowski, US Senator for Alaska, 10 February 2024. URL: <https://www.murkowski.senate.gov/press/release/dr-michael-sfraga-officially-sworn-in-as-first-united-states-ambassador-at-large-for-arctic-affairs> (accessed 15 April 2025).

²⁶ Canada's Arctic foreign policy. Government of Canada. 2024. URL: <https://www.international.gc.ca/gac-amc/publications/transparency-transparence/arctic-arctique/arctic-policy-politique-arctique.aspx?lang=eng> (accessed 15 April 2025).

the time of the publication of the first House of Lords report: emphasis is placed on scientific co-operation, the role of indigenous peoples, environmental initiatives and regional development.

At the same time, current trends of escalation in the Arctic are also affecting diplomatic proposals. During a debate in Parliament in early 2025, Sir David Hanney, requesting clarification on the government's actions, noted that significant changes have occurred recently, particularly in the areas of defense and the presence of new actors, which fall outside the remit of the Polar Regions Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This suggests a return to the idea of creating a "polar ambassador" position with the joint participation of the Foreign and Commonwealth Offices and the Ministry of Defense ²⁷.

The existence of such proposals at the official level indicates a gradual shift in the British approach to the Arctic, including in diplomatic matters. Moreover, these proposals go further than the approaches of NATO allies: the US and Canadian approaches are based on appointing specialists in science and communication with indigenous peoples, while D. Hanney's proposal considers the British equivalent of a "polar ambassador" to be part of the Ministry of Defense's responsibility. As of early 2025, the position of special representative has not been created, despite more than 10 years of ongoing discussions. This also partly reflects the UK's cautious approach to "governance" of the region as a non-Arctic country.

Prospects for development of the UK's capabilities in the Arctic

Security-related issues in the region have become increasingly prominent in recent years, with the growing number of military exercises and the country's plans to strengthen its capabilities (Zagorsky, Todorov, 2021). Ensuring a presence in the Far North, as well as fulfilling conceptual objectives aimed at maintaining a presence in the region, including as a NATO member state, requires significant technological capabilities and an expanded network of interactions with other countries.

Furthermore, issues of naval rearmament and modernization are key ones in security policy documents. Naval capabilities in the North are currently significantly limited, despite growing attention to the region at the document level.

London has a relatively small number of submarines — ten units of various types. These include the latest nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN), the Trafalgar, five newer Astute-class submarines, and four Vanguard-class ballistic missile submarines capable of carrying nuclear weapons. This class is the only component of the UK's strategic nuclear forces within the Royal Navy ²⁸.

²⁷ UK strategy towards the Arctic (International relations and defence committee report). Vol. 842. UK Parliament. 2025. URL: [https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2025-01-09/debates/759F6046-C65A-4746-9A6C-7073E4CD2461/UKStrategyTowardsTheArctic\(InternationalRelationsAndDefenceCommitteeReport\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2025-01-09/debates/759F6046-C65A-4746-9A6C-7073E4CD2461/UKStrategyTowardsTheArctic(InternationalRelationsAndDefenceCommitteeReport)) (accessed 15 April 2025).

²⁸ UK opens new military base in Northern Norway. URL: <https://www.defencetoday.com/security/military-capabilities/uk-opens-new-military-base-in-northern-norway/> (accessed 13 April 2025).

The UK places particular emphasis on submarines for several reasons: the navy lacks specialized anti-submarine warfare vessels, while monitoring the Faroe-Iceland line requires patrolling vast areas of water and operating autonomously.

Recognizing the particular effectiveness of submarines in this area, the Ministry of Defense is currently implementing a number of modernization initiatives. Another Astute-class submarine is under construction, and development on a Dreadnought-class submarine capable of carrying ballistic missiles is underway, with plans to commission the first model in the coming years ²⁹.

The capabilities of the Royal Air Force play a key role in patrolling both the Faroe-Iceland line and Arctic regions as a whole. Currently, nine P-8A Poseidon aircraft are based at the Royal Air Force base in Lossiemouth (Scotland). Five of these were ordered in 2019 ³⁰ and entered service by the end of 2024 ³¹. Despite the modernization of the Royal Air Force, a report by the House of Lords estimates that the existing fleet of P-8As is insufficient to safeguard Britain's interests, particularly in the absence of other assets ³².

Thus, the icebreaking capabilities, required to project influence and "presence" in the region, are significantly limited. The British Navy has only one ice-class patrol vessel capable of operating in Arctic waters — HMS Protector. Compared to icebreakers from other countries, the vessel's technical capabilities are limited: the Protector has an ice class of DNV 05, which allows it to break through first-year ice up to half a meter thick.

Moreover, the vessel is primarily designed to patrol Antarctic waters: tasks include hydrographic surveys, supporting British and overseas research stations, and assisting the British Antarctic Survey.

The vessel made its first visit to Arctic waters with the Royal Navy in 2021, traveling 1,050 km from the North Pole, the farthest north point ever reached by a Royal Navy surface ship ³³. Protector was last deployed to the Arctic in 2024 for icebreaking operations in Canadian waters, but was subsequently sent back toward the South Pole ³⁴. Six multi-role support ships (MRSS) ³⁵ for

²⁹ Dreadnought class. Royal Navy. URL: <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/equipment/submarine/dreadnought-class> (accessed 13 April 2025).

³⁰ Allison G. UK spends 507m on final four P-8A Poseidon Maritime Patrol Aircraft. UK Defence journal, 28 January 2019. URL: <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/uk-spends-507m-on-final-four-p-8a-poseidon-maritime-patrol-aircraft/> (accessed 13 April 2025).

³¹ UK Poseidon force tracking 2024 target for full operational capacity. Flight Global, 2024. URL: <https://www.flightglobal.com/defence/uk-p-8a-poseidon-force-tracking-2024-target-for-full-operational-capability/149399.article> (accessed 13 April 2025).

³² UK strategy towards the Arctic (International relations and defence committee report). Vol. 842. UK Parliament. 2025. URL: [https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2025-01-09/debates/759F6046-C65A-4746-9A6C-7073E4CD2461/UKStrategyTowardsTheArctic\(InternationalRelationsAndDefenceCommitteeReport\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2025-01-09/debates/759F6046-C65A-4746-9A6C-7073E4CD2461/UKStrategyTowardsTheArctic(InternationalRelationsAndDefenceCommitteeReport)) (accessed 15 April 2025).

³³ HMS Protector makes history sailing further North than any other royal navy ship. Royal Navy, 25 June 2021. URL: <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news/2021/june/25/20210625-protector-north> (accessed 13 April 2025).

³⁴ Royal Navy's icebreaker heads south after completing first northern mission in two years. Forces News, 12 August 2024. URL: <https://www.forcesnews.com/services/navy/royal-navys-icebreaker-heads-south-after-completing-first-northern-mission-two-years> (accessed 13 April 2025).

³⁵ The British Navy will receive up to six new ships with laser weapons. URL: <https://ria.ru/20240514/britanii-1945758123.html> (accessed 13 April 2025).

personnel transport are currently in the design phase, but the fleet's Arctic icebreaking capabilities are not being developed.

The British Navy's specialized Arctic capabilities are significantly limited, both in terms of responding to operational tasks and in the area of projecting long-term influence.

Thus, given the current state of the armed forces, considerable resources are required to fulfil the planned objectives regarding a presence in the Far North and a contribution to NATO's policy on building security architecture in the European Arctic.

Following the end of the Cold War, the UK reduced its defense spending, including on the Navy. This was largely due to the political elite's desire to shift the main responsibility for NATO's military component onto the US. This made it possible to free up a significant amount of funds and redirect them towards other priorities. The UK's military expenditure as a proportion of GDP fell from 5.5% in 1984 to around 2% by the early 2020s, leading to a number of funding problems for the armed forces ³⁶.

In the spring of 2023, the UK Ministry of Defense requested an £11 billion increase in Royal Navy spending. This request was partially granted, but the £5 billion allocated was to be used exclusively for the maintenance of the active fleet and future new shipbuilding projects. In February 2025, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced plans to increase the military budget from 2.3% to 2.5% of GDP by 2027 and to 3% by 2030 ³⁷. This was, in part, a response to demands from the Donald Trump administration to increase military spending by other NATO countries ³⁸.

At the same time, according to former Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, Lord Dannatt, the country's defense requires much greater investment than the funds allocated ³⁹. Due to inefficiencies, existing spending cannot cover the maintenance of the expensive armed forces (Shikhov, 2021).

Furthermore, compared to other states with interests in the region, the planned expenditure increase to 2.5% by 2027 appears relatively modest: Sweden has set a target of 3.5% by

³⁶ The Royal Navy has shrunk significantly over the past 70 years. URL: <https://topwar.ru/246171-za-70-let-korolevskij-flot-velikobritanii-znachitelno-sokratilsja.html> (accessed 13 April 2025).

³⁷ Prime Minister sets out biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the Cold War, protecting British people in new era for national security. UK Government. Press release. 25 February 2025. URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-sets-out-biggest-sustained-increase-in-defence-spending-since-the-cold-war-protecting-british-people-in-new-era-for-national-security> (accessed 15 April 2025).

³⁸ Trump stated his goal of forcing NATO countries to increase defense spending to 5% of GDP. URL: <https://iz.ru/1825636/2025-01-21/tramp-zaavil-o-celi-zastavit-strany-nato-narastit-rashody-na-oboronu-do-5-vvp> (accessed 15 April 2025).

³⁹ "Commanders are blushing": why the British Navy is in crisis. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/19825477> (accessed 15 April 2025).

2030⁴⁰, France also states the need to increase its budget to 3.5%, while Poland is aiming for 5% by 2026⁴¹.

Another obstacle to increased spending is the high level of public debt, which stands at around 100% of GDP. Since the 2010s, this figure has risen by 30% and continues to grow⁴².

Plans to modernize the fleet and increase its autonomy from the EU and the US have faced difficulties and high costs since their implementation began. In particular, staff and skills shortages, and the lag in certain areas require significant resources and funds⁴³. Thus, Arctic capabilities are not a priority.

Even taking into account increased funding, these issues will require long-term investment and a high level of coordination between British industry and the Ministry of Defense, which casts doubt on the feasibility of the plans in the short term.

Cooperation with allies: exercises and military presence

Engagement with allies, particularly Arctic states and NATO partners, has always been a priority for the UK. London has now built a fairly extensive base of bilateral agreements with all Nordic countries: from the intention to create a Joint Expeditionary Force in 2014⁴⁴ to the publication of the Joint Statement⁴⁵.

For the gradual integration of the Nordic countries into the alliance, the UK concluded security pacts with Finland⁴⁶ and Sweden⁴⁷. Within these statements, which have a similar structure, London expressed its readiness to provide the necessary support to counter external threats, primarily those emanating from Russia.

⁴⁰ Sweden eyes rise in defence spending to 3.5% of GDP by 2030. Reuters, 26 March 2025. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/sweden-eyes-defence-spending-35-gdp-2030-prime-minister-says-2025-03-26/> (accessed 13 April 2025).

⁴¹ Poland aims to use EU recovery funds for defence sector. Reuters, 21 February 2025. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/defence-spending-will-remain-top-priority-poland-says-finance-minister-2025-02-21/> (accessed 13 April 2025).

⁴² Public sector net debt expressed as a percentage of GDP in the United Kingdom from 1900/01 to 2029/30. Statista. URL: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/282841/debt-as-gdp-uk/> (accessed 13 April 2025).

⁴³ Shkrobtak I.O. British Maritime Strategy: Reality and Prospects. Russian International Affairs Council. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/britanskaya-morskaya-strategiya-realnost-i-perspektivy/> (accessed 28 April 2025).

⁴⁴ Joint Expeditionary Force. URL: <https://jefnations.org/> (accessed 13 April 2025).

⁴⁵ Joint Statement on Enhanced Defence Cooperation between Norway and the United Kingdom. UK Government. 20.02.2025. URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/joint-statement-on-enhanced-defence-cooperation-between-norway-and-the-united-kingdom/joint-statement-on-enhanced-defence-cooperation-between-norway-and-the-united-kingdom> (accessed 13 April 2025).

⁴⁶ United Kingdom — Finland Statement. UK Government. 11 May 2022. URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/united-kingdom-finland-statement-11-may-2022/united-kingdom-finland-statement> (accessed 13 April 2025).

⁴⁷ United Kingdom — Sweden Statement. UK Government. 11 May 2022. URL: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/627b71d6e90e0712dec7527a/UNITED_KINGDOM_-_SWEDEN_STATEMENT.pdf (accessed 13 April 2025).

Between 2023 and 2025, the UK published joint declarations on strategic security partnerships with Norway and Finland ⁴⁸, and issued a Joint Statement on Foreign Security, Defense, Development and Bilateral Cooperation with Denmark ⁴⁹. Both declarations followed the principle of strengthening common Euro-Atlantic security policy and jointly responding to geopolitical challenges in the Far North. Similar goals are set in the UK-Danish document, with particular attention paid to Russia's actions in Ukraine as a catalyst for strengthening cooperation.

It is worth noting that the documents are united by common principles; the frequency of their publication and the rapid adaptation of bilateral agreements to changing geopolitical realities underscore the notably high level of cooperation between the countries of Northern Europe and the UK.

Furthermore, there has been a noticeable increase in the presence of British armed forces in the Arctic region in recent years. The UK is taking a more active part in military exercises in the Arctic. London committed its forces to six maneuvers in 2023 and three in 2024 ⁵⁰. All exercises took place in Northern Europe alongside NATO allies.

The main objectives of the maneuvers are to practice and coordinate maritime efforts and troop deployment. Due to their scale, particular attention is being paid to Joint Viking and Nordic Response exercises.

The Nordic Response exercises are held in Northern Norway every two years and combine naval and air forces. In 2024, the maneuvers involved over 20,000 personnel from 13 NATO countries, 100 fighter jets, transport aircraft and maritime aircraft, as well as allied CH-43 Super Stallions, Merlins, Cobras and Ospreys. British forces played a leading role in coordinating the exercises (Arzhanov, 2024).

The Joint Viking maneuvers were the largest for NATO countries in the Arctic in 2025, involving more than 10,000 troops from Norway and eight other alliance countries ⁵¹. Given the relative deterioration of US-Ukrainian relations, as well as Donald Trump's statements regarding the need to begin negotiations to resolve the Ukrainian crisis and the status of Greenland, they presented a notable example of the unity of European states. Joint Viking demonstrates the high level of cooperation between the UK and Norway: in 2023, alongside the Joint Viking exercises led by

⁴⁸ Joint Declaration on the Strategic Partnership between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Finland. UK Government. 21 May 2024. URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-finland-bilateral-cooperation-joint-declaration-on-the-strategic-partnership/joint-declaration-on-the-strategic-partnership-between-the-united-kingdom-of-great-britain-and-northern-ireland-and-the-republic-of-finland> (accessed 13 April 2025).

⁴⁹ Joint statement on foreign security, defence, development and bilateral cooperation between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Kingdom of Denmark. UK Government. 20 June 2023. URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-denmark-joint-statement-on-bilateral-cooperation/joint-statement-on-foreign-security-defence-development-and-bilateral-cooperation-between-the-united-kingdom-of-great-britain-and-northern-ireland> (accessed 13 April 2025).

⁵⁰ Compiled by the authors of the study based on open data.

⁵¹ Joint Viking 2025. URL: <https://www.forsvaret.no/en/exercises-and-operations/exercises/jv25#:~:text=Around%2010%2C000%20Norwegian%20and%20allied,ability%20to%20receive%20allied%20reinforcements> (accessed 14 April 2025).

Oslo, the Joint Warrior naval maneuvers were conducted under the leadership of the Royal Navy, involving 8,000 personnel.

Furthermore, this ensures a virtually permanent presence of British armed forces on the territory of allied Norway. Camp Viking, opened in March 2023, is designed to support the operations of British special forces in the Far North over the next 10 years. The base is located 40 km from the Norwegian city of Tromsø and, according to statements by the British armed forces, will be able to accommodate the entire personnel of the country's Coastal Rapid Response Group ⁵².

It is worth emphasizing that Camp Viking represents an example of the high degree of cooperation between the two countries, partly due to Norway's self-imposed restrictions. The "Basic Policy" was formulated before the creation of NATO and was reaffirmed as a political doctrine throughout the second half of the 20th century. It prohibits the establishment of military bases with a permanent presence of foreign armed forces during peacetime. The country's key defense ministry document, the "Long-Term Defense Plan" of 2020, notes that "the presence of allies on Norwegian territory is of particular importance, and the government will continue to develop infrastructure to accommodate foreign forces". However, it does not explicitly specify the duration of such "presence", reflecting both Oslo's continuing commitment to the political doctrine of self-restraint and its gradual retreat from it ⁵³.

In statements by the British Royal Navy, Camp Viking is positioned as a military "base". According to Major Kirk Allen, the deployment commander, the facility is intended to serve as a "home" for British armed forces in the North ⁵⁴. Thus, the existence of the base and the rhetoric of the British authorities can be seen as yet another step toward the de facto erosion of Norway's "base policy".

Similar to the UK, only the US maintains such a presence in a "grey zone" with regard to Oslo's political doctrine: according to the 2022 Defense Agreement, the armed forces are granted "exclusive jurisdiction" in "agreed areas" (the number of which increased to 12 in 2024) ⁵⁵.

Officially, Oslo maintains a position of self-restraint in its relations with both London and Washington. The Norwegian government notes that Camp Viking is not a military base, but a new name for an existing training center on the territory of a Norwegian military base. Article 1 of the US-Norway agreement emphasizes: "Nothing ... shall alter Norway's policy regarding the stationing

⁵² New Arctic operations base for UK commandos. Royal Navy News. 8 March 2023. URL: <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news/2023/march/08/230308-campvikingnorway> (accessed 13 April 2025).

⁵³ Norway Releases its Long Term Defence Plan, 2020: Resilience as a Core Defense Capability. SLD, 20 April 2020. URL: <https://sldinfo.com/2020/04/norway-releases-its-long-term-defence-plan-2020-resilience-as-a-core-defense-capability/> (accessed 15 April 2025).

⁵⁴ New Arctic operations base for UK commandos. Royal Navy News. 8 March 2023. URL: <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news/2023/march/08/230308-campvikingnorway> (accessed 13 April 2025).

⁵⁵ Agreement Between the United States of America and Norway. Treaties and Other International Acts Series 22-617. The White House. URL: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/22-617-Norway-Defense-SDCA-Ready-for-Review.pdf> (accessed 15 April 2025).

of foreign forces on Norwegian territory, and the stockpiling or deployment of nuclear weapons on Norwegian territory”⁵⁶.

Washington has also concluded almost identical treaties with other Nordic countries, according to which the US armed forces are granted expanded jurisdiction in agreed areas⁵⁷.

Unlike the United States, the United Kingdom does not have a system of binding defense agreements granting similar rights and guarantees to British troops in Northern European countries. Camp Viking represents the only long-term British troop presence in the region, which coincides with limited resources and fits into London’s cautious approach to the Far North.

The decision regarding the presence of British forces, as well as the significant attention paid to this presence in discussions within the British Parliament, represents an element of escalation. This move demonstrates the UK’s positioning as a key element in the defense of NATO’s northern flank, alongside Norway and the United States.

In turn, infrastructure within the UK, particularly closer to the Arctic Circle in Scotland, is being more actively used for the temporary deployment of allied forces. In addition to deepening force coordination, this signals the formation of a unified northern front and the alignment of priorities among European countries. In particular, the Royal Air Force base at Lossiemouth regularly hosts armed forces from other countries wishing to conduct exercises in adjacent waters or undergo training with the Royal Air Force. In early 2025, the base hosted the Joint Exploration and Deliberation Initiatives (JEDI) Symposium, attended by representatives from the US, Canada, Germany and Norway. During the event, NATO allies’ personnel practiced simulated anti-submarine warfare missions with Poseidon aircraft to develop skills and coordination between countries. In January 2025, Norwegian warships visited Glasgow ahead of NATO’s Joint Viking exercise⁵⁸. The involvement of Scotland’s infrastructure emphasizes the UK’s “northern” importance, as well as its strategic position within NATO forces.

The increase in British forces in Northern Europe, particularly in Norway, is a direct consequence of the military-political confrontation between the NATO bloc, specifically the UK, and Russia. Camp Viking is an attempt to create an additional lever of influence over Moscow. Furthermore, given the close ties between Norway and the UK, as well as the fact that neither of these countries is part of the European Union and is therefore not constrained by pan-European bureaucracy or Brussels’ influence on domestic processes, it can be assumed that further military

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Agreement On Defense Cooperation Between The Government Of The Republic Of Finland And The Government Of The United States Of America. Ministry of foreign affairs of Finland. URL: <https://um.fi/defence-cooperation-agreement-with-the-united-states-dca-#:~:text=The%20DCA%20specifies%20the%20areas,possible%20infrastructure%20investments%20in%20Finland> (accessed 28 April 2025); Agreement On Defense Cooperation Between The Government Of The Kingdom Of Sweden And The Government of The United States of America. Swedish government. URL: <https://www.government.se/contentassets/ad5f87be923e4065b658189a9294f480/agreement-on-defense-cooperation-between-sweden-and-the-united-states-of-america.pdf> (accessed 28 April 2025).

⁵⁸ Operation Strike Warrior: Ships arrive in Scotland for Nato exercise. The National, 11 October 2024. URL: <https://www.thenational.scot/news/24645468.operation-strike-warrior-norwegian-ship-maud-greenock/> (accessed 15 April 2025).

cooperation between the UK and Norway, including on the issue of the long-term deployment of armed forces, will expand.

Conclusion

The Arctic region, specifically its Euro-Arctic part, is becoming an arena for militarization not only by Arctic states, but also by countries that, like the UK, seek to secure the status of a “near-Arctic state”.

Although the UK continues to use scientific and environmental arguments to justify its role in the Arctic, the path to achieving such a status now begins with the state’s positioning through the rhetoric of political figures and references to the region in strategic planning and security documents. At the same time, the UK maintains a restrained approach to military-political development of the region, emphasizing the importance of key Arctic actors. One of the consequences of this policy is the relatively low level of coordination on Arctic issues between British departments and institutions.

In order to build up the UK’s own military capabilities, the current level of understanding of the Arctic’s significance within the state’s internal structures is insufficient, as is the level of financial investment in the country’s Royal Navy and military infrastructure in the Arctic. Technical limitations are offset by close cooperation with allies, not only in documents, but also in practice.

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