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# United Kingdom and the Arctic: A View from India

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## Abstract

*Geography mainly determines geopolitics. One region where this is seen is the Arctic. It is affected by politics, economics, strategy and climate change. The Arctic eight are the leading countries in the region. Other countries outside the region are also becoming involved. One country located proximately to the Arctic is the United Kingdom, particularly Scotland. The UK has been involved in the region for the past few years. The UK is keen to play an active role along with allies. It seeks to maintain stability and provide a military deterrent to ensure regional security. Besides, it is concerned with climate change and the environment. However, there are military and other technological challenges to attain this goal. India, too, is taking an interest in the region. Geography makes Russia the most proximate Arctic state to India. There is currently cooperation with Russia primarily for economic and environmental reasons. India could cooperate with other Arctic states. It is unlikely that India would be geopolitically involved in the region. UK and India, too, can cooperate in areas of relevance. While India does have an Arctic, there should be references to the region in Maritime Policy documents.*

**Key Words:** *Arctic, Maritime, Pacific, Russia, UK*

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**Map 1: Arctic Circle: Source: House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023)**



Geography is often the primary determinant of International Relations and Politics (VADm Chauhan, 2020)<sup>1</sup>. One region which is becoming geopolitically significant is the Arctic. The Arctic is considered any area north of the Arctic Circle, located at approximately 66 degrees, 34 minutes North Latitude. It is the latitude above which the sun does not set on the summer solstice and does not rise on the winter solstice. Current polar

research is at the juncture of geostrategy, geo-economics and Climate Change (Dutta and Banerjee, 2022)<sup>2</sup>. Due to climate change, it is melting faster than the rest of the world (VAdm Soni, 2023)<sup>3</sup>. This has led many non-littoral states to make claims well beyond its proximity (Dutta and Banerjee, 2022). The Arctic had been militarised during the Cold War. However, starting from 1987 it was gradually demilitarised. Since 2000, the melting polar ice has caused countries to make increasing claims on Arctic territory even beyond their Exclusive Economic Zone (Dr Sharma and Dr Sinha, 2022)<sup>4</sup>.

The Arctic Council is the leading international organisation for the region. There are eight states in the Arctic Council, namely Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the USA (Arctic Council, n.d.1)<sup>5</sup>. There have been studies on the Arctic Policies of the Arctic Eight, as also China (Dutta and Banerjee, 2022; Tüter, 2022)<sup>6</sup>. However, it is necessary to study other countries' position in the region. This is akin to studies on countries of the Indo-Pacific undertaken in a book published by CAPS (Air marshal Copra et al, 2022)<sup>7</sup>.

### **United Kingdom's Arctic Policy**

There are two primary policy documents of the UK relating to the Arctic:

- *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North* of the Ministry of Defence (2022) (Ministry of Defence and Rt Hon Wallace, 2022)<sup>8</sup>
- *Looking North: the UK and the Arctic* of the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO, 2023)<sup>9</sup>

In both of these, the United Kingdom claims to be the Non-Arctic state that is geographically most proximate to the Arctic region. The UK, particularly Scotland, has been described as having an *Arctic-facing* (emphasis added) geography (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023)<sup>10</sup> This paper will study the United Kingdom's Arctic

policy and explore India—UK Relations with an Arctic and High North focus.

Given that these have been released in the past two years, the importance given to that region by the UK is shown. The latest Integrated Review Refresh also has mentions of the Arctic (Cabinet Office, 2023)<sup>11</sup>. The House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee recently published a report titled *Defence in Scotland: the North Atlantic and the High North* (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023). As long ago as 2019, the Scottish Government published a document titled Arctic Connections: Scotland's Arctic Policy Framework (External Affairs Directorate, 2019)<sup>12</sup>. In geographic terms, Scotland is closest to the Arctic.

**MoD Policy:** The MoD 2022 document says the UK Government aims to **preserve the stability and security of the Arctic region** and sets out four goals it will pursue in support of this aim (Ministry of Defence and Rt Hon Wallace, 2022, pg 8):

- Protect our Critical National Infrastructure, our other national interests, and those of our Allies.
- Ensure our freedom to navigate and operate across the wider region
- Reinforce the rules-based international system, particularly UNCLOS [The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea].
- Contest malign and destabilising behaviours.

Scotland, due to its geographic location, remains vital to the security of the High North (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023; Depledge and Østhagen, 2021)<sup>13</sup>. The document published by the Scottish Government states that Scotland's northernmost islands are closer to the Arctic Circle than they are to London (External Affairs Directorate, 2019, pg 5).

However, there are concerns about whether the UK armed forces will have sufficient resources, including hardware, to discharge these stated aims (Childs, 2022).<sup>14</sup> One issue is whether there are enough

Royal Air Force assets based in Scotland to address the needs of the High North (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023). Other issues include the lack of icebreakers available to the UK and its allies. Moreover, the UK Armed Forces have limited expertise in cold weather operations (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023). The Government is apparently addressing these issues (Ministry of Defence and Rt Hon Wallace, 2022).

**Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office Policy:** The main priorities are as follows (FCDO, 2023):

- Partnering and collaborating
- Protecting the climate, people and environment:
- Preserving security and stability: Eden
- Promoting our shared prosperity:

**Integrated Review Refresh (IRR):** This mentions Four Pillars as ways it will pursue its ends (Cabinet Office, 2023, pg 16).

- Pillar 1: Shape the international environment.
- Pillar 2 Deter, defend, and compete across all domains
- Pillar 3 Address vulnerabilities through resilience.
- Pillar 4 Generate strategic advantage.

**Maritime Security:** The UK *National Strategy for Maritime Security* is jointly promulgated by several government departments, namely, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Department of Transport; Home Office; Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office; and Ministry of Defence (HM Government, 2022)<sup>15</sup>.

**Military Assets:** Scotland has several military assets that facilitate High North and Arctic Security. The Greenland-Iceland-UK Gap is an important geography where the RAF and Royal Navy are deployed (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023). There is concern about the need for Space Technology and Drones in the High North. It is

recommended that Scotland's space sector be involved in achieving these goals (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023).

## **Military Alliances**

The UK is actively involved in international cooperation with allies in the Arctic region. The IRR mentions that this is in pursuance of supporting European security through various fora (Cabinet Office, 2023).

Several international organisations provide a platform for such an interface. The Arctic Council and NATO are the main two institutions, but there are a few other important bodies.

**Arctic Council:** The Arctic Council is the region's leading international organisation. The Arctic Council is specially not military (Arctic Council, n.d.2)<sup>16</sup>. There are eight states in the Arctic Council, namely Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the USA (Arctic Council, n.d.1). China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Poland, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom are observer states at the Arctic Council (Arctic Council, n.d.3)<sup>17</sup>. Norway holds the current Chair of the Arctic Council (Arctic Council, n.d.4)<sup>18</sup>. One concern is the breakdown of cooperation in the Arctic due to the war in Ukraine (Buchanan, 2022)<sup>19</sup>. The seven members besides Russia have issued a statement suspending participation in the Arctic Council (Office of the Spokesperson, 2022)<sup>20</sup>. The UK mentions this in its policy documents (FCDO, 2023).

**NATO:** There is concern about the stability of the High North, which became peaceful after the end of the Cold War (Allied Command Transformation, 2023)<sup>21</sup>. The NATO Strategic Concept mentions Russia as a threat. It mentions that, in the High North, Russia's capability to disrupt Allied reinforcements and freedom of navigation across the North Atlantic is a strategic challenge. The military build-up, including in the Baltic, Black and Mediterranean Sea regions, along with its integration with Belarus, is also seen as a security challenge<sup>22</sup>.

The UK has positioned itself as the anchor of NATO's new defence and deterrence posture. It is reviewing existing positions and providing strong support for NATO's new adaptation initiatives, particularly along the eastern flank and at sea in the Baltic, the North Atlantic and the High North, where the UK will likely play a leading role (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2023)<sup>23</sup>.

Five of the Atlantic Council members, namely Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and the USA, were NATO members at the time of the commencement of hostilities in Ukraine. After the commencement of the war, there was discussion about whether Sweden and Finland would join NATO. Matters were more complicated in Finland since Finland shares a direct land border with Russia. On 4 April 2023, Finland became the 31<sup>st</sup> member of NATO (NATO Website, 2023)<sup>24</sup>. Given Finland's and Russia's land borders, this is believed to improve NATO's access to defend members against Russia<sup>25</sup>. Sweden has been a member of NATO since 7 March 2024<sup>26</sup>.

**Joint Expeditionary Force:** The UK also leads the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), a defence initiative whose membership of ten countries includes five Arctic States: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. The other members are Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Netherlands. It is seen as *complementary to NATO* (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023). The FCDO mentions collaborating with the JEF (FCDO, 2023, pg 21). Britain's contribution to the JEF includes personnel and equipment from the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, British Army and Royal Air Force, with the maritime element headed up by the Royal Navy and Royal Marines (Knighton, 2024)<sup>27</sup>.

At a summit of Defence Chiefs convened in Sweden in Feb 2022, it was decided to Work Together on Shared Challenges' Amid Rising Tensions with Russia (Ministry of Defence, 2022)<sup>28</sup>. A similar meeting of ministers reasserted the importance of shared values with a common focus on security and stability in the High North, North Atlantic and

Baltic Sea region. They further stated that the JEF is designed from first principles to be complementary to NATO's Defence posture (Ministry of Defence and Rt Hon Wallace, 2022)<sup>29</sup>.

A long-term advantage of the JEF is its ability to operate in the Grey Zone below the onset of war (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023). Some scholars describe the JEF as akin to the Quad and AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023).

Thus, while Sweden and Finland's joining NATO is being seen as a watershed, they are already indirectly under the NATO umbrella. NATO membership formalises an arrangement that was long in place for both these countries.

**Northern Group:** Another group in the region is the Northern Group, which comprises Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and the UK. This is a forum for discussion and understanding rather than explicit military action (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023). However, the FCDO mentions it as a platform to discuss defence and security issues (FCDO, 2023, pg 21). In a recent meeting, they condemned the invasion of Ukraine by Russia and expressed concern about stability in the Euro-Atlantic area<sup>30</sup>.

**Barents Euro-Atlantic Council** (The Barents Euro-Arctic Council, n.d.)<sup>31</sup>: The members of the *Barents Euro-Arctic Council* are Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the European Commission. The chairmanship of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council rotates between Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden. Finland holds the chair for 2021-2023 (The Barents Euro-Arctic Council, n.d.). The FCDO mentions this as an essential forum (FCDO, 2023, pg 21). The Barents Euro-Atlantic Council claims that having fostered cooperation is no longer the situation with the return of a Cold War-like situation in the High North and the Barents Sea.



**Joint Exercises:** The UK undertakes joint exercises involving the RAF, Royal Navy and Royal Marines with several allies (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023). In Cold Weather training, the Army is also involved (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023).

## **Non Traditional Challenges**

The UK also faces non-traditional challenges in the maritime sphere that apply to the Arctic. Non-traditional challenges are threats other than those from other states. In some cases, these arise from armed groups and criminals. Other is from climate change, energy, and the environment (VADM Muralidharan, 2022)<sup>32</sup>.

**Climate Change:** The UK sees Climate change as a significant threat, including in the Arctic (HM Government, 2022, pg 26; House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023). The UK considers Climate change in its approach to the Arctic (FCDO, 2023, pg 22–23). The opening of Sea Lanes is seen as making Arctic resources more accessible. Trade Routes are mentioned as necessary. The opening of Arctic Sea routes is highlighted. China and its Polar Silk Route as part of the Belt and Road Initiative are mentioned (FCDO, 2023, pg 39–40). It is suggested that the UK Government address Climate Change issues and open new sea routes. The role of the Royal Navy is also mentioned in this regard (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023).

There is also a concern about marine conservation and biodiversity. An important aspect is deep-sea mining. This includes oil, gas and rare earth metals (FCDO, 2023, pg 29–30). Energy and Critical Minerals and the need for Governance frameworks are also highlighted (FCDO, 2023, pg 40–41).

**Technological Challenges:** Scientific Research and Innovation is also part of the UK agenda in the Arctic. This includes International Science Collaboration (FCDO, 2023, pg 30 – 33). The Maritime Strategy also

mentions a need for scientific research in the Arctic and High North (HM Government, 2022, pg 92).

**Search and Rescue:** There is concern about the need for Arctic search and rescue (FCDO, 2023, pg 37). There are recommendations to enhance this capacity (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023). There has been cooperation with Norway (House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023).

### **Russia Arctic Policy**

Russia has the largest share of the Arctic territory and population (Arctic Council, n.d.5). The UK acknowledges Russia's importance (Ministry of Defence and Rt Hon Wallace, 2022). The Ukraine War is a significant hurdle in relations with Russia (FCDO, 2023, pg 19; House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, 2023). The tension with Russia has been brewing for a long time. An article published in 2016 highlights that cooperation between the Coast Guards of Norway and the USA with Russia at their respective borders continued, notwithstanding the 2014 attack on Crimea (Østhagen, 2016)<sup>33</sup>.

Given Russia's preeminent position, studying the Russian position and definitions of the Arctic is necessary. The term *Northern Sea Route* [Emphasis added] is defined by Russian statute as a water area adjoining the northern coast of the Russian Federation, including internal sea waters, territorial sea, contiguous zone and exclusive economic zone of the Russian Federation, and limited in the East by the line delimitating the sea areas with the United States of America and by the parallel of the Dezhnev Cape in the Bering Strait; in the West, by the meridian of the Cape Zhelanie to the Novaya Zemlya archipelago, by the east coastal line of the Novaya Zemlya archipelago and the western limits of the Matochkin Shar, Kara Gates, Yugorski Shar Straits<sup>34</sup>. As can be seen in **Map 2**, this extends from the Siberian Pacific to the Barents Sea.

**Maritime Doctrine:** Russia’s priorities in the Arctic were established on four cornerstones: First, free access of the Russian fleet to the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans; Secondly, the abundance of natural resources in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and the Continental Shelf (CS) of the Russian Federation; Thirdly, the growing importance of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) for sustainable development and security of the Russian Federation; and fourthly, the decisive role of the Northern Fleet in defence of the country from the sea and ocean (Captain Parmar, Commander Sawan and Captain Agnihotri, 2022; Russian Maritime Studies Institute and Davis, 2015)<sup>36, 37</sup>.

**Map 2: Northern Sea Route: Source: Barents Info Website<sup>35</sup>**



**Northern Fleet:** The Northern Fleet of the Russian Navy is the primary force for the central and western part of the Russian Arctic, including the Barents Sea. It has nuclear-capable submarines with second-strike capability (Russian Federation Defence Ministry, n.d.; Kjellén, 2022)<sup>38, 39</sup>. The eastern part of the Russian Arctic is under the Pacific Fleet.

**Emerging Alliances:** China calls itself a *Near Arctic* (emphasis added) state (Dutta and Banerjee, 2022, pg 24). It has long made claims to have access to the Arctic and Northern Sea Route<sup>40</sup>. This has been a contentious issue with the USA (Bisen, 2022)<sup>41</sup>. Scholars are concerned about support for Russia among certain Asian countries, including ASEAN states, India, and the UAE.

Investment in the UAE and China's interest in the region are examples. It is suggested that isolating Russia from the other members of the Arctic Council may be counterproductive (Buchanan, 2022).

## India Arctic Policy

India's Arctic Policy rests on six pillars: Science and Research, Climate and Environmental Protection, Economic and Human Development, Transportation and Connectivity, Governance and International Cooperation, and National Capacity Building (Government of India, 2022)<sup>42</sup>. Importance has been given to the training of the workforce in maritime technology and governance (Government of India, 2022). The relevance of the Arctic for India is in Scientific Research, Climate Change and Environment, Economic and Human Resources, and Geopolitical and Strategic (Bisen, 2022a).

In political terms, Indian Foreign Policy has the concept of Strategic Autonomy (Khilani, 2012)<sup>43</sup>. Experts see this position as a natural continuation of the erstwhile Non-Alignment (Ambassador Ranganathan, 2020)<sup>44</sup>.

**Climate Change:** Climate change is key for India. The Himalayas are considered the *Third Pole* (emphasis added) given their similar climate to the Arctic and Antarctic (Dr Sharma and Dr Sinha, 2022). India has long been involved in research in all three areas (Government of India, 2022, para 2.1). India established the first Arctic station, *Himadri*, in 2008 (National Centre For Polar And Ocean Research, n.d.)<sup>45</sup>. India is keen to further integrate with the Svalbard Integrated Arctic Earth Observing System (Government of India, 2022, para 2.1). This is an international observing system for long-term measurements in and around the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard, addressing Earth System Science questions (SIOS, 2021)<sup>46</sup>. Due to its location in the littoral region of the Gulf Stream, Norway's climate is different from that of other parts of the Arctic.<sup>47</sup> In particular, Svalbard has a milder climate than the rest of the region.<sup>48</sup>

**Space technology:** Space technology is mentioned in India's Arctic Policy (Government of India, 2022, para 2.2). Given the paucity of space-based infrastructure needed for connectivity, India has an opportunity to provide low-cost solutions. While there is cooperation with Russia and the USA, this needs to be extended to other Arctic States (Dr Sharma and Dr Sinha, 2022). As noted, this is also a need for the UK and Scotland.

**Maritime Doctrines:** Even before the promulgation of the Arctic policy, the roots of India's Arctic Policy are to be seen in India's Maritime Strategy (Directorate of Strategy, Concepts and Transformation, 2015)<sup>49</sup> and Doctrine (Maritime Doctrines and Concepts Centre, 2015)<sup>50</sup>. The prominent roles of the Indian Navy are Military, Diplomatic, Constabulary, and Benign (Maritime Doctrines and Concepts Centre, 2015). India's next iteration of these documents should ideally include a section on the Arctic and High North covering all countries in the region.

**India-Russia Cooperation:** India has long cooperated with Russia in the Far East and the Arctic. Hydrocarbons, Strategic Minerals, the Northern Sea Route, and the Russian Far East are the principal areas

of cooperation. India has scientific, environmental, commercial, and strategic interests in the Arctic, and the Russian Arctic can potentially address India's energy security objectives. There is a view that synergy exists between Russia's Maritime Doctrine and India's Polar Strategy (Bisen, 2022b)<sup>51</sup>.

In a recent meeting between the Indian Minister for Waterways and the Russian Federation Minister for the Development of the Far East and the Arctic, Mr A.O. Chekunkov discussed a wide range of items of maritime communication between India and Russia. These aim to widen maritime cooperation, including the possibility of using new transport corridors like the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the Eastern Maritime Corridor (EMC) between Vladivostok and Chennai. It was also decided that India and Russia agreed to train Indian seafarers in Polar and Arctic waters at the Russian Maritime Training Institute, named after GI Admiral Nevelsky, which is equipped with simulator training facilities, in Vladivostok, Russia<sup>52</sup>. This is consistent with India's Polar Strategy (Government of India, 2022).

**Geopolitical:** As can be seen, severe geopolitical tensions exist in the Arctic. There is also concern about India's relationship with Russia. It is vital that India stays neutral and enhances bilateral relations with all Arctic Council states (Dr Sharma and Dr Sinha, 2022). This paper posits that this should be extended to *Near Arctic* states that are influential in the region, including the UK.

## Conclusion

This paper is the first time an Indian think tank has published a study of the UK's Arctic. It examines the UK's Arctic Policy through the prism of Indian strategic thinking.

**Arctic:** The militarisation of the Arctic, especially by Russia and the USA, is here to stay. This is, in effect, a reversal of the demilitarisation seen after the Cold War. The Barents Euro-Arctic Council started out as

an organisation for benign cooperation. However, despite its supposed success, there has been a return to hostilities in the Arctic, especially in the Barents Sea. This is driving the building of ability by all sides.

**UK:** Due to their *Arctic-facing* geographical location, the United Kingdom and especially Scotland are influential factors in Arctic and High North Security and Politics. The existence of the JEF shows a long-term strategy to develop a sub-conventional tri-service force to defend the European Arctic States and the High North. However, as the UK intends to be the principal maritime security provider in the Arctic and High North, it faces resource challenges. Allies in the region would need to share costs.

**Russia:** Russia's geography makes it the preeminent country in the Arctic. Any country or the entire world's Arctic policy will essentially be Russo-centric. The UK and its various groups' allies must work around this geopolitical situation.

**India:** Geographically, Russia is the most proximate Arctic state to India. India's main interests in the Arctic are Russia's Natural Gas and other Minerals. India would not likely want to use the Northern Sea Route to travel to Europe. There is no geographic advantage over the Suez Canal. The extent to which China wants to use the NSR is due to geography.

The main interests besides energy and minerals will be scientific. While there is scope for cooperation with Russia, this should preclude other countries. Currently, India cooperates with Norway in climate change and scientific research. This is partly due to the relatively milder climate created by the Gulf Stream. The United Kingdom and Scotland, too, have such a climate. Once again, geography plays a role in deciding alliances and cooperation. All these allow India to cement ties further. The UK can collaborate with India in benign maritime activities and the economic sphere.

Given its position of Strategic Autonomy, in Geostrategic terms, it is unlikely that India would need to be militarily involved with the Arctic

or the High North. However, India should not be seen as taking sides in Arctic military tensions. India can play the role of a mediator between Russia and the other Arctic states.

On the issue of training from Naval personnel and Merchant Marine Crew, there are suggestions for receiving this training from Russia. India could also avail this from other Arctic states and the UK. India is in the *Third Pole*, training in Cold Weather.

However, India should be open to collaborating with Russia, the UK, or any other Arctic country in defence technology. Space technology is a specific area of cooperation.

The UK has various documents on maritime security. India's position on the Arctic should be stated in the next iteration of the maritime doctrine. Besides, the maritime security strategy could follow the UK's example and take a whole-of-government approach.

India's Arctic Policy and Maritime Doctrine and Strategy are on the right track. They need to be maintained at a steady tempo and enhanced with the recommendations above.

## Notes

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