



# The Wider North: Refocusing on NATO's northern flank

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Wider North requires a robust British strategy to counter dual threats: a revisionist Russia likely to challenge the regional order in the Baltic and Arctic in the event of a peace settlement in Ukraine, and the People's Republic of China's (PRC) growing polar footprint.
- The United States' (US) 2026 National Defence Strategy shifts the burden of containing Russia primarily to major European powers. It also seeks domination of the Western Hemisphere. Donald Trump, President of the US, has threatened to annex Greenland, while the conflict in Iran has added to Euro-Atlantic strains, with Washington articulating multiple criticisms of British defence priorities.
- His Majesty's (HM) Government should mobilise and lead an enlarged 'coalition of the willing' in the Wider North, stretching from Canada to a confederation of northern European states, to reinforce the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in a period of great power rivalry and uncertainty over American intentions.



Over the last 18 months, Greenland has emerged as a critical area for American power projection. Donald Trump, President of the United States (US), seeks to acquire the world's largest island for a multitude of reasons. These range from wanting access to rare earth minerals to enhancing deterrence against Russian aggression and preventing Chinese ships and aircraft from operating in American and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) space. The US seeks additional military installations on Greenland for its missile defences; the 'Golden Dome' is a symbol of an enhanced forward defence for its Atlantic seaboard. All of this is a reassertion of the Monroe Doctrine, focused on the primacy of hemispheric defence. The US will focus on who and what moves through the Western Hemisphere, which includes the waters due north of Alaska, northern Canada, and Greenland. Trump's interests in Greenland – and Iceland, which was referenced in his speech at Davos in January 2026 – align with the 2025 US National Security Strategy's (NSS) goal 'to restore American pre-eminence in the Western Hemisphere'.<sup>1</sup> Washington feels that the threat is so acute that allies such as Denmark can no longer be trusted with underwriting the defence of the US homeland.

Whatever deal might emerge between the US and Denmark over Greenland, there is concern that the transatlantic security relationship has been irrevocably changed, indeed 'ruptured', to echo the Davos speech of Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the transformations brought about by Trump's agenda, climate change is a vital factor for the future. The Arctic is melting fast, and with ice disappearing, some routes are becoming more accessible to a variety of actors, including the People's Republic of China (PRC), South Korea, and indeed North Korea.

It is therefore worth analysing the implications of these physical and geopolitical changes for the United Kingdom (UK). The British Isles are central to the 'Wider North', the maritime and littoral theatre that includes the Arctic, the North Atlantic, Northern Europe, and the Baltic Sea region.<sup>3</sup> As identified in His Majesty's (HM) Government's Strategic Defence Review (SDR) of June 2025, this space is crucial for British national security and economic prosperity.<sup>4</sup> The protection of NATO's northern flank has long depended upon a series of relationships and commitments, including the transatlantic relationship between the US, Canada, and European allies, as well as a Northern Triangle involving Norway, the UK, and the US. Notwithstanding the collaboration between Britain and America in January 2026 over the interception of the Russian 'shadow fleet' tanker *Bella 1*, the US NSS and National Defence Strategy (NDS) made it clear that

<sup>1</sup> 'National Security Strategy', The White House, 04/12/2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Carney, Speech: 'Davos 2026: Special address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada', World Economic Forum, 20/01/2026, <https://www.weforum.org/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>3</sup> See: Alec Smith (ed.), 'How should Britain adapt its strategy towards the Wider North?', *Britain's World*, 30/05/2025, <https://www.britainworld.org.uk/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>4</sup> 'The Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: Secure at home, strong abroad', Ministry of Defence, 02/06/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

the UK and allied European powers are expected to do far more to uphold regional security.<sup>5</sup>

This Primer addresses the present threat from Russia and the emerging threat from the PRC to the Wider North. The US is now focused on the Western Hemisphere, its ‘America First’ agenda, and the Middle East. Therefore, Britain must demonstrate its military and intelligence leadership as an ‘Atlantic gateway.’ This should ideally be achieved without further alienating the White House, nor exacerbating the fractures in Euro-Atlantic ties.

## Strategic context: Geography and geopolitics

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The strategic context of the Wider North is shaped by regional geopolitical dynamics as well as the specific physical geographies of the British Isles. Longstanding harmony over the Arctic was disrupted by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This triggered a political breakdown in the Arctic Council, the primary intergovernmental forum, which paused its activities and refused to continue cooperation with the Kremlin. As its military losses mounted in Ukraine, Russia deepened its relationship with the PRC and other BRICS countries, creating an alternative vision of the international order. The focus for BRICS (and BRICS+, which now includes Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates [UAE]) is on areas of common interest, shaped in turn by regular summits and bodies such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Russia’s offensive against Ukraine has complicated the politics of the circumpolar Arctic, divided between a Russian-Asian bloc and a Euro-American coalition. In reaction to increasing Russian aggression, Finland and Sweden have integrated into NATO. Having been offered security assurances by the UK during their application and then accession, Finnish and Swedish membership mean the alliance’s frontline with Russia is now geographically longer to defend. Indeed, seven of the eight Arctic states are now protected by NATO’s Article 5.

The physical, environmental, and political geographies of the Wider North now resemble those of the Cold War. What is different though is the American willingness to provide an unconditional and comprehensive security umbrella for NATO allies. The US expects the UK and its European allies to assume greater burden-sharing in the defence of the North Atlantic and European Arctic, and Britain is the obvious guardian of the ‘Atlantic gateway.’<sup>6</sup>

What has also changed since the Cold War is the position of the PRC, which is now an ambitious global actor. Chinese-Russian cooperation has already involved

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<sup>5</sup> ‘2026 National Defence Strategy’, US Department of War, 23/01/2026, <https://media.defense.gov/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>6</sup> ‘National Security Strategy’, The White House, 04/12/2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/> (checked: 23/04/2026).



joint aerial and maritime patrols off the coastline of Alaska, and Trump has expressed concerns about activities around Greenland.<sup>7</sup> There is little evidence for this, but it nevertheless remains a distinct future possibility. The PRC, a self-proclaimed 'near-Arctic state,' is not only involved in joint exercises with Russian forces, but also conducts underwater scientific expeditions in the Central Arctic Ocean, deploys fishing vessels, and, through economic power, buys up considerable assets in and around the Wider North. All of this signals Chinese ambition to influence and direct future activities, whether military or economic.

## Atlantic gateway: The economic importance of the Wider North to Britain

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As the threat from Russia has grown, the Wider North has become more important to the UK. Accordingly, in the words of Al Carns, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Armed Forces, this region is now 'the UK's strategic centre of gravity'.<sup>8</sup> This new centre of gravity is deeply entwined and connected to the maritime approaches to the British Isles, upon which the UK depends for its security and prosperity.

As a North Atlantic nation, the maritime sector is central to Britain. It supports an estimated one million jobs, and ports are essential to the maintenance of supply chains. Regional seas and maritime passages, such as the North Sea, English Channel, and Irish Sea, host critical infrastructure, including undersea pipelines, data cables, and offshore energy projects. The Norwegian sector of the North Sea is the single largest source of natural gas in Europe, relied upon not only by the UK, but also by the European Union (EU). All are vulnerable to Russian and Chinese sabotage by spy ships, underwater drones, and 'shadow fleet' vessels.

Scotland's strategic geography makes it central to the gateway to the Arctic and the High North. It has deep historical and cultural ties to Arctic nations, and is home to significant military assets. It is a British defence hub, with Royal Air Force (RAF) air stations such as Lossiemouth hosting nine P-8A Poseidon patrol and reconnaissance aircraft tasked with deterring, intercepting, and tracking enemy forces, such as the Russian Navy's Aleksandr Shabalin landing ship when it traversed the English Channel.<sup>9</sup> Scotland is also home to the UK's nuclear deterrent, although there is a long-term question over the fate of the base at Faslane should Scotland ever become independent.

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<sup>7</sup> Anna Commander, 'NATO Commander Sounds Alarm on China and Russia's Patrols Near Alaska', *Newsweek*, 13/01/2026, <https://www.newsweek.com/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>8</sup> Charlie Parker, 'Greatest threat to Britain comes from High North, minister warns', *The Times*, 05/02/2026, <https://www.thetimes.com/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>9</sup> Michael Brash, 'Royal Navy and RAF shadow Russian Task Group returning from Syria', *Pathfinder*, 19/03/2025, <https://pathfinderinternational.co.uk/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

Northern Ireland is also part of the gateway. It serves as a vital port for sea and air routes to North America and Europe. Of the components of the UK, Northern Ireland has the only land border with the EU, and this region secures a naval and air presence critical to countering potential maritime threats in the Atlantic and the Arctic. The Republic of Ireland, a neutral nation, is also crucial, as 75% of undersea data cables in the Northern Hemisphere pass through or near Irish waters, representing 95% of international data traffic.<sup>10</sup> Ireland has only eight patrol ships and no submarines, but is responsible for patrolling 16% of EU territorial waters.<sup>11</sup> Britain assists by providing air support, including the deployment of helicopters with sonar to track Russian submarines. The 2015 defence agreement between the two nations permits cooperation, and arrangements have been recently upgraded, while in December 2025, Thomas Byrne, Irish Minister for European Affairs and Defence, announced €300 million (£258.7 million) in coastal funding for new strategic aircraft and radar developments.<sup>12</sup>

Russian naval activity in and around British and Irish waters is increasing. The UK has observed a 30% increase in Russian vessels (both ships and submarines) operating near its waters.<sup>13</sup> Yantar, the Russian spy vessel, was escorted out of Irish-controlled waters in November 2024, but was again spotted in November 2025 operating near critical undersea cables and pipelines. Heading towards Irish waters, laser incidents were reported to be emanating from the vessel against RAF pilots tracking its progress.

Another key challenge is the use of Russian ‘shadow fleet’ oil tankers, which appear frequently in Ireland’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) for sanctions evasion.<sup>14</sup> These vessels are poorly maintained, uninsured, and capable of causing a serious pollution incident. One unedifying prospect could be environmental sabotage involving a sanctioned vessel; a latter-day Torrey Canyon disaster.

## Geopolitical competition in the Wider North

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The threat from Russia and the PRC to the UK and its European allies continues to grow. Additionally, Nordic and Baltic states face the prospect of Washington

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<sup>10</sup> Jason Power, ‘Why Irish undersea cables are seen as potential military targets’, Raidió Teilifís Éireann, 20/11/2024, <https://www.rte.ie/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>11</sup> Frank Ledwidge, ‘Irish Airspace and Waters Remain Europe’s “Open Flank”’, Royal United Services Institute, 02/06/2023, <https://www.rusi.org/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Byrne, Speech: ‘Speech by Minister Byrne at IIEA Symposium on National Security and Resilience, 11 December 2025’, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Republic of Ireland, 11/12/2025, <https://www.gov.ie/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>13</sup> ‘Royal Navy tracks Russian submarine through UK waters’, Royal Navy, 11/12/2025, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>14</sup> Joe Galvin, ‘Defence Forces monitor west coast as shadow fleet ships enter EEZ’, Raidió Teilifís Éireann, 16/12/2025, <https://www.rte.ie/> (checked: 23/04/2026).



withdrawing from their region in any post-Ukraine settlement era. If such a settlement left the Kremlin in a strengthened position, Russia would not take long to recover and redeploy its forces on the land border with Finland, and escalate its disruptive activities in the Arctic, the Baltic Sea, and around the British Isles.

## Russia: The predominant Arctic threat

Under the presidency of Vladimir Putin, Russia's posture in the Arctic and the Wider North has shifted. While always important to the Kremlin, the Arctic is a particular priority for Putin. Successive strategies for the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF) have reiterated its strategic resource importance, including expanding the volume of cargo carried across the Northern Sea Route (NSR). The Northern Fleet, based in the Kola Peninsula, has undergone enhancement, with the nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) Borei-A class fleet joining the Yasen class nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs). These are designed to patrol the Barents Sea and then pass through the Bear Gap (the sea between Svalbard and Northern Europe) onto the wider North Atlantic. Both boats have the potential to carry Kalibr and Zircon cruise missiles, which increase their standoff capabilities across the European Arctic. Russia has invested in missile test sites, airstrip extensions, and base facilities to enable force projection across the Wider North. Underwater and air-based drones are also stationed in the Arctic as part of the Russian northern glacis.

While Russia has upgraded its military capabilities, its strategic position has been challenged by Sweden and Finland joining NATO. This expansion has extended the NATO-Russian border between northern Norway and the Baltic Sea. The Murmansk region, home to Russian nuclear assets, is now surrounded by Norway to the northwest, Finland to the west, the Barents Sea to the northeast, and the White Sea to the southeast.

Defence cooperation agreements have been established between the Nordic countries and the US. In principle, these agreements enable Washington to deploy missiles rapidly in Norway and Finland which could target the Northern Fleet and other strategic assets within minutes. The US now has access to 47 air and port facilities in Northern Europe.

In June 2025, Ukraine launched an audacious attack using inexpensive drones against Russian bombers at air stations in northern and western Russia. This attack revealed weaknesses in Russia's strategic capabilities, prompting the country to relocate its bombers to the Russian Far East.<sup>15</sup> A future drone attack could, in principle, saturate Russia's Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2/AD) complex, even if Counter-Uncrewed Aerial Systems (C-UAS) capabilities are developed.

An enhanced NATO strike ability might provoke further redeployment of the Russian strategic centre of gravity to the east of the country. As such, the Kremlin

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<sup>15</sup> 'After Operation Spiderweb, Russia relocated its strategic aviation to Far East', *Ukrinform*, 12/06/2025, <https://www.ukrinform.net/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

has made further investments in drone technologies, seeking to strengthen the layered defences around the Kola Peninsula and beyond, including the installation of drone nets in Novaya Zemlya, where nuclear testing facilities are maintained.<sup>16</sup>

## The PRC: A newer challenge

The PRC is a growing polar power. It operates icebreakers undertaking multiple logistical and scientific expeditionary voyages to both poles. A Chinese research station on Svalbard is supported and supplemented by complex missions, including deep-dive operations in the Central Arctic Ocean. Throughout 2024 and 2025, Beijing's policy explicitly articulated a vision to transform the People's Liberation Army (PLA) – the Chinese armed forces – into a 'White Dragon'. The PRC has expanded its military influence in the Arctic through drilling, resource extraction, research, fishing operations, and the staging of provocative events.

Chinese cooperation with Russia has also grown across the Arctic. While modest to begin with, the limited observer status of military exercises has evolved to integrated joint operations and direct participation, including in Vostok in 2018.<sup>17</sup> Joint naval exercises have moved northwards through the Arctic, while escort operations along the NSR and submarine-related activities will enable the PRC to operate under the icecap, challenging NATO's presence. The emphasis upon submarine activities is important from a People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) perspective, threatening the traditional NATO dominance of the underwater Arctic. This is complemented by underwater surveillance systems and anti-submarine capabilities. Another concern is the PRC's growing nuclear capabilities and their potential deployment in the Arctic environment.

From the UK's standpoint, the challenges the PRC poses are not just at sea, but also on land. These include challenges to Scottish national security in terms of critical infrastructure, such as wind farms and the potential for strategic economic dependencies. Most recently, a focal point of this debate has been the now-blocked £15 billion facility east of Inverness that was to be built by Ming Yang Smart Energy.<sup>18</sup> While a boost for local employment, critics argued that such projects would accelerate a reliance on Chinese technology, potentially creating long-term strategic vulnerabilities.<sup>19</sup>

The exploratory voyage of the Chinese-registered Istanbul Bridge in September–October 2025 was designed to demonstrate the commercial viability of a

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<sup>16</sup> 'Bolstering Russia's Northern Fleet: Deployment of Robotic Systems and Drones for Arctic Security', *Debug Lies News*, 17/01/2026, <https://debuglies.com/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>17</sup> Helena Legarda, 'The Arctic, outer space and influence-building: China and Russia join forces to expand in new strategic frontiers', Mercator Institute for China Studies, 22/10/2025, <https://merics.org/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>18</sup> David Leask, 'John Swinney offered help for Chinese energy firm's North Sea plans', *The Times*, 24/11/2025, <https://www.thetimes.com/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>19</sup> Adnan Memija, 'Mingyang [sic] Plans to Build "Britain's First Fully Integrated Offshore Wind Manufacturing Facility"', *offshoreWIND.biz*, 13/10/2025, <https://www.offshorewind.biz/> (checked: 23/04/2026).



faster lower-carbon shipping lane to British and European ports, exhibiting the pace of climate change in opening trade routes, but it has also highlighted the PRC's influence and reach.<sup>20</sup> Chinese ambitions (whether in cooperation with Russia or not) mean that the UK and its allies will need to invest in maritime domain awareness, port and critical infrastructure security, and the promotion of safe shipping.

The Royal Navy is tracking and tracing more suspicious and sanctioned vessels (often engaging in Global Positioning System [GPS] spoofing and ship-to-ship transfers) coming in and out of the wider waters around the British Isles. The Chinese-Russian strategic economic and military relationship demands careful monitoring because when the NSR opens and is used by the PRC and others, it may embolden Russia to promote that route as a workable alternative to other maritime chokepoints. The standoff in the Strait of Hormuz beginning in February 2026 provides one example of how Russia and the PRC might seek to benefit from the opening of alternative routes.

## Changing operational dynamics

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The Soviet Union, as an adversary, shared a land border with NATO ally Norway. Soviet military doctrine assumed that its Northern Fleet could navigate between the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap and, if required, launch missile attacks on both Europe and North America. In his speech to the International Sea Power Conference in December 2025, Gen. Sir Gwyn Jenkins, First Sea Lord, referenced a significant increase in 'incursions' by Russia's submarine fleet and noted that detection of those vessels is harder now compared to during the Cold War.<sup>21</sup> The primary concern for now is deterring the threat posed to critical underwater infrastructure sabotage, including against pipelines and communication cables.

Russia's military posture is rooted in its bastion defence concept on the Kola Peninsula, from which its military forces project power extending into the GIUK gap and the North Atlantic.<sup>22</sup> This concept originates from the Soviet era, and refers to the need for heavily fortified designated maritime zones in the Barents Sea and the Sea of Okhotsk, designed to protect SSBNs.<sup>23</sup> At stake was the resilience of Russia's nuclear retaliatory capability, with the bastion defences aimed at neutralising NATO's Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) forces.

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<sup>20</sup> 'Container ship Istanbul Bridge on International transit voyage via the NSR', Centre for High North Logistics, 09/10/2025, <https://chnl.no/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>21</sup> Gwyn Jenkins, Speech: 'First Sea Lord's speech to the International Sea Power Conference', Ministry of Defence, 08/12/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>22</sup> William Freer, 'Exit "Fourth battle of the Atlantic"; enter "Battle of the Bastions": Part 1', *Britain's World*, 16/12/2025, <https://www.britainsworld.org.uk/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>23</sup> Jonas Kjellén, 'The Russian Northern Fleet Bastion Revisited', *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, Special Issue (2025).

The new Russian bastion assumes integrated ASW, surface, and air defences, all designed to create a multi-layered A2/AD system around deployed SSBNs. This view of the posture dominates British assessments about the threat from Russia. However, calculations in the Kremlin underpinning its bastion are evolving, and are influenced by enemy drones and AI-related technologies. These will temper any easy assumptions that the bastion remains unassailable.<sup>24</sup>

Climate change also alters the calculations for Russian force ambitions as well as protection and posturing. A warming Arctic imposes costs on Russia, which has to deal with permafrost thawing, unpredictable sea ice conditions, and huge wildfires across its northern territories.<sup>25</sup> Russia is losing its historic defence of ice protection, which will affect its naval second-strike capabilities: ice melt allows NATO forces to track submarines more effectively using satellites, patrols, and sonar capabilities. Indeed, the area of the northern Barents Sea, crucial to the Kremlin, is projected to be the first part of the Arctic to be ice-free within 40 years.<sup>26</sup>

The UK and its European allies are learning lessons from Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and from Houthi rebels targeting vessels across the Red Sea. Both demonstrate the need to defend against a complex mix of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, drones, and other uncrewed systems. Strategic passageways such as the Strait of Hormuz are vulnerable to persistent disruption.

Early warning, tracking, and interception capabilities in the North Atlantic and Wider North will demand greater investment in Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. The Royal Navy's 'Atlantic Bastion' concept emphasises both crewed and uncrewed presence in and around the GIUK gap.<sup>27</sup> Britain wishes to protect its underwater battlespace to enable operations for its submarine-based Continuous At-Sea Deterrent (CASD) and to deter Russian submarines, which are harder to detect than their Soviet counterparts were. The UK and Norway will probably invest in new drone technology such as the MQ-9B Sea Guardian; a long-endurance (c. 4,000–5,000 nautical miles), remotely piloted aircraft, equipped with advanced sensors designed for ASW. Atlantic Bastion has been paired with Atlantic Shield and Atlantic Strike – a tripartite approach addressing underwater domain defence, air defence, and counter-strike capabilities in the North Atlantic and Wider North.<sup>28</sup>

Norway, as Britain's key northern ally, has also unveiled plans for a new ground-based strike capability, which would enable missiles to target deep into the Kola Peninsula. Oslo's Finnmark strategy is premised on the presence of a

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<sup>24</sup> Mathieu Boulègue, 'The Impact of the War Against Ukraine on Russia's Arctic Posture: Hard Power on Vulnerable Ice', Wilson Centre, 14/06/2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>25</sup> Wildfires in Siberia's Zabaikalsky Region Cause Nearly \$6M in Damage', *The Moscow Times*, 26/05/2025, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>26</sup> E. Eriksen et al., 'The living Barents Sea response to peak-warming and subsequent cooling', *Scientific Reports*, 15 (2025).

<sup>27</sup> 'The living Barents Sea response to peak-warming and subsequent cooling', Royal Navy, 08/12/2025, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>28</sup> Gwyn Jenkins, Speech: 'First Sea Lord's speech to the International Sea Power Conference', Ministry of Defence, 08/12/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 23/04/2026).



permanent brigade, and Ukrainian defence technology firms are advising on drone defence.<sup>29</sup> Norway has also ordered Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS) for its new long-range artillery from South Korea, alongside six submarines from Germany.<sup>30</sup>

Russia will continue to operate its multi-layered defence strategy, designed to protect its military installations and the Northern Fleet. However, an enhanced British and Norwegian interception capability via an interchangeable fleet of Type 26 frigates equipped with ASW helicopters would force the Kremlin to rethink its posture in and beyond the Kola Peninsula. One egregious move, which would likely play out similarly to its illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, would be for Russia to annex Svalbard and move assets to the archipelago. Norway and its allies, including the UK, will need to monitor any upsurge in Russian provocation and false-flag operations designed to justify military intervention in the face of a Norwegian violation of the 1920 Svalbard Treaty. Svalbard is covered by the collective security guarantee of Article 5, but Russia might conclude that Washington will not respond to any call by Oslo for assistance. Norway's neighbouring Bear Island is not covered by the 1920 Treaty, and as such Oslo might conclude that the small outpost needs urgent upgrading.

It is also important not to assume that there is only one fixed 'bastion' in the Kola Peninsula. Some of it could be dispersed within and beyond the Russian Federation, including road-mobile air defence, anti-drone capabilities, and Electronic Warfare (EW) systems.<sup>31</sup> Aircraft, submarines, and warships are clearly mobile, and the term 'Kalibrisation' refers to the upgrade and integration of the Kalibr cruise missile systems into ships and submarines of the Northern Fleet. All of this enhances the strike capabilities of the fleet.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion: Towards a new British geostrategy for the Wider North

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The UK recognises the strategic value of the northern theatre. This realisation is evident in its pivot towards Norway. A new era has arrived where Britain and its European allies must lead on Euro-Atlantic defence – moving beyond the goal of interoperability to the higher standard of interchangeability. Atlantic Bastion, cited

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<sup>29</sup> Atle Staalesen, 'Oslo ratchets up defence plan, strengthens control in border region', *The Barents Observer*, 27/03/2026, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>30</sup> 'Norway orders \$2 billion artillery system from South Korea's Hanwha Aerospace', *Reuters*, 29/01/2026, <https://www.reuters.com/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Nilsen, 'Group of Tu-22M3 bombers redeployed to Kola', *The Barents Observer*, 25/11/2025, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

<sup>32</sup> Joshua Menks and Michael B. Petersen, 'The "Kalibrisation" of the Russian Fleet', *US Naval Institute*, 05/2022, <https://www.usni.org/> (checked: 23/04/2026).

in the SDR and launched in September 2025, is an explicit recognition that the UK and its allies need to step into this operational and strategic domain, given the growing threat from Russia's Northern Fleet.<sup>33</sup>

The strategic environment in the Wider North may yet worsen. Russia and the US could secure bilateral rapprochement, where American companies return to the Russian energy and transport sector following a settlement over Ukraine. The PRC could, with other BRICS+ partners, continue to maximise access to the Wider North. The Arctic Council may not recover. The region could be permanently divided into two segments, and the Kremlin may yet enlist Saudi Arabia and the UAE for the furthering of its energy and transport ambitions.

Under these circumstances, Britain urgently needs a more strategic and better-resourced approach to security across the Wider North if it is to be taken seriously in Washington, or indeed Moscow. This means a new Arctic policy framework is required, which fully operationalises the SDR and 2025 National Security Strategy's designation of Russia as the primary disruptive actor.

Other than Norway, the UK should draw together its northern allies into a vanguard. The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) should become the Northern Deterrent Force, with the inclusion of Canada as an 'enhanced partner'. This would be an arrangement modelling the new JEF partnership with Ukraine. Such a grouping would signal Britain's resolve in the Kremlin's eyes as well as the UK's allies and partners, including Trump's more transactional America. This grouping would act as a force multiplier for northern nations and as a positive vehicle for British influence in equal measure.

The UK and its allies should re-conceptualise the Wider North not as a remote frontier, but as a contiguous security theatre inextricably linking the Arctic to the North Sea, the Baltic, and strategic chokepoints such as the English Channel.

## Recommendations

To prevent geopolitical rivalry and instability from consuming the Wider North, HM Government should:

1. Establish the Wider North as a national enterprise, similarly to AUKUS.
2. Invite Canada to join the JEF as an 'enhanced partner,' similarly to Ukraine, and recognise that a new northern group will stretch from Canada to Finland and the Baltic states.
3. Further enhance Britain's relationship with Norway to deepen interoperability and interchangeability in training and equipment, including Type 26 class frigates, ASW helicopters, and P-8A Poseidon aircraft. While

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<sup>33</sup> 'The Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: Secure at home, strong abroad', Ministry of Defence, 02/06/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 23/04/2026).



the Royal Marines' training facility Camp Viking in northern Norway is undergoing expansion, Norway's expertise in underwater surveillance and undersea sensing needs further utilisation. The shift from a platform to a network-centric approach, with assets such as the Type 26 partnering with autonomous underwater and surface vehicles, should be accelerated.<sup>34</sup> The Type 45 class destroyers possess a nascent capability to intercept short-range ballistic missiles; all the destroyers are undergoing upgrades to improve their ballistic missile defences through the Sea Viper Evolution Programme. The system will protect the UK's Carrier Strike Group and can track, target, and destroy a variety of threats from the air over 70 miles away. This is part of a cooperation with MBDA UK, which includes contracts to enhance capabilities on Type 45 warships.

4. Invest further in defence infrastructure, including A2/AD capabilities as part of the commitment to connect and integrate the strategic ambitions and operational reach of Atlantic Bastion, Shield, and Strike. The 'New Hybrid Navy' concept depends on a resilient and dense network of seabed sensors, long-range and autonomous drone capabilities, advanced EW countermeasures, and Artificial Intelligence (AI)-enabled capabilities to ensure that maritime domain awareness is shared among allies.
5. Seek to learn from Ukraine's experience of attacking Russian vessels at port and consider further how its naval forces would be able to counter any mass underwater and aerial drone assault. Ukraine has, for example, used three types of underwater drones to destructive effect, including the Magura V5. Major facilities such as Portsmouth naval base must be considered vulnerable to any Russian aerial and underwater drone strikes.
6. Establish a Wider North research and technology fund dedicated to enhancing collective domain awareness in the Arctic Ocean. Ocean monitoring satellites will be critical, as will underwater expeditionary research, given the PRC's focus on seabed resources in parts of the Central Arctic Ocean. East Asian telecommunications cable systems in and out of Korea, Taiwan, and Japan must also be considered vulnerable to Chinese, North Korean, or Russian aggression.

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<sup>34</sup> 'UK and Norway to operate together to counter Russian undersea threat through major new defence agreement', Ministry of Defence, 04/12/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 23/04/2026).



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