



## Introduction

During the Cold War, the Seas of Norway and the North had a significant strategic role for the prosperity and security of both the European continent and the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>1</sup> Both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the USSR (today Russia) became increasingly aware of the strategic importance of a region in particular; an imaginary line drawn between Greenland, Iceland, and the UK, which also marked the division between the Arctic and the Atlantic oceans. The area found within this region attracted particular attention since the times of World War II, an attention directly derived from the high strategic value for both sides.

Known as the GIUK Gap (for the initials of all three nations that create it), this imaginary line through which anyone aiming to cross from one ocean to another will inevitably have to cross, became the defense barrier between an Arctic region predominantly controlled by the USSR (and Russia today) and the Atlantic (core of the Alliance's security). Being a scenario of strategic tensions between the two opposing sides during the Cold War, its importance has now resurfaced as has the international community's interest for the Arctic. Just as Tim Marshall underlined in its fantastic work *Prisoner of Geography*, «The hunger for energy suggests the race is inevitable in what some Arctic specialists have called the New Great Game. There are going to be a lot more ships in the High North, a lot more oil rigs and gas platforms—in fact, a lot more of everything».<sup>2</sup> The Gap is, precisely, one of the only entrances to this brave new world.

This article reviews, in the first place, the most prominent features of the region during the early days of the Cold War, also describing the interests which motivated such activity. In second place, it analyzes some of the regions behind the current strategic importance of the regions, as well as the role of the main actors involved nowadays. At last, it defines several key issues concerning the future of this region and the importance for NATO to invest adequate resources and capabilities to ensure it remains under its control.

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<sup>1</sup> OLSEN, John Andreas. «Introduction: The Quest for Maritime Supremacy. in: Whitehall Papers, Vol. 87/1/2016, p. 3. Available at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/02681307.2016.1291017?needAccess=true&role=button>

<sup>2</sup> MARSHALL, Tim. *Prisoners of Geography: Ten maps that tell you everything you need to know about global politics*, Updated Edition, (Londres 2016), p. 281.

### Background: 20th Century and the Cold War

When in April 1940 Germany occupied Norway, the Reich's Kriegsmarine displaced many of its U-Boats and warships to Norwegian ports; many of which had to be readapted in order to host all these vessels. The British responded to this movement by blocking maritime access to the North Sea and the GIUK Gap. Four days after the German mobilization to the North, they occupied the Faroe Islands, and Iceland a month after that (although they would end up handing the latter to the United States a year later).



Figure 1: Illustration of the GIUK Gap (with the arrows), with the bases of the Russian Navy's Baltic and North Fleets. Given the map is from 1983, Russia appears as the USSR. Source: CIA

Once the Allies were able to completely erase the German naval threat and won the war, a new enemy emerged in the form of the USSR; and with NATO coming to life in 1949, the GIUK Gap instantly became a scenario for strategic tensions. Adding to the fact that the Northern Fleet of the USSR (and Russia) has its base at Murmansk (thus, with direct access to the Arctic, but not the Atlantic), such tensions turned this region into one of the most important chokepoints for the Alliance. In case the Soviets wanted to cross into the North Atlantic, their ships and submarines would have to come through the Gap; just as

NATO forces in case they would attempt to reach the Kola Peninsula<sup>3</sup> in order to attack Murmansk or its surroundings. Soviet authorities became perfectly aware of the fact that «a war could be won at the Fulda Gap, but it could also be lost in the GIUK Gap»<sup>4</sup>

Traditionally the Northern Fleet of the Russian Navy has been the biggest and one of the most important ones for Moscow, especially during the Cold War. It has always had the highest number of ballistic and attack submarines of all Russian fleets; submarines which, in order to access the Atlantic Ocean from their base at Murmansk, had to cross through any of the gaps between Greenland-Iceland or Iceland-Scotland. This threat posed by submarines, such as the Typhoon-class, equipped with intercontinental ballistic missiles, was among the main reasons pushing the Allies to invest money, time, and huge efforts in turning the GIUK Gap into a solid defense barrier.

As explained by Dean Allard, during the 1960s,

The first defensive line, in the waters off northern Norway, consisted of SSNs, NATO's carrier striking forces, ASW hunter-killer groups, and minelaying units. The alliance's priority target was the Soviet submarine. To the south, the GIUK Gap marked the second line of defense. Here were deployed land-based patrol aircraft operating from Iceland and other locations, reinforced by sea-based aviation.<sup>5</sup>

In this environment, Iceland has been a fundamental element throughout the years, having a central role for more than half a century in the geopolitics of the North Atlantic. Located at Europe's westernmost point, and a mere 300 kilometers from Greenland, the island was for decades an indispensable piece of the US' defense strategy for the Atlantic; bearing a huge importance resulting from the interest shown by maritime powers to use it as their base of operations. Its geographical location, the rise of air transport and submarine technology, together with the growth experienced by commercial routes linking the old and the new worlds, have also played a role in the making of this little island a highly strategic hotspot.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Kola peninsula is at Russia's northwesternmost region, with most of its territory inside the Arctic Circle, and surrounded by the Barents Sea to the North and the White Sea to the East.

<sup>4</sup> OLSEN, John Andreas. «Introduction: The Quest for Maritime Supremacy. in: Whitehall Papers, Vol. 87/1/2016, p. 4. Available at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/02681307.2016.1291017?needAccess=true&role=button>

<sup>5</sup> ALLARD, Dean C. «Strategic views of the US Navy and NATO on the Northern Flank, 1917-1991. *Northern Mariner*, Vol. 10, Nº 1. January 2001, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> KOCHIS, Daniel y SLATTERY, Brian. «Iceland: Outsized importance for Transatlantic Security». *The Heritage Foundation*, 21 June 2016. Available at: <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/iceland->





**Figure 2: Russian bastion defence around the Barents Sea and the Gap. Bastion indicates the patrol area of Russian strategic submarines.** Source: Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)

This was very well explained by US Navy Captain Carl Schuster, who argued how,

Located just outside bomber range of the North American land mass, Iceland was ideally positioned to decisively influence the battle of the Atlantic. Whoever possessed the island could base air and naval forces to dominate the sea and skies of the western and central Atlantic, through which virtually all of Britain's sea commerce had to transit. In effect, Iceland was a potential knife at Britain's seaborne jugular vein.<sup>7</sup>

Such importance was later used by the US and NATO during Cold War, with Iceland and Scotland as support bases for their deployments against Soviet threats coming from the north. Thus, considering the effectivity of its use during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the events in Ukraine and rising Russian hostilities and militarization in the Arctic with its Northern Fleet assets, have once again brought back the strategic importance of the region, underlining the necessity of keeping both a capable military presence and strengthening cooperation among countries surrounding the GIUK Gap region for all NATO allies.<sup>8</sup>

[outsized-importance-transatlantic-security.](#)

<sup>7</sup> ZABECKI, David T. *World War Two in Europe* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), p. 1538.

<sup>8</sup> See MACKINLAY, Alejandro. *Islandia, flujo y reflujo estratégico. Documento de Opinión IEEE 27/2019,*

## Current Landscape

Although it would not be precise to affirm that today's situation in the region mirrors that of forty or fifty years ago, there are nevertheless certain parallelisms with the current landscape. Such landscape around the Gap can be observed and studied from a variety of different perspectives, depending what the object of the study is or through which lens it is looked at. Thus, for the purpose of this analysis, three main issues are dealt with: (1) Russian militarization in the Arctic, together with the deterioration of their relations with the rest of regional actors and its eco in the Gap; (2) some of the capabilities and key bases NATO holds around the Gap; and (3) Scotland's geostrategic importance for both the Royal Navy and the Alliance's nuclear deterrent against a possible independence from the United Kingdom.

The importance of commercial routes that are opening and will keep opening in the region as a result of climate change and the consequences derived from it –which are not small– have not been considered for the purpose of this work.<sup>9</sup> Although they are briefly mentioned at various points, attempting to predict future scenarios based on the melting of the ice is a complicated thing to do.

## ***Russian Militarization and its echo in the Gap***

Russia has developed very advanced systems to be deployed throughout the surroundings of the Kola Peninsula, with cruise missiles for their aerial and coastal defense. The Northern Fleet's conventional and nuclear submarines conduct regular patrols around the area, patrols which, according to Andrew Foxall, are not confined exclusively to the Arctic, but do also include patrols into the Atlantic through the GIUK Gap.<sup>10</sup> As shown in the figure below, most Russian civil and military bases pertaining to

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1 April 2019. Available at:

[https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2019/DIEEEO27\\_2019ALEMAC-Islandia.pdf](https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2019/DIEEEO27_2019ALEMAC-Islandia.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> On this issue, see: FUSTER LEAL, Rubén. Convivencia ruso-china en el Ártico: explicación de la Ruta de la Seda Polar. Documento de Opinión *IEEE* 128/2021. Available at:

[https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2021/DIEEEO128\\_2021\\_RUBFUS\\_Artico.pdf](https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2021/DIEEEO128_2021_RUBFUS_Artico.pdf); SANZ ALISEDO, Gonzalo. Océanos y choke points, oportunidades y riesgos para el comercio marítimo global. Documento de Análisis *IEEE* 68/2022. Available at:

[https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2022/DIEEEA68\\_2022\\_GONSAN\\_Oceanos.pdf](https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2022/DIEEEA68_2022_GONSAN_Oceanos.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> FOXAL, Andrew. «Russia's Policies towards a Changing Arctic: Implications for UK Security», *Russia Studies Center*, Research Paper No. 12, June 2017, p. 10; CONTE DE LOS RÍOS. Augusto. «La Nueva Doctrina Marítima de la Federación rusa», *Revista Ejércitos*, 1 September 2022. Available at: <https://www.revistaejercitos.com/2022/09/01/la-nueva-doctrina-maritima-de-la-federacion-rusa/>.

the North Fleet are located closer to the Barents Sea, at the westernmost part of the country; thus, closer to the GIUK Gap. This is because this precise region is among the only ones which remain free of ice all year round.

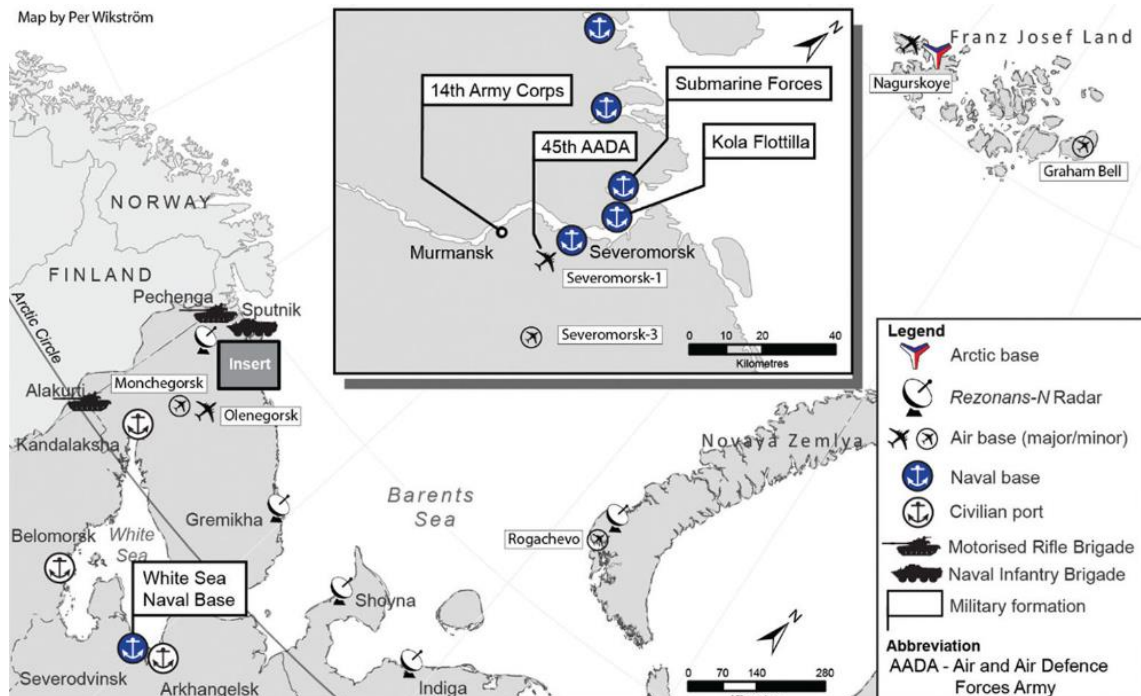


Figure 3: Location of the main military and civil infrastructures in the Barents Sea. Source: Arctic Review on Law and Politics

As pointed out by Kjellén, the most solid evidences certifying the growing Russian militarization in the region, beyond the Kola peninsula, are precisely the construction of infrastructure and bases around the Barents Sea.<sup>11</sup> Moscow «has provided its new Arctic command established in 2014 with an ambitious agenda, which includes six new bases, four new brigades, 14 airfields, 16 deep-water ports and 50 icebreakers».<sup>12</sup> More precisely, in 2015 an air-defense missile regiment was established, with the northernmost unit composed by conscripts, which was further strengthened in 2019 with the S-400 SAM system.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, a big base was established at the Fridtjof Nansen archipelago (otherwise known as Franz Joseph Land), with capacity for 150 soldiers, and equipped

<sup>11</sup> KJELLÉN, Jonas. «The Russian Northern Fleet and the (Re)militarization of the Arctic», *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, Vol. 13, 2022, p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> ALONSO, Ana. El Ártico ruso: Análisis geopolítico de las oportunidades y amenazas del deshielo polar, *Grupo de Estudios en Seguridad Internacional*, Análisis 5/2018, February 2018. Available at: <https://www.seguridadinternacional.es/Articulo-ruso-y-amenazas-del-deshielo-polar/>

<sup>13</sup> VIKHROVA, Anna. «Tyazhelovesy' na zashchite arktiki», *Na Strazhe Zapolyarya*, 5 February 2021. Available at: <https://ric.mil.ru/upload/site173/X5AiFvVWqS.pdf>.

with both medium-range surface to air missiles *Pantsir-SA*, and the coastal defense system *Bastion-P*.<sup>14</sup> In sum, a growth in their military presence and capacity which adds up to the deterioration of their relations with the rest of regional actors as a direct consequence of the conflict in Ukraine, and which aims at strengthening their position in order to prevent the rest actors from gaining momentum at a region Moscow regards as its own property.

This militarization, in sum, reflects the two sides of the same coin that ice melting in the region represents: although it effectively opens the possibility to exploit the natural resources across the region which would undoubtedly secure Moscow's energetic future, it also leaves their previously-protected northern flank now exposed to a possible attack by another power (namely, the US).

### ***NATO Assets in the Gap***

Such evolution of the region has put forward the importance for the Alliance to revise and adjust its maritime strategy for its northern flank,<sup>15</sup> so as to include the GIUK Gap as well. The rise of Russian submarine activity has led NATO to reconsider the importance of having a solid military capacity in the region. This perception has translated into a reinforcement of their antisubmarine warfare capabilities, the re-establishment of the US Navy's Second Fleet (suspended in 2011 by the Obama Administration), or the creation of a new Joint Command for the supervision of the Alliance's maritime reinforcements, among others.<sup>16</sup>

The United States has been present in the region with several spots, the most important of them being the base of Keflavik, in Iceland. With its abandonment in 2006 after more than five decades of permanent presence, they returned in 2017 to reform it and reequip it in the face of renewed Russian activity. As expressed by US Navy Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Mike Gilday in his last visit to the base, «we need a combat credible

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<sup>14</sup> TASS. «Inostrannym zhurnalistam pokazali rossiiskuiu voennuiu bazu v Arktike», 17 mayo 2021. Disponible en: <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/11396071>.

<sup>15</sup> ALLPORT, Rowan. «NATO needs a new Maritime Strategy for its Northern Flank», *UK Defence Journal*, 12 febrero 2018. Disponible en: <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/nato-needs-new-maritime-strategy-northern-flank/>

<sup>16</sup> «The GIUK Gap's Strategic Significance», *IJSS Strategic Comments*, Vol. 25, Commentary 29, October 2019, p. 2.



naval force that can protect our interests [...] The Sailors here in Iceland are just that...»<sup>17</sup>  
 This way, Iceland has once again become a fundamental piece in the Gap's geostrategy.

Norway, on its side, with the proximity of borders with Russia and its Northern Fleet's bases, will also play a very relevant role in future dynamics around the region; just as it already did back during the Cold War. Norwegians have traditionally been NATO's firmest advocates for the pursuit of further presence of the Alliance across the Arctic and the GIUK Gap; a persistent posture derived, among other things, from being the most prone of all members to suffer the negative consequences of a nuclear accident with Russian ageing submarines, or Russian fishermen overfishing the cod stock inside their EEZ, or even from a conflict that may arise in the proximities of the Svalbard Archipelago.<sup>18</sup>

Oslo has been especially attentive to its patrols around the Barents Sea, a delicate region for their national interests. In October 2022, the *HMS Northumberland* and *HNoMS Thor Heyerdahl* frigates, with replenishment oiler *RFA Tiderace*, carried out a patrol in international waters adjacent to Norwegian and Russian territorial waters.<sup>19</sup> Norway's geographical location makes it imperative for them to hold proper surveillance capabilities which allow them to be conscious about everything that goes on around them. Solid proof of this is the declaration by its armed forces' members *early in 2022*: «Norway is responsible for vast sea areas in a strategically important part of the world, and we must therefore know and understand what is happening in these areas».<sup>20</sup>

Lastly, another example of the importance of having a proper degree of presence along the region became evident not so long ago, when US President Donald J. Trump offered to buy Greenland. Both Denmark and Greenland announced in May 2022 an agreement to make significant investments in their military capabilities around Greenland. More precisely, they agreed on the establishment of a military education program at Kangerlussuq (in the West, to the North of the Sea of Labrador), together with equipment

<sup>17</sup> US NAVY. «Chief of Naval Operations visits Iceland, discusses maritime security and partnership», *US Navy Press Office*, 15 June 2022. Available at: <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Press-Releases/display-pressreleases/Article/3064646/chief-of-naval-operations-visits-iceland>.

<sup>18</sup> ØSTHAGEN, Andreas. «For Norway, the risk of conflict in the Arctic has increased», *The Arctic Institute*, 20 October 2022. Disponible en: <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/norway-risk-conflict-arctic-increased/>.

<sup>19</sup> VÅGENES, Marius. «Allied patrolling in the Southern Barents Sea», *Norwegian Armed Forces*, 24 October 2022. Disponible en: <https://www.forsvaret.no/en/news/articles/allied-patrolling-barents>.

<sup>20</sup> BAHTIĆ, Fatima. «Norway's patrol aircraft track Russian warship's near NATO's Arctic exercise», *Naval Today*, 16 March 2022. Available at: <https://www.navaltoday.com/2022/03/16/norways-patrol-aircraft-tracks-russian-warships-near-natos-arctic-exercise/>

of advanced-vigilance technology, and, above all, more presence along the territory and its surroundings.<sup>21</sup> Such program adds to the radar already established in Denmark and the Faroe Islands to control the region, with a 300-400 kilometers range.<sup>22</sup> The role of such investments in surveillance capacity is quite significant from a geostrategic conscience standpoint, as an insufficient knowledge of what goes on in the region may favor an unnecessary escalation in tensions out of a misunderstanding.



**Figure 4: Location of the Thule base in Greenland, together with other bases in the region. The only one missing, however, is the one in Keflavik (Iceland).** Source: IEEE.

Also in Greenland, the base of Thule (in the image above), which was jointly operated by Denmark and the US during the Cold War, is another spot with great potential –integrated in NATO’s Airborne Warning and Control System (EWCS) for both the GIUK and the North Atlantic.<sup>23</sup> As will be later seen, this base constitutes a good opportunity to

<sup>21</sup> «Agreement between Denmark and Greenland about Arctic capacities», *High North News*, 11 May 2022. Available at: <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/agreement-between-denmark-and-greenland-about-arctic-capacities>.

<sup>22</sup> JONASSEN, Trine. «Denmark and Faroe Islands close surveillance gap with new radar», *High North News*, 13 June 2022. Available at: <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/denmark-and-faroe-islands-new-radar>.

<sup>23</sup> COLOM PIELLA, Guillem (Ed.) «Geopolítica de las Bases Militares», Spanish *Ministry of Defense & IEEE*, 2022, pp. 146-147.

strengthen the Alliance's EWCS for military purposes, but also to monitor a future Northwest Passage commercial route (see Figure 6 in page 14).

As said before, the GIUK Gap is destined to witness important advancements in naval warfare and strategy in the future. The strengthening of military assets in both sides signals how these new challenges Russia now presents won't come in the shape of high numbers of submarines trying to access the Atlantic, but «relatively small numbers of high-capability assets seeking a strategic advantage».<sup>24</sup> In other words, the technological development the Russian Navy is experiencing will change the threat's nature for NATO in the Gap.

### **British Concerns: Scotland and NATO's Nuclear Deterrent**

Aware of such renewed importance, the Royal Navy is also carrying out a serious modernization of its strongest assets; with their new Type 26 frigates as a clear example. The new units, eight in total, will provide a strengthening of the Alliance's anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities; although the project's main drawback is their lengthy fitting-out period. It will be around 11 years since the keel was laid down for the first unit (HMS Glasgow) until it achieves an operational status somewhere around 2028.<sup>25</sup> Yet, rather than weapon capabilities, the UK's main concern as of today remains Scotland's independence.

Scotland is integrated in the UK's national defense as a vital element. The Lossiemouth Base, in Moray, received in early 2022 the last unit of its new P-8A Poseidon aircraft<sup>26</sup> that conform the fleet of maritime patrol aircraft operating from the base, thus strengthening the assets held by NATO there.<sup>27</sup> The region's strategic importance has been rising over the past years at the same time Arctic military activity has done so. Thus, the value held by Scotland around the GIUK Gap should also be considered when studying regional geopolitics; a value that can be outlined with two key ideas: its role as

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<sup>24</sup> «The GIUK Gap's Strategic Significance», *IJSS Strategic Comments*, Vol. 25, Commentary 29, October 2019, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> «In Focus: Delivering the Type-26 Frigates», *Navy Lookout*, 12 December 2022. Available at: <https://www.navylookout.com/in-focus-delivering-the-type-26-frigates/>

<sup>26</sup> The P-8s are maritime patrol aircraft with anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities, more advanced than the P-3 which Spain removed from service in late 2022.

<sup>27</sup> ALLISON, George. «Final P-8 Poseidon Maritime Patrol Aircraft Arrives in Scotland», *UK Defence Journal*, 11 January 2022. Available at: <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/final-p-8-poseidon-maritime-patrol-aircraft-arrives-in-scotland/>

protector of the North Atlantic in case of hostile approaches from the Far North, and its endowment as an advanced base of operations to be used in case of naval conflict in the surrounding area.<sup>28</sup> Bearing these ideas in mind, it is worth considering also the negative consequences a hypothetical independence of Scotland would bring about for the Royal Navy (and NATO).

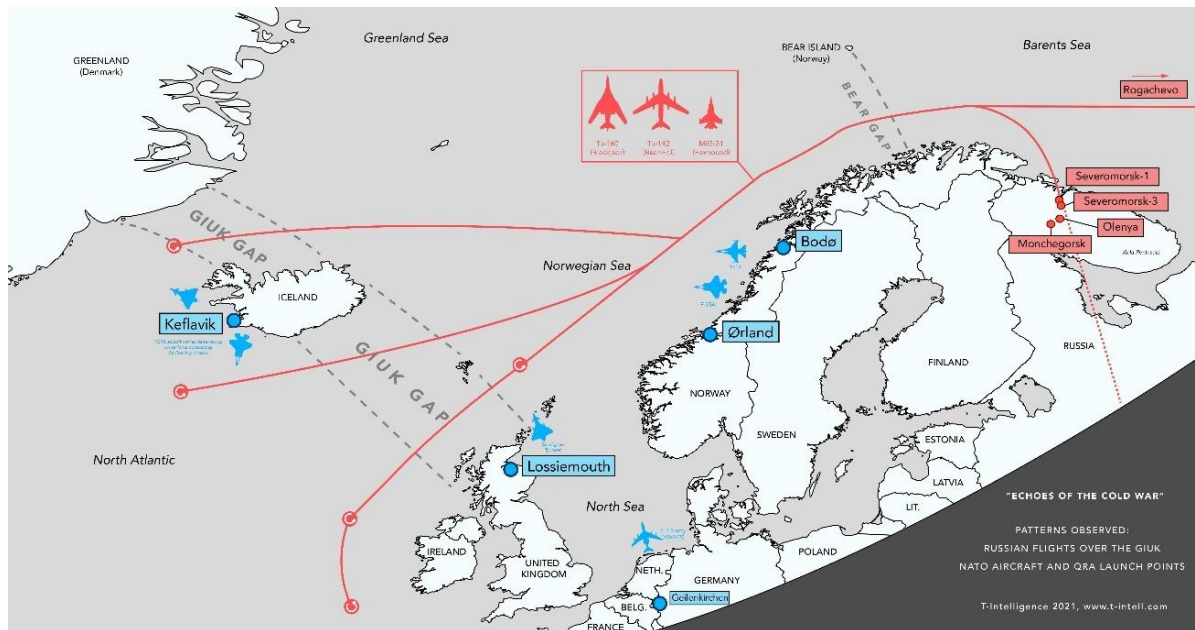


Figure 5: Illustration map of Russian incursions into the GIUK Gap, as well as some of the main military bases in the region. Source: T-Intelligence

After the sharp decrease of naval activity in the region during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which seemed to indicate Scotland's strategic value was something of the past; the situation began to return to its status in the 70s and 80s, sparking British strategic interests for the North Atlantic and the Arctic yet again. The notable increase of Moscow's investments and military activity in the High North has generated a new wave of concern for the region's security. Norway, as has been already mentioned, has been the main voice warning about the resurgence of Russian submarine capabilities, and a firm defendant of the Alliance's collective defenses in the GIUK Gap and the Norwegian Sea.<sup>29</sup>

The UK has also shown concern for the evolution of Russian naval activity, in several occasions operating close to their territorial waters (as shown by the map below in Figure

<sup>28</sup> ROYLE, Trevor. *Facing the Bear: Scotland and the Cold War* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2019), p.4.

<sup>29</sup> See ØSTHAGEN, Andreas. «Norway's Arctic Policy: Still high North, low tension?», *The Polar Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2021, pp. 75–94.

6); and has consequently strengthened its military assets in the region. Thus, Scotland finds itself, once again, as a location of critical importance for British national defense (as well as NATO's) at the GIUK Gap.

The Royal Navy has its Vanguard-class fleet of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) stationed in the North of Scotland, at the base of Clyde; which together with the Royal Naval Armament Depot at Coulport (where missiles and nuclear warheads are stored), constitute, as of today, a vital pillar of NATO's nuclear deterrent. This situation, however, is under threat ever since pro-independence movements began to grow in Scotland over a decade ago. In case such movement ended up achieving its goal, the situation with the Royal Navy's submarines would be put at risk, as it would imply the need to relocate them to an alternative base in British soil.<sup>30</sup>

Although there are still some doubts on whether this will end up happening, at least in the near future, it seems obvious that British defenses and their role as a pillar for NATO's defenses in the Atlantic would be deeply affected. «The problem that would arise in this case for British planners would be hardly solvable. Put simply, the costs which would derive from having to move all infrastructures needed to operate the nuclear deterrent fleet to another base in British soil would be excessively high»<sup>31</sup> Among the options which have been brought to the table in case independence movements finally succeeded, strong candidates are the bases of Devonport, Falmouth, or even Barrow in Furness. Yet, for any of them, costs derived from their displacement (and of all the nuclear materials they bear with them) would be too expensive and would most likely be fatal for the British nuclear program.<sup>32</sup> Thus, as said by Depledge and Østhagen, «given the potential impact of Scexit, politicians on both sides would do well to remember the wider geostrategic context the British Isles are located in as they proceed in years to come».<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> «Scottish nationalism continues to cast a shadow over the Royal Navy», *Navy Lookout*, 14 June 2018. Available at: <https://www.navylookout.com/scottish-nationalism-continues-to-cast-a-shadow-over-the-royal-navy/> (Consulted 20 February 2023).

<sup>31</sup> VÁZQUEZ, Gonzalo «Escocia y su valor estratégico para la OTAN», *Revista Ejército*, 8 February 2023. Available at: <https://www.revistaejercitos.com/2023/02/08/escocia-y-su-valor-estrategico-para-la-otan/> (Consulted 20 February 2023).

<sup>32</sup> (2016) «Why relocating Trident away from Scotland is virtually impossible», *Navy Lookout*. Disponible en: <https://www.navylookout.com/why-relocating-trident-away-from-scotland-is-virtually-impossible/>

<sup>33</sup> DEPLEDGE, Duncan & ØSTHAGEN, Andreas. «Scotland: A Touchstone for Security in the High North?», *The RUSI Journal*, Volume 166, Issue 7, March 2022, p. 62.



### Some ideas for the Future

At the end of the day, all which has been mentioned until now allows us to extract some key ideas about the GIUK Gap's strategic significance for the years to come, as well as how should NATO adapt to these new trends.

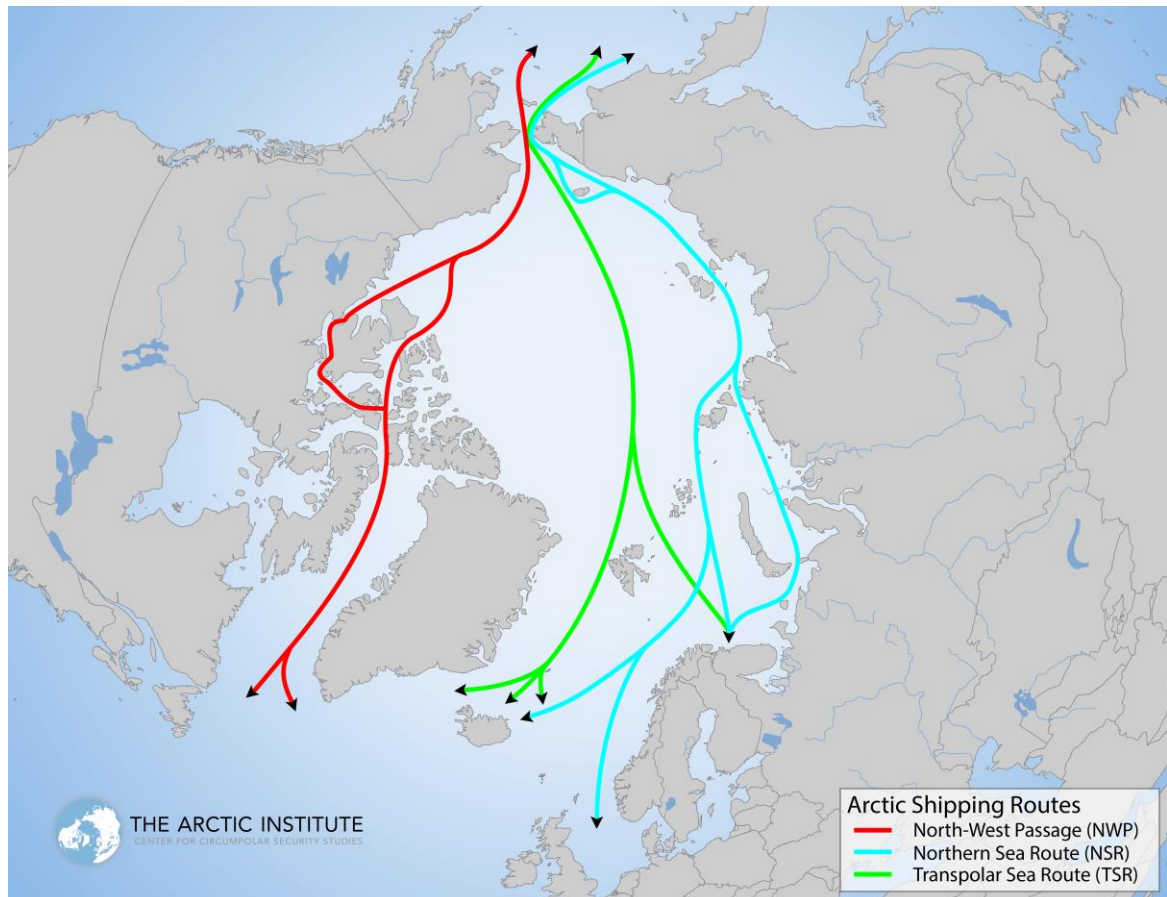


Figure 6: Map of all three commercial routes which could be developed when the Arctic ice melts. Source: The Arctic Institute

First and foremost, the Gap constitutes the main entrance door to the Atlantic; a door which must be permanently watched: The GIUK Gap's importance is destined to keep progressively increasing during the next years. Such importance is intrinsically linked to its location as gateway between the Arctic and the Atlantic, as well as with the activity growth the region is experiencing due to ice melting in the Far North. Any commercial route the Arctic may allow between the Pacific and the Atlantic during the upcoming years will be notably shorter than any of the existing ones, and will necessarily cross through the Gap (as seen in Figure 6 above). In this sense, it is worth remembering former Secretary of the Navy John Lehman's words back in the 1980s, as he underlined how «the only way you can really keep them [the Soviets] above the GIUK Gap . . . is to be up

there... forcing them onto the defensive initially because they know they will have to protect their assets». <sup>34</sup>

Therefore, NATO, with Iceland, Denmark (Greenland) and Norway among its members, is in a strategically favorable position, holding control over the region against China or Russia. Nevertheless, that control is precisely the main reason for which investments must be made in military capabilities, so that it is possible to withhold strategic superiority by promptly using the bases of Thule and Keflavik and be in better position to confront Russian and Chinese growing expansionist efforts. «The events and conflict dynamics around the GIUK gap during the twentieth century», Marcus Nordenman underlines, «point to the inherent and enduring importance of the far north of the North Atlantic and the Norwegian and Barents Seas to the US, Europe and Russia». <sup>35</sup>

Secondly, the United States is not in position to take the lead nor to assume most of the effort by itself. The current landscape clearly shows the great responsibility it takes to try maintaining a proper level of naval and military presence across the globe. The number of emerging challenges, combined with the limited resources the US Navy holds, makes it imperative for the countries in the region and other NATO members to cooperate among them. Precisely, Nordenman proposed a few years back the establishment of a «NATO Consortium» with maritime patrol aircraft to survey the area, and the development of surface naval capabilities and anti-submarine warfare capabilities to confront any threat or hostile presence. That way, interoperability among the different actors will be strengthened, as will their effective control over the region. <sup>36</sup>

Aside from the GIUK Gap, Coffey y Kochis propose the United States should dedicate their efforts to invest in enhancing their military presence in what they label as NATO's «Arctic chain of defense» (as seen in the image above), made up of Greenland, Iceland, Svalbard<sup>37</sup>, and Jan Mayen; and which constitutes an advanced operations base in the

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<sup>34</sup> GETLER, Michael. «Lehman sees Norwegian Seas as a Key to Soviet Naval Strategy», *The Washington Post*, 29 December 1982, p. 4; in POLMAR, Norman. «Sailing under the Ice», *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 110/6/976. Available at: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1984/june/sailing-under-ice>

<sup>35</sup> NORDENMAN, Marcus. «Back to the Gap: The re-emerging Maritime Contest in the North Atlantic», *The RUSI Journal*, Vol 16, Issue 1, 2017, p. 25.

<sup>36</sup> See NORDENMAN, Marcus. NATO'S Next Consotrium: Maritime Patrol Aircraft, *Atlantic Council*, Issue Brief, 6 May 2016. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/nato-s-next-consortium>

<sup>37</sup> Svalbard, however, has the handicap for Norway of it not being allowed to be militarized by virtue of the 1920 Svalbard Treaty. This prevents NATO from using it as a base to deploy its ASW capabilities.

region for their allies.<sup>38</sup> The last two of them, located in the north of GIUK Gap, are also NATO territory (Norway), so that such strengthening of military cooperation between United States (both with their Navy and the US Coast Guard) and the rest of members in the region would be an important element of their deterrent against any Russian hostile activity.

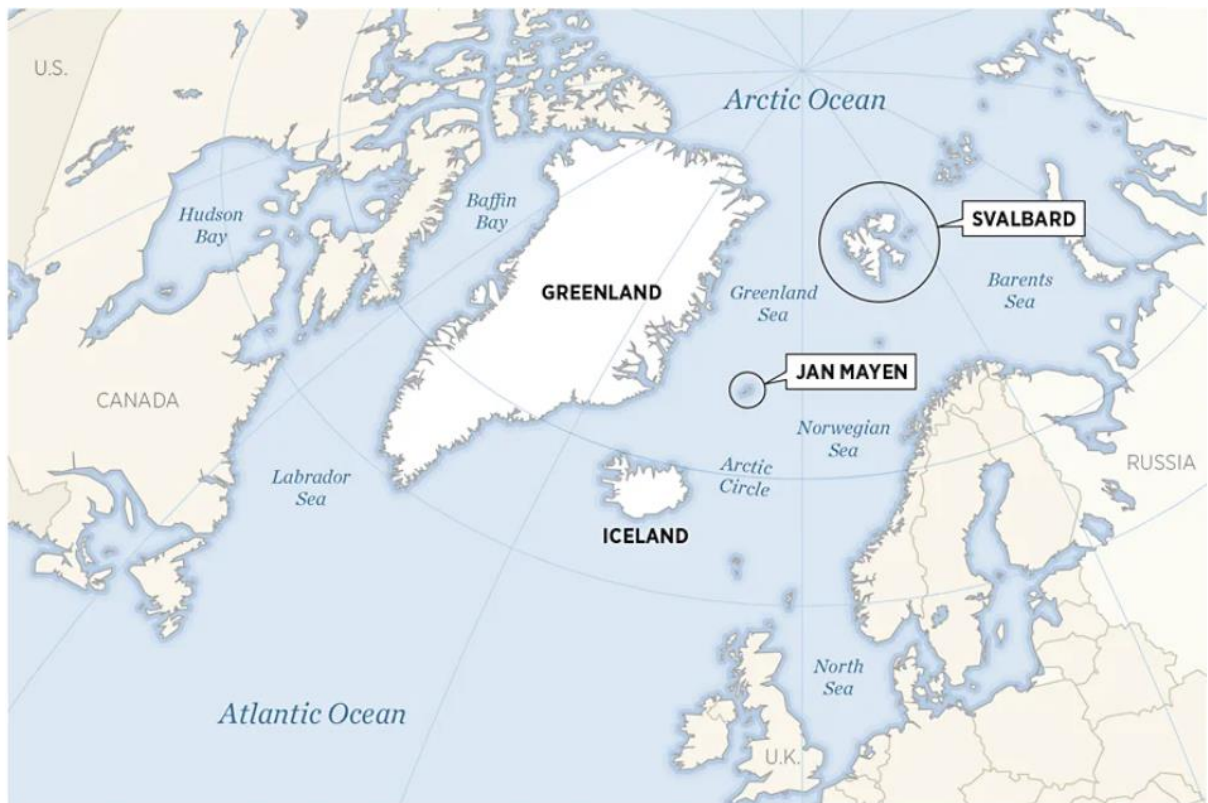


Figure 7: Location of Svalbard and Jan Mayen, north to GIUK Gap. Source: The Heritage Foundation

In third place, NATO should seriously reflect about the importance of this region, adopting a solid Arctic Strategy, which assigns more importance to the Gap.<sup>39</sup> According to Andrew Foxal, director of the *Russia and Eurasia Studies Center*, the United Kingdom is not able to play a seriously important role in the Arctic, at least not directly. Yet, what it can still – and should– do, is contributing to enhancing the Alliance’s strategic awareness in what regards the potential of Russian threats across the Gap. And the same happens with the rest.

<sup>38</sup> COFFEY, Luke y KOCHIS, Daniel. Strengthening America’s and NATO’s Arctic Chain of Defense, *The Heritage Foundation*, 27 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/strengthening-americas-and-natos-arctic-chain-defense>

<sup>39</sup> FOXAL, Andrew. Russia’s Policies towards a Changing Arctic: Implications for UK Security., *Russia Studies Center*, Research Paper No. 12, June 2017, p. 2.

One base with a potential yet to exploit is the one of Thule, in the northeastern part of Greenland, which could provide with «an early warning and interception system of missiles coming from the other side of the Arctic, as well as reinforcing American capabilities in Greenland and the Arctic for NATO.»<sup>40</sup> This is due to the fact that, aside from the already mentioned early-warning function, it is also situated in an optimal location to launch multiple deployments to different regions of the North Pole.

Russia y China, on their part, will rely on the GIUK Gap in case the Northern Sea Route or the Polar Silk Route are established. Therefore, NATO must keep that in mind and properly consolidate its presence throughout the different key locations in the region, to ensure that any future effort by Russia or China to take advantage in the region can be properly dealt with and deterred. Additionally, climate change could bring about modifications in the geographical landscape of the region which aside from making commercial routes viable, will also reveal other regions such as Greenland where to exploit their natural resources. In all probability, this will be another factor derived from climate change to consider, which at the end of the day not only will turn the Gap into a much more transited region, but also one with more permanent presence.

Lastly, China keeps investing time and efforts in the Arctic, and thus the Alliance finds itself in the need to act consequently in order to prevent the Asian giant from gaining influence there. Thus, with the desire to establish a Polar Silk Road, their self-denomination as a «near-Arctic state» is quite interesting to observe. The nearest point to the Arctic Circle lies some 150 kilometers away from Chinese territory. This way, if the range was to be expanded to include these «near Arctic states», all the Baltic countries, the United Kingdom and Ireland would find themselves in the same position as Beijing.<sup>41</sup> In spite of this, Chinese interests have so far prevailed, and the efforts they are making must be carefully studied and followed, in order to strengthen the Alliance's capacity to respond any unwanted encounter derived from the presence of Chinese vessels.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> COLOM PIELLA, Guillem. Geopolítica de las Bases Militares, *Ministerio de Defensa*, 2022, p. 118. The base does also hold an important fuel storage potential, as well as bunkhouses and industrial infrastructure. Adding to them, the so-called Site-J, an underground shelter with enormous potential to host troops in a little hill, protects one of the radars conforming the US' missile defense system.

<sup>41</sup> KOCHIS, Daniel. US policymakers should remain wary of Chinese ambitions in the Arctic, *The Heritage Foundation*, 28 July 2022. Available at: <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/us-policymakers-should-remain-wary-chinese-ambitions-the-arctic>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



The reasons for which such presence is seen as worrying can be found, among other places, in their Arctic Policy published in 2018. The document stands out for the amount of expressions such as «mutual interests», «active participation in international cooperation», or the use of natural resources in a «legal and rational way»<sup>43</sup> Seeing such pretensions being now published in their Arctic Policy shouldn't leave anyone unbothered, just as it doesn't with all those who have studied and observed their Navy's history of activities around the South China Sea and its surroundings –where Beijing rarely acts following and respecting international norms and the Law of the Sea.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusions

With the current strategic landscape, in which the «Sino-Russian strategic partnership continues to enjoy good health»,<sup>45</sup> NATO must invest in its surveillance and alert capabilities, especially in those countries close to such a strategically important region; Norway, Iceland, Greenland and the United Kingdom.

The ability to collect as much information as possible in what concerns Moscow's naval and air incursions will provide the Alliance with the capacity to provide a faster response to any hostility presented by Russia. For this, and the reasons developed throughout this paper, the GIUK Gap will remain as a strategic point of vital importance, not only for NATO, but also for Moscow and anyone else aspiring to play a relevant role in the geopolitics of the frozen ocean (including the EU).<sup>46</sup>

For NATO, it will remain a place to deal with Russian submarine capabilities attempting to enter into its region of influence. For Russia, it will be the point through which the Northern Sea Route will inevitably have to cross once it becomes a viable alternative to the Indian Ocean. Such viability, however, doesn't seem plausible yet, given the lack of

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<sup>43</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "China's Arctic Policy," *White Paper*, January 26, 2018. Available in English at: [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2018/01/26/content\\_281476026660336.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm)

<sup>44</sup> See NGUYEN CAO, Viet Hung. Vietnam struggles in the South China Sea: Challenges and Opportunities, *CIMSEC*, 21 September 2021. Available at: <https://cimsec.org/vietnams-struggles-in-the-south-china-sea-challenges-and-opportunities/>

<sup>45</sup> PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José. Sino-Russian strategic partnership continues to enjoy good health. *IEEE Analysis Paper 03/2023*. [https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2023/DIEEEA03\\_2023\\_JOSPAR\\_Asociacion\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2023/DIEEEA03_2023_JOSPAR_Asociacion_ENG.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> PALACIÁN DE LEZA, Blanca & CASTELLÓN MORENO, Joaquín. Hacia una Política Ártica de la Unión Europea, *Documento de Análisis IEEE 11/2011*, pp. 7-9. Available at: [https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2011/DIEEEA11\\_2011PoliticaArticaUE.pdf](https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2011/DIEEEA11_2011PoliticaArticaUE.pdf)



adequate infrastructure and ports along it; and attention will have to be paid to the evolution of the region before attempting to predict any future scenario bases on the melting of the ice caps.

Lastly, both Scotland and Iceland will have a fundamental role to play in the evolution of the region. Scotland, host to the fleet of Vanguard-class nuclear submarines, conforms one of the pillars of NATO's nuclear deterrent. Thus, the possibility of an independent Scotland and the high cost that would derive for the Royal Navy from relocating them outside of the perfect location Faslane is, must be carefully followed.

Iceland, on its part, is also in position to be an important base of operations for the Alliance to permanently control activity around the Gap. The bases it hosts today are of great utility for the patrols in the region; and from them, operations in the Barents and Norwegian Seas could also be deployed. Altogether, the one thing clear is that for the Alliance to succeed, its members must act united against Moscow's antagonism. The GIUK Gap is precisely one of the places where that unity will need to prove stronger among its members.

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