1. My name is Luke Coffey and I am the Margaret Thatcher Fellow at The Heritage Foundation, a think tank based in Washington, D.C. In my current role I write and research on topics pertaining to transatlantic security with a specific focus on Anglo-American relations. Previously, I worked for the Rt Hon. Dr Liam Fox MP from 2006 to 2011—including 18 months as one of his Special Advisers while he was the Secretary of State for Defence. I saw firsthand how Dr Fox’s interest in the Arctic while in Opposition translated into Government policy when in the Ministry of Defence (MoD). I am well-travelled in the Nordic-Baltic region, I have visited the Arctic region, and I have briefed congressional staff members on Arctic security issues. At The Heritage Foundation I have published a number of policy papers on Arctic security, albeit from a NATO and US point of view. This written testimony will narrowly focus on security aspects and how the UK, primarily through bilateral and multilateral relationships in the region, can be a security actor in the Arctic.

The UK Might Not Be an Arctic Power—but It Sure Is Close

2. It is a simple fact of geography that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is a northern European nation. In fact, the UK is the closest country in the world to the Arctic Circle without actually having any territory above it.\(^1\) Dating back to the 16th century, the UK has had a long history of Arctic exploration. The recent announcement that Canada has found one of the two ships lost during the ill-fated Franklin Expedition of 1848 serves as a reminder of this proud history. The UK’s geographical proximity to the Arctic region, coupled with London’s close relations with the Arctic powers, means that the UK has no choice but to pay close attention to Arctic matters.

3. The Arctic region, commonly referred to as the High North, is becoming more contested than ever before. The Arctic region encompasses the lands and territorial waters of eight countries (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States) spread across three continents. Although, unlike in the Antarctic, there is no Arctic land mass covering the North Pole—just ocean—the region is home to some of the roughest terrain and waters, and harshest weather, found anywhere on the planet. The region represents one of the least

\(^1\)The small island of Grímsey is the only part of Iceland that is above the Arctic Circle.
populated areas in the world, with sparse nomadic communities and very few large cities and towns. Although official population figures are non-existent, the Nordic Council of Ministers estimates the figure to be four million—making the Arctic’s population slightly bigger than Wales and slightly smaller than Scotland. Approximately half of the Arctic population lives in Russia. It is a region rich in minerals, wildlife, fish, and other natural resources. Some estimates are that up to 13 percent of the world’s undiscovered oil reserves and almost one-third of the world’s undiscovered natural gas reserves are located in the Arctic region.

4. The melting of some Arctic ice during the summer months creates challenges in terms of Arctic security but also new opportunities for economic development. A decrease of ice will mean new shipping lanes opening, increased tourism, and further natural resource exploration. However, it will also mean a larger military presence by more actors than ever before.

A Role for the UK in Arctic Security

5. Under the Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition government there has been a renewed focus on the Arctic region. Perhaps the best example of this was the first ever UK strategy for the Arctic, *Adapting To Change: UK policy towards the Arctic*, published in 2013. However, in terms of the UK’s role in Arctic security, the 40-page document offers only one paragraph, stating:

The UK remains committed to preserving the stability and security of the Arctic region. This objective will be pursued through a wide range of defence engagement and bilateral security co-operation with a number of close allies and partners in the region. This will include the essential training needed for the military on cold weather training exercise. The role of NATO will remain central, as will the UK’s participation in the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable forum, which promotes security co-operation on issues such as situational awareness and search and rescue missions.

6. If this sole paragraph is the standard on which UK policy on Arctic security is measured, then the results have been mixed. Although the UK’s Arctic strategy states the UK is ‘committed to preserving the stability and security of the Arctic region,’ the Arctic region is not discussed at all in either the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) or the 2010 National Security Strategy.

7. The mention of NATO’s role being ‘central’ to Arctic security is also curious. For reasons that will be explained in more detail later in this testimony, NATO has no agreed common position on its role in the Arctic region. Although NATO’s 2010 Strategic Concept was praised for

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acknowledging new security challenges for the alliance, such as cyber and energy security, Arctic security was not included. In fact, the word ‘Arctic’ does not appear in the 2010 Strategic Concept, the 2010 Lisbon, the 2012 Chicago, or the 2014 Wales NATO summit declarations.

8. However, one area where the UK has had some success is with its ‘defence engagement and bilateral security co-operation with a number of close allies and partners in the region.’ In 2010, the then-Secretary of State for Defence, Dr Liam Fox, was behind the creation of the Northern Group—a multilateral arrangement that created a forum where the UK can discuss areas of common defence and security interest across the Nordic-Baltic Region. Perhaps most importantly this grouping often met during NATO and EU ministerial meetings to help coordinate common positions. It also meant that the UK has a seat at the table for the very first time at the annual Nordic-Baltic Defence Ministers’ meeting. Without Dr Fox’s personal drive and leadership on Arctic issues the Northern Group would not exist today.

9. The UK’s closest bilateral relationship in the European Arctic region is with Norway. Both countries share a long history of bilateral cooperation in the multiple areas, especially with defence. Norway supplies 30 per cent of Britain’s primary energy supplies. Bilateral trade is worth £18bn and is increasing year after year. Norway is a valuable defence partner for the UK. It plays a leading role in NATO, including as one of the few countries to carry out strike missions during the 2011 Libya operation, and has had a contingent of troops serving in Afghanistan. When Russian bombers patrol the North Sea and probe British airspace, the first NATO member to respond is Norway.

10. Dr Fox travelled to Norway twice as Defence Secretary including a visit to Svalbard—probably the first visit of its kind for a British defence secretary. With the foundation laid by Dr Fox, his successor in the defence portfolio, the Rt Hon. Phillip Hammond MP, signed a detailed Memorandum of Understanding ‘On the Enhancement of Bilateral Defence Co-operation’ with Norway and visited Denmark and Sweden. The focus on the Arctic region inside the MoD under the current government has never been greater.

A Role for NATO

11. Regardless whether it is the sunny Mediterranean or the frozen Arctic, NATO is a collective security organization with a mission to defend the territorial integrity of all 28 members. Five NATO members (Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and the United States) are Arctic countries. In addition, two closely allied nations (Finland and Sweden) are Arctic nations.

12. In May 2014, then-NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen acknowledged that the changing dynamic of the Arctic region will require the alliance to develop a strategy. ‘No doubt the Russians will focus more on the Arctic,’ he said. ‘NATO allies will have to address this issue.’

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13. Inside NATO, members view the Arctic differently. Norway is a leader in promoting NATO’s role in the Arctic. It is the only country in the world that has its permanent military headquarters above the Arctic Circle and the primary force driver for its armed forces is Arctic security. The Norwegians have invested extensively in Arctic defence capabilities. Norwegian officials, both military and civilian, want to see NATO playing a larger role in the Arctic.

14. The Norwegian position regarding NATO’s role in the Arctic is in contrast to Canada’s. Like Norway, Canada has invested heavily in its Arctic defence and security capabilities. Unlike Norway, the Canadians have made it clear that they do not want NATO involved in the Arctic. Generally speaking, there is a concern inside Canada that non-Arctic NATO members favour an alliance role in the Arctic because it would afford them influence in an area where they otherwise would have none. As a sovereign nation-state, Canada has a prerogative to determine what role, if any, NATO should have in Canada’s Arctic region. However, as a collective security alliance, NATO cannot ignore the Arctic altogether, and the alliance should not appear divided on the issue.

Russia and the Security Situation in the Arctic

15. The UK’s security concerns in the Arctic are derived from its membership in NATO. Russia’s bellicose behavior toward its neighbours, especially the illegal annexation of Crimea and its military invasion of southeastern Ukraine, makes the Arctic a security concern in a way not thought of only a few years ago.

16. Vladimir Putin has made Russian policy on the Arctic very clear. During a recent press conference outside Moscow he broke away from talking about the situation in Ukraine to say: ‘Our interests are concentrated in the Arctic. And of course we should pay more attention to issues of development of the Arctic and the strengthening of our position [there].’

17. Currently, the Arctic region remains peaceful, but it is a fact that Russia has taken steps to militarize the region. It is Russia’s prerogative to place military assets inside its national territory as it wishes. However, these actions should be a concern to NATO, and by extension the UK, because Moscow has shown its intention to use its military force to achieve its national objectives outside its national borders. One must assume the Arctic region would be no different.

18. Russia’s Northern Fleet, which is based in the Arctic, counts for two-thirds of the Russian Navy. A new Arctic command will be established by 2015 to coordinate all Russian military activities in the Arctic region. Over the next few years two new so-called Arctic brigades will be permanently based in the Arctic region, and Russian Special Forces have been increasing training in the region. Old Soviet-era facilities have been re-opened, for example, putting the

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The ultimate goal is for Russia to deploy a combined arms force in the Arctic by 2020 and it appears they are on track.  

19. As ice continues to dissipate during the summer months, new shipping lanes have offered additional trade opportunities. The Northern Sea Route along the Russian coast reduces the time it takes to sail from Europe to Asia by half. However, the opening of the Northern Sea Route also provides Russia with a huge geostrategic advantage in that it can move its naval fleet to Asia far faster than before. For example, during the 1904–1905 Russian-Japanese War, it took Russia’s Baltic Fleet seven months to travel from the Baltic Sea to the Sea of Japan. Of course, modern warships and likely access to the Suez Canal would make the same journey much faster. But this illustrative point shows that Russia has long been concerned about defending its long frontier, and access to the Northern Sea Route offers flexibility that Russian military planners rarely had before. Security of the Northern Sea Route, and the potential of natural resources that the Russian economy is dependent on, is what motivates Russia’s revitalization of old Soviet military bases in the region.

Situational Awareness

20. Although many of the security challenges currently faced in the Arctic are not yet military in nature, there is still a requirement for military capability in the region that can support civilian authorities. For example, civilian search and rescue (SAR) and natural disaster response in such an unforgiving environment as the Arctic can be augmented by the military. Anyone who has visited or operated in the Arctic will agree that situational awareness of what is happening in the region is extremely important for maintaining security there. Since the distances are vast, the terrain harsh, and the weather extreme, achieving situational awareness in the Arctic region is a challenge in itself.

21. The Arctic environment affects many capabilities that are required for good situational awareness. For example, high-frequency radio signals are degraded in latitudes above 70 degrees north due to magnetic and solar phenomena. The Global Positioning System, which is heavily relied on by both civilian and military authorities, is degraded due to poor satellite geometry.

22. In many ways, the UK is blind in the Arctic. The fastest way for the UK to achieve better situational awareness in the Arctic region is to bring into service a Military Patrol Aircraft (MPA) at the soonest possible moment. The UK has been without a significant MPA capability since March 2010 when the then-Labour Government removed the Nimrod MR2 from service. One of

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the most controversial, but in my opinion necessary, decisions taken during the 2010 SDSR was the cancellation of the Nimrod MRA4 programme (which was meant to replace the MR2s).

23. Then-Defence Secretary Liam Fox summed up his decision best writing in *The Daily Telegraph*:

> The decision to scrap the Nimrod MRA4 programme was one of the most difficult we had to take. This capability was conceived to provide the very outermost ring of long-range layered reconnaissance. The original plan conceived in 1996 was for 21 aircraft to be delivered in 2003. By the time the new Government took office in 2010 the programme had already been reduced to just nine aircraft, was almost £800m over budget with the unit cost of each aircraft ballooning by 300 per cent, and the aircraft were still nowhere near ready to enter service. The single MRA4 aircraft that had been delivered to the RAF was so riddled with flaws it could not pass its flight tests, it was simply unsafe to fly. I am not prepared to put our service personnel into any plane that isn’t safe. It would have taken more money and more time to rectify all the problems, if it was possible at all, and the onward cost of sustaining even the reduced fleet over the next ten years was a prohibitive £2bn. So we took the decision not to throw good money after bad. In the final analysis, it had to go.\(^9\)

24. The UK has since mitigated the loss of this capability with other platforms such as frigates, Merlin helicopters, and C-130 Hercules aircraft combined with close cooperation with partners such as the US, Canada, and Norway. However, this is a short-term solution to what could become a critical and long-term problem.

25. The lack of an MPA capability will have to be addressed during the next SDSR if not sooner. The UK’s ability to locate, track, and identify surface vessels is limited and depends largely on collaboration with partner nations in the Arctic.

**The Way Forward**

26. During the Cold War the UK had two main missions in the Arctic region: defending the so-called Greenland–Iceland–UK gap (to ensure that American reinforcement could arrive to northern Europe) and to reinforce Norway in the event of a Soviet invasion. Although the nature of the threats has changed in the post–Cold War world, the challenges in the Arctic have not gone away. In order to play a constructive role in Arctic security the UK should:

- **Encourage NATO to focus on the Arctic.** The UK has a very close relationship with both Canada and Norway. Consequently, it is the best placed NATO member to broker an agreement on what NATO’s role in the Arctic should be. Ahead of the next NATO Summit in

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Poland, the UK should work to ensure that consensus inside the alliance on the issue of Arctic security is achieved.

- **Continue to deepen bilateral and multilateral relations in the Arctic.** The current Government has made a real effort to engage with its northern European neighbours and this should continue. The new Secretary of State for Defence, the Rt Hon. Michael Fallon MP, must continue with the Northern Group initiative.

- **Include the Arctic in the next SDSR.** As a leading member inside NATO, the UK has an obligation to ensure its defence planning fulfills its obligations inside the alliance. With nationalism increasing in Russia, coupled with Moscow’s willingness to use military power to achieve national objectives on its periphery, the next SDSR should factor in the Arctic.

- **Bring into service real and credible MPA capability.** Although the cancellation of the Nimrod MRA4 was the correct decision at the time, it is quite extraordinary that the U.K. has gone so long without a dedicated MPA capability. The UK should consider ‘buying off the shelf’ the Boeing P-8 Poseidon—a tried and tested MPA platform—from the USA.

**Conclusion**

27. The UK has an interest in stability and security in the Arctic because of its history in the region, its geographical proximity, and its leading role inside NATO. With the Arctic becoming increasingly important for economic and geo-political reasons, now is not the time for the UK to turn away from its own backyard. Sensible policy decisions will make the UK an important Arctic security actor. This is in the UK’s and NATO’s interest.

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