Matthew Willis, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies –
Written Evidence (ARC 0043)

The present state of security in the Arctic
and implications of the tensions in Eastern Europe

1. Contrary to the impressions conveyed by labels like the ‘New Cold War’ or the ‘Scramble for the Arctic’, the Far North is a stable region where tensions are, and have every reason to remain, low. In the absence of the conditions that could trigger jockeying for territory or resources, the Arctic states have focused mainly on the sustainable economic (and in some cases social) development of their respective northern zones – an activity in which all can engage more effectively by co-operating than competing.

2. The tensions between Russia and the ‘West’ in Eastern Europe are not likely to overflow into the Arctic in a meaningful military-strategic way. From a Russian perspective, there is too little to be gained and too much to be lost from belligerence, and no other Arctic state has any reason to alter the status quo. There is a danger, however, that the Western bloc could shift Russia’s strategic calculus inadvertently. Defensive moves involving the Arctic, whether through the strengthening of the NATO missile defence system or the expansion of the Alliance to Sweden and Finland, would appear distinctly offensive to Moscow. In a worst-case scenario, they could turn what has so far been only a regeneration of Russian military capabilities in the Arctic into something closer to a remilitarisation.

3. This submission offers an assessment of the current political and military reality in the Arctic, followed by a brief discussion of Russia’s Arctic interests, mindset and plans. After addressing the present tensions’ conceivable military-strategic implications, it touches on their plausible politico-diplomatic impacts and concludes with a short list of policy recommendations for Her Majesty’s Government.

4. On a definitional note, ‘Arctic security’ is treated herein as the aggregation of the Arctic states’ mindsets, policies and activities concerning the region as a military-strategic theatre. The term, and the variations on it that appear below, should therefore be understood in the traditional sense of security, involving hard power; this submission does not touch on other ‘securities’ such as environmental, energy or human security.

The Arctic so far: an economic zone of low tension

5. For the eight states with Arctic territory, the Far North figures prominently as a source both of national identity and economic prosperity.1 This mixture, whose
composition varies country-to-country, makes it important to all of them, and especially to the five with Arctic Ocean coastlines. Crucially, however, since the end of the Cold War and the subsidence of geopolitical tensions between the blocs, the region’s military-strategic importance has declined even as its economic importance has risen. This phenomenon explains why, although every Arctic state has released an Arctic strategy over the past decade, the profile of defence and security in these documents is consistently low. To illustrate, in Canada’s 2011 Arctic Foreign Policy, the terms ‘defence’ and ‘security’ figure fewer than five times between them; in Norway’s 2009 High North Strategy update, ‘defence’ appears a mere three times and ‘security’ eight – including in food- and energy-security contexts.

6. Energy resources have been identified as a potential driver of competition, even involving extra-regional actors. The basic assumption underpinning talk of interstate competition is groundless, however, since the vast majority of accessible hydrocarbons lie in undisputed national jurisdictions. It should also be noted that extraction of Arctic hydrocarbons, an extraordinarily complex undertaking technically and technologically, typically requires not only political stability, but also consortia comprising oil and gas firms from different countries. Extraction activities are thus inherently co-operative, although commercial disputes can arise, as the case of British Petroleum, TNK-BP and Rosneft showed.

7. Unanswered questions over maritime boundary delimitation, primarily in the Bering Strait and around the Lomonosov Ridge, mean that potential for political friction exists. However, given the 2010 Ilulissat Declaration, whereby the five Arctic coastal states committed themselves to the orderly settlement of overlapping claims, the odds favour a negotiated solution to current and future differences. The resolution of the Barents Sea dispute between Russia and Norway in 2011 showed both the sincerity underpinning the Ilulissat document and the incentive for co-operation that unexploited hydrocarbons can present.

8. The much-documented enhancement of regional military capabilities is widely misunderstood and (save for the Russian case) less significant than depicted. Norway moved its National Joint Headquarters to Bodø – inside the Arctic Circle – in 2009-10, Denmark established a new Arctic Command at Nuuk, Greenland, in 2012, and Canada has been experimenting with a hub-and-spoke system of supply depots in order to project its forces northwards more effectively. But much of the Arctic states’ ostensible procurement has been either modernisation of existing, or replacement of obsolete, equipment, and little of it has been Arctic-specific. Even more importantly, bellicose intent is absent from their plans. The Arctic militaries’ role is to support civilian agencies in day-to-day activities and emergencies. These include: aerial surveillance, anti-smuggling inspections and fisheries monitoring; patrolling or simple provision of presence; search-and-rescue on land or at sea; and even assistance with oil spill-response efforts. Such tasks fall to the armed forces
because, with some exceptions, only they have the training, equipment and other capabilities to operate in Arctic conditions.

9. The Arctic has never been a fundamentally military-strategic theatre. As Louis DeGoes, then-executive secretary to the US Committee on Polar Research for the National Science Foundation, remarked in the late 1960s, ‘In the Arctic and Antarctic the Russians and the United States have everything in common and very little in conflict. True, the polar areas are of great strategic importance, but the development of modern weaponry has made physical dominance and control less important than understanding and exploitation.’

10. Over the past 30 years, various initiatives have helped establish habits of regional co-operation among the Arctic states. Almost exactly 27 years ago, on October 2, 1987, Mikhail Gorbachev called for co-operation between ‘East and West’ to help make the Arctic a ‘zone of peace’, where military activities could be reduced and natural resources better extracted. Two years after Gorbachev’s proposal, in 1989, the Finnish government helped launch a series of meetings designed to foster circumpolar co-operation on environmental protection. Besides yielding the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy, the meetings laid the foundations of an intergovernmental forum for carrying forward discussions on environmental protection and sustainable development: the Arctic Council.

11. A key condition of the Arctic Council’s establishment was that issues of defence and security be kept beyond its remit. This stipulation allowed for a political atmosphere in which potentially divisive issues could be kept off the table, helping to ensure that Russia never felt itself encircled or otherwise threatened in the presence of four NATO members. As a result, the organisation has been resilient at times of international discord, including the present. (Incidentally, the Council may also serve, on occasion, as a venue for ‘offline’ discussions about sensitive political issues, such as Syria.)

The Arctic as seen from Russia

12. The Arctic was a touchstone of Soviet national identity, and the Soviet Union’s ‘conquest’ of the region – in the form of industrial development far beyond that achieved by other Arctic countries – was a symbol of national greatness. The Arctic also gave the Soviet Union at once strategic depth and an impenetrable rampart that allowed it to devote most of its attention to its western, southern and eastern periphery. The basing of the Northern Fleet (and thus the bulk of the country’s sea-based nuclear arsenal) at Murmansk made the Arctic a key military zone as well. The severe economic and military decline that accompanied the Soviet Union’s collapse drastically diminished the region’s profile.
13. The Kremlin’s plans to rebuild Russia’s Arctic military capacity have been interpreted as an expression of territorial assertiveness motivated by hunger for offshore oil and gas, and even an unvarnished desire for regional dominance. Given credence, such speculation provides a plausible foundation for further concern – that the conflict in Eastern Europe could give President Putin a pretext to begin exerting pressure on the Nordic countries.

14. What some observers have labelled a militarisation is really an effort to return to the status quo ante – a level of capability commensurate with Russia’s self-image and perceived defence needs. The timing of this ambitious undertaking relates partly to the treasury’s oil-buoyed return to health, but there is an even stronger rationale: as it announced as early as 2008, Russia aims to make the Arctic its ‘foremost strategic base for natural resources’ by 2020. To do so, it must invest massively not only in economic infrastructure but, equally, in the military means to police a region being restored to national economic centrality. It certainly has no need to covet its neighbours’ seabeds: 43 of 61 large Arctic oil and gas fields already lie within its undisputed jurisdiction, accounting for fully 52 percent of the Arctic’s remaining reserves of undiscovered conventional oil and gas. The regeneration of the military should be seen as part of a much broader revitalisation of the entire Russian Arctic and, effectively, a ‘return to normal’ after two exceptionally grim decades.

**Potential fall-out from Ukraine for Arctic security**

15. Russia can therefore be expected to avoid any behaviour that could unsettle the region. That is not to say it will put an end to the ‘fly-bys’ its long-range bombers have carried out on the edges of its neighbours’ airspace since 2008. In June 2014, Ottawa reported an increase in patrols as compared to the two previous years, and in late August, Helsinki reported three airspace violations in a week. Nor does it mean it will halt the sorts of naval exercises and war games in which the Northern Fleet engaged in the Barents Sea throughout August and September.

16. But such activities do not risk shifting the Arctic’s military-strategic balance. (The aerial patrols in particular are unpleasant and unsettling, but little more.) In a region in which it has never been challenged, hemmed-in or humiliated, and in which everything it needs for prosperity is within its jurisdiction, Russia would gain nothing from raising hackles. It could, in fact, do itself considerable damage. Creating ‘incidents’ between Russian and Norwegian fishing vessels in the Barents, exposing Canada’s inability to enforce NORDREG (a mandatory self-reporting scheme for vessels operating in Canadian waters north of 60°N) or otherwise challenging established governance structures would likely backfire – most plausibly by diminishing the chances of recent sanctions’ being lifted.
17. Counter-intuitively, however, Russia is not the key player in the Arctic right now. Knowingly or not, it is the Western block that is playing with strategic fire. By imposing sanctions on Russia’s oil and – especially – gas sector, the ‘West’ struck at the heart of Russia’s economy, its prospects for long-term prosperity and, ultimately, its political stability. The message was clear and, given the situation as seen through Western eyes, no doubt deliberately calibrated. However, the sanctions carry more than economic meaning. Whereas Russia’s behaviour in Eastern Europe has been classically revanchist, that of a state believing itself to have been held down and ill-used, in the Arctic, Russia has never had any reason to behave that way. There, it is a (indeed, the) pre-eminent and respected power. Left in place, sanctions on the oil and gas sector could change its outlook.

18. Developments relating to the Western bloc’s military posture could be even more significant. Although NATO’s remit naturally encompasses the Arctic by virtue of Canadian, American, Danish, Norwegian and Icelandic membership, its low profile is clearly one reason for the absence of geopolitical tension. Events this year, however, have triggered renewed calls to make the Arctic a higher priority, particularly from Norway. Combined with the deployment of the NATO rapid reaction force agreed at Newport and the probable expansion of the ballistic missile defence system (conceivably via Norwegian AEGIS-equipped frigates), movement in that direction risks putting the Arctic ‘in play’. Finnish and Swedish NATO accession, unlikely though it is, would be sure to rile Moscow.

19. It does not matter that Western governments believe themselves to be reacting. As Mikhail Popov, Deputy Secretary of the Russian Security Council, recently observed, ‘We were assured about [NATO’s] good intentions [in 2010], but the actions of recent years suggest the complete opposite. […] Russia is always expected to make unilateral concessions on many issues of international relations…’. Russia has a victim complex, and a defensive move by the Western bloc in the Arctic will only reinforce Moscow’s suspicion that Ukraine is but a pretence for expanding the ‘pressure’ under which NATO and the European Union have put it for two decades. That is not to say that the Arctic should at all costs remain insulated from geopolitics elsewhere. Simply, Western governments should be as careful about the messages they send as the ones they intend to be received.

Other potential political fall-out from Ukraine

20. Only in extremis will Russia respond to Western ‘provocation’ in such a way as to alter current military-strategic assumptions in the Arctic. Its long-term goals are too important to be sacrificed under any but the direst circumstances. If it seeks to retaliate for Western actions in the North, it is more likely to choose another time and place. Thankfully, the odds of other sorts of fall-out in the region are relatively low as well, though greater than nil.
21. The annual Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) has been the most notable casualty. The ASFR is a response to the fact that civil contingencies in the Arctic will require co-ordination between the militaries of different countries, and not only between the civilian agencies and military of a single country. The ASFR’s purpose is thus to bring together military officials from the Arctic states (and northern Europe) to strengthen working relations and discuss technical-level aspects of co-operation. One of the Forum’s biggest virtues is the way it builds trust among participants. Unfortunately, Russia did not participate this year. If the absence of the Arctic’s single most capable player continues for long, the value of the ASFR will be substantially diminished. Most damagingly, the channels for military-to-military communication it has helped open between Russia and its neighbours – vital to co-ordinating a response to any emergency – are likely to close up.

22. On the whole, the consensus-based Arctic Council (AC) is weathering the storm. Canada’s non-participation in the meeting of the Task Force on Black Carbon made headlines, but it was a token gesture, and substantial efforts have been made to ensure Russian delegates attend AC meetings in Canada. In 2015, however, Canada will cede the chairmanship to the US. Washington will not unveil its agenda for some time, but Russia could prove an insuperable obstacle to any major American initiative should it so choose – without affecting the scientific work taking place within the Council’s six working groups.

23. Obstructionism is an option that cannot be ruled out. Should the Kremlin shift gears and abandon co-operation, it could harm its neighbours in any number of ways. If it banned its scientists from participation in international polar research or Arctic Council working groups, some projects would stall. If it refused to negotiate with Canada or Denmark over the delineation of national boundaries on the Lomonosov Ridge, it could keep parts of the Arctic Ocean in legal (and economic) limbo for decades. If it wished to needle the United States, it could find reasons to exclude Washington from discussions of maritime law on account of Congress’s refusal to ratify the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. These scenarios are not beyond the realm of possibility, particularly if hard-line nationalists in the Kremlin strengthen their hold on policy-making.

24. Fortunately, such scenarios appear extreme. Despite his palpable anger at Western governments’ actions, Mikhail Popov, quoted earlier, still spoke positively of the Arctic: ‘It should be noted,’ he said ‘that we are open to partnerships in the Arctic. We not only call for cooperation, but we support our intentions with actions.’ Putin, too, appears to understand just how important good working relations are.

25. Moreover, the insulation protecting the Arctic is highly resilient to the vagaries of international politics. Let two examples suffice. The infamous Arktika expedition of 2007, which ended with Russia’s flag on the seabed, was made possible only by the international web of personal and professional relationships uniting a collection of
veteran scientists, entrepreneurs and explorers from Australia, Russia, Sweden and the United States.\textsuperscript{14} And, although states are often treated as the Arctic’s only political units, the regions are equally important. At a conference in September, the head of Troms County Government and the governor of Arkhangelsk both called for Norwegian-Russian co-operation to continue regardless of the geopolitics.\textsuperscript{15} There are, in other words, myriad interconnected sub-national actors able to keep the Arctic working. The strength of their bonds would almost surely withstand a real ‘New Cold War’ – but it would clearly be preferable not to find out.

**Concluding observations and policy recommendations for the UK**

26. There are excellent reasons, therefore, to believe the Arctic will escape the worst of the fall-out from Eastern European tensions. It is a region whose military-strategic significance is far lower than its economic-strategic significance, and in which habits of co-operation are well-established. Everyone has an economic stake in its continued stability, and Russia’s is of virtually existential size.

27. The regeneration of Russia’s Arctic military presence is partly driven by the felt need to restore a base level of capability following the post-Soviet atrophy. This imperative ties into the Arctic’s place in Russia’s psyche as well as concerns caused by the Arctic’s increasing accessibility – and thus diminishing defensive quality. But the region’s accessibility is driving military investment in a ‘positive’ sense as well: very simply, the security needed to anchor Russia’s all-or-nothing economic plans demands it. Along with the coast guard and FSB, the armed forces will provide the presence, surveillance capability and contingency-response capacity needed to support the government’s civilian agencies – and the operations of international commercial actors.

28. Western governments could change Russia’s strategic calculus if they carry their military response too far north. The imposition of oil and gas sanctions already qualifies as a strategic Arctic thrust, though one Moscow will aim to return somewhere other than the Arctic. Should it believe a military follow-up is in the offing, however, even its economic ambitions may not suffice to dissuade it from responding militarily too. This is a scenario the ‘West’ should take care to avoid.

29. Bearing these arguments in mind, what actions should the United Kingdom take? The ‘Arctic Policy Framework’ (2013) is the document defining the UK’s current posture towards the Arctic.\textsuperscript{16} It formalises Britain’s commitment to the region’s security and stability, and states its intention to pursue that goal through defence engagement and bilateral security co-operation. The UK should make good on this intention. Active partnerships (such as with Norway and Sweden, with whom it has bilateral defence agreements) and engagement in plurilateral groupings (such as the Northern Group) have many benefits. They reassure allies of our intention to remain present; help them improve their defence capacities; yield cold-weather
training opportunities for UK forces; and generally contribute to a strong political and military fabric across the ‘sub-Arctic’ region.

30. More specifically, the UK should demonstrate its intention to remain engaged in the north by replacing its stable of Maritime Patrol Aircraft after the next Strategic Defence and Security Review. Norway has picked up the slack since the demise of the UK’s Nimrods and now patrols a portion of the North Sea that would ordinarily be Britain’s responsibility. Oslo is understandably keen to see the UK resume aerial patrols, and given the likelihood that maritime traffic in the Greenland-Iceland-UK Gap and North Sea will gradually increase, there is every reason it should.

31. The British government should also commit to maintaining, if not increasing, the number of Marines and other personnel it puts through cold-weather training facilities in Norway’s High North. These facilities are expensive to keep open, not least because Norway gives countries like the UK such a good rate for using them. The UK would derive clear benefit from continued access to Norway’s facilities, but committing longer-term would also be the kind of tangible engagement Norway is seeking from its NATO allies. Similarly, the UK should continue participating in Exercise Cold Response, the Norwegian-led biennial international military exercise in which 14,000 troops (including Britain’s) partook in 2012.17

32. The UK should adopt a considered stance on a northward NATO ‘pivot’. Any change in posture that made NATO a de facto Arctic actor must only be made on the understanding that it is liable to trigger an energetic Russian response. In view of the Western bloc’s hesitancy to commit itself to anything more than a half-hearted trial of strength with Russia so far, opening up a second, potentially military-strategic front is probably unwise.

33. Finally, the UK should rebuild Russian and Eastern European expertise in the Ministry of Defence and Foreign Office. The atrophy in their capacities since 1991 may be partly responsible for the seeming failure to foresee the price of EU and NATO eastward drift. More importantly at the present juncture, its reversal now will not only improve the UK’s grasp of European geopolitics, but also strengthen its voice in NATO and on the Continent.

The author gratefully acknowledges the valuable advice and research input of Dr Igor Sutyagin and Ben Shook.

September 2014

1 The Arctic states are: Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Norway, Russia, the United States, Iceland, Finland and Sweden. The first five are the acknowledged coastal states, although Iceland considers itself one as
well.

2 The text of the Declaration can be found here: http://www.oceanlaw.org/downloads/arctic/Iulissat_Declaration.pdf


5 An article in the New York Times covered Gorbachev’s speech, and is available in the online archives: http://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/02/world/soviet-proposes-arctic-peace-zone.html


8 The government’s aims were enunciated in its 2008 Arctic Strategy, a short English analysis of which was written by Katarzyna Zysk of the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies: http://www.geopoliticsnorth.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=100:russian-arctic-strategy&catid=52:uncategorised

9 Data from the US Geological Survey’s 2008 findings can be found at the accompanying link. It should be borne in mind that the estimates are probabilistic. Moreover, the mere presence of hydrocarbons is entirely separate from their extractability at an economically attractive price. USGS, ‘Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle,’ 2008 http://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2008/3049/fs2008-3049.pdf

10 Information on NORDREG can be found here: http://www.mondaq.com/canada/x/114788/Marine+Shipping/NORDREG+now+Mandatory+Within+the+Northwest+Passage

11 RIA Novosti interview, ‘Russian official interviewed on key areas of new military doctrine’ (trans. BBC Monitoring), September 2, 2014.


13 RIA Novosti, op. cit.

14 The concise history of the expedition written by one of its participants deserves wider circulation: http://www.explorers.org/flag_reports/Mike_McDowell_Flag_42_Report.pdf

Importantly, as laid out on page 7, the document is an exposition of the UK government’s policies towards the Arctic, not a strategy: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/251216/Adapting_To_Change_UK_policy_towards_the_Arctic.pdf

Information on the last and forthcoming editions of Cold Response can be found here: http://mil.no/exercises/coldresponse/Pages/about.aspx