

A Supporting Paper to the Mind the Gap Series By Robin Ashby, Director General UK Defence Forum; Rapporteur, High North Observatory



The reassertion of strategic competition in the High North has been accompanied by a proliferation of national and institutional Arctic policy documents. Between 2020 and 2026, Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Norway, Canada, Denmark, the European Union and NATO have all published or substantially updated their Arctic strategic frameworks. This paper surveys those documents, identifies their common threads and significant divergences, and assesses where declared policy aligns with — or falls short of — actual investment and capability. It is intended as a reference companion to the Mind the Gap series rather than a standalone analytical paper. The indigenous dimension of Arctic governance — including the legal arguments around Sami national claims and the application of historical legal precedents to indigenous sovereignty, explored by Joe Fallon in ICE3 of the underlying Vuollai Rahkadus series — lies beyond the security-focused scope of this paper but represents an important parallel body of analysis to which readers with broader Arctic governance interests are directed.

The survey confirms one finding above all others: the gap between strategic aspiration and operational reality is a consistent feature across Western documents, while Russia's strategy — whatever its implementation shortcomings — has been executed with greater consistency and at greater resource intensity than any Western equivalent until very recently.

Russia: Strategy 2035 — Declared and Delivered

Russia is the one actor in this survey that emphatically did publish an Arctic strategy — two related documents signed into law in March and October 2020 respectively: the Fundamentals of State Policy in the Arctic to 2035 and the Strategy for Development of the Arctic Zone to 2035. Together they constitute the most comprehensive Arctic strategic framework of any nation, covering military posture, economic development, Northern Sea Route governance,

infrastructure investment, and the social development of Arctic communities.

The 2035 Strategy is notable for several reasons. It explicitly acknowledges the growth of conflict potential in the Arctic as a threat — a departure from earlier Russian documents which maintained cooperative rhetoric alongside military build-up. It commits to a continuous increase in military capabilities in the Arctic zone. It sets an 80 million tonne annual cargo target for the Northern Sea Route — originally by 2024, subsequently revised to 2030 after actual volumes, while reaching a record high of approximately 38 million tonnes in 2024, fell well short of the original ambition. And it frames the NSR as falling substantially within Russian national jurisdiction — a position that puts Moscow in direct legal conflict with Western states that assert freedom of navigation under UNCLOS.

The strategy's implementation record is mixed. On the military side, the base network along the Northern Sea Route has been progressively restored and in some cases rebuilt, the Northern Fleet has received the Borei-A and Yasen-M classes, and the FSB Border Service infrastructure has been strengthened. The icebreaker fleet has expanded — four Project 22220 nuclear-powered vessels are now in service. NSR cargo volumes reached a record high of approximately 38 million tonnes in 2024 despite Western sanctions — significant growth, but less than half of the original target for that year, with the 80 million tonne ambition now pushed to 2030. On the economic development side, the ambitious targets have been undermined by sanctions, the departure of Western energy partners, and the diversion of state resources to the Ukraine war. The Rossiya Project 10510 super-icebreaker has been delayed to 2030. Social development in Arctic communities remains patchy.

The most significant implementation failure — not anticipated in the 2035 Strategy — is the destruction of the conventional Arctic ground force in Ukraine. The strategy assumed the continued availability of the 80th and 200th Arctic brigades as the landward shield of the Kola Peninsula bastion. Both have been effectively destroyed as specialist formations, with recovery not assessed until the mid-to-late 2030s. The 2035 Strategy's military objectives in the High North are consequently being pursued with a nuclear and maritime posture that remains intact, and a conventional ground capability that has been largely spent.

United States: From NSAR 2022 to the 2024 DoD Arctic Strategy

The United States published its National Strategy for the Arctic Region in October 2022, followed by an implementation plan in 2023 and a Department of Defense Arctic Strategy in July

2024. Together these represent the most comprehensive US Arctic strategic framework since the Cold War.

The 2022 NSAR organises US Arctic interests around four pillars: security, climate change and environmental protection, sustainable economic development, and international cooperation and governance. Its security pillar commits to defending the US Arctic homeland, deterring strategic attack, and maintaining freedom of navigation. It explicitly names Russia as the primary security challenge and China as a growing concern whose dual-use Arctic research activities warrant close monitoring.

The 2024 DoD Arctic Strategy adopts a monitor-and-respond approach — a calibrated posture that reflects the reality of US global commitments and the need to balance Arctic requirements against Indo-Pacific priorities. It commits to enhancing domain awareness, deepening cooperation with Arctic allies, and building cold-weather capable joint force capacity. The reactivation of the 11th Airborne Division in Alaska in 2022, the deployment of HIMARS to Shemya Island in 2024, and the expansion of the Defense Cooperation Agreements with Norway, Denmark, Finland and Sweden all represent concrete implementation of the strategy's intent.

The significant caveat is the Trump administration. President Trump has not issued his own Arctic strategy as of early 2026, and key Arctic policy posts across federal agencies remain unfilled. His expressed interest in acquiring Greenland, his ambivalence toward NATO Article 5 commitments, and his administration's posture toward European allies have introduced uncertainty into the US Arctic commitment that the Biden-era strategies did not anticipate. The 2024 DoD Arctic Strategy should therefore be read as a statement of institutional intent rather than a guarantee of continued political direction.

United Kingdom: Looking North and the Integrated Review Refresh

The United Kingdom published its third iteration of the Arctic Policy Framework — Looking North — in February 2023, consolidating existing UK policies under a single integrated framework for the first time. The document reflects the changed security environment following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and is more explicitly security-focused than its predecessors. It commits the UK to being an active, reliable and influential partner in the Arctic across four priority areas: security and geopolitics, climate and environment, science and research, and economic development.

The UK's position is distinctive: it is not an Arctic state but describes itself as the nearest neighbour to the region. This formulation — accurate geographically, slightly strained legally — reflects the UK's genuine interest in High North security while acknowledging that it operates in the Arctic by invitation and partnership rather than by sovereign right.

Looking North's security commitments are modest in their specificity. The Integrated Review refresh of 2023 goes somewhat further, stating that developments in the High North have direct consequences for the Euro-Atlantic and the UK's place within it. But the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee's November 2023 report — *Our Friends in the North* — delivered the frankest assessment: long-standing concerns that the UK has insufficient resources to meet its aspirations for a meaningful security presence in the High North. The Royal Navy's single ice-capable patrol ship, the nine P-8 Poseidons covering a vast operational canvas, and the Camp Viking establishment in 2023 as the belated permanent hub for Arctic ground operations all reflect a capability that is growing but remains below the level the strategic documents imply.

The gap between the UK's declared Arctic ambition and its current deployed capability is the most consistent finding of independent scrutiny of UK Arctic policy since 2013. The Strategic Defence Review of 2025 and the subsequent Type 26 agreement with Norway, the HMS Prince of Wales carrier strike group deployment to the High North planned for 2026, and the Lunna House Agreement represent the most concrete steps yet toward closing it.

Norway: The Indispensable Ally

Norway occupies a unique position in the High North strategic landscape — the only NATO member with a land border with Russia in the Arctic, the principal custodian of the Barents Sea, and the state with the deepest and most sustained institutional knowledge of Russian Arctic military activity. Norway does not publish a single Arctic strategy document in the manner of the US or UK, but its Long-Term Defence Plan 2024 represents a comprehensive restatement of its Arctic strategic priorities.

The 2024 Long-Term Defence Plan commits to expanding the Norwegian Army from one to three brigades, growing the Home Guard to 45,000 troops, and increasing defence spending toward 3% of GDP — among the most ambitious NATO burden-sharing commitments in

Europe. The confirmation in August 2025 of the Type 26 frigate procurement as Norway's largest ever defence investment, and the Lunna House Agreement with the UK, represent the operationalisation of a strategic relationship that has deepened dramatically since 2022.

Norway's Arctic policy is distinctive in two respects. First, it maintains the most granular intelligence picture of Russian Northern Fleet activity of any Western ally — a product of geography, persistent surveillance investment, and decades of institutional focus that cannot easily be replicated by partners further from the theatre. Second, Norway has consistently advocated for a NATO Arctic posture that is calibrated and deliberate rather than provocative — reflecting a judgement that managing escalation risk in a theatre where Russia's nuclear assets are geographically concentrated requires care as well as deterrence. That judgement is well-founded and occasionally under-appreciated by allies further from the consequences.

Canada: The Northwest Passage and the Investment Gap

Canada's Arctic policy has historically been shaped by two preoccupations: the sovereignty of the Northwest Passage — which Canada treats as internal waters, a position the United States contests — and the social and economic development of its northern indigenous communities. The security dimension, while always present, has been secondary to these domestic priorities in most Canadian Arctic policy documents.

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine significantly shifted Canada's Arctic strategic posture. Canada has committed billions to Arctic security — over-the-horizon radar modernisation under NORAD, expanded maritime surveillance, new support ships, Arctic patrol vessels, and domestic ammunition production. The ICE Pact — a trilateral icebreaker procurement arrangement with the US and Finland announced in 2024 — represents a meaningful step toward the industrial cooperation that Canada's Arctic ambitions require but have historically lacked.

The capability gap remains significant. Canada has the largest Arctic territory of any NATO member and the fewest resources persistently deployed in it. The Northwest Passage is increasingly navigable, increasingly interesting to both commercial and military actors, and remains inadequately monitored. A 2025 assessment noted that Canada is investing billions into Arctic security but that the timeline for delivery of key capabilities — radar systems, vessels, surveillance infrastructure — extends well into the 2030s.

Denmark: Greenland and the Western Arctic Gate

Denmark's Arctic policy is inseparable from its sovereignty responsibilities for Greenland and the Faroe Islands — responsibilities that give it jurisdiction over vast Arctic and North Atlantic waters including the western approaches to the GIUK Gap. For most of the post-Cold War period, Denmark managed those responsibilities with modest resources and limited political attention from Copenhagen.

2025 changed that comprehensively. Two Arctic and North Atlantic agreements — signed in January and October 2025 — committed total investments of \$13.7 billion in new Arctic capabilities: five new Arctic patrol vessels, maritime patrol aircraft, a new Joint Arctic Command headquarters in Nuuk, satellite surveillance, long-range drones, air-to-air refuelling, 16 additional F-35s bringing the Danish fleet to 43 aircraft, and a new subsea telecommunications cable between Denmark and Greenland. A specialist Arctic unit is being established under Special Operations Command.

The scale of this investment — the largest in Danish Arctic history by a substantial margin — reflects two simultaneous drivers: the genuine strategic requirement to cover the western approaches to the GIUK Gap, which NATO's eastern-focused attention had left under-resourced, and the political pressure created by President Trump's renewed expressions of interest in acquiring Greenland. Denmark's response has been to demonstrate, through concrete investment rather than diplomatic protest, that it takes its Arctic sovereignty responsibilities seriously and that Greenland's future lies within the European family of nations.

China: The Near-Arctic State and the Polar Silk Road

China published its first and only Arctic Policy White Paper in January 2018 — the most detailed official statement of Chinese Arctic strategy, and a document whose careful legal construction repays close reading. The White Paper describes China as a near-arctic state on the grounds that its natural conditions and changes have a direct impact on China's climate, environment, agriculture and economic development. The self-designation drew scepticism from Arctic governments and analysts, since China's northernmost territory lies approximately 1,400 kilometres from the Arctic Circle, but the legal argument it supports is substantive: as a signatory to UNCLOS and the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, China claims rights of scientific research, freedom of navigation, overflight, fishing, and resource exploration in the Arctic high seas that are legally difficult to contest.

China's position on freedom of navigation in the Arctic is worth noting explicitly, given the broader framing of this paper: Beijing explicitly endorses freedom of navigation under UNCLOS, stating that the management of Arctic shipping routes should be conducted in accordance with international law and that the freedom of navigation enjoyed by all countries should be ensured. This formally aligns China with Western states and against Russia's jurisdictional claims over the Northern Sea Route — a genuine tension within the Russia-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership that neither party presses publicly, since China requires Russian cooperation for NSR access and Russia requires Chinese investment to offset Western sanctions. The tension is real nonetheless, and will sharpen as Chinese NSR traffic grows.

The White Paper's central economic ambition is the Polar Silk Road — Arctic shipping lanes developed as extensions of the Belt and Road Initiative, providing alternative trade routes between Asia, Europe and North America that bypass the Suez Canal and shorten distances by approximately 40%. Chinese state enterprises have participated in feasibility studies and infrastructure development along Russia's Arctic coast. China has conducted Arctic expeditions annually since 2016 and has operated its Yellow River Station on Svalbard since 2004 — a research facility whose dual-use potential has been noted by the Pentagon and Nordic security services. China commissioned its third polar icebreaker, *Jidi*, in 2024, alongside the *Xue Long* and *Xue Long 2*.

The White Paper's public caution — emphasising science, cooperation and respect for Arctic state sovereignty — sits alongside a more ambitious military strategic discourse that the Chinese National Defence University's Science of Military Strategy 2020 makes explicit, describing the Arctic as the main direction in which Chinese national interests are expanding and envisaging future PLA missions there. China's stated goal, articulated in a 2014 State Oceanic Administration document, is to become a polar great power by 2035. The gap between the cooperative public document and the strategic military thinking is a consistent feature of Chinese Arctic policy — and the feature that Western intelligence assessments take most seriously.

China has not published an updated Arctic strategy since 2018. The 2024 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Russia, which explicitly references Arctic cooperation, and the joint naval exercises in Arctic-adjacent waters in 2023, represent the most significant practical evolution of Chinese Arctic engagement beyond the 2018 White Paper's framework. The Polar Silk Road concept — first articulated in the White Paper and referenced in the High North Observatory's supporting paper *Zashchitnyy Kupol: Russia's Protective Three-Ocean Dome* along the Northern Sea Route — remains the organising framework for Chinese Arctic economic ambition, and its implications for the balance of access and influence across the

northern maritime space are among the most consequential long-term variables in the theatre.

The European Union: From Observer to Actor

The EU has published Arctic policy documents since 2008, most recently a Joint Communication on Arctic Policy in 2021 covering climate, sustainability, international cooperation and governance. For most of its Arctic policy history, the EU has been primarily an environmental and scientific actor rather than a security one — a posture that reflects both the institutional mandate of the Commission and the political sensitivities around defence in an organisation that includes non-NATO members.

The appointment of Andrius Kubilius as the EU's first Commissioner for Defence and Space in November 2024 has begun to shift this posture. The White Paper on the Future of European Defence, published in early 2025, addresses Arctic security explicitly for the first time in an EU defence document, framing it as part of the broader challenge of European strategic autonomy. The ReArm Europe programme — up to €800 billion over the coming years, with €150 billion in SAFE loans for joint procurement — provides a financial framework within which Arctic capability investment can be funded.

The structural tension that the EU's Arctic engagement creates for the High North security architecture is worth naming directly: the UK and Norway — the two states most operationally active in the northern theatre outside the Nordic members — are not EU members. Both participate in some EU frameworks but lack full access to the European Defence Fund and SAFE procurement incentives. The bilateral UK-Norway relationship and the Nordic co-procurement model that the Mind the Gap series has documented as the most effective approach to northern defence sits substantially outside the EU institutional framework. This is not a fatal contradiction, but it is an unresolved one that the architects of European Arctic security will need to address.

NATO: From Aversion to Architecture

NATO's relationship with the Arctic has been historically ambivalent. For most of the post-Cold War period, NATO leadership actively resisted the regionalisation of Arctic security — a position shaped partly by disagreements between Canada and Norway about Alliance roles in the

region, and partly by a general wariness about provoking Russia in a theatre that remained relatively stable.

The invasion of Ukraine ended that ambivalence. The transfer of Denmark, Finland and Sweden to JFC Norfolk on 5 December 2025 — placing all seven NATO Arctic members under a single command — gave NATO something it had never previously had: a unified operational picture of the High North. The launch of Arctic Sentry in February 2026 translated that command architecture into an active enhanced vigilance activity. Regional Plan North-West provides the defence planning framework.

NATO does not publish an Arctic strategy as such — a gap that analysts have noted and that the 2024 Washington Summit's final declaration conspicuously failed to fill. What NATO has instead is an emerging operational Arctic posture built on the bilateral and multilateral frameworks described throughout this paper — JFC Norfolk, Arctic Sentry, the Nordic joint defence concept, the CAOC at Bodø, and the Forward Land Forces in Finland. Whether that posture requires formalisation in a dedicated NATO Arctic strategy is a question that remains open.

Common Threads and Significant Divergences

Across the national and institutional documents surveyed, several common themes emerge. Every Western document published since 2022 identifies Russia as the primary security challenge and Chinese Arctic engagement as a growing concern. Every document endorses the principle of freedom of navigation in Arctic waters — a position China's 2018 White Paper formally shares, in direct tension with Russia's jurisdictional claims over the NSR. Every document acknowledges the dual nature of the Arctic challenge: simultaneously a security competition and a climate emergency requiring scientific cooperation. And every document commits to increased investment, enhanced capability and deeper allied cooperation.

The divergences are equally instructive. The US documents are the most operationally specific about military posture but are now subject to political uncertainty under the Trump administration. The UK documents are the most honest about the gap between aspiration and capability. Norway's documents are the most grounded in operational reality — the product of decades of direct experience rather than strategic theorising. Canada's documents are the most ambitious in relation to actual deployed capability. Denmark's documents have transformed most dramatically in the shortest period. The EU's documents are the most institutionally

cautious but are now moving toward genuine engagement with hard security questions for the first time.

Russia's documents are alone in having been executed with sustained resource commitment over a fifteen-year period — and alone in having been significantly disrupted, not by Western countermeasures, but by Russia's own strategic decision to invade Ukraine and sacrifice its specialist Arctic ground forces in a war that its Arctic strategy did not anticipate.

Conclusion: Declaration and Reality

The most consistent finding across this survey is the gap between declared Arctic strategic ambition and operational capability — a gap that is narrowing rapidly but remains significant, and that will determine whether the window of Western conventional advantage in the High North identified in the Mind the Gap series is exploited before Russian recovery closes it.

Russia declared its Arctic intentions clearly and executed them consistently for fifteen years. Western nations declared their intentions with increasing frequency and are now beginning to execute them at meaningful scale. The question — which the concluding paper of the Mind the Gap series addresses directly — is whether the execution is fast enough.