

Russia has permanently lost the Arctic to NATO
Tom Sharpe - The Telegraph



*Russian warship Marshal Ustinov is part of the threat facing NATO in the Arctic -
Russian Defence Ministry/EPA/EFE/Shutterstock© Russian Defence
Ministry/EPA/EFE/Shutterstock*

Periodically the Arctic, the second most austere place on the planet, raises a gloved mitt for attention in the international debate. The impending [addition of Sweden and Finland to Nato](#) means that this is one of those moments.

Just four months after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, head of the UK armed forces, boldly stated that Russia has "strategically lost the war in Ukraine". First among his reasons for this was the unifying effect the war was having on NATO.

Before the invasion, the alliance was wobbling. Its senior member, the US, was asking why it had to keep paying for it whilst European countries, having largely underpaid yet benefited from its umbrella for so long, were throwing up EU-shaped alternatives. Bad ideas, but that was the European rhetoric and the US was understandably unimpressed.

Then Putin invaded Ukraine (again) and suddenly all eyes were back on the world's strongest military alliance. It wasn't long before the Arctic nations Sweden and Finland were asking to join.

Once they join, every Arctic country except Russia will be a member of NATO. That matters for the same two reasons every maritime trade area in the world matters – routes and resources.

As commercial shipping routes, the speed with which the Northeast Passage (Russia and Norway) and Northwest Passage (Canada and Alaska) will become viable

remains uncertain. The latest Met Office figures show that the amount of sea ice now is less than the 1981 to 2010 mean (when some of the starkest ice-retreat predictions were emerging) but that for the last five years, the trend has reversed a little.

In other words [the Arctic ice is proving hard to predict](#). Should the passages open up and be available for use for two or three months a year by 2030, which many forecasters predict, then they will become subject to increased rates of commercial traffic with the insurance and operating issues that this raises. At this point, the disposition of the countries bordering these routes, and which treaties they are signed up to, matters.

It's not just commercial shipping though. Russia has significant military resources in the Arctic, including its submarine-launched nuclear deterrent. The Northern Fleet, the core of the Russian navy, also has 16 nuclear-powered attack submarines that range from "old and noisy" to "new and extremely capable".

I went up against the latter in the days when I commanded a Royal Navy anti-submarine frigate and can testify to their capabilities.

Russia's flotilla of specialized submarines, oceanographic research ships, undersea drones and autonomous vehicles, sensor systems, and other undersea systems – collectively known as Gugi, the so-called "Main Directorate of Deep Sea Research" – is growing in size, capability and audacity.

Gugi is not a scientific Organisation: it is actually one of the most secretive parts of the Russian armed forces. The Northern Fleet also has more than 30 surface vessels intended for Arctic use, including two nuclear-powered missile battle-cruisers, the largest surface warships in the world. The Kalibr missile is ubiquitous, taunting the West with displays of what outstanding missile design and interoperability looks like.



Russia arctic icebreaker as confrontation with NATO builds - Ekaterina Anisimova/AFP© Provided by The Telegraph

The Northern Fleet command also has powerful land forces: two arctic motor-rifle brigades, naval infantry, special forces and reconnaissance assets are all based in the north as are maritime patrol aircraft, the occasional bomber and in excess of 70 fast jets.

In other words, the Russian north is home to an entire spectrum of conventional war fighting capabilities. A combination of sanctions, corruption, general neglect and loss of people and kit reallocated to Ukraine – reportedly most of the soldiers and marines have been sent south to the warzone – will have degraded much of Russia's Arctic-facing capabilities, but, as ever, they cannot be written off.

When it comes to resources in the High North, there is plenty to contest. Oil and gas capture the headlines with potentially 20 per cent of the world's undiscovered hydrocarbon reserves there, but there is also nickel, zinc, diamonds, rubies and methane hydrate deposits to exploit, not to mention fish and tourism.

And it's not just natural resources that could be contested. The [Nord Stream attack](#) brought into stark relief how vulnerable undersea infrastructure is. The Norwegian continental shelf is covered in such pipelines and their infrastructure has been on the receiving end of all sorts of Russian "activities" in recent years, from fishing boats with no fishing gear to drone overflights to a visit by Russian Orthodox priests who showed an ungodly level of interest in the Severomorsk to Kirkenes water supply.

It doesn't need to be conventional to pose a threat.

One of the problems with the Arctic over the years has been its governance. All regulatory bodies and treaties have either been without a legally binding mandate, not signed up to by all relevant countries or are of low international significance.

The Arctic Council, established in September 1996 but without a firm legal charter perhaps illustrates this issue. In any case the Council is now suspended due to the invasion.

The United Nations Convention on Laws of the Sea and the International Maritime Organisation both have elements of regulatory authority but without universal signatories and so on.

The problem is that the Arctic is the embodiment of "out of sight, out of mind". Flag-planting stunts, polar bear documentaries and apocalyptic ice predictions aside, most people just don't care that much.

As ever, there is one country with the resources and clout to make a difference. In October 2022 the US issued a "National Strategy for the Arctic Region", their first for many years. It focuses on security, climate change, sustainable economic development and international cooperation/governance. It's fourteen pages long but Russia is mentioned twenty-one times.

Has the invasion forced the US to finally commit resources to the High North? There are plenty of other countries that have a vested interest in ensuring Russian malfesance is regulated in the Arctic. Canada, Denmark and Norway from the Arctic

Five are the most obvious but also Iceland, Finland and Sweden as Arctic Council States with the last two now aspiring NATO members.

The six permanent participants who represent the people who actually live there must feature in all conversations and by the time you get to the 38 countries who are Arctic Council Observers, there is a long list of countries who have opposed the invasion. Both the UN and the EU have a vested interest in stability there as well.

In other words, it's not just NATO that Putin will have to stare down as and when he gets up to no good in the Arctic, it's everyone.

What can the UK do in this environment?

The UK is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a state observer on the Arctic Council, a signatory to the Svalbard Treaty and a prominent member of the G8, G20, Commonwealth and NATO. It enjoys comprehensive membership of a range of lesser Arctic bodies such as the Arctic Military Environmental Cooperation Programme (AMEC); the Arctic Ocean Science Board (AOSB) and the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) and the well established Polar Regions Unit within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office allows the UK to address many of the Arctic issues with credibility.

The Shetlands, the northern limit of UK territory, are not far from the Arctic Circle. We host the International Maritime Organisation and the UK is a major proponent of the need for maritime security. Britain has also been closely engaged with commercial operations in the Arctic since the days of whaling.

There is a role for the UK to shape sustainability in the region, as well as contributing to Arctic science through internationally respected organizations such as the British Antarctic Survey which despite its name, also has an Arctic mandate. The UK Hydrographic Office (UKHO) has a clear role to play by bringing its world-leading expertise in charting to bear.

Militarily the story is familiar to those who study UK Defence; we have some excellent equipment to use up there but not enough of it. Our attack submarines have been operating under the ice from their inception and our frigates were detecting and deterring Russian submarine activity in the vicinity of the critical trans-Atlantic cable infrastructure from the start of the Cold War.

Currently, there is one of each assigned to this task, at best. Likewise, the new fleet auxiliary vessel Proteus was purchased recently to protect our undersea cables. She's a great asset but there's only one of her and her dance card will be full from the minute she deploys until the day she pays off. We need more.

In 2021, HMS Protector, our one and only ice patrol ship, set a northerly latitude record for an RN ship but her operating schedule in the Antarctic prohibits more regular work there. The RAF's excellent new P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft is up and running but we only have nine. And so on.

In other words, the UK's role in facing down Russia in the High North is much the same as it is everywhere; strong on soft power, diplomacy, science and technical expertise but with the bare minimum of military hardware to credibly back it up.

Does this matter? In the case of the Arctic, I don't think it does. As the only major European power not meaningfully increasing defence expenditure just now the weak refrain "but that's why we have allies" is, in this case, our only choice.

The good news is that with the US now looking north and major Arctic players about to join NATO, all Russia will find as it inevitably crosses acceptable international norms of behaviour is unified diplomatic and military opposition from everyone who lives and operates there.

[Admiral Radakin](#) was right - Russia's re-invigoration of NATO is a strategic fail everywhere, including the High North.

**** Tom Sharpe is a former Royal Navy officer. He commanded an anti-submarine frigate on operations in the Greenland-Iceland-UK Gap, involving live contact with Russian submarines*