Geopolitics and Geostrategy of the GIUK Gap

Rising Stakes in a Strategic Sea Corridor

Matěj Prášil

Abstract

This study explores the geopolitical and geostrategic significance of the GIUK (Greenland, Iceland, United Kingdom) Gap, a region of the North Atlantic Ocean between those respective islands, part of the broader Arctic realm known as the High North. It begins with a short overview of the historical development of the GIUK Gap’s geopolitical and geostrategic significance, followed by an analysis of the region’s current geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics. For the analysis, Walt’s balance of threat was employed as a neorealist theoretical framework, with four specific variables chosen. This theory assumes that states try to balance potential threats. The study highlights the growing importance of the GIUK Gap for both NATO and the Russian Federation, whose interests have increasingly clashed in recent years. The paper argues that the deteriorating relations between NATO and Russia following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 have causally contributed to the growing importance of the GIUK Gap.

Keywords

GIUK; Arctic; High North; NATO; Russian Federation; Balance of Threat; Power.

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Introduction

The primary objective of the presented paper is to map in detail the geopolitical and geostrategic significance of the GIUK (Greenland, Iceland, United Kingdom) Gap. The region of the North Atlantic Ocean to which, in the academic and policy-decision community, little attention is paid. This paper, in the form of an analytical study, will expand on the relatively small amount of published publications.

The specific research question which will be answered throughout my paper is:

*Can a causal relationship be traced between the generally deteriorating relations between NATO and the Russian Federation and the growing importance of the GIUK Gap?*

For this paper, I have identified 2014, the year of Russia’s annexation of Crimea, as the moment when the relations between NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) and the Russian Federation objectively sharply deteriorated. The choice of these actors, i.e., NATO and Russia, was driven by their long-standing high level of activity and their mutual geopolitical and geostrategic animosity in the GIUK Gap region.

The Arctic region had significant geopolitical and geostrategic importance during the Cold War. At that time, some of the specific geographical segments of that area were considered to be the most militarised zones in the world. The most visible example of that segment was the GIUK Gap, which NATO at that time referred to as a “death zone” (Marshall 2016, p. 278).

After the end of the Cold War, as well as with the new-emerging threats from the Middle East, etc., the Arctic region (and GIUK Gap) almost immediately lost its popularity among academic and policy-decision communities in the Western hemisphere. Most military facilities were closed or restricted to a shallow operational level. Keflavik’s US airbase was closed in 2006, military exercises of NATO troops became limited compared to the Cold War levels, a NATO command for North Atlantic Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic was deactivated and dissolved, etc.

However, due to the deteriorating strategic environment over the last few years, we observe an inevitable revival of the Arctic’s geopolitical and geostrategic significance for various actors. United States (and NATO as such) are reactivating their military structures and facilities in the region: restoration of the airbase mentioned above in Keflavik in 2017, more extensive NATO military exercises focusing on cold weather operations (*Trident Juncture* or *Cold Response*), re-establishment of the *NATO Joint Forces Atlantic Command* in 2020 or reactivation of the US 2nd Fleet whose primary operational space is North Atlantic (The Barents Observer 2016 and NATO 2020).

On the opposite side, Russia has become more assertive in international relations in general (annexation of Crimea, the war in Ukraine, and well before the war in Georgia, etc.), but also specifically in the Arctic space. There have been extremely high expenditures on Northern Fleet capabilities in the last ten years (cf. The Military Balances 2013 and The Military Balances 2023) or the increasingly aggressive framing of Russian security and foreign strategy documents focusing on the Arctic region (cf. Russian Foreign Policy Concept 2013 and Russian Foreign Policy Concept 2016).

All the above is slowly moving the Arctic region and, more specifically, the GIUK Gap back as an area of interest for policy-making institutions and academia. In the following text, I will briefly introduce Walt’s balance of threat theory; based on this theory, I will operationalise specific variables, which will be later used to analyse the current geopolitical dynamics of the GIUK Gap.

**Methodology**

In the first part, I will proceed with the description, as my goal will be to introduce readers to the theoretical postulates of Walt’s defensive neorealism. Precisely, his balance of threat theory. Moreover, a brief introduction to the broader theory of neorealism will be provided.

Walt’s balance of threat theory (Walt 1987) will be used in the part focusing on the region’s current geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics. In that section, I will choose four variables which, according to Walt, lead to a high or low perception of threat. This perception of threat then directly affects concrete steps of states (or alliances of states such as NATO) in international relations.

The analytical part will be fully grounded within the individual descriptive case study. In this case study, I will analyse the behaviour of the two most prominent actors (specifically NATO and the Russian Federation) concerning the annexation of Crimea. Even though those two actors are not the only ones in the region, they are by far the most active ones. Therefore, this analysis will give us a relatively complex image of full geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics in the Arctic.

The case study will be explanatory because my intention will be “to find and describe the relationship between different aspects of the phenomenon under study” (Babbie 2007). For this purpose, a combination of analysis and synthesis will be used. In one specific part focusing on offensive intentions, content analysis of the strategic and policy documents will be deployed. The whole research will be conducted exclusively qualitatively with some illustrative data and figures. The research, as such, is highly empirical and uses the theoretical framework of Walt’s balance of threat.

In this text, geopolitics and geostrategy will be seen within the traditional definition as a spatial study, but primarily the “spatial study and practice of international relations” (Gray 1999, 164), i.e. within the classical (neo)realist paradigm as a determination of and the assertion of a power-defined national interest in space (Morgenthau 1949). More specifically, the text will discuss the intersection, interaction, and dynamics of the aforementioned actors’ national interests in the Arctic’s geographic space.

**Defensive Neorealism and Balance of Threat Theory**

Stephen M. Walt first developed the neorealist balance of threat theory in his essay *Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power* published in 1985 (Walt 1985). He then developed these ideas in even greater detail in his 1987 book *The Origins of Alliances* (Walt 1987). Walt agrees
with the father of neorealism, Kenneth N. Waltz (1979), on most of his neorealism ideas and conclusions; for example, he argues that the international environment is anarchic, and states struggle to survive in it. However, while Waltz considers the balance of power the central aspect of the international environment, Walt emphasises the balance of threats much more (cf. Waltz 1979 and Walt 1987).

Based on this, Walt also differs from Waltz's view of how states try to balance. While Waltz argues that states always try to do so by allying with a weaker actor, Walt argues that states can preserve themselves in both ways, either by siding with the weaker state (balancing) or with the stronger state (bandwagoning).

So, while balancing aligns with Waltz's theory of the balance of power, bandwagoning directly contradicts it. Walt argues that power attracts states; therefore, the stronger a particular state is, the more likely it is that other (usually weaker) states will want to become its allies. Yet, simultaneously, he argues that if a state's power capacity declines, its allies are more likely to prefer neutrality or even to side with another stronger actor. In other words, states, according to Walt, "are not just balancing against greater power, but more importantly against a greater threat." (Walt 1987, 7-8).

Waltz's theory of the balance of power considers only one variable: the variable of power. However, according to Walt, there are four other variables to remember.

Those variables are:

1. Aggregated power,
2. geographic proximity,
3. offensive capabilities,
4. offensive intentions (Walt 1987, 9).

Walt’s theory genuinely received some criticism from specific parts of the academic spectrum. Due to the limited space of the article, I will mention just one author and one publication – Robert G. Kaufman and his article “To Balance or To Bandwagon?” Alignment Decisions in 1930s Europe, published in 1992 (Kaufman 1992). This article even received a reaction from Walt, to which I will also refer later in this text (Walt 1992).

Kaufman challenges Walt's neorealist view of alliances formed in response to the Nazi threat (1933-1941). He argues that Walt's focus on the international system is too narrow and that:

1. Walt's theory doesn't fully account for how a state's internal situation influences alliance decisions,
2. Walt presents a limited view where states either balance against a threat or bandwagon with it. Kaufman argues there were other options, like appeasement, neutrality, or seeking alliances with non-dominant powers and finally,
3. The article criticises Walt for underestimating the risks of delaying a response to a threat. It suggests his view of diplomacy during the 1930s neglects the costs of waiting to address a growing threat (Kaufman 1992, 419-420).

Walt addressed these criticisms in the mentioned reply, *Alliances, Threats, and U.S. Grand Strategy*. He clarifies that his focus on core factors like power, geography, and capabilities doesn't diminish the role of ideology. He emphasises how ideologies like Marxism-Leninism can be a significant source of conflict (Walt 1992, 450).

Walt acknowledges that domestic politics influenced the pace and focus of military buildup during the interwar period. However, he argues that domestic factors weren't the primary determinant of each nation's response to Nazi Germany. In his view, the main challenges faced by European powers stemmed from strategic complexities, including multiple threats, unclear German intentions, and disadvantageous geography (Walt 1992, 461).

**Operationalisation of Walt's Variables**

Before answering the research question set out in the introduction of this paper, it is necessary to operationalise the respective variables. Therefore, in this chapter, Walt's variables will be elaborated in more detail, with the focus now being on their specific application in the context of the GIUK Gap. Similarly, it will also describe how and based on which sources the analytical part of the thesis will test these variables.

**Aggregated Power**

In analysing this variable, military capabilities and defence spending will be crucial. Specifically, in the case of the Russian Federation, these capabilities can play a significant role in NATO's assessment and perception of the Russian threat and vice versa. Thus, based on Walt's theory, it is very reasonable to assume that if the Russian Federation or NATO possesses quantitatively or qualitatively superior military capabilities, the other side will perceive them as a threat to its security and interests in the region in general.

Therefore, the analytical part of the thesis will include a comparison of the military capabilities of both actors (i.e. the Russian Federation and NATO) in the field of conventional weapons. The comparison will be made with a primary emphasis on the geographical area of the GIUK Gap (in the case of the Russian Federation, e.g. the capabilities of the Northern Fleet; in the case of NATO, e.g. the capabilities concentrated on bases in Greenland: e.g. Thule, UK: e.g. Royal Navy Faslane or Royal Air Force Lossiemouth and in Iceland: e.g. Keflavik).

I will rely here mainly on the information from the annual publication *The Military Balances* by the *Institute for Strategic Studies* (e.g. The Military Balances 2013 or 2023).

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2 Russian naval fleet with its HQ in Severomorsk, for which the Arctic, the North Atlantic, and therefore the GIUK Gap, is a primary area of interest.
Geographic Proximity

For this variable, I will primarily analyse whether the geographic proximity of the NATO-Russia alliance in the North Atlantic region or the GIUK Gap, respectively, leads to an increased threat perception by both actors and to a subsequent increase in the geopolitical and strategic importance of the GIUK Gap region. This analysis will include, for example, an assessment of the mutual "proximity" of constructing new military bases and modernising the existing ones in the region, an assessment of the frequency of violations of NATO airspace by Russian Federation aircraft, etc.

For this variable, I will rely primarily on academic and expert papers describing the geographic dimension of the Russian naval strategy, especially the so-called Bastion strategy (e.g. Boulègue 2019). But equally important will be secondary sources from (various) media (e.g. The Barents Observer 2011 or The New York Times 2017) describing, for example, the development and modernisation of NATO bases in Norway or the current enlargement of the Alliance by Finland and, most recently, by Sweden.

For this variable, I will rely mainly on academic articles, media outlets, and the Russian Military Incident Tracker dataset (Russian Military Incident Tracker 2023) of the American Security Project.

Offensive Capabilities

Walt's penultimate variable describes offensive capabilities. This variable can be used to analyse how one actor can threaten the territorial integrity and sovereignty of another actor. This part will mainly present and analyse the frequency and size of military exercises of both actors that have taken place in the North Atlantic and Arctic, respectively. In analysing this variable, I will rely on strategic documents of both actors, open secondary sources from the media, monographs, and expert papers dealing with this topic.

Offensive Intentions

This Walt variable assesses the aggressiveness of actors' behaviour in the international environment, both at the diplomatic and foreign policy levels. Thus, this section will aim to determine whether the actor perceives the foreign policy intentions of another actor as aggressive. In this case, according to Walt, a broad coalition of states usually tries to counterbalance (i.e., confront) the actor with aggressive intentions.

To analyse this particular variable, I will rely primarily on official foreign policy documents from both the Russian Federation and NATO, such as the 2013 and 2016 Russian Foreign Policy Concept and the NATO Strategic Concept from 2010 and 2022. As in the case of geographic proximity, these official documents will be appropriately supplemented with information from open media sources or official speeches by respective officials.

Analysis of Geopolitical and Geostrategic Dynamics of the GIUK Gap

This chapter aims to analyse the current geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics of the region of the GIUK Gap and, through this analysis, answer the research question formulated at the very beginning of this paper. For this purpose, Walt's threat balance theory, or its specific variables
(aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, offensive intentions), introduced and operationalised earlier in this paper, will be applied.

**The Perspective of Aggregated Power**

The first of Walt’s variables is *aggregate power*. In recent years, following the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, there has been an obvious renewed interest in both NATO and Russia in the Arctic region, specifically the GIUK Gap. A concrete example would be the 2018 reactivation of the US 2nd Fleet, which is tasked to operate specifically in the North Atlantic region and, thus, the GIUK Gap (BBC 2018 and The Military Balances 2019, 77). The same year also saw the deployment of the US aircraft carrier *USS Harry S. Truman (CVN-75)* as part of the *Trident Juncture* exercise (The Military Balances 2019, 77), which docked in both Iceland and the UK (United Kingdom) during the exercise and was the first US aircraft carrier to cross the Arctic Circle since 1991 (USNI News 2018).

Another example would be the reopening of the US air base in Keflavik (The Barents Observer 2016). Interestingly, the decision to reopen this base was made in the same month in which the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 happened (Pincus 2020, 53). This air base is home to, among other equipment, the *Boeing P-8 Poseidon* aircraft, a more modern but also heavier aircraft than the previous *P-3 Orion* (The Atlantic Council, 2018). According to the top NATO and US military officials, the reactivation of the 2nd Fleet and the reopening of the Keflavik base were driven primarily by concerns about Russian submarine activity in the region (The Atlantic Council 2018 and The Military Balances 2019, 77).

The annual journal The Military Balances (2019, 77) also mentions Russia's submarine superiority as a potential threat to NATO interests. It argues that:

"Russian force levels – including submarines – remain substantially lower than those of Soviet forces at the end of the Cold War (...) these may remain relatively low by historical standards, but the potency of individual Russian platforms, together with the reduction in NATO anti-submarine-warfare (ASW) and blue-water naval capabilities since the end of the Cold War, suggest that Russian capabilities would pose a significant challenge to Alliance forces" (The Military Balances 2019, 77).

In this context, particular mention is made of the new Russian Yasen-class nuclear submarines (Severodvinsk) or the modernisation of the Russian Antey-class nuclear submarine (Oscar II). Specifically, in the GIUK Gap region, the UK has seen increased Russian activity around Scotland’s *Royal Navy’s Faslane submarine base* in recent years (The Military Balances 2019, 77).
Figure 1. Map of Russian military districts as of February 2024

The increased Russian perception of the region’s geopolitical importance is matched by the fact that the Northern Fleet has been officially declared Russia’s fifth military district as of 1 January 2021. This only underlines the importance Russia has seen in recent years in the GIUK Gap region and, hence, the Arctic, which is the main operational area of the fleet. However, the system and naming of military districts in the Russian Federation were updated again in February 2024 (see Figure 1), the Northern Fleet, respectively the Leningrad Military District still constitute a separate military district. Meanwhile, a new air defence division was established under this fleet already in 2019, equipped with, among other things, the S-300 (SA-10 Grumble) and S-400 (RS-SA-21 Growler) missile systems (The Military Balances 2022, 231). A comparison of the military equipment of the Northern Fleet in 2013 and 2023 can be seen in the attached Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of the Northern Fleet equipment in 2013 and 2023

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2023</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Navy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submarines</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSBN (Nuclear-Powered Ballistic Missile Submersible Ship)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactical</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSGN (Nuclear-Powered Guided Missile Submersible Ship)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to the aforementioned technical equipment, the Northern Fleet Military District currently includes two motorised brigades designed for combat in Arctic terrain, a marine brigade and an artillery and anti-aircraft brigade (The Military Balance 2022, p. 231). In 2013, it was only a mechanised marine regiment and an artillery and anti-aircraft brigade with a combat support regiment (The Military Balance 2013, p. 202). A comparison of the military equipment of the Northern Fleet shows that there has been a significant increase in the category of fighters and, on the contrary, a particular decrease in the submarine capabilities of the fleet. However, the latter is likely due to the large-scale modernisation of Russian submarines, the acquisition of entirely new types, and the associated phasing out of obsolete Soviet types (The Military Balance 2022, p. 171).

The evolution of NATO's regional capabilities is difficult to summarise in a single clear table. The Alliance does not yet have a specific operational multinational group tasked with a permanent presence in the Arctic region or directly in the GIUK Gap. A possible first step toward such a creation could be the establishment of NATO Atlantic Command in 2020, whose mission is to:

"...provide coherent command arrangements for Allied forces, maintain situational awareness, conduct exercises, and draw up operational plans covering vast geographic areas, from the US East Coast, past the Greenland-Iceland-U.K. gap and into the Arctic."

(NATO 2020).

However, the region already hosts, among others, two US air bases at Keflavik in Iceland and Thule in Greenland, the Danish Arctic Command in Nuuk, a British submarine base in Faslane, Scotland, and the previously mentioned US 2nd Fleet.
It is clear from the above overview of the aggregate power of Russia and NATO that there is a rapid increase in this variable. Since the annexation of Crimea, Russia’s focus on modernising and increasing the armament of the Northern Fleet is particularly evident. Equally apparent is the return of the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of the GIUK Gap for NATO, which has reactivated the US 2nd Fleet in the region since 2013, reopened the US airfield at Keflavik or established the NATO Atlantic Command. Moreover, the re-establishment of NATO Atlantic Command, the reopening of the air base in Keflavik and the reactivation of the 2nd Fleet have been officially linked to increased Russian aggression and assertiveness or directly to the occupation of Crimea as such.

**The Perspective of Geographic Proximity**

It has been mentioned several times in the text that the GIUK Gap region essentially forms a maritime border between NATO and the Russian Federation. For the Russian Navy (The Northern Fleet), crossing the GIUK Gap is the only possible way from the Norwegian Sea to the North Atlantic. In this geographical context, it is important to mention the Russian defence concept of the so-called *Bastion* (see Figure 2).

*Figure 2. Map of Russia's strategic Bastion; dark area: ambition of control, light area: ambition of denial*

(House of Commons Defence Committee 2018, 14)

The Bastion concept is based on the Soviet strategy introduced by the Ministry of Defence at the end of the USSR’s (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) existence in the early 1990s. Important to this Soviet strategy was the protection of second-strike nuclear facilities located on the Kola Peninsula. Until now, one of the most militarised areas in the world (see Figure 3). For this reason, a defensive

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3 About 2/3 of the total nuclear strike capability of the entire Russian Navy is located within the Northern Fleet (Boulègue 2019, p. 8)
perimeter was drawn up to protect these facilities, which is still considered strategic for Russian interests.

The Bastion (sometimes also called the Strategic Bastion) continues to focus on the defence of nuclear weapons on the peninsula and includes a region that extends from the Kola Peninsula towards the Barents Sea and the Norwegian Sea and further west just towards the GIUK Gap.

**Figure 3. Map of Russian military bases in the Arctic**

![Map of Russian military bases in the Arctic](image)

(German Institute for International and Security Affairs 2022)

The Bastion has a dual purpose. While in the narrowest perimeter around the peninsula, it is an inner defence and an "ambition of control," in the wider perimeter, it is then an outer defence and an "ambition of denial" (House of Commons Defence Committee 2018, p. 14 and Boulègue 2019, p. 7). Russians tend to have ambitions to achieve those goals both at sea and, in recent years, even in the air. While the submarines and ships of the Northern Fleet have been used to protect the Bastion at sea for several years, sixty combat aircraft have been newly deployed to the Northern
Matěj Prášil

Fleet to protect the Bastion in the air since 2016, and a new air defence division in 2019, as stated in the previous chapter of this paper.

Such naval and air activities by Russia within the Bastion close to the GIUK Gap pose a significant threat to SLOCs (Sea Lines of Communication) important to communications between North America and Europe. NATO was aware of this threat and since 1988 has had a Globus I radar system deployed on a Norwegian islet Vardo northwest of the Norwegian coast (virtually next to the Russian border) to monitor the activities of Russian forces on the Kola Peninsula and in the surrounding defence Bastion. The radar has undergone two upgrades: the first in 1999 (Globus II) and the second (Globus III) from 2016 to 2022. Other such NATO facilities that lie virtually directly on the border between Norway and the Russian Federation are the OP 247 outpost and, a little further inland, the Norwegian Army’s Porsangermoen military base (for all those bases, see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Norway’s military facilities designed to monitor Russian activity on the Kola Peninsula and in the adjacent Russian Strategic Bastion

![Map of Norway and Russia showing military facilities](image)

(House of Commons Defence Committee 2018, 14)

Denmark also plans to reopen the NATO radar base at Sornfell Peak in the Faroe Islands, which has been closed since 1 January 2007 (High North News 2022). However, a wave of protests by residents on the island has risen against the construction of the radar. In the same year, Denmark announced
it would acquire surveillance drones with plans to deploy them in Greenland. Denmark plans to invest the equivalent of $245 million in the two projects (Cryopolitics 2021). Thus, the construction of the renewed radar in the Faroe Islands will at least geographically encroach directly on the outer perimeter of the Russian strategic bastion (cf. Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 5. Location of Faroe Island

(Encyclopædia Britannica 2021)

The Svalbard archipelago is the last but certainly not the least important geographic phenomenon that impacts the region's geopolitical dynamics. It is an archipelago that has been under the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Norway since the post-war negotiations and the resulting Svalbard Treaty (signed in 1920 but legally effective since 1925). At the same time, however, this agreement allows the economic exploitation of the island by third parties and specifies that Norway may not use the island for war purposes (The Svalbard Treaty 1920).

Thus, even before the start of the Second World War, the Soviet Union had already been very active on the island economically. Russia's renewed interest in Svalbard in the context of its own geostrategic and security intentions in the region has been observable again since at least 2017 when a Russian Ministry of Defence report explicitly described Svalbard and its maritime zone as an area of potential confrontation between NATO and the Russian Federation (The Barents Observer 2017; cf. Avango & Roberts 2017, 125-143 and CSIS 2020, 3-6).
Since 2014, there have also been more frequent violations of the airspace of the Alliance states from the Russian side as well as Russian naval activity in the North Sea and North Atlantic. So far, the largest naval activity of this kind since the end of the Cold War would be in October 2019, when ten Russian submarines passed through the European part of the North Sea heading for the North Atlantic. To illustrate the frequency of airspace violations, it is important to mention that so far, the largest number of such incidents occurred in 2016: a total of 780 violations of NATO space as a whole, more than double the number of incidents before the annexation of Crimea (The Independent 2017).

Individual violations have also occurred specifically in the GIUK Gap region:
- and on 19 November 2015, two Russian Tu-160 Blackjack bombers were intercepted again in the North Sea;
- on 9 February 2017, two Russian Tu-160 Blackjack bombers were intercepted again in the North Sea;
- on 21 September 2018, two Russian Tu-160 Blackjack bombers were intercepted in the North Sea;
- on 27 March 2019, two unspecified Russian aircraft in Icelandic airspace;
— on 12 November 2021, two Russian Tu-160 Blackjack bombers in the North Sea;
— on 3 February 2022, unspecified Russian warplanes in North Sea airspace;
— on 30 April 2023, Royal Air Force Typhoon fighter jets intercepted a Russian Tu-142 maritime patrol aircraft over the Norwegian Sea (Russian Military Incident Tracker 2023).

Finally, in response to an unprecedented act of Russian aggression against Ukraine, the previously neutral Sweden and Finland have decided to join NATO, and Denmark decided to participate in the EU (European Union) initiative for defence cooperation PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation). At the time of the writing of the article both Sweden and Finland have already joined NATO. Specifically, with Finland’s entry into NATO structures, which shares a 1,340-kilometre border with Russia, the shared border (till that time 1,213 km) between NATO and Russia has more than doubled. By comparison, the northern border between Norway and Russia described above is only 200 km long.

Figure 7. Finland-Russia 1,340 km long border with highlighted border crossings

4 from which they previously in 90s opted-out
All the NATO and Russian military installations described above and the concept of a Russian strategic bastion extending into the western part of the GIUK Gap unambiguously show how close the Alliance's eastern border and the Russian Federation's western border are in this region. Since the annexation of Crimea, there has also been a significant expansion and modernisation of the military equipment of the Northern Fleet, which is tasked with the defence of the aforementioned Bastion. From the Russian side, there has also been an increase in the violation of the airspace of the Alliance states since 2014, as well as in Russian naval activity in the North Sea and the North Atlantic.

The Perspective of Offensive Capabilities

The Russian army has organised its military exercises and smaller drills in the Arctic basically without interruption since the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, in the context of increased tensions between the West and Russia following the annexation of Crimea, these military exercises have increased significantly, both in frequency and, above all, in size. Once a year, the Russian army holds one of the military exercises, either Vostok (East), Zapad (West), Tsentr (Centre), or the Caucasus (South). These exercises rotate regularly, so each year, a different exercise is held, with the GIUK Gap and Arctic areas always touched by the Zapad and Tsentr exercises, respectively.

The most recent Exercise Zapad in 2021 involved over 200,000 troops, up from 48,000 in 2017 (though some estimates spoke of up to 100,000) and 12,000 in 2013 (High North News 2021). The most recent Tsentr exercise in 2019 involved 128,000 troops (up from 100,000 in 2015 and up from 12,000 in 2011), with the primary goal, according to an official Russian statement, to "maintain a high level of combat readiness in the Arctic environment." (CNBC 2019). Chinese and Indian troops also participated in the exercise, as did the Collective Security Treaty Organization member-states.

One of Russia’s most extensive regional exercises since 2014 was the relatively new Ocean Shield exercise held in 2019 in the Baltic Sea region. This exercise was significant for its scale and the fact that both the Northern and Baltic fleets participated in it. According to official reports from the Russian side, 49 warships and 20 support ships, as well as 58 aircraft and 10,634 troops, were involved in the exercise. Ocean Shield 2019 was followed a year later by Ocean Shield 2020, which consisted of only 30 ships, but unlike the previous Ocean Shield, this exercise was based on an offensive scenario (Russian Fleet Analysis 2019 and 2020).

As already indicated above, the presence of the Northern Fleet was significant primarily in terms of strengthening cooperation between the Northern and Baltic Fleets, and the joint exercise described above also provided the Northern Fleet with first-hand experience of operating in the Baltic Sea environment. This exercise thus confirmed and reinforced the trend in recent years towards greater cooperation between the two fleets. The last separate exercise of the Northern Fleet took place in November 2023 and included 1,800 soldiers, up to 15 ships, and 40 aircraft. According to the Northern Fleet, the exercises aim to protect “the security of Russia’s merchant marine and sea lanes such as the Northeast Passage.” (Deutsche Welle 2023).
While the frequency of regular large exercises is the same as it was before 2014, the size of these exercises is increasing significantly each year. Conversely, both the frequency and the scale are increasing considerably for smaller regional exercises, including those involving the Northern Fleet. After 2014, the previously common joint exercises between Russia and some NATO member states also ceased. An example could be the annual joint naval exercises between Norway and Russia between 2010 and 2013 (The Arctic Institute 2018).

NATO has also been increasing the frequency and size of individual exercises in the region since 2014. Like the Russian Federation, NATO has regular large-scale exercises targeting the Alliance's northern flank. These exercises have occurred since the early 1950s and have been hosted, in most cases, by Norway. More recent exercises include the annual Cold Response exercises held in 2006 (10,000 troops), 2009 (7,000), 2010 (9,000), 2012 (16,000), 2014 (16,000), 2016 (15,000) and 2022 (30,000), or the (so far largest) NATO troop exercise in Norway, Trident Juncture, in which 50,000 troops participated in 2018 (AA 2022). Since 2013, the Arctic Challenge, smaller in number but no less important, has also been held every other year, with 8,000 troops participating in the last one conducted from 29 May to 9 June 2023 already with Finland as a new member of NATO (AC NATO 2023).

The most noteworthy is undoubtedly the latest Cold Response 2022 exercise, which, in addition to 30,000 troops, also involved 220 aircraft and 50 ships from 27 NATO countries and its closest partners. This makes it the largest NATO exercise in the Arctic in more than 30 years (Forsvaret 2022a). The entire exercise was then conducted from 14 March to 1 April 2022, in a period of intense tensions between the West and Russia over the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is not entirely without interest that Norway, as the host nation of the exercise, invited all 57 members of the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) to observe the exercise, yet Russia declined (Forsvaret 2022b).

Although the Russian military is still undergoing some not-always-successful reforms (ECFR 2024), its ability to fight in the Arctic environment cannot be underestimated. This ability is manifested by exercises within the Northern Fleet military district and the large regular Zapad and Tsentr exercises, as well as by several smaller drills and exercises in which units from other military districts of the Russian Federation also participate.

It also should not be entirely overlooked that while Alliance exercises are always based on a defensive scenario, Russian exercises are often based on an offensive scenario. While the frequency of regular exercises has remained the same, their size has increased significantly since the annexation of Crimea, with smaller irregular exercises and drills increasing in size and frequency. After 2014, all joint military exercises between the Alliance States and the Russian Federation held regularly until then also ceased.

The increase in frequency and size of Arctic exercises is logically occurring on the NATO side as well (although their size is still not comparable to Russia's huge regular exercises). An example would be the annual Arctic exercise Cold Response, which in 2022 - during the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine - involved approximately twice as many troops as previous exercises of the same type.
**The Perspective of Offensive Intentions**

The last foreign policy document issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry just before the annexation of Crimea was the *2013 Russian Foreign Policy Concept*. This document mentions the Arctic region 12 times, with no specific mention of the GIUK region. Aside from the mentions of "progressive practical cooperation with Northern European states" (Russian Foreign Policy Concept 2013, paragraph 65) in the Barents Sea, the Euro-Arctic region, and the Arctic as a whole, a separate paragraph 73 is devoted to the Arctic.

In this paragraph, Russia emphasises the promotion of a "proactive and constructive policy of strengthening multilateral international cooperation in the Arctic." (Russian Foreign Policy Concept 2013, paragraph 73). In the same section, however, it immediately recalls that it is pursuing its national interests in the region. It adds that Russia believes the existing international legal framework is sufficient to resolve all regional problems through negotiations successfully. In the last section on the Arctic, the document highlights the key importance of the Arctic Council. Finally, it briefly describes the possibilities and advantages of using the Northern Sea Route.

In contrast, the *2016 Russian Foreign Policy Concept* mentions the Arctic only 8 times. While the text largely replicates the content of the previous concept, it is supplemented with a sentence that already reflects the general and even regional deterioration of relations between NATO and Russia:

"Russia will resolutely counter any attempts to introduce elements of political or military confrontation in the Arctic and to politicise international cooperation in the region in general." (Russian Foreign Policy Concept 2016, paragraph 76)

From the security-policy documents, the paper will focus on the National Security Concept (2000) and its updated versions, the Russian National Security Strategy (2015 and 2021). While the Arctic region is not mentioned once in the document from 2000, the Arctic is named three times in the subsequent strategy from 2015 and twice in the latest version of 2021. More important, however, is the broader context of the references to the Arctic. While the 2015 strategy is still written with an emphasis on international cooperation (Russian National Security Strategy 2015, paragraph 99), the more recent version mentions the bilateralism and independence of Russian foreign policy with the need to "secure Russian interests in the Arctic region." (Russian National Security Strategy 2021, paragraph 17). Another change is also evident in the framing of climate change. For example, the older version of the strategy only speaks of "the consequences of climate change" (Russian National Security Strategy 2015, paragraph 23). Yet, the newer one already refers to the "necessity of adaptation and prevention" of climate change (Russian National Security Strategy 2021, paragraph 25).

The Russian Federation also issued three Arctic Strategies (2008, 2013 and 2020) on Russia's strategy in the Arctic region. However, those strategies consistently cover only the phenomena of the Northern Sea Route, which has no practical geopolitical (security-wise) impact on the GIUK Gap region. Thus, I will not further compare these documents in my paper.
NATO’s last strategic document before the annexation of Crimea is the *NATO Strategic Concept: Active Engagement, Modern Defence*, approved at the Lisbon Summit in 2010. There is not a single mention of the Arctic or the High North in it. There is not even a description of the importance of the maritime domain, which is crucial for transatlantic cooperation (NATO Strategic Concept 2010).

The two domains (i.e. the Arctic and the High North) were also completely absent from the *Alliance Maritime Strategy* implemented a year later, even though the North Atlantic forms a vital link between Alliance members in North America and Western Europe (NATO 2011). The strategic importance of the Alliance’s northern border was also omitted from *NATO’s 360-degree Approach*, first officially described in 2015, which spoke explicitly only of threats coming from the east and south (Statement by NATO Defence Ministers 2015).

The first mention of the importance of protecting SLOCs in the North Atlantic in an official NATO post-Cold War document was the 2016 *Warsaw Summit Communiqué*, which explicitly stated that:

“In the North Atlantic, as elsewhere, the Alliance will be ready to deter and defend against any potential threats, including against sea lines of communication and maritime approaches of NATO territory. In this context, we will further strengthen our maritime posture and comprehensive situational awareness.” (Warsaw Summit Communiqué 2016)

Two years later, similar thoughts appeared also in the *Brussels Summit Declaration*:

“We are reinforcing our maritime posture and have taken concrete steps to improve our overall maritime situational awareness. (...) Including the transatlantic dimension with the North Atlantic being a line of communication for strategic reinforcement.” (Brussels Summit Declaration 2018)

At the same time, however, none of the official documents to date have directly mentioned the High North and the GIUK Gap.

The first mention of the High North region in official NATO documents can be found in the *Brussels Summit Communiqué* of 2021. In this communiqué, the leaders of the Alliance member states agreed that:

“In the High North, we will continue to undertake necessary, calibrated, and coordinated activities in support of the Alliance’s security interests.” (Brussels Summit Communiqué 2021)

So far, the most important reference to the Arctic region (respectively High North) happened at the *Madrid Summit on 29 June 2022*. At that summit, an approved new Strategic Concept explicitly stated that:

“In the High North, its [the Russian] capability to disrupt Allied reinforcements and freedom of navigation across the North Atlantic is a strategic challenge to the Alliance.” (NATO Strategic Concept 2022, 4)
This sentence was a part of the broader segment warning about increasing Moscow’s military build-up and describing the Russian Federation as “the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area.” (NATO Strategic Concept 2022, 4). So far the most recent communique from the NATO summit in Vilnius covered the Arctic and High North in the same framing as the NATO Strategic Concept from 2022 (Vilnius Summit Communiqué 2023)

The analysis of the variable of offensive intentions clearly shows that the largest number of assertively formulated parts of strategic documents regarding the Arctic region can be found in the official documents of the Russian Federation. In addition, it is quite obvious that the conclusions of the official strategic documents are reflected in the concrete actions of the representatives of Russia, led by Vladimir Putin himself. It is also more than evident that there is a difference in the contextual framing of the Arctic region in documents issued before and after the annexation of Crimea.

A different approach can be seen in the case of NATO. In its strategic documents, the Alliance (despite the annexation of Crimea) completely ignored the strategic and geopolitical importance of the Arctic, High North or even the GIUK Gap until 2021. This is very likely due to the Alliance’s desire to cooperate with Russia. As much as there were slight changes in NATO’s strategic and foreign policy official outputs after the annexation of Crimea, it was not until NATO Strategic Concept 2022 that a more significant definition of NATO’s strategy towards the Arctic space occurred.

**Conclusion**

Despite the limited scope of the paper, it is apparent that a causal link between the increased geopolitical and geostrategic significance of the GIUK Gap and the Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014 can be identified. This causality has been studied using the following variables: aggregated power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions of both protagonists.

The analysis of the variables based on the defensive neorealist framework clearly showed that, compared to the pre-2014 period, the subsequent period saw an increase in geopolitical and geostrategic significance for the Russian Federation and NATO alike (simplified summary in Table 2 below). Moreover, many of the increased tensions in the region (such as military build-up, military exercises or framing of the strategic and foreign policy documents) have been quite explicitly linked to the annexation of Crimea.

**Table 2. Simplified summary of analysed Walt’s defensive neorealist variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Evidence (since the annexation of Crimea)</th>
<th>Perception of threat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>aggregate power</td>
<td>the increase in the modernisation and armaments of the Northern fleet</td>
<td>increased</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 Simplified and not exhaustive. For full analysis please consult the analytical section of the article.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geopolitics and Geostrategy of the GIUK Gap: Rising Stakes in a Strategic Sea Corridor</th>
<th>81</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the reactivation of the US 2nd Fleet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the reopening of the US airfield at Keflavik</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the establishment of the NATO Atlantic Command</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the increase in the Russian violation of the airspace of the Alliance states</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the increase in the Russian naval activity in the North Sea and the North Atlantic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark’s plans to reopen NATO radar base at Sornfell Peak in the Faroe Islands</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the accession of Finland into NATO</td>
<td>increased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>geographic proximity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the increase in the size of the Russian regular large exercises and in the size and the frequency of the Russian irregular smaller exercises and drills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the termination of all joint military exercises between the Alliance States and the Russian Federation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the increase in the size and the frequency of NATO exercises</td>
<td>increased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>offensive capabilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the difference in the contextual framing of the Arctic region in Russian documents issued before and after the annexation of Crimea</td>
<td>increased</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
although, for a long time, it was neglected in NATO strategic and foreign policy documents, the Arctic region started to be continuously mentioned in 2021 onwards.

The limitations of the paper, apart from the academic criticism of Walt’s balance of threat theory, undoubtedly include the limited geographical focus on the GIUK Gap area only and, thus, lack of comparison with other geographical areas that may (or may not) have experienced the same increase in tensions as the GIUK Gap region. Although this may not be a significant limitation, I consider it important to mention this fact in the conclusion of my paper. I also find it difficult to analyse the offensive capabilities of both actors in a situation where there has not yet been an actual conflict in this or a similar terrain and climate-specific region. Thus, capabilities can only be inferred, for example, from ongoing military exercises.

Despite the above-mentioned limitations, it is apparent that the annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked a turning point for the Arctic, transforming it from a region of relative cooperation into a potential flashpoint. Russia’s aggressive actions triggered a consequential response from NATO, leading to a significant military buildup on both sides.

Russia’s modernisation and expansion of the Northern Fleet, coupled with assertive strategic documents and actions, point towards a potential offensive posture in the Arctic. This is further underscored by the increased frequency and scale of Russian military exercises, often based on offensive scenarios. In contrast, NATO’s response, though substantial, has been more measured. While the Alliance has reactivated military installations, increased exercises (like Cold Response), and adopted a more robust Arctic strategy in 2022, its focus remains on defence. However, the current trajectory, according to Walt’s theory, suggests a growing potential for conflict. The proximity of military forces on both sides, combined with heightened tensions, intentions and capabilities, creates a precarious situation.
List of Abbreviations

ASW (anti-submarine-warfare)
EU (European Union)
GIUK (Greenland, Iceland, United Kingdom)
NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation)
OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe)
PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation)
SLOCs (Sea Lines of Communication)
SSBN (Nuclear-Powered Ballistic Missile Submersible Ship)
SSGN (Nuclear-Powered Guided Missile Submersible Ship)
SSK (Diesel-Electric Hunter-Killer Submersible Ship)
SSN (Nuclear-Powered Submersible Ship)
UK (United Kingdom)
US (United States)
USA (United States of America)
USS (United States Ship)
USSR's (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics)
References


