

# The United Kingdom and the Arctic in the 21st Century

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*Britain's interest in the Arctic stretches back over half a millennia. British explorers, companies, ships and scientists have at various times been at the forefront of bringing the Arctic into wider global, economic, political, scientific and cultural networks. This paper offers a glimpse into how the Arctic is seen by UK civil servants in the contemporary British government, as well as the challenges they face in reconciling the Arctic with broader global interests. No formal Arctic Strategy has been published although there has been a tentative declaration of intent. Lastly, the paper suggests how the UK can make a constructive contribution to the region through the development of a formal strategy.*

## Introduction

The United Kingdom's (UK) interest in the Arctic stretches back over half a millennia. Shut out of the Atlantic and Pacific trade routes to Asia by the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) between Spain and Portugal, English ships were among those that set sail north in search of a new corridor to the Far East through the Arctic (Lainema and Nurminen, 2009). In the centuries that followed, British explorers, companies, ships and scientists were often at the forefront of bringing the Arctic, and more specifically Arctic resources, into wider global, economic, political, scientific and cultural networks. This presence in Arctic affairs continues to be sustained by a small, but not insignificant number of actors engaged primarily in diplomacy, military exercises, scientific investigations and the exploration and extraction of hydrocarbons (Archer, 2011).

This chapter, firstly, offers a glimpse into how the Arctic is seen from the position of civil servants in London's Whitehall, the heart of the British government. In the past, the UK's interest in the Arctic has been overshadowed by its interests in Antarctica, but this is starting to change (Archer, 2011). Second, the chapter suggests how the development of a formal strategy by the UK could be constructive to pursuing its interests in the region. While this chapter refers to the UK as a whole,

Rachael Lorna Johnstone offers a distinct view from Scotland in a separate chapter of the *Arctic Yearbook*. For the sake of brevity, UK policy in the European Union context is not discussed.

### **The Arctic in UK Policy**

Traditionally, the UK has been an Antarctic state. However, in recent years, an increasing number of civil servants and parliamentarians in London have become aware of, and started reacting to, extraordinary environmental changes occurring in the Arctic (ACIA, 2004). These reactions have gone beyond simply invoking the Arctic in service of an established ‘Green’ domestic political agenda as reported in the British media (Jowit and Aarskog, 2006), or as a natural extension to the UK’s activities in the British Antarctic Territory. The meeting of Arctic stakeholders in Oban, Scotland, hosted by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), and the UK Parliament Environmental Audit Committee’s inquiry, ‘Protecting the Arctic’, as well as the provision of funding for a new Arctic science programme, are indicative of just some of the ways in which the British government has recently sought to clarify how the Arctic matters to the UK (DEFRA/JNCC, 2008; Parliament, 2012; NERC, 2012). The Ministry of Defence has also shown greater interest in the future security of the region (DCDC, 2007; 2010).

While there is ambiguity about whether the UK has any kind of formal Arctic Strategy (Archer, 2011; Depledge and Dodds, 2011), in 2011 the FCO Minister, Henry Bellingham, outlined a tentative statement of intent:

Our principal aims in the Arctic are to promote peace and good governance, and increase UK influence in the region by maintaining good bilateral and multilateral relationships with the Arctic States, for example through supporting the work of the Arctic Council and other international and regional bodies.

The UK recognises the need to protect the Arctic environment, particularly in light of rapid regional climate change, but also recognises that the Arctic region is crucial to UK energy security and of increasing interest to British business and scientists. The government therefore works with the Arctic states to promote and support British interests in the region, including in respect of science, energy, fisheries and potential transport routes opened up by melting sea ice” (*Hansard*, 2011: col 700W).

The website of the FCO further helps to orientate the direction of UK engagement with the Arctic. The UK’s “active role in Arctic affairs” since the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, its geographical position as the “Arctic’s closest neighbour”, the presence of British citizens and the implications of climate change (including for energy security and increased shipping) are all invoked in various accounts of UK-Arctic relations where past, present and future are used to justify the UK’s continuing interest (and

presence) in this part of the world (FCO, 2012). The FCO's Polar Regions Unit represents the UK's 'Arctic face' internationally, helping to coordinate the UK's contribution to Arctic Council working groups. As the working groups are generally recognised as the workhorses of the Arctic Council, this is where the UK expects to have its greatest impact on Arctic assessments and policy, particularly when it comes to environmental protection. Contributing to these groups is also crucial for justifying the UK's continued presence as a permanent observer to the Arctic Council. In evidence submitted to the British parliament by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Polar Regions Unit (PRU), specific British interest in the Arctic was discussed in terms of this permanent observership status at the Arctic Council, energy and climate change research, international climate negotiations, protection of biodiversity, the potential of new shipping routes, the implications for bilateral relations (with Denmark and Norway in particular), and the country's contribution to fisheries management (Parliament, 2012b). While these interests may appear marginal to some observers, the UK-Norway fisheries dispute, which the UK referred to the International Court of Justice in 1951 (Evensen, 1952); the UK-Iceland 'Cod Wars' (Jónsson, 1982); and the UK's on-going disagreement with Norway over the application of the Svalbard Treaty (Pederson, 2006) have demonstrated the UK's willingness to defend them.

Responsibility for different UK interest areas is spread out among a diffuse set of government actors. For example, responsibility for climate change and energy exploration and exploitation issues lies with the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC). The Department for Transport (DfT) and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) respond to developments in shipping. The Department for Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) leads on question of biodiversity, the environment and fisheries, and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) is responsible for overseeing the Arctic Research Programme run by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC). Defence rests with the Ministry of Defence (MOD). The FCO, aside from the work of the PRU at the Arctic Council, also manages bilateral relations with the so-called Arctic states through country-specific posts and its network of British Embassies and High Commissions (Parliament, 2012b). What this means in practice is that bilateral relations have an Arctic dimension quite apart from the work of the PRU as evidenced in the UK's Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) with Norway and Canada (AANDC, 2009; FCO, 2011). Similarly, DECC's attention to climate change and energy, or DEFRA's responsibility for fisheries, treats the Arctic as part of a much broader policy agenda.

The above is indicative of the way in which the UK claims no interest in the Arctic *per se*. This stands in contrast to the way that Arctic states such as Canada, Norway and Russia portray the Arctic as a place that is intrinsic to their national identity/objectives. However, this has not stopped the UK from seeking to use the Arctic to support its own interests, relating, for example, to scientific research, negotiations on climate change, national security and potential economic opportunities. These interests are largely linked to the UK's own sense of itself (and the recognition it seeks from Arctic states) as not just a 'sub-Arctic' or 'near-Arctic' state (as China has – see SIPRI, 2012), but as the Arctic's "closest neighbour" (FCO, 2012). This in turn is seemingly used to justify, to domestic and international audiences, the claim that the UK has an extra responsibility to protect the Arctic (Parliament, 2012a), as well as a sense that the UK is somehow more vulnerable (physically, economically, and militarily) to an Arctic undergoing rapid geopolitical and environmental transformation. The notion of vulnerability is particularly suggestive of the ways in which the Arctic also physically demands attention from the UK, because of the influence the Arctic can potentially exert on the UK's local weather systems, marine surroundings, and ecosystems, as well as larger Earth systems (terrestrial, oceanic and atmospheric). The UK is subsequently assembled by government as an actor that is not only relevant to the Arctic region, but potentially more relevant than other states and organisations from outside the region, particularly as a partner for scientific and economic collaboration [see the recent MOUs signed with Canada and Norway, and attempts by UK-based energy firms to secure hydrocarbon exploration licenses in the Arctic (Dulnev, 2011)], but also in negotiations over the future role and remit of the Arctic Council (Koivurova, 2010) and regional security (Depledge and Dodds, 2012).

### **A UK Arctic Strategy?**

The FCO, which coordinates the various Arctic interests of different government departments, has largely been against the idea of developing a formal, overarching Arctic Strategy for the UK (Parliament, 2012b). FCO officials have privately expressed reservations that the publication of a formal Arctic strategy would not be welcomed by Arctic states (FCO official, personal communication, January 17, 2011). There is also concern in the FCO that a formal Arctic strategy would provide a reference point for other, mainly Arctic states, to measure, evaluate and potentially criticise UK policies and practices (Depledge and Dodds, 2011). And as noted earlier, other UK government officials have questioned whether it is even helpful to talk about having 'Arctic' interests

because these are rarely divisible from the UK's broader international objectives (personal communication, September-December, 2011).

But how strong are these reservations? As noted earlier, the UK has not shied away from defending its northern interests in the past, so these interests are clearly not marginal. It could be that the UK government is anxious to avoid being caught up in the on-going debate about the status of observers and applicants (such as China, the EU, Italy) at the Arctic Council. Canada and Russia have been especially wary about the motivations of non-Arctic states and organisations (especially those which do not have a tradition for Arctic-related activities) and see their presence as potentially detrimental to the influence currently wielded by the Arctic states (North Norway, 2011). However, government officials from other Arctic states (most notably Canada, Norway, Finland and Sweden) have generally been positive about the UK's continuing involvement in Arctic affairs, to the point where a number of Scandinavian countries have expressed support for the writing of a UK Arctic Strategy, and called for the UK to increase its level of participation in the Arctic Council's working groups (Parliament, 2012c). At present these states seem more disappointed by the lack of British interest in the Arctic, than concerned by an excess of it.

In continuing to take a reactive approach to the dramatic environmental and geopolitical changes occurring in the region – one which simply seeks to benefit from opportunities and reduce risks – the British government is leaving itself unprepared to respond quickly to political and economic developments in a part of the world which is geographically proximate to the UK. A more comprehensive approach has therefore been suggested (Archer 2011; Depledge and Dodds, 2011); one which sets common objectives to coordinate the different activities of various government departments involved and clearly establishes the contribution that the UK wants to make. The Canadian Arctic and the Norwegian Arctic may be different places, but actions taken in one part are likely to have ramifications for British actions in the other, just as they will across different issue-sectors. Without a formal strategy, there is greater potential for such actions to contradict each other, wasting time and resources, and potentially generating confusion and ill-feeling among the Arctic states – something the UK wants to avoid.

It is unlikely that the actual content of a UK Arctic Strategy would prove controversial, with the possible exception of content relating to the on-going disagreement the UK has with Norway over the application of the Svalbard Treaty. Even in the case of Svalbard, greater transparency between allies is likely to be far more constructive than lingering distrust that can be a barrier to closer

cooperation. The UK shares a common interest with all the Arctic states to see the development of safe and effective legal, security, shipping and resource regimes rooted in UNCLOS and the Arctic Council (for a review see Østreng et al., 2010). An Arctic Strategy could be used to detail to both domestic and 'Arctic' audiences how the UK proposes to contribute to these developments at a time when its material capacity to contribute to scientific activity, maritime patrols, search and rescue and maritime surveillance has been reduced. This would provide a far more durable political framework to provide support to both public and private interests, justifying investment in intellectual and material assets that have long build-times. Perhaps more significantly, it would provide the political basis for strengthening existing and developing new partnerships in the region, facilitating scientific and commercial objectives, in particular the UK's contribution to the working groups of the Arctic Council.

Where a formal Arctic Strategy could prove controversial is in the practices through which it is developed. Reading the Ilulissat Declaration (OceanLaw, 2008), the Arctic coastal states have somewhat justifiable concerns about the way in which their management of the Arctic region is being portrayed as an arena of high tension, militarisation and a race for resources; as if they need help from the rest of the international community to manage their affairs and maintain stability. Such sensitivities are only exacerbated by perceptions from the Arctic states that non-Arctic states are developing their own strategies for the region behind closed doors. If Britain wants to develop an effective Arctic strategy it will have to do so transparently and in conversation with the eight Arctic states. At least as important will be the need to open up channels for the UK to discuss directly with indigenous groups what is at stake in the region. As Nuttall (2010) observes, indigenous peoples have become increasingly important to political processes in the Arctic. Moreover, sensitivity to indigenous issues is an important source of legitimacy, particularly at the Arctic Council but also with key Arctic partners such as Canada (Leahy, 2012).

The British government also has a domestic agenda which it will have to contend with concerning the degree to which the British public is consulted on what kind of future the UK should push for in the Arctic. There has been no attempt to measure what the Arctic means to the British population at large, although the Arctic does enjoy high visibility within popular culture, in books, television documentaries and film, as well as in museums, art galleries and NGO campaigns. However, the degree to which the Arctic resonates with their everyday lives is unclear. The *Frozen Planet* series, for example, attracted millions of viewers but does not appear to have inspired a clearer understanding of how individuals' own lives are connected to the region. If the government is to continue to invest

in the material capabilities required to be present in the Arctic then it is important that it has public support, especially at a time when financial cuts are taking their toll across government.

## **Conclusion**

In the UK, the Arctic has become a concern predominantly limited to the ‘especially interested’ (for example, individual academics, journalists, politicians and researchers). Among civil servants, attention to the Arctic dimension of broader UK interests is growing but from a low base. More problematically for the UK, the attention of the civil service is often reactive and diffuse with investments made on a short-term project-by-project basis. Few appear concerned with how Britain should engage with the Arctic over the long-term, instead favouring a reactive approach based on the management of emerging risks and opportunities. Ad hoc participation in Arctic Council activities is paralleled by Britain’s broader tendency, at least since the Cold War, to dip into and out of Arctic affairs, and potentially positions the UK as an unreliable partner in the region, whether for the purposes of science, economic activity or defence.

A strong case can be made for the UK government to develop an overarching formal Arctic Strategy to bring together the diffuse strands of government policy and embed them in a durable political framework which charts a clear course for scientific and economic engagement with Arctic states and peoples. A formalised strategy would also send a clear signal to the Arctic States that while their sovereignty in the region is indisputable, pursuing greater exclusivity in the region is neither constructive nor warranted when so many ramifications of environmental and economic change in the Arctic reach out beyond the region (Depledge and Dodds, 2011). This would provide a political basis for strengthening existing and developing new partnerships in the region, facilitating scientific and commercial objectives, in particular the UK’s contribution to the working groups of the Arctic Council. There are considerable similarities in the policies of the Arctic states and it is unlikely that the contents of a UK strategy would be markedly different. Where such a strategy could prove controversial is in the manner of its development. The UK will have to work openly and transparently with the Arctic states and peoples if it is to maintain its long-standing presence in the Arctic.

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