

The Arctic's Nearest Neighbour?

An Evaluation of the UK's 2013 Arctic Policy Document

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In October 2013 the United Kingdom became the first sovereign state not included among the Arctic Council's members to publish an official Arctic strategy document. The paper discusses the human, environmental, and commercial aspects of Arctic management in turn, and places a strong emphasis throughout on British scientific contributions. It seems to be trying to stress relevant UK competences, and keep the door open for UK firms to get their fair share in development, while assuring the Arctic powers proper that London respects their rights and will behave as a 'model' Arctic Council observer. Compared with other Arctic strategies, the UK document is rather light on security-related analysis, climate concerns and commercial facts, taking in fact a rather laissez-faire position on economic development. It says little on the European Union's role. It remains to be seen whether this presentation of the UK position is complete and compelling enough to secure the desired national influence in Arctic affairs. Much may depend on how other AC observers behave and react.

Introduction and Aims

The rapid progress of climate change and its impact on land and sea conditions in the circumpolar North has created new policy challenges for states both in the Arctic zone¹ and beyond it. Between 2008 and 2012, the governments of all eight states who are members of the Arctic Council (AC)² published documents described as 'strategies' (or the equivalent), analyzing the issues and spelling out their intentions for handling them.³ These strategies, like the 'security strategies' or other single-issue strategies issued both by nations and institutions in the post-Cold War period,⁴ typically serve a combination of purposes. In contrast to former times' strategic planning carried out in secrecy, they offer a transparent declaration of intent, usually projecting a message of responsibility and readiness for international cooperation – though they may also warn of resolve to protect national interests. Domestically, they signal the government's concern and competence

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and seek to coordinate the efforts of the various departments of state, as well as providing guidance for non-state actors. In countries that have been less involved hitherto in Arctic governance or where only a limited part of the population lives in the High North, the educational motive towards their own publics may also be strong.

The world's largest powers outside the Arctic, and the larger states of Europe, have also shown a growing interest in Arctic developments. As many as twelve have now been accepted as Observers within the AC system,⁵ allowing them to participate on carefully circumscribed conditions that were elaborated by the member states in 2011.⁶ Some of these interested 'outsiders' have begun to make their own Arctic policy statements, or at least to publicly debate the issues and their own particular interests.⁷ However – and understandably – they have been slower than the AC member states to formalize their overall national strategies.⁸ Following the eight full members, the first government to issue such a document was in fact that of the Faroe Islands, an autonomous nation within the kingdom of Denmark, in April 2013.⁹ When the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), acting on behalf of the whole Government, published the document 'Adapting to Change – UK policy towards the Arctic' on 17 October 2013,¹⁰ the latter thus constituted the first comprehensive statement from a sovereign state outside the circumpolar region proper. Hard on its heels, however, in November 2013 came a 20-page policy statement by the German Foreign Ministry on behalf of the German Federal Government;¹¹ and France is now working on a similar document.

The purpose of this study is to present and evaluate the UK's Arctic policy document, starting with the longer-term background of UK involvement, and the pre-history of the present paper (the second section). The third section summarizes and comments on the various parts of the text. In the fourth section, the UK statement is viewed in a comparative light alongside the ten other national strategies now available, and some larger analytical and normative issues are raised. The fifth section offers brief conclusions.

The UK and the Arctic: From Historic Times to 2013

Even leaving aside the semi-mythical tales of monks visiting Thule in the dark ages, the British connection with High Northern latitudes goes back far into history and has at least three main dimensions. Probably foremost in the popular mind is the British role in Arctic exploration, which at times had had commercial or even strategic motivations but has been most strongly linked with the theme of discovery and scientific research. British expeditions began in the 16th century, probing both Westwards (Frobisher) and Eastwards into the White Sea (Willoughby and Chancellor). The 19th century saw UK explorers thronging the approaches to the NorthWest Passage (NWP), including the famous tragedy of Sir John Franklin's expedition and the useful discoveries made by some of those searching for him. In the twentieth century Wally Herbert became the first solo traveller to reach the North Pole and perhaps (depending on one's position on the Peary and Cook claims) the first person to reach it at all. More recent British adventurers like Ranulph Fiennes have gained their fair share of international attention. Organized British science has also been strongly engaged, with the principal clusters of expertise at

the Scott Polar Research Institute (founded 1920)¹² and the British Antarctic Survey (thus named since 1962, formerly the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey),¹³ which actually cover both poles; but many other scientific agencies and programmes have been engaged in (for example) climatic and atmospheric, marine and other environmental, social and anthropological research, making use among others of a permanent British base on Svalbard.¹⁴

The second dimension is one that the UK has less cause to boast of: a prominent and sometimes leading role in raiding the High North's natural resources. In the early 17th century, British whalers were among those heading the race to hunt bowheads around Spitsbergen (Svalbard) – an archipelago that King James I for a while claimed as British territory. When the industry's focus shifted to Greenland and points West, UK-based vessels and companies again took a large part, alongside the Dutch and others, in whaling so intensive that it almost exterminated several species. The last British whalers left the area just before the First World War. More constant and still continuing has been the interest of the British fishing industry – particularly fishermen from England's East coast, Scotland and the Northern isles – in the cod, herring and other marine riches of High Northern seas. In the 15th century, English and German ships fought over the Icelandic cod harvest; the 20th century saw three UK-Iceland Cod Wars, and in 2013 a new dispute began with Scotland and Iceland (among others) on opposite sides, over quotas for an apparently Northward-migrating mackerel stock. A further 'dark side' of the British relationship with High Northern resources, at least in Nordic eyes, is the release of radioactive contaminants (principally technetium) from the Sellafield nuclear reactor on the Cumbrian coast, the results of which have been traced from the Irish Sea as far as the Barents Sea. This has long caused concern notably in North-West Norway and led to official protests (right up to the 2000s) from several Nordic ministers.¹⁵

In the latest surge of interest in exploiting new oil and gas fields exposed by melting ice, British firms have perhaps not had the highest profiles but are determined not to be excluded. The British flagship company BP has been dogged by a dispute with its Russian partner Rosneft over ownership of the subsidiary TNK-BP; but when Rosneft finally purchased the latter in March 2013, it offered BP a fresh chance of cooperation on other Arctic projects. Meanwhile, BP's Canadian subsidiary does co-own licences for offshore exploration in the Beaufort Sea and Eastern Canada, as well as shale oil/gas extraction on land. In July 2013 three out of six of the UK's main energy companies – Centrica, E.ON and RWE – were reported to have secured licences for offshore exploration fields including some considered sensitive by Norwegian environmental agencies.¹⁶ Headlines of this kind help to explain why British companies have been among the targets of Greenpeace warnings about Arctic pollution, and why some British MPs (see below) have suspected excessive commercial influence behind the UK's Arctic policy-making.

Third and not least is the military role that the UK has played in the Arctic, both for its own direct defence and as a member of Western alliances. The icy seas saw acute naval competition in both World Wars as Germany sought to block Atlantic supply and reinforcement routes, and British troops occupied Iceland from 1940-41 and the Faroe

Islands from 1940-1945 to pre-empt German control. As the Second World War ended, British diplomacy smoothed the path of Norway, Iceland and Denmark into the new NATO alliance, and the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap became a strategic focal point as the route that any major Soviet naval break-out would have to take. While British nuclear, naval and naval-air assets were the most obviously relevant to countering this danger, from 1960 the UK also made an essential contribution to the ACE Mobile Force (Land) tasked to bring rapid reinforcement to NATO's Northern flank. British troops regularly carried out cold-weather exercises in Norway in that context, and continue to exercise there and in Canada despite the AMF(L)'s disbandment. Throughout such changes, Britain has maintained its general commitment to North European defence, as shown by its affiliation to earlier Nordic defence cooperation schemes such as NORDCORP, its stake in the current Nordic framework organization NORDEFECO,¹⁷ and frequent joint participation with the Nordics in High Northern force exercises (eg Arctic Challenge, which focused on air patrolling between Finland, Norway and Sweden in September 2013). Bilateral ties are also strong, as reflected in the intensifying UK/Norway defence cooperation cited by Depledge and Dodds as a significant part of the background to the UK Arctic 'strategy'.¹⁸ Last and not least, UK force representatives were invited to the Helsinki meeting in 2013 of the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, an informal group first formed by the eight Arctic Council states to discuss topics of search and rescue and other military inputs to emergency management.¹⁹ While Nordic governments with very rare exceptions²⁰ have welcomed this British commitment to their region's defence, it has not failed to raise its share of environmental concerns, notably after an incident in 2007 when a British submarine suffered an explosion when patrolling near the North Pole and had to surface through the polar ice.²¹

The sum of these factors may seem to raise the question why a UK 'strategy' document on the Arctic was not produced much earlier. Indeed, the idea of such a publication was mooted at least five years before the present paper appeared. From the start, it involved close consultation especially with the British Antarctic Survey (which covers both poles) and the polar scientific community in general. While polar experts at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office did the drafting, the Department of Energy and Climate Change, the Department of the Environment, Farming and Rural Areas (DEFRA), the Department of Business and Innovation Skills, the Department for Transport, the Department for Education (in the context of its science responsibilities) and the Ministry of Defence were particularly important stakeholders.

The document was, further, designed for presentation to Parliament, where the issues covered had been in contention between MPs and ministers even before its appearance. During a series of hearings on Arctic developments, Members of Parliament's Environmental Audit Committee had questioned the consistency of the UK's position in endorsing tough climate-related measures while also countenancing major new oil and gas extraction in the High North. In its report of September 2012, 'Protecting the Arctic',²² the Committee called for a moratorium on new drilling in the High North at least until a strong regulatory and security framework could be put in place to deal, especially, with the risk of accidental pollution. It questioned the logic of opening up new

regions of supply when climate policy demanded a move away from fossil fuels. Caroline Lucas, the Green Party's representative on the Committee, and other members challenged the government to stop uncritically supporting British firms and to lobby for an Antarctic-style protected Arctic zone.²³

The official UK strategy document took account of, but – as we shall see – was not notably swayed by such pleas. Its public launch on 17 October was presided over by Mark Simmonds MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the FCO, who also authored its Foreword. Simmonds was effectively the most junior Minister in the FCO team but held responsibility at the time for the polar regions as well as Africa, the Caribbean, and generic issues like climate change, energy, and conflict. In public comments he described the Arctic as 'one of the most dynamic and influential regions of the world', while the Government's Science and Universities Minister, David Willetts, stressed the challenge for and importance of science in seeking to understand Arctic developments.²⁴

The Policy Document

The Foreword to 'Adapting to Change' begins the presentation of Arctic issues with climate change, but quickly segues to the new commercial opportunities arising. As regards the British national starting-point, a careful balance is drawn. The UK is not an Arctic state, but does claim to be the Arctic's 'nearest neighbour' – since the northern tip of the Shetland Isles falls only 400 kilometres short of the Arctic Circle. It respects 'the sovereign right of the Arctic States to exercise jurisdiction over their territory', and the interests of all people living in the Arctic: but it has a claim to be involved firstly in the light of its own national interests and competences (including possible 'leadership' in some fields), and secondly because 'what happens in the Arctic has a global impact'. Overall, the document commits the UK to work 'with international partners to balance the needs of human development with environmental protection'. It confirms that the principles and actions laid down will be binding on 'the whole of Government' in the UK. (Later, it is explained that the document will be open to review with no fixed timetable, and is designed to encourage public debate.)

The rest of the 33-page paper falls into four main sections. Its introductory part comprises a sketch of what is happening in the present-day Arctic and a chapter on 'the UK's approach'. The former covers the obvious ground on climate change and emergent commercial possibilities, but includes some interesting nuances, stressing for example that the Arctic has been linked with the world both by trade and by the effects of pollution since Roman times, and that fossil-fuel exploitation, fishing and tourism have already been expanding there since the 1960s. Current changes are driven substantially by pollution from outside the Arctic but in turn can affect non-Arctic regions through climatic feedback effects, new energy and rare earth supplies, new shipping routes and further growth in tourism. These points are clearly designed to bolster the legitimacy of a non-Arctic state's involvement, and recall arguments used lately by Chinese representatives among others.²⁵ Further, the document stresses that the Arctic is not a homogeneous region and contains many different sets of climatic and social conditions –

perhaps an indirect way of relativizing the issue of indigenous peoples. Finally, this scene-setting section recommends an Arctic information website provided by British academic institutions for secondary schools.²⁶

The UK's policy 'vision' is summarized thus:

The UK will work towards an Arctic that is safe and secure; well governed in conjunction with indigenous peoples and in line with international law; where policies are developed on the basis of sound science with full regard to the environment; and where only responsible development takes place.

More details are provided in sections sub-titled 'respect', 'leadership' and 'cooperation'. The first of these again states the UK's respect for the rights of the Arctic States, the rights of local peoples, and the environment (in that order), but again emphasizes that the Arctic is far from a 'pristine wilderness'. Environment and development need not form a dichotomy if good 'stewardship' is exercised, 'while providing opportunities for growth and prosperity'. Under 'leadership', the Arctic States are once more accorded the first responsibility for peaceful and well-balanced development in the Arctic; but the UK lays a claim to be a leading actor in analyzing and reacting to climate change, and to have expertise in its governmental, scientific, industrial and NGO (non-governmental organizations) sectors that can help with Arctic solutions. Under 'cooperation' there is a short statement of the UK's intent to go on working together with the Arctic States, indigenous peoples 'and others': there are no references (at this stage) to specific institutions and their roles.

The introductory part of the document then closes with three pages of information on the UK's role in Arctic science: a choice that becomes understandable when we are told that this is an area in which 'the UK excels and has an outstanding international reputation'. Details are given of the numbers (more than 500) of UK specialists working and publishing on Arctic issues; UK national funding for Arctic research (over £50 million in the last decade); the UK scientific base on Svalbard; UK assets (ships, aircraft etc.) available for polar research, and the relevance of British Antarctic expertise. The importance of science as a basis for understanding and policy is stressed, and it is said that this work will remain 'central' to the UK's contribution and its interaction with other Arctic actors.

The rest of the document has three parts dealing respectively with the human, environmental, and commercial dimensions. Perhaps significantly, they receive four, six, and eight pages respectively.

Human Dimension

Belying its title, this section serves mainly to explain the UK's stance on Arctic security and governance, with a view to an Arctic that is 'safe and secure; well governed in conjunction with indigenous peoples and in line with international law'. First, the importance of maintaining security and stability is stressed and the UK pledges itself to contribute through various local/bilateral defence and security cooperation arrangements – including visits for military cold-weather training – and the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable forum (see above). It is said that 'the role of NATO will remain central' –

without further explanation. When it comes to general governance solutions, the coastal Arctic states are first mentioned and it is noted that in the Ilulissat declaration of 2008,²⁶ they committed themselves to peaceful solutions within international law for all outstanding territorial claims: an approach that the UK supports. The Arctic Council is then commended for successfully promoting cooperation especially on ‘environmental and sustainable development issues’. The UK has used its AC Observership actively, especially in order to participate in the Council’s six working groups (a whole page, p.15, is later devoted to examples of this from 2004-2013). When issues arise that have repercussions outside the Arctic, the UK recommends addressing them through dialogue with interested powers – who can be engaged both through the AC itself and ‘other fora’ – and notes the relevance of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). ‘The UK considers moving towards a specific Arctic Treaty at this time neither necessary nor beneficial.’

The section goes on to provide details (with a map) of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic, and to note that they vary both in their views and in their opportunities to participate in local decisions. The UK will uphold their right ‘to be heard at the decision-making level of the Arctic Council’. After providing examples of UK work within AC working groups (as mentioned), the section concludes with an explanation of the role of the Scott Polar Research Institute, and a case-study where one of its senior researchers (actually a Canadian) worked with Inuit in Igloolik to establish how indigenous communities could best interact with and benefit from independent scientific activities.

This section is interesting both for its emphases and its omissions. It aligns the UK with all AC states in rejecting an Arctic Treaty, in identifying the AC as the central place to seek Arctic solutions (also in dialogue with outsiders), and in noting the importance of UNCLOS – on which the document later expands. While the UK itself has no sovereign rights or territorial claims to protect in the Arctic, the forthright references to military activity and the role of NATO²⁸ bring London in line, notably, with Denmark’s stated strategy for defending its Arctic possessions²⁹ as well as with some of the more recent US policy documents.³⁰ By praising the Ilulissat statement the UK also implicitly recognizes the special status under UNCLOS of the five ‘coastal’ (or ‘littoral’) states – Canada, Denmark by virtue of Greenland, Norway, Russia and the US. The other AC member states (Iceland, Finland Sweden) have complained when these five met separately, at Ilulissat and elsewhere.³¹

On the other hand, the document does not directly discuss the risks of and safeguards against conflict in the Arctic, as does for instance the recent Faroese strategy; and it fails to highlight – either here or, with only slight exceptions, later – the non-military security threats of accidents and oil spills, natural disasters, and possible non-state attack (terrorism, sabotage, violent protest). The AC has in fact devoted particular attention to civil emergency response in recent years, leading to the achievement of two legally-binding agreements among member states on Search and Rescue and major oil-spill handling respectively.³² A further gap is any substantive discussion of the societal, developmental, and health challenges facing many indigenous groups, and indeed the urbanized Arctic populations. As for institutional omissions, the British document does

not mention any general role for the European Union (EU), despite the fact that the latter has issued at least one set of (unanimous) Ministerial decisions outlining EU Arctic policies and contributions in the relevant fields,³³ and is directly engaged in the European Arctic through its Northern Dimension programme.³⁴ Even the more detailed later sections of the paper will mention the EU just three times in passing, in connection with its anti-sealing and fisheries policies and its research projects (see below). One other apparent omission will be remedied, however, in those sections when the important role of the global International Maritime Organization (IMO) in regulating Arctic shipping is acknowledged.

Environmental Dimension

Starting with another reference to the importance of good science, this section first introduces the UK's general position on climate change including support for a global climate treaty, and mitigation efforts including reduced emissions where the UK regards itself as a leader in setting tough national targets. On Arctic issues, the document urges further action on black carbon (soot) emissions – a topic on which the AC set up a working party in 2013;³⁵ discusses action to protect biodiversity (including Arctic bird species that also visit the UK) and to preserve marine species *inter alia* by Marine Protected Areas; and endorses a moratorium on commercial whaling and the EU ban on trade in seal products (with exceptions for indigenous subsistence sealing).

A separate sub-section discusses possible environmental risks from new commercial activity. Making a point that will recur in the text, it stresses that 'Decisions on whether to proceed with exploration and extraction projects are commercial matters for operators to make in the light of prevailing market and regulatory conditions.' Regulatory frameworks will be set first and foremost by the states in whose jurisdiction the activity occurs. However, the UK will give advice where asked and will press for 'the highest environmental and drilling standards in the Arctic, as elsewhere' (an implicit reference to expertise gained in the North Sea). It will support stronger anti-pollution standards for shipping in the Arctic – within the IMO framework – 'where scientific evidence demonstrates' a practical need for this. Future Arctic fisheries should be handled on a precautionary principle, with especial prudence where the prospects for a given stock are not clear: decisions should be taken (in the UK's case, through the EU) on scientific evidence and with a view to sustainability. The section ends with another page of case-studies on British inputs to climate science, mentioning among others UK expertise on ice observation and the study of ocean circulation, and UK leadership in the EU's forthcoming ICEARC research project.

While prosaically expressed without talk of extreme climate scenarios (or indeed, of existing and ongoing environmental damage), this section situates the UK in a responsible European mainstream as regards the mitigation of climate change and concern for biodiversity. It implies support for further regulation of Arctic shipping (a topic currently on the table in the IMO) and for prudent management of new Arctic fisheries, where EU documents have mooted a moratorium.³⁶ Again, there is a marked emphasis on science; but this also implies reservations about more extreme conservationist positions not backed by specific evidence of environmental risk. Critics

of the document's pro-business bias could point, further, to the *laissez-faire* tone of the reference to business development, which by emphasizing national jurisdiction seems to be coming down against new international rules – even of a business-generated and voluntary nature.³⁷

Commercial Dimension

The statement that decisions on business development will be taken by companies themselves, and that regulation will be provided nationally, is repeated twice more on the first page of this section. The UK's approach is defined as 'to support legitimate and responsible business activity', since 'people in the Arctic, as elsewhere, have a right to pursue economic prosperity'. Companies should be encouraged to discuss the issues themselves with the AC and other stakeholders, and a case-study explains how a UK-based firm has worked with local reindeer-herders while developing a mining project on the far North of Finland.

The document then identifies energy, shipping, tourism, fisheries, and (more unusually) bio-prospecting as key commercial sectors. The energy page reduces to a single argument: that the world, including the UK, will need more gas imports in future, so the UK should support further Norwegian production in the High North (and help finance new infrastructure connections, as necessary). On shipping, the UK strongly supports taking any necessary measures within the IMO and on the basis of UNCLOS, and rejects any 'fundamental changes to existing regimes'. The UK hopes that its ports, shipping companies and 'maritime cluster' can share in any profits from new Arctic shipping routes, and the government will consider whether to do or propose anything particular in this context. As for safety and environmental risks linked with shipping, the UK 'will play a leading role in the development of the mandatory Polar Code' – actually scheduled for discussion at the IMO in 2014 – 'so as to ensure it comprehensively addresses safety and environmental issues, and press for its early adoption'. Here the document does finally mention the AC's Search and Rescue agreement, though not its more recent agreement on oil-spills. It commits the UK to seek membership in the Arctic Regional Hydrographic Commission so that its hydrographic expertise can be applied.

Recognizing a likely increase in Arctic tourism, the UK will refine its system of online advice to travellers about hazards, and will discuss safety issues with the industry including arrangements for vessels to help each other. The short section on fishing repeats the importance of scientific study and expresses support for the system of Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) which should be best placed to ensure responsible and sustainable fishing. On bio-prospecting, the sole point covered is the UK's respect for the Nagoya Protocol – which deals with local sharing of the benefits of any new discoveries – and its intention to make sure its companies conform with it. The section closes with general remarks about the range of British commercial expertise, as seen *inter alia* in the fact that Lloyds of London launched a report offering advice for business in the Arctic in 2012. It ends with yet another advertisement for British science: a 'box' describing the British Antarctic Survey's leadership in the 'Polar View' consortium providing real-time information on the state of polar ice.

Nothing in this section could be construed as supporting *irresponsible* and *non-*

sustainable commercial development, but the environmentally-motivated criticisms of it are also possible to understand. First, the UK stance on new regulation is relatively conservative, explicitly accepting only a new Polar Code for shipping, while it also explicitly rejects ‘fundamental changes’ to the rules either for shipping or fisheries. The idea of business self-regulation, or even the existing concept of Corporate Social Responsibility, remains absent. Perhaps more disturbing, however, for some readers will have been the general *laissez-faire* attitude implied and the relative shallowness – or at least, selectivity – of the analysis. The limitation of the energy discussion to gas, to offshore production, and to Norway (where the government actually decided just before publication of the UK document to halt exploration in a number of sensitive offshore fields³⁸) avoids tackling more contentious dimensions of the topic, while the tourism and bio-prospecting sections also skirt the edges of the issues. (Bearing in mind the troubling experiences and hot debates generated by Antarctic tourism,³⁹ is an improved advisory service really the key to managing tourist access to the Arctic?). No facts are provided on the actual involvement of British companies, for instance, in oil and gas prospecting, in shipping operation and insurance, or in processing Arctic investments generally, while the selected case-studies are less than impressive.⁴⁰

Evaluation: Comparisons, Concepts and Norms

When attempting a broader evaluation of the UK paper, perhaps the first question should be: is it a ‘strategy’? In a perceptive comment on the day of its publication, Professor Klaus Dodds from the Royal Holloway blog team on Geopolitics & Security⁴¹ suggested that the looser term ‘policy framework’ was chosen in order to de-dramatize the statement and in particular, not to alienate states within the Arctic who might be sensitive about ‘outsider’ involvement. The explanation is compelling given that the form, length and content of the paper are close enough to those of other European ‘strategies’ to have merited attaching the strategy label to it if so wished. (There have been cases, notably in Swedish policy-forming, of avoiding the s-word in fear of its militaristic connotations: but British attitudes to the military are sufficiently different to make that explanation implausible.)

Drawing on Dodds’ hypothesis, the general signal sent by the UK document may be analyzed at two levels – identity definition, and the politics of participation. Several authors have noted how the strategy documents of AC members all stress their owners’ identity as ‘Arctic nations’: even the Faroes make the claim (far-fetched in strict terms of physical geography) to be ‘a nation in the Arctic’.⁴² Clearly, a country lying beyond even the most widely-drawn depictions of the Arctic proper⁴³ cannot take this line, but must choose between justifying its interest on the basis of global implications, practical links of cause and effect with Arctic developments, and/or shared institutional responsibility. The UK document indeed presses all these buttons, albeit limiting the institutional references to NATO and UN agencies: but it also (already in its title) defines a distinct category of Arctic ‘neighbour’. On the one hand this is a strong, simple claim that other larger EU members would find it hard to match;⁴⁴ on the other it accepts clear differentiation from the Arctic states proper, making a name weaker than ‘strategy’ for the policy paper appropriate.

At the level of institutional politics, Dodds is clearly also right in seeing the UK as trying to frame itself as a ‘model’ AC observer. The publicity and controversy surrounding the six would-be observer nations⁴⁵ who were eventually admitted at Kiruna in May 2013 (see above) also impacted upon existing holders of that status. The new rules framed in 2011 made clear that observership was not ‘permanent’ but conditional, and might be called in question if a nation failed to demonstrate its practical interest in the Arctic (e.g. by contributions to AC work) or to respect the jurisdictions and rights of full AC members. It can be no coincidence that, five months after Kiruna, the UK policy document went out of its way to meet both these points by its massive stress on British scientific inputs (including those to AC working groups), and its almost comically frequent assurances of ‘respect’⁴⁶. Indeed the whole timing of the paper’s appearance makes most sense if it was held back – in face of rising parliamentary, business, and public interest – until it became clear what posture was the ‘safest’ for an observer nation to adopt. The resulting message is most obviously directed to the Arctic Eight themselves, conveying that the UK is no threat and there will be no down-side to accepting British (notably, scientific and commercial) contributions – a signal further underpinned by the paper’s prudent, mainstream treatment of key issues like the idea of an Arctic Treaty. However, given that the group of AC observers is starting to be institutionalized in its own right (informal meetings of the twelve with the AC Chair and Permanent Participants are now held annually under the ‘Warsaw process’⁴⁷), the UK document might also imply a bid for some kind of trail-blazing role within that group. How other observers react will be interesting to watch.

Comparison of Content

A comparison of existing Arctic strategies, as in Figure 1 below, reveals much overlap in their major themes. This is understandable not just because of the increasingly clear and homogeneous international discourse on the matter, but also because the strategies were produced in sequence, so that each could build on its predecessors. However, interesting distinctions also emerge, principally between the five coastal states whose texts must first and foremost buttress their claims to sovereignty, and those nations who lack an Arctic coastline (and in the Faroes’ case, also full statehood). The latter tend to focus more narrowly on economic, environmental and human issues, though they may also highlight non-military, trans-national security challenges such as the shipping disasters that loom large in the Faroese document. Along this spectrum the UK strategy largely, and logically, lies closer to the latter group, notably in its dual focus on environmental responsibility and sharing the economic spoils. Where it diverges from the ‘non-coastal’ model is in its forthright treatment of the military dimension (rather than, for instance, merely calling for ‘peaceful’ Arctic development): but this could be explained variously as a further claim to meaningful Arctic involvement, or a further expression of responsibility (since UK forces also boost neighbours’ defence).⁴⁸ Similar motives, combined with the play of institutional influences during drafting, can explain the abnormally large coverage of science.

Figure 1: Priority Themes of Arctic/High Northern Strategy Documents

Adapted and expanded from Lassi Heininen, 'Arctic Strategies and Policies – Inventory and Comparative Study', Northern Research Forum 2011 (updated April 2012), available at <http://www.nrf.is/arctic-strategies>

<u>Arctic Council Member States</u>	Sov/Sec	Econ/Trans	Envir	Man/Res	Human/Ind	Sci
Canada	x	x	x	x		
Kingdom of Denmark (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x
Finland	/x	x/x	x	(x)	/x	
Iceland	/x	x/x	x	x/x	x	x
Norway	x	x	x	x/x	/x	x
Russia	/x	x/x		x/x	/x	(x)
Sweden	/x	x	x	/x	x/x	(x)
USA	x	x/x	x	x/x		x
<u>Other States and Entities</u>						
European Union 2012		x	x	x	x	
Faroe Islands 2013		x	x	x/x	/x	x
UK 2013	/x	x/x	x	x/	(x/x)	x
Germany 2013	/x	x/x	x	x/	(x/x)	x

Key to abbreviations:

Sov = Sovereignty

Sec = Comprehensive security

Econ = Economic development (inc. natural resources)

Trans = Transportation

Envir = Environment

Res = Rescue and search

Human = Human dimension

Man = Management and governance

Ind = Indigenous peoples

Sci = Science and Research

A further contrast is found between the larger or more influential states (including Norway) that can take their role and voice in Arctic management for granted, and smaller ones (notably Iceland and the Faroes) whose strategy papers focus largely on how to get their views heard. The latter start by stressing their Arctic identity and stakeholdership – see above – but also voice strong support for institutions where even the smallest can participate, and criticize fora where they cannot. The Finnish strategy of 2010⁴⁹ goes particularly far in pushing the EU as a vehicle for Nordic and European engagement. Where does the UK paper lie in this spectrum? It reflects the novel situation of a European observer state that is ‘large’ *per se* (including in its economic, military and scientific impact on the High North), but has a relatively ‘small’ foothold in formal Arctic governance. The UK’s chosen tactics in this situation seem to be to focus mainly on establishing stakeholdership in practical terms, while commending certain fora (the global ones, AC Observership and NATO) where the UK is present and comfortable, but *not* attacking the more exclusive groups (the five littoral states). The German document of November 2013 makes very similar choices, albeit playing up the EU role – as already noted – possibly to help make up for Berlin’s greater geographical distance.

Balance and Strength

Like any published strategy document, the UK paper had to balance between the needs and expectations of different audiences, as well as between the claims of different Arctic challenges. The fact that pro-environment parliamentarians, and also the liberal media,⁵⁰ found it disappointing cannot have surprised its drafters, but was rather the price for two conscious choices the latter appear to have made. The first was to focus on smoothly inserting the UK into the discourse and practice of Arctic governance as defined by the eight AC states themselves. The second was to select topics where the UK had expertise to offer and a role to play, rather than highlighting such general and altruistic concerns – always liable to irritate certain AC members – as the plight of indigenous peoples or the danger to Arctic wildlife. Such choices would make sense in a document tailored to protect UK interests in the tactical situation of 2013, five months after Kiruna, with competition in the offing from six new AC observers and with the EU’s place in governance still moot. In addition, even if the strategy paper offered little detail of the ambitions of British firms like BP, its clear intent was to keep the way open for them to play an officially approved role, i.e. by rejecting any regulatory solutions that would narrow the space both for Arctic commercial development and free competition.

Clearly, the papers’ drafters could not please everyone; but one may still ask whether they created the best and strongest instrument imaginable for a coherent, and internationally respected, UK Arctic policy. Here the extreme prominence given to science could – for example – be questioned. While the document presents scientific knowledge as fundamental to environmental and fisheries management, it is less clear how it boosts British chances of profiting from new economic activity generally, and that linkage can anyway hardly be explored in the policy paper given the latter’s coyness (see above) over engagement in some key sectors. One could again argue that what is said about defence is either too much (because it might jar with opinion, especially when placed under the Human Dimension!), or too little, given that it is one of the UK’s strongest tools and

also a major variable – will this activity expand as the UK gives higher priority to Arctic security, or decline for economic reasons? A more general weakness, if the paper was meant to fulfil some functions of a ‘strategy’ without the name, lies in its lack of any explicit discussion of or blueprint for ways to mobilize the various British actors involved. The US and Russian strategies – admittedly facing bigger coordination challenges – devote much space to ‘who does what’, while the smaller nations Finland, Iceland and the Faroes also explicitly address coordination in their strategies, and the Faroese paper includes interesting thoughts about optimizing non-state contributions.

The general tone of the document also has a bearing on its adequacy. It has been suggested above that the treatment of new economic activity is too ‘light’ or *laissez-faire* in nature. While critics have seen it as underplaying the ecological impact of business (to which might be added social implications and other aspects of human security), the British document also arguably says too little about regulatory possibilities including self-regulation, and the accompanying safety risks (accidents, pollution, fragile infrastructures etc). Yet more nationalistic observers might also ask if it does enough to assert British interests and to signal where the UK must take a distinctive stand. By comparison, the German strategy has robust sections insisting on ‘freedom of shipping’ (where it echoes EU language) and ‘freedom of research’.⁵¹ All these particularities of the British document could be explained by its tactical aim as posited above, namely to conciliate the Arctic states (especially the larger ones) and project a ‘model observer’ image. But while they may help the UK to go on playing its role in the AC (and bilaterally) without making enemies, they have clearly not enhanced the UK image with all important constituencies, and may fall short of boosting the UK’s actual *influence* on Arctic outcomes.

A final question is prompted by the planned referendum on Scottish independence in September 2014:⁵² does the UK strategy adequately reflect the interests of Scotland or indeed, any other part of the realm with particular Arctic connections? Obviously, it is Scotland that lies nearest the Arctic and would be the first port of call for any new shipping routes transiting the North Sea. It is more affected by patterns of Arctic weather and is more likely to be involved (including its rescue services and the armed forces stationed there) in any major civil accident in Arctic waters. Some Scottish economic interests are also particularly strong: a 2004 report found that with less than 9% of the UK’s population, Scotland lands 62% of its fishing catch.⁵³ Conversely, Scotland has societal and human knowledge, notably of the impact of nearby offshore oil/gas development on remote areas (like Shetland), that could be of interest to nations like the Faroes, Iceland and Greenland now starting to develop their own fields. None of these points is made in the 2013 UK document, and there seems to be some merit in the discussion – launched in academic circles,⁵⁴ but also under consideration by the devolved government authorities in Edinburgh – over whether Scotland can and should (under any constitutional scenario) develop an Arctic strategy of its own.

Conclusions

The UK Arctic policy document of October 2013 adds a new shade to the rainbow of existing Arctic strategies and strategy-equivalents, casting into clearer relief some distinctions among the states involved. Alongside the existing categories of littoral states, Arctic Council members, and interested great powers, it creates a self-styled class of ‘neighbour’ – a neighbour, in this case, with ties to the Arctic past, present and future going beyond mere proximity. How, then, does a neighbour define its place, entitlement, and goals in the growing and increasingly complex and sensitive Arctic ‘business’?

The current UK answer seems to be to demonstrate engagement, illustrate present and future usefulness, and conciliate the major Arctic stakeholders at state and institutional level. This is certainly a necessary minimum, or starting point, for any state finding itself in the corresponding position. The more critical questions emerging above – and which cannot be fully answered until more is known of the reception and impact of the UK paper – are whether the UK has correctly framed and balanced these three basic objectives, and whether they are sufficient (and strongly enough expressed) to safeguard its national stake in the Arctic game.

The UK paper calls itself a ‘living document’ designed both to stimulate and to reflect debate, and it is open to review at any time. It will be discussed with partners abroad and at relevant public conferences, and while no formal debate was scheduled in Parliament on the strategy as such, the House of Lords is now studying the issue⁵⁵ and MPs may always revert to the question themselves. If reactions are lively, the authorities have hinted that a new version could be considered even within a year or so. The above analysis suggests that some adjustments may indeed be in order, both in the balance of issues covered and in the tone. How the British authorities will proceed depends on many possible factors; but the launch and reception of ‘strategies’ (whether so-named or not) by other observer states will surely be among the influential ones.

Notes

1. The present author defines this zone not strictly by the geographical Arctic Circle, but in climatic, economic and societal terms corresponding to the usage of the Arctic Council itself.
2. The membership of the AC also includes six indigenous peoples’ groups as permanent participants .
3. The nations concerned are Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States. On the substance of their strategies see Alyson JK Bailes and Lassi Heininen, *Strategy Papers on the Arctic or High North: a comparative study*, Occasional Paper of the University of Iceland Institute of International Studies, 2012, available at http://ams.hi.is/sites/ams.hi.is/files/strategy_papers_-_pdf_-_singlepage.pdf.

4. Alyson JK Bailes, 'Does a small state need a strategy?', Occasional Paper of the University of Iceland Centre for Small States, 2008, available at http://stofnanir.hi.is/sites/files/ams/Bailes_Final_1.pdf.
5. They are France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, the UK, China, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Singapore and India, of which the last six were accepted at the AC Ministerial meeting of May 2013 in Kiruna, Sweden. An application for Observership by the European Union (EU) was left unresolved on that occasion. A number of non-governmental and international governmental organizations also hold Observer status.
6. See <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/about-us/arctic-council/observers>; and for analysis, P. Graczyk & T. Koivurova (January, 2013). A new era in the Arctic Council's external relations? Broader consequences of the Nuuk observer rules for Arctic governance. *Polar Record*. ref.10.1017/S0032247412000824.
7. See for instance, on the Chinese case, L. Jakobson (2010). China Prepares for an Ice-free Arctic. SIPRI: Stockholm. Available at <http://books.sipri.org/files/insight/SIPRIInsight1002.pdf>.
8. National situations and motives vary in this context; for some examples see A. Spruds and T. Rostoks (2014) (eds.). *Perceptions and Strategies of Arcticness in the sub-Arctic Europe*, Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs. Available at: <http://liia.lv/en/publications/perceptions-and-strategies-of-arcticness-in-sub-a/>.
9. A. J. K. Bailes & B. í Jákupsstovu (December, 2013). The Faroe Islands and the Arctic: Genesis of a Strategy. *Stjórnmal og Stjórnisysla* (University of Iceland). Available at <http://www.irpa.is/article/view/1228>.
10. The text is at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/251216/Adapting_To_Change_UK_policy_towards_the_Arctic.pdf. For the Ministerial comments on publication see <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/respecting-the-arctic-promoting-uk-interests>.
11. (In the author's English translation) 'Guidelines for Germany's Arctic Policy; accepting responsibility, seizing opportunities', Auswärtiges Amt (Berlin) November 2013, available at <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/cae/servlet/contentblob/658714/publicationFile/185889/Arktisleitlinien.pdf>; English summary at http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/Aussenpolitik/InternatRecht/Einzelfragen/Arktis/Arktis-Grundlagentext_node.html.
12. See www.spri.cam.ac.uk.
13. See <http://www.antarctica.ac.uk>.
14. There is more on the scientific contribution in section 3 below.
15. L. Heininen & B. Segerstahl. (2002). International Negotiations Aiming at a Reduction of Nuclear Risks in the Barents Sea Region. In R. Avenhaus, V. Kremenyuk and G. Sjöstedt (eds.). *Containing the Atom. International Negotiations on Nuclear Security and Safety* (pp. 243-270). New York: Lexington Books.
16. 'Centrica, E.ON and RWE lead Arctic rush for oil', *The Guardian* online 4 July 2013, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/jul/04/uk-energy-companies-arctic-oil>.

17. The UK was among observers at the Nordic defence ministers' latest meeting at Helsinki in December 2013, see <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20131212/DEFREG01/312120021/Nordic-States-Roll-Out-New-Defense-Roadmap>.
18. D. Depledge and K. Dodds. (2014). No "Strategy" Please We're British: The UK and the Arctic Policy Framework. *RUSI Journal* (forthcoming). See also D. Depledge (2013). Arctic Security and the United Kingdom'. *IFS Insights* 3/2013. Available at http://ifs.forsvaret.no/publikasjoner/ifs_insights/insights_13/Sider/Ins_3_2013_UK_Arctic.aspx.
19. The other non-AC states invited were France, Germany and the Netherlands. See comments by an officer of the US European Command at <http://www.eucom.mil/blog-post/25348/arctic-security-forces-round-table-a-new-way-to-live-by-an-old-code>.
20. A planned British air force deployment to Iceland was abandoned in the winter of 2008-9 at a time of unusual bilateral tension over the 'Icesave' problem.
21. Also often cited is a collision between a French and a British nuclear submarine in 2009, reportedly in the Bay of Biscay. The British authorities stated that there was no release of radioactive material on either occasion.
22. Text at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmenvaud/171/17102.htm>.
23. 'MPs demand moratorium on Arctic oil drilling', *The Guardian* 20 September 2012, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/20/mps-demand-moratorium-arctic-drilling>.
24. For both sets of remarks see the government press release 'Respecting the Arctic, protecting UK interests' of 17 October 2013, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/respecting-the-arctic-promoting-uk-interests>.
25. See e.g. a statement by Ambassador Lan Lijun at a meeting with the Swedish AC Chairmanship in November 2012, available at <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/document-archive/category/392-observer-meeting-stockholm-6-nov-2012>.
26. <http://www.discoveringthearctic.org.uk>.
27. Text at http://www.oceanlaw.org/downloads/arctic/Ilulissat_Declaration.pdf.
28. It is hard to deny the *de facto* role that NATO plays in the High North notably through the membership of four out of five coastal states and the system of strategic nuclear deterrence. But any overt Arctic role/policy for the Alliance is not only objected to by Russia, but currently barred from discussion in NATO itself because of Canadian objections. See Alyson JK Bailes (February, 2013). Turning European Security Upside Down? The Future Significance of the Arctic. In *Dis-politika* (Turkish Foreign Policy Institute, Ankara). Vol. XXXVII: 3-4.
29. Kingdom of Denmark Arctic Strategy 2011-2020, available at http://um.dk/en/~media/UM/English-site/Documents/Politics-and-diplomacy/Arktis_Rapport_UK_210x270_Final_Web.pdf.

30. For the US Department of Defense's Arctic strategy published in November 2013, see http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2013_Arctic_Strategy.pdf.
31. The 'Arctic five' held Ministerial meetings at Ilulissat, Greenland, in 2008 and near Ottawa, Canada, in 2010.
32. Texts available at <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/document-archive/category/20-main-documents-from-nuuk>, and <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/05/209406.htm>, respectively.
33. The EU Arctic policy documents most frequently cited in the literature were issued by the European Parliament and Commission and so do not bind the Member States, but the Council did issue policy conclusions in 2009 as well in 2014 on the basis of the Commission's 2008 and 2012 submissions – see http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/111814.pdf.
34. For comparison, the EU gets only brief coverage in other national strategies aside from Finland's (the 2010 version, see <http://www.geopoliticsnorth.org/images/stories/attachments/Finland.pdf>), but the German document (note 9 above) states as the last of its guiding principles that Germany 'supports an active Arctic policy by the European Union and is committed to ensure horizontal coherence in (the Union's) foreign and security policy and in the policy fields of research, environment protection, energy and natural resources, industry and technology, transport and fisheries.' (Author's translation). The downplaying of the EU in the British text may variously reflect a currently Eurosceptical British government; a wish not to inflame anti-EU sentiment in some AC (e.g. Canadian indigenous) circles; and a sense that the EU's Arctic policies and role are still a work in progress.
35. See <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/resources/news-and-press/news-archive/782-the-task-force-for-action-on-black-carbon-and-methane>.
36. 'The Council expresses its readiness to consider a proposal to put in place a regulatory framework for the part of the seas not yet covered by an international conservation system by extending the mandate of relevant Regional Fisheries Management Organisations or any other proposal to that effect agreed by the relevant parties. Until such a framework is in place, the Council favours a temporary ban on new fisheries in those waters.' *Op. cit.* at note 33 above, p. 3.
37. The AC's Kiruna Ministerial meeting agreed to establish a Circumpolar Business Forum which is expected among other things to discuss responsible business governance in the region. See <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/resources/news-and-press/news-archive/732-press-release-15-may-kiruna>.
38. 'Norway's new government drops Lofoten oil', *Barents Observer* 1 October 2013, available at <http://barentsobserver.com/en/politics/2013/10/norways-new-government-drops-lofoten-oil-01-10>.
39. An incident of cruise ship stranding in December 2013 has exacerbated these debates; see e.g. 'Antarctica expedition: are research and tourism a toxic mix?', *Christian Science Monitor* 7.1.2014, available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2014/0107/Antarctica-expedition-Are-research-and-tourism-a-toxic-mix-video> (accessed 8 January 2014).

40. Commercial confidentiality may of course have been a factor here.
41. <http://rhulgeopolitics.wordpress.com/2013/10/17/adapting-to-change-uk-policy-towards-the-arctic-2/>. The analysis is developed further in Depledge and Dodds (note 18 above).
42. *Op. cit.* in note 9 above, pp. 536-539.
43. The UK document devotes space to explaining these definitions in pp. 1-2; see also note 1 above.
44. China does, however, call itself a 'pole-near' country.
45. The EU had also applied to be an institutional observer (a status already held by several institutions, see <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/about-us/arctic-council/observers>) but a decision on admitting it was deferred at Kiruna.
46. Page 7 of the document is an outstanding example.
47. See http://www.msz.gov.pl/en/foreign_policy/international_organisations/other_organisations/arctic_council. In 2012 this meeting was held at under-secretary of state level.
48. Given the MOD's strong engagement in preparing the UK document, the military section might perhaps have been even more prominent, were it not for London's awareness of sensitivities about 'militarization' in some AC states and in public opinion.
49. 'Finland's Strategy for the Arctic Region', Prime Minister's Office publications 8/2010, text at <http://www.geopoliticsnorth.org/images/stories/attachments/Finland.pdf>.
50. See for instance Fiona Harvey, 'UK aims to become hub for oil exploration', 17 October 2013, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/oct/17/uk-hub-arctic-oil-exploration-greenpeace>.
51. *Op. cit.* at note 11 above, pp. 9-11.
52. For background and the international issues involved see Alyson JK Bailes, Baldur Thorhallsson and Rachael L Johnstone, 'Scotland as a Small State: Where would it seek shelter?', *Stjórnmal og Stjórnýsla* (University of Iceland) June 2013, available at http://english.hi.is/files/scotland_as_an_independent_small_state_1.pdf.
53. Royal Society for Scotland, 'Inquiry into the Future of the Scottish Fishing Industry', available at http://www.royalsoced.org.uk/cms/files/advice-papers/inquiry/scottish_fishing_industry.pdf.
54. R. L. Johnstone. (2012). An Arctic Strategy for Scotland?. *Arctic Yearbook 2012*. Available at http://www.arcticyearbook.com/images/Articles_2012/Johnstone.pdf.
55. A Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Arctic has called for evidence and scheduled its first hearings for September 2014; see <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/arcticcom>,