HM Government

The UK and the Arctic

An Update to the United Kingdom's Arctic Policy Framework



Contents

Foreword	2
Executive Summary	4
Protecting people, climate and environment	6
Preserving security and stability	10
Promoting our shared prosperity	14
Appendix	18
References	22

Front Cover Image: Fieldwork to conduct isotopic tracking of salt in snow on Arctic sea ice in Cambridge Bay (Nunavut, Canada). This research was supported by the RGS via a Walters Kundert Fellowship.

Credit: Clement Soriot (University of Manitoba)

Foreword

The United Kingdom approaches the Arctic as a committed and responsible neighbour. For over 500 years our histories have been intertwined, through exploration, scientific discovery, and enduring partnerships across the region. Today, we continue to contribute to understanding the Arctic's unique environment, supporting world-leading research that helps protect its ecosystems and livelihoods, and strengthening collaboration with those who live and work there. In doing so, we also deepen our understanding of how rapid change in the Arctic is shaping weather, climate, and prosperity far beyond the region, including here in the UK.

Home to over four million people, the Arctic is a region of vibrant cultures, resilient communities, and growing economic opportunity. But it is also undergoing profound and accelerating change. Climatic shifts are transforming the physical environment, affecting biodiversity and infrastructure, and testing the resilience of Indigenous communities and other communities in the Arctic. These changes have global consequences, increasing the urgency of coordinated scientific effort and international cooperation.

This update to the UK's Arctic Policy Framework reflects our commitment to remain an engaged, constructive and outward-looking partner. It builds on strong foundations and sets out how the UK will work across science, environmental protection, economic engagement and diplomacy to support a stable, sustainable and prosperous Arctic.

However, we must also be clear-eyed about a more contested geopolitical context. While our ambition is for a more secure and co-operative Arctic, the challenges to that vision continue to intensify. The region today is far removed from the 'zone of peace' envisaged at the end of the Cold War, and the conditions that enabled close co-operation, including through the Arctic Council, have been significantly undermined.

Russia's sustained militarisation of the Arctic over nearly two decades, compounded by its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, has disrupted established patterns of cooperation and increased risks to regional stability. At the same time, wider strategic competition, including China's stated ambition to become a Polar great power by 2030, is shaping the region in new ways. Greater accessibility is opening economic opportunities, from shipping to resource development, but also increasing pressure on environmental and social systems.

The UK's response is clear. There can be no UK or global security without Arctic security. While we do not seek escalation, we will—as set out in our Defence Investment Plan—strengthen deterrence, enhance situational awareness and ensure that our northern flank remains secure, including by stepping up our support to regional allies and partners and working through NATO and the Joint Expeditionary Force. In that context we also welcome the recent agreement between the US, Denmark and Greenland which will strengthen Arctic and North Atlantic security.

This is a complex balance. We will pursue effective deterrence and readiness without unduly securitising the region; remain open and collaborative while protecting against exploitation by adversaries; and support sustainable economic opportunity without compromising environmental and social standards. Achieving this requires a coordinated, all-of-government approach, grounded in strong partnerships across the Arctic.

Through this refreshed framework, the UK reaffirms its commitment to being a reliable neighbour, a partner in science and stewardship, and a steadfast ally in maintaining the stability and security on which the Arctic's future—and our own—depends.

Uma Kumaran MP
Minister for the Polar Regions

October 2026



Executive Summary

This update to the UK's Arctic Policy Framework sets out our assessment of the key developments in the region since 2023 and our response to them. The pace of change has been significant, and its impacts are a reminder of the degree to which our interests and responsibilities are inter-connected.

Indeed, the region is of fundamental importance to the UK. What happens there has a direct bearing on our weather, climate, economy, national security and domestic resilience. As the Arctic warms it is driving new climate and environmental security risks demanding a better understanding of, and stronger action on, climate change and its impacts. As a leader in Polar science, the UK is well placed to contribute to that growing body of understanding, and recognises the importance of doing so in collaboration with Arctic States, Indigenous communities, and non-Arctic State partners.

Challenges to the security and stability of the Arctic, and more specifically the High North, have more immediate implications for global, Euro-Atlantic and UK security, including NATO's deterrence and defence. In line with the UK's 2025 Strategic Defence Review, the UK's approach to the Arctic will follow our 'NATO-First' approach to deterrence and defence. As the strategic context has become more challenging, we will continue to work closely with Allies to ensure that activity in the High North and Arctic supports our collective security and stability, and is underpinned by strong and effective governance.

Growing accessibility and new economic opportunities offer the potential to deepen our trading relationships and support our supply chains. The UK's interests include maritime professional business services, our port industry, space capabilities and technological innovation. These activities must support the effective governance of the region on which our overarching economic and security interests depend. We therefore seek to ensure that economic development is responsible and transparent, and undertaken in collaboration with the people of the Arctic.

Our collective cross-government interests in the Arctic and High North will therefore focus on the following priorities:

1. Understanding and responding to a changing Arctic:

As the Arctic warms at up to four times the global average the UK will continue to demonstrate leadership in reducing global emissions and will work to better inform policy by furthering our understanding of climatic and environmental change, to address its causes and impacts for the people and environment of the Arctic and the wider region including the UK, and draw on the UK's Polar research capabilities and expertise to drive research collaboration that recognises the value of modern science and traditional knowledge.

2. Enhancing security and stability:

We will step up our defence contribution to the High North, including through our NATO-First approach, in conjunction with Arctic, European and wider partners to counter threats to our security and stability, invest in defence infrastructure and technology, support interoperability and interchangeability, and maintain credible deterrence and warfighting readiness, without seeking escalation or unduly securitising the region.

3. Supporting strong and effective governance:

We reaffirm our support for the Arctic Council as the key inter-governmental forum for positive multilateral engagement in the region alongside our championing of rules-based international governance consistent with established norms and fundamental principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity as emerging economic opportunities place new pressures on the region.

4. Building responsible trade and economic partnerships:

We will develop our trading relationships with Arctic States and others active in the region where the UK has expertise and capabilities to offer, while managing risks to our security, safety and environment and ensuring that new economic activity is undertaken responsibly and transparently and in a way that directly benefits Indigenous communities and other inhabitants of the Arctic.

5. Strengthening resilience:

Our ability to deter threats to our security and prosperity depends on our resilience and the resilience of our partners in the region, from a national to community level, and we will therefore work collaboratively to enhance our understanding of the risks that we face and appropriate mitigations.

These priorities reflect our diverse interests and relationships with the Arctic as a region. What unites them is the importance of partnership in their delivery. We value the strength of our relationships with our Arctic State Allies* and with Indigenous partners† in the region, and seek to build on these where opportunity allows. We also recognise the value of the constructive collaboration we enjoy with other actors engaged in the region, notably other State Observers to the Arctic Council across Europe and Asia-Pacific, and the European Union (EU). We seek opportunities to develop these relationships further and in 2025 we committed to engage and collaborate with the EU under our Security and Defence Partnership, which recognises our common interest in the security and stability of the Arctic and in collaborating at the interface of climate change, peace, security and defence. As the strategic importance of the Arctic continues to grow, so these relationships will be crucial to delivering on the Government's priorities and on our shared objectives for the region.

* The Appendix sets out further details of our partnerships and collaborations with Arctic States.
† In 2007 the UK supported the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Protecting people, climate and environment

The Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme's latest Arctic Climate Change Update 2024 is clear: "…the Arctic emerges as being in a new physical state beyond that implied by previous indicators and processes, and that these multiple Arctic changes serve as an ongoing indicator of global change". In other words, we are bearing witness to "a new Arctic climate"[1]. In recent years extreme events have increased and new climate records have been recorded, in many cases only to be broken again in succeeding seasons. Indeed, the last 10 years are the 10 warmest on record in the Arctic[2]. Sea ice extent at the summer maximum has decreased 12% per decade since the 1990s[3]. Since our Arctic Policy Framework was published in February 2023 new records have been set against a backdrop of rapid warming which in places is occurring at rates nearly four times faster than the rest of the planet[4].



The US' National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's latest Arctic Report Card, and recent research shows us that:

- The record lowest annual maximum extent of winter sea ice in the 47-year satellite record was observed in March 2025. The oldest, thickest Arctic sea ice (> 4 years) has declined by more than 95% since the 1980s[5].
- Glaciers in Arctic Scandinavia and Svalbard experienced the largest annual net loss of ice on record between 2023 and 2024 while in Alaska, glaciers have now lost an average of 38 vertical meters of ice since the mid-20th century[6].
- Following the beginning of pan-Arctic observations in 2000, 2025 saw the third highest maximum Arctic tundra greenness in the 26-year satellite record, continuing a sequence of record or near-record high values since 2020[7].

First-hand testimony highlights how the extreme conditions experienced in the Arctic are affecting Indigenous communities and other communities of the Arctic, challenging their livelihoods and cultural foundations. Reduced snow cover, winter rainfall and increased shrubification are changing reindeer herding patterns[7].



Royal Research Ship Sir David Attenborough on the KANG-LAC Cruise, Greenland.
Credit: Joe Laurence, British Antarctic Survey

Shifting fisheries and sea ice are affecting hunting seasons and food availability[8]. Thawing permafrost is driving ground subsidence and coastal erosion, undermining infrastructure and traditional activities such as access to land, with the potential for subsequent methane emissions to further drive climate change[1]. Snow redistribution is impacting water supplies, agricultural production and fire risk with impacts on ecosystems and health[1]. And climate change is also expected to exacerbate pollution, such as marine litter and micro-plastics, as sea ice melts and human activities increase, which adds to the effects of climate change on marine ecosystems in the Arctic[9].

But the consequences of climate change are also felt beyond the Arctic. It is changing the nature of the environment in which we operate for our deterrence and defence. It is making accessible new shipping routes and Arctic resources of global interest. It is also changing weather patterns, shifting ecosystems and raising sea levels. Indeed, the climate and nature security impacts of a warming Arctic are increasingly clear, with consequences for national security, domestic resilience, food supplies and critical infrastructure in countries like the UK. And there is growing evidence of the potential for broader impacts such as the weakening of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation[10].

It is therefore in our collective interests to work collaboratively with existing and new research partners to enhance our understanding of the Arctic and the impacts of climate and environmental change. With that in mind, in 2026 the UK launched the first ever taskforce to strengthen our action on climate security and boost UK preparedness for climate change - identifying gaps, assessing risks and providing independent recommendations and expertise on climate and nature threats to national security, including in the context of a warming Arctic[11].

In response the UK will:

(i) Support collaborative science and research to understand and manage these growing climatic and environmental challenges

The UK has built its reputation as a leader in Polar research, ranked first for scientific impact of its Arctic research by the University of the Arctic[12], and UK researchers are engaged across the natural, physical and social sciences and humanities.

The UK, through the Head of the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC)'s Arctic Office, has provided strategic science leadership as President of the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) between 2022-2026, and UK researchers have a strong presence in IASC's Working Groups. Some of our research partnerships have set new standards in co-designing and delivering research projects with Indigenous Peoples, such as the £11.2m Canada-Inuit Nunangat-UK Arctic Research Programme 2021-2025, funded jointly by UK Research and Innovation and Canadian partners.

NERC has invested over £145m in UK Arctic science since 2014, in addition to investment in infrastructure and other assets such as the Royal Research Ship Sir David Attenborough which undertook its first Arctic research cruise in 2024, returning again in 2026. Understanding the environmental impacts of an increasingly ice-free Arctic Ocean, and developing the predictive capability and operational capacity needed to build resilience and security as the Arctic changes, is now a focus for UK Research and Innovation's (UKRI) Climate, Adaptation, Environment and Resilience priority programme. UKRI will initially invest around £13m up to 2032 in a partnership with the Research Council of Norway, including with their Polhavet (Arctic Ocean) 2050 programme.

Additionally over the past four years the Government has made available over £2.75m in grant funding specifically to support UK-based researchers to develop collaborative research projects with the Arctic Council Working Groups[13] and Arctic-focused bilateral partnerships with Iceland[14], Greenland[15] and Japan[16], together supporting around 100 new international projects. As part of this we have integrated a strong focus on the development and training of early-career researchers and their collaboration with Arctic State partners. This includes our field skills programme based at our research facility in Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard, part of a unique international research community of ten nations, hosted by Norway.

We look forward to continuing to develop and deepen our research presence in Svalbard. We have recently committed over £4m over the next 3-year period to support the further strengthening of UK science and research collaborations in the Arctic, including with the Arctic Council and with partners both in and beyond the region. Additionally, we deliver Arctic weather and climate science and associated services through the Met Office and others in the UK Arctic science community in collaboration with Arctic State partners, to enhance our collective understanding of the Arctic and develop UK national capability, at a time when more reliable climate and weather forecasting is needed more than ever before. We also recognise the value and opportunity presented by the Fifth International Polar Year in 2032-33 to invest in collaborative Arctic science.

(ii) Tackle the urgency of the climate crisis and strengthen adaptation and resilience

The UK continues to work to tackle the urgency of the climate crisis, including through our commitment to delivering net zero and our commitments to the Paris Agreement. Our research in the Arctic plays a crucial role in advancing our collective scientific understanding of the nature and impacts of climate change, as seen through the Arctic's complex environmental systems, and to building a secure and resilient Arctic and wider world. Accelerating the transition to clean energy and reducing emissions, including from short-lived climate pollutants, remains essential to safeguarding ecosystems and communities. UK scientists are actively engaged with international collaborators, communities and Indigenous Peoples within the Arctic, to co-ordinate scientific endeavours and to help communities adapt to the changing environment and to protect it. This matters to us all. As Arctic warming continues, the material risks to the region and to the UK's interests increase. This includes the possibility of more significant impacts on the UK's weather[17] and longer-term climate through changes in oceanic and atmospheric circulation[14].

In response to this we seek to strengthen our adaptation and resilience planning. In 2024 the UK's Advanced Research and Innovation Agency committed £81m towards developing a better understanding of, and an early warning system for, Arctic tipping points, working closely with Greenlandic and international partners.

(iii) Build stronger collaborations with local and Indigenous knowledge systems

Respect and inclusion of Indigenous knowledge systems, norms and guidelines is crucial to all our work and a fundamental part of our expectation for UK researchers. We recognise that Indigenous Peoples are often at the forefront of climate impacts and we value their knowledge and deep understanding of the region. We are committed to ensuring that UK researchers co-ordinate and work in line with local strategies and policy, a principle embedded in our UK Arctic Code of Conduct published in 2025[18]. This is especially important at a time when global interest is growing in climate interventions. We are actively engaged in ensuring this interest is guided by evidence, appropriate governance mechanisms and local and national consent.

(iv) Pursue a science-led, precautionary and ecosystem-based approach to guide our economic interests

As the ice melts, and the Arctic is becoming more economically attractive for activities such as fishing, deep-sea mining and other extractive industries, we remain an international advocate for the highest possible environmental and social standards informed by the best quality science. We are guided by a science-led, precautionary and ecosystem-based approach. We therefore support the current commercial fishing moratorium (in place until 2037) of the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement, to which we are an Observer State, and will seek to join the Agreement at the earliest opportunity. And we will not sponsor or support the issuing of any deep-sea mining exploitation contracts by the International Seabed Authority (ISA) until there is sufficient scientific evidence about the potential impact of deep-sea mining activities on marine ecosystems and strong, enforceable environmental regulations, standards and guidelines have been developed and adopted by the ISA.

The UK remains committed in its support for the work of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) including its proposals to reduce the environmental impact of Arctic shipping, and OSPAR's work to protect the Arctic marine environment. We were among the first to sign the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (the "BBNJ Agreement"). The UK ratified the BBNJ Agreement on 10 July 2026 and it came into force on 9 August 2026.



No PlastiCups project, Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard, Norway.
Credit: Iain Rudkin, British Antarctic Survey

Preserving security and stability



30 Commando IX Group, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Squadron beach assault in Inflatable Raiding Craft (IRC), Northern Norway.

Credit: MoD

The UK is committed to the long-term peace, security and stability of the Arctic region characterised by co-operation and adherence to international law. This is fundamental: there can be no UK or global security without Arctic security. The Arctic is no longer peripheral, if it ever was, but a region of strategic importance and one that is vital for UK national security. Our assessment is that the region will increasingly shape UK prosperity, climate and environmental security, and energy resilience. But that is under threat. The era of Arctic exceptionalism, of 'high North, low tension', that has characterised the region for the best part of 30 years, is over. While low tension remains our long-term ambition, recent geopolitical events and rapid climate and environmental change mean that the Arctic is more competitive and contested than ever, while a deteriorating security environment has increased the risks to the region and beyond.

Indeed, the security environment in the Arctic is becoming more complex and will continue to be shaped, in part, by wider changes in Euro-Atlantic security and vice-versa. The Arctic and the High North represent the northern approaches to the UK and our ability to protect ourselves against threats in the region is vital to our territorial sovereignty and resilience. In addressing these, the UK will work with Arctic allies through NATO, recognising its central role in collective defence of the High North. Our approach to the Arctic will be key to the UK's leading role in the Alliance and is a clear example of our 'NATO-First' approach and steadfast commitment to the Alliance. Through this we will continue to contest malign and destabilising behaviours and activity which threaten our interests and the stability of the region.

Russia has, over many years, increased its military presence and modernised its bases across the region, including both the north Atlantic and north Pacific. The Arctic is home to Russia's Northern Fleet, which is capable of threatening the UK, Western Europe and North America. With expanded patrols and new capabilities across multiple domains, Russia is strengthening and modernising its military presence in the region, with the potential to project this force against the UK and UK interests. This includes the threat posed to critical national infrastructure (CNI), and other non-critical infrastructure by Russia's Main Directorate for Deep-Sea Research (GUGI), the operations of which the UK has exposed and demonstrated our capability to respond to. Russia's actions in Ukraine, undermining the stability and security of the Euro-Atlantic, have contributed to the erosion of Arctic governance. Russia has also dramatically expanded its use of shadow fleet vessels in an attempt to circumvent sanctions on its energy exports. The use of these vessels poses a systemic risk to international maritime safety and standards, in addition to increasing the potential for serious environmental damage in a highly sensitive region.

The Arctic environment is itself changing rapidly due to climate change[1]. It is undermining community and human resilience, including for many Indigenous communities and other communities of the Arctic who play a key role in national sovereignty and defence. It is changing the operational environment, our understanding of which is critical to ensure continued effective defence, domain awareness and deterrence. It is also precipitating an increased presence in the Arctic of other state and non-state actors alike competing for influence as economic resources become more accessible.

China, while not an Arctic military power, sees the changing Arctic as increasingly geopolitically significant. It has been open about its desire for a bigger role in the region, declaring itself a "near-Arctic state", with ambitions to become a Polar great power by 2030[19]. China is using its strategic relationship with Russia to expand its presence and activities, including joint maritime and aerial patrols. But China is not alone. Other countries are also seeking a greater role. It is also true that we can no longer consider the Arctic immune to the consequences of wider global events, whether Ukraine or the Middle East - a clear demonstration of the increasing interconnectedness of the Arctic with the rest of the world.

All these developments have the potential to challenge many of the rules which govern the international system which underpin the region's stability; they have the potential to fundamentally change the region and our relationship with it.



Commando Helicopter Forces Driver Training Team conducts a recce of potential areas for Oversnow Reconnaissance Vehicle (ORV) operator training in Bardufoss, Norway.

Credit: MoD

In response the UK will:

(i) Step up investment in, and capabilities for, defence and deterrence in the High North

In responding to these developments and with a view to strengthening our security, the UK's Strategic Defence Review made clear our commitment to a NATO-First approach. The Defence Investment Plan is putting that commitment into action and will enhance our readiness and capability to deter threats in the High North, including incidents such as pipeline or undersea cable sabotage, and respond to increased accessibility due to climate change.

NATO activity reflects the increasingly interconnected nature of defence and deterrence across the Nordic region, the Baltic Sea, the North Atlantic and the Barents Sea, in response to adversaries that are becoming more assertive and capable. The accession of Sweden and Finland to the NATO alliance has improved our collective capability and interoperability among members. It also means that there is now a stronger NATO presence in the Arctic, with seven of the eight Arctic States protected by Article 5.

The UK's defence contribution to the Arctic and High North is focused on ensuring credibility, interoperability, and adaptability. These principles are exemplified through Atlantic Bastion, a UK-led naval programme involving crewed and uncrewed assets, designed to protect the North Atlantic against emerging threats by leveraging AI-enabled drones, Type 26 frigates, and P8 aircraft to create a digital targeting network. This will enable the Armed Forces to find, track and, if required, act against adversaries. We will continue to align capability development with our Allies to maximise collective effect, ensure interoperability, and sustain a robust deterrent posture, while supporting the co-development, co-design and co-manufacture of defence capabilities that are interoperable with close partners.

(ii) Enhance co-operation, interoperability and interchangeability with partners

In consequence, the UK is deepening its bilateral defence co-operation with Arctic State partners and scaling up joint exercises with NATO allies. This includes: doubling the number of troops deployed to Norway over the next three years from 1000 to 2000 personnel to conduct extreme cold weather training; enhancing our engagement with Iceland by playing a role in NATO air policing; carrying out maritime patrols to protect NATO airspace and the Greenland – Iceland – UK (GIUK) gap; and developing our defence cooperation with Canada through joint training, capability building, and knowledge exchange, with the collaboration and support of Indigenous communities. NATO remains the cornerstone of security in Europe, and our Security and Defence Partnership with the EU recognises our common security interests in the Arctic. In September 2026 the UK took command of NATO's Joint Force Command Norfolk, NATO's newest operational headquarters with responsibility for the North Atlantic and the Arctic. Drawing on the UK's maritime expertise and historic role in trans-Atlantic security, this move reflects NATO's broader shift towards enhanced European responsibility within the Alliance. For example, our Lunna House Agreement with Norway will see UK and Norwegian navies operating side-by-side in the North Atlantic, protecting CNI from malign activity. Deterring and disrupting the Russian shadow fleet is also a priority for the UK, on which it works closely with the Nordic Baltic 8++ partnership.

And through the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), the coalition of 10 like-minded Northern European allies[‡] for which we are proud to be the framework nation, we are increasing awareness, understanding and coordination of activities and efforts in the Arctic, High North, North Atlantic and Baltic Sea regions. It seeks to strengthen NATO's northern flank and increase deterrence and resilience through alignment with NATO's Arctic Sentry, and through

this reaffirm our commitment to European security and stability. This includes closer engagement on JEF activity with other nations, in particular Canada, where we will explore options for greater collaboration.

(iii) Support security and stability through our commitment to good governance, resilient societies, and science and research

We recognise that the risk of military and commercial miscalculation, with consequences for our security, safety and the environment, cannot be ruled out. So in responding to the growing threats we do not seek escalation. And by being transparent in our actions and seeking to engage constructively with partners we aim to minimise the risks of miscalculation. We also know that stability and security is derived from more than our clear-eyed focus on deterrence and defence, including sustainable livelihoods, resilient communities and successful economies. For 30 years the Arctic Council has brought together Arctic States and Permanent Participants, with State Observers like the UK, to help determine the strategic direction of the region and promote science collaboration. While Russia's invasion of Ukraine undermined political co-operation, we recognise the Council's intrinsic value as the key intergovernmental forum for circumpolar co-operation, and its potential to convene growing interest and respond to climatic and environmental change.

We therefore reiterate our support for the Council and will continue to champion the wider rules-based international order and freedom of navigation, in particular UNCLOS and maritime safety and environmental regimes such as the Polar Code. These take on renewed importance in promoting lawful, respectful, and transparent behaviour consistent with fundamental principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, as economic interest and activity intensifies.

As the region faces new risks driven by climatic, geopolitical and technological change, we are deploying our world-leading polar science capability in partnership with others to help us understand the changes taking place and improve our situational awareness, maritime security and domain knowledge. This will help us to build stronger resilience within the Arctic and ensure we retain our ability to operate effectively within this shifting landscape.



45 Commando Royal Marines Cold Weather Survival Courses, led by instructors of the Royal Marines Mountain Leader Cadre.
Credit: MoD

‡ Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden alongside the UK as the JEF Framework Nation.

Promoting our shared prosperity

The UK's vision is for shared prosperity across the Arctic underpinned by safe, responsible and sustainable development that benefits the people and environment of the region. The Arctic is already characterised by vibrant economies including traditional subsistence-based production of commodities. But as the Arctic becomes more accessible and inter-connected to the rest of the world, so it is bearing witness to growing interest in the economic resources that it holds with much focus on raw materials such as critical minerals, and the growth of shipping for tourism and commerce. This presents significant opportunities for the UK, while recognising the responsibility to ensure appropriate governance, social and environmental standards.

The Arctic has significant potential as a source of some of the raw materials necessary for the energy transition and new technologies. Security of critical mineral supply is increasingly important with increasing 'resource nationalism' adding to geopolitical tensions. The Arctic is also becoming increasingly accessible for tourism and commercial shipping alike[20]. But the Arctic is not just a destination in its own right. The commercial use of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) between Asia and Europe has slowly been developing, notwithstanding that many operators judge this sea route to be operationally risky and environmentally precarious. We have also seen the growth of the shadow fleet, with sanctioned vessels sailing in and out of the Russian Arctic now accounting for nearly a third of all cargo traffic along the NSR and posing a potentially serious threat to UK interests. There are UK equities at stake from these developments. They offer opportunities as a recipient of, and destination for, future Arctic trade, and as a country with strong maritime traditions, but also bring challenges to our security, safety, and environment.

In response the UK will:

(i) Seek to deepen valued trading relationships with Arctic State partners, and others operating in the region, where our values align

The UK has deep historic ties with many Arctic States. These underpin modern trading partnerships across diverse sectors including defence-industrial, research, space, energy, fisheries, and others. The UK is committed to further developing these partnerships, recognising the mutual benefits of greater economic co-operation. Building on our existing

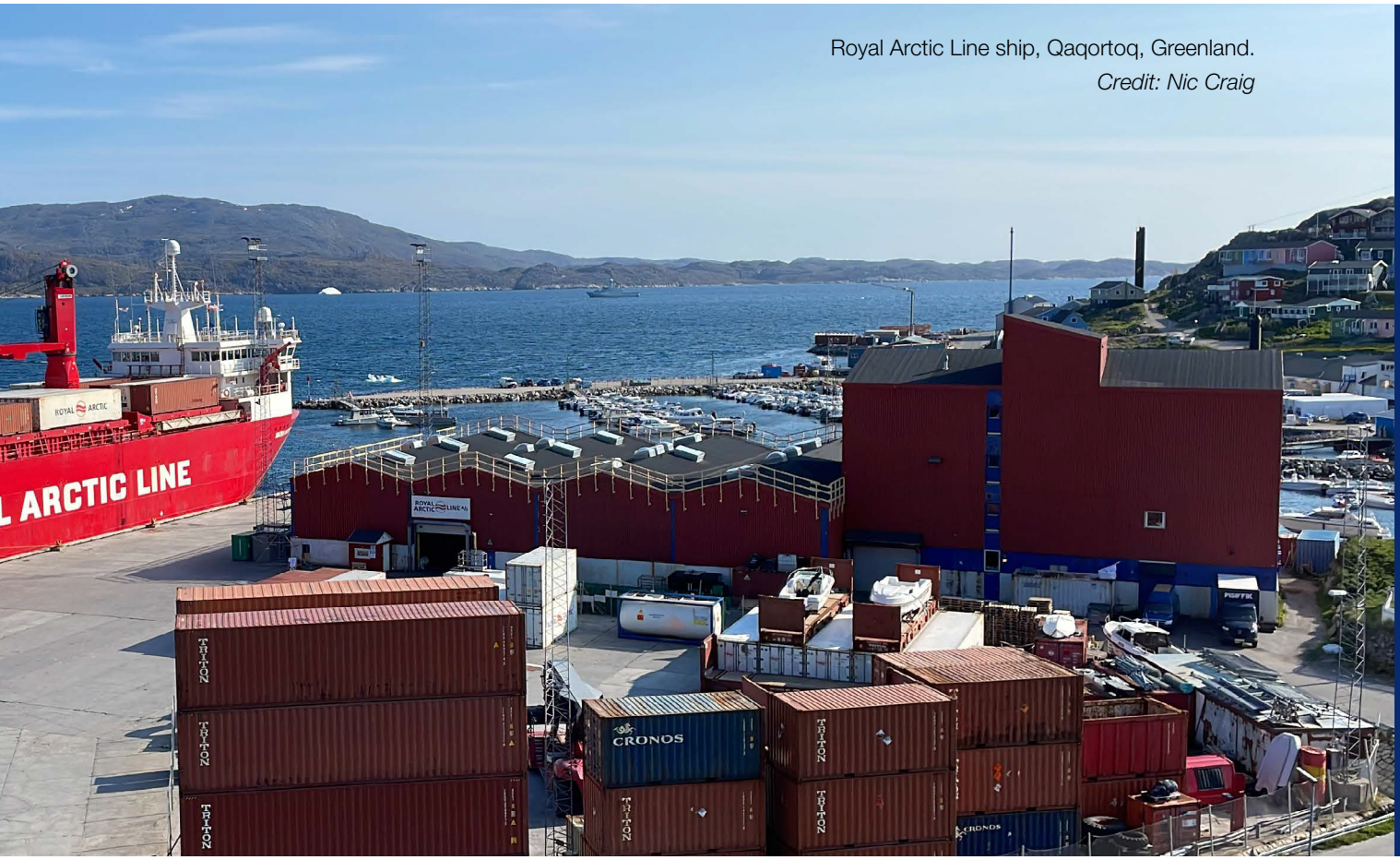


free trade agreement (FTA) with Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein, in October 2025 we announced the resumption of UK-Greenland Partnership, Trade and Cooperation Agreement talks, recognising the mutual benefit of greater economic co-operation. As set out in the UK's Trade Strategy, we recognise the role of FTAs as "instruments for certainty" in rapidly shifting geopolitical environments, and nowhere is this better exemplified than the Arctic. Ensuring genuine and effective collaboration between likeminded partner countries working towards the same goals will be key to securing a competitive, secure and prosperous region while effectively managing emerging risks. Indeed, the juxtaposition of commercial



Drix (uncrewed surface vessel) operated from the Royal Research Ship Sir David Attenborough, Greenland.

Credit: Richard Dale



Royal Arctic Line ship, Qaqortoq, Greenland.

Credit: Nic Craig



French/UK company EUTELSAT outside Nuuk, Greenland.
Credit: Nic Craig

and state interests amidst rising geopolitical tensions has the potential to increase maritime risks in areas such as cyber security, military miscalculation and unintended escalation, and increase challenges such as tracking Russia's shadow fleet of unregulated tankers.

(ii) Harness opportunities for UK industry to support responsible, safe and sustainable economic growth

The UK's 2025 Critical Minerals Strategy sets out a proactive approach to ensure the UK retains and future-proofs our supply of critical minerals, including through diversity of supply chains. Some of these minerals may come from the Arctic and UK companies have interests there. The UK is a leading proponent of ensuring critical minerals are produced and processed responsibly and transparently. To that end we are working in international fora to promote high Environmental and Social Governance standards. We expect these to apply in the Arctic, underpinned by effective local, regional and national engagement to ensure and maintain a 'Social Licence to Operate'.

The UK has long been a leader in maritime professional business services, including maritime insurance, much of it vested in the City of London. The UK is also home to the second largest port industry in Europe[21], supporting the growth in offshore renewable energy and national supply chains. So the growth in marine traffic offers opportunities to draw on, and in the longer-term develop new markets for, this world-leading expertise. The UK also has a capability offer in areas such as shipping technology, Artificial Intelligence, drones and data analytics, and cleaner fuels for shipping. But we also recognise that as sea ice becomes more mobile, navigation in the Arctic becomes more hazardous requiring effective standards of safety, search and rescue, and environmental protection.

Rapid environmental change threatens to exacerbate this and, if sustained, has the potential to outpace regulatory and governance standards. Issues such as accident risk, environmental damage including oil release and black carbon emissions, and compliance with the IMO's Polar Code and wider international standards take on renewed importance in this context. The potential impacts of an

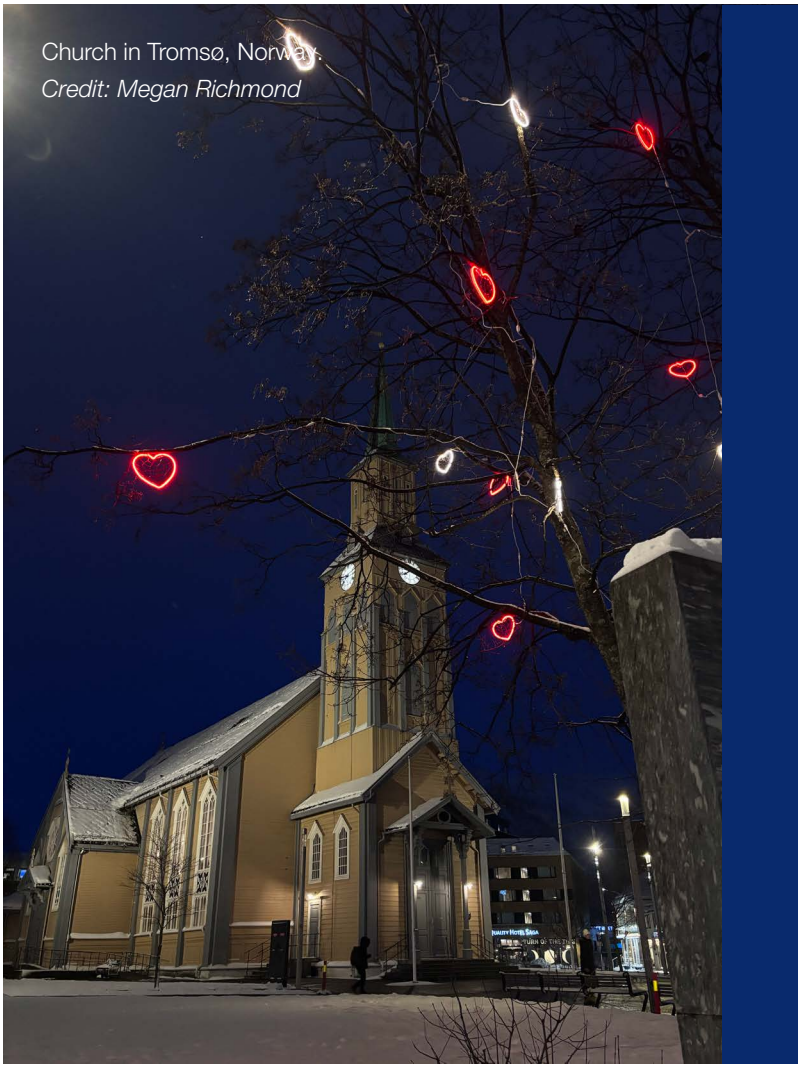
accident for Indigenous communities and other communities of the Arctic could be catastrophic, in a region where high levels of global pollutants already aggregate[22]. We will therefore look to work with international partners to ensure that the growth of new Arctic shipping routes is managed in a responsible, safe and sustainable way to minimise risks to people and planet, while ensuring that UK ports and associated services and expertise can benefit from these developments without undue risk to our security and wider domestic resilience.

(iii) Support co-innovation in science and technology to deliver shared priorities for a secure and prosperous region

The UK has internationally recognised strengths in science and technology, a mature innovation ecosystem and defence relevant expertise. This includes strong capabilities in Arctic optimised satellite technologies in a polar satellite communications market valued at around $2.5bn today and forecast to grow to over $4bn by 2030, and space launch capability for low earth orbit satellites and international collaboration opportunities through SaxaVord space port in the Shetland Islands. The UK wants to work with a coalition of like minded partners in Norway, Finland, Canada and elsewhere to support alignment and co-innovation in Arctic-relevant science and technology, including exporting space analytical capabilities to meet shared strategic and security priorities. We also seek to work increasingly closely with the EU such as through Horizon Europe and the Copernicus Earth Observation Programme.

We see the Fifth International Polar Year of 2032/33 as a significant milestone with which to spur collaboration with our partners. The opportunities from collaborative Arctic research have never been greater. The Arctic is experiencing a data revolution. New insights into the changes, risks, and opportunities in a globally-connected Arctic are being driven by the availability of unprecedented volumes of data and are being powered by innovation in AI and big data processing.

The UK has wide-ranging expertise in these fields backed by high-performance computing facilities such as the UK's National Supercomputing Service and those within UK universities. UK-led AI research is already helping to deliver new understanding of the Arctic's rapidly changing environment, and helping to identify currently unknown future challenges that will impact the region, the UK and beyond. We will drive stronger collaboration between science and business to help unlock the full potential of our research, and to better inform investment decisions based on a fuller understanding of the environments they are operating in. At the same time, we must remain alert to the risk of actors intentionally exploiting blurred lines between civil and military application of scientific research, with implications for military capability development, intelligence collection, and strategic positioning, and raise awareness of these risks within the UK Arctic science community.



Church in Tromsø, Norway.
Credit: Megan Richmond

Appendix

Our Partnerships and Collaborations with Arctic States

Canada

The UK and Canada maintain a long-standing partnership on Arctic issues and Canada is an important partner for the UK for science, prosperity and defence. Our science collaboration has been guided by several Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) which have facilitated research initiatives such as the Canada-Inuit Nunangat-United Kingdom Arctic Research Programme (CINUK) between 2021-2025. CINUK sponsored 13 projects and spearheaded equitable, Indigenous-led research collaboration that prioritised Indigenous communities and addressed issues such as coastal erosion in Inuit Nunangat and capacity-building amongst Inuit youth. The UK continues to collaborate closely on defence, including to develop new activities under the 2021 MOU between the Royal Navy and Canadian Coast Guard. UK troops recently participated in cold weather training with Canadian partners including Indigenous communities to build knowledge and capability, and worked alongside their Canadian counterparts to resupply Canadian Forcers Station Alert as part of Canada's Operation Boxtop. The UK and Canada are leading efforts to turn British Army Training Unit Suffield into a multi-purpose facility for the development and testing of new equipment and cutting-edge technology, including capabilities that will be vital for ensuring future Arctic defence and security. We are actively exploring opportunities to deepen this partnership, including with European JEF allies.

The Kingdom of Denmark

The United Kingdom is a partner and friend to all parts of the Kingdom of Denmark (Denmark, Greenland and the Faroe Islands). Our partnership is characterised by shared ambitions for prosperity, sustainability, and security in the Arctic region and our shared North Atlantic neighbourhood, and respect for the Kingdom's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the right to self-determination. We offer our full support to the Kingdom's chairship of the Arctic Council and its goal of maintaining stability and constructive cooperation. The UK and the Kingdom of Denmark are NATO and JEF allies, with shared security interests across the Greenland – Iceland – UK Gap. We have growing collaboration in many areas including science, education and trade. With Greenland this has included the 2023-25 research bursary programme, our Advanced Research and Invention Agency's £81million 'Forecasting Tipping Points' programme to develop an early warning programme for catastrophic climate shifts, and the launch of a Greenland Chevening Scholarships scheme in 2026. And we look to conclude negotiations on a Partnership, Trade and Cooperation Agreement with Greenland at the earliest opportunity to deepen our economic and political partnership. With the Faroe Islands we aim to sign a bilateral Partnership Declaration to strengthen cooperation across numerous areas of shared interest.


180°
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
CANADA
THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION
0 500 1,000
km
Arctic Ocean
90°W
90°E
80°N
Greenland
Barents Sea
Svalbard (Norway)
Greenland Sea
70°N
Norwegian Sea
Arctic Circle
Atlantic Ocean
ICELAND
Faroe Islands
0°
60°N
NORWAY
SWEDEN
FINLAND
UNITED KINGDOM
DENMARK

Finland

The UK endorses Finland's vision, as outlined in their 2025 Arctic Foreign and Security Policy, of a stable and secure Arctic governed by the principles of international law and sustainable development. The UK and Finland work closely on a range of issues from defence financing and procurement to clean energy and space technologies. Following Finland's accession to NATO in 2023 (which significantly increased NATO's Arctic land border with Russia) the UK and Finland are committed to deepening our partnership on security and defence and to promoting security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area, including in the Baltic Sea, the High North and the North Atlantic, drawing on Finland's deep knowledge of operating in Arctic and Baltic environments. We also have substantive science and research engagement, with opportunities to deepen collaboration around defence innovation, research cooperation, and climate security.

Iceland

The UK and Iceland have a strong partnership on the Arctic, spanning defence and security, scientific research, fisheries, innovation and space. We work both bilaterally and through NATO and JEF to advance shared priorities on regional deterrence and resilience, and countering hybrid and hostile state threats. Keflavik Airbase, Iceland's excellent host nation support and its strategic location, make collaboration vital for preserving Arctic security and stability including in the GIUK gap. We have established new Arctic science collaboration through our UK-Iceland Arctic Science partnership scheme and will continue to identify additional opportunities for collaborative scientific research through multilateral organisations and Arctic Council Working Groups. Development of emerging technology is a priority for both the UK and Icelandic governments, and we will continue to explore opportunities to connect scientific research to security to deliver our shared long-term objective of a stable and secure Arctic.

Norway

Rooted in shared polar heritage and history, our Arctic partnership with Norway is underpinned by close diplomatic, scientific and defence cooperation. A number of bilateral agreements including the 2025 UK-Norway Lunna House Defence Agreement, 2024 PM level Strategic Partnership, 2022 UK-Norway Joint Declaration, 2021 High-Level Arrangement on Cooperation on Polar Affairs and 2020 UK-Norway Fisheries Framework Agreement underline the importance of working together on issues relevant in the Arctic. Our polar research collaboration runs deep with significant amounts of our Arctic research run out of the UK's research operation at the Ny-Ålesund Research Station in Svalbard. We see opportunities to further build on that in the coming years as we head towards the Fifth International Polar Year of 2032/33, in respect of which Norway will host the secretariat (International Coordination Office) with Chile and South Korea. Our defence and security ties are enduring, extensive and of strategic significance to both our countries. We collaborate closely as members of NATO and JEF, train and exercise extensively together and with allies. Over 1,000 UK troops train in Norway each year, to rise to 2,000 by 2029. UK and Norwegian Poseidon P-8 maritime patrol aircraft track threats across the Arctic. We are committed to building an interoperable T-26 ASW frigate fleet which will defend NATOs northern flank against the most significant maritime threats to the UK and our allies, alongside our bespoke counter shadow fleet partnership.

Sweden

The UK and Sweden share the ambition for the Arctic to be a place of peace, stability and sustainable development. The UK welcomes the publication in June 2026 of Sweden's new Arctic strategy. Through the UK-Sweden Strategic Partnership, signed by our Prime Ministers in 2023, our respective strategies will guide the strengthening of cooperation across the full breadth of Arctic issues. Shared security interests are central to

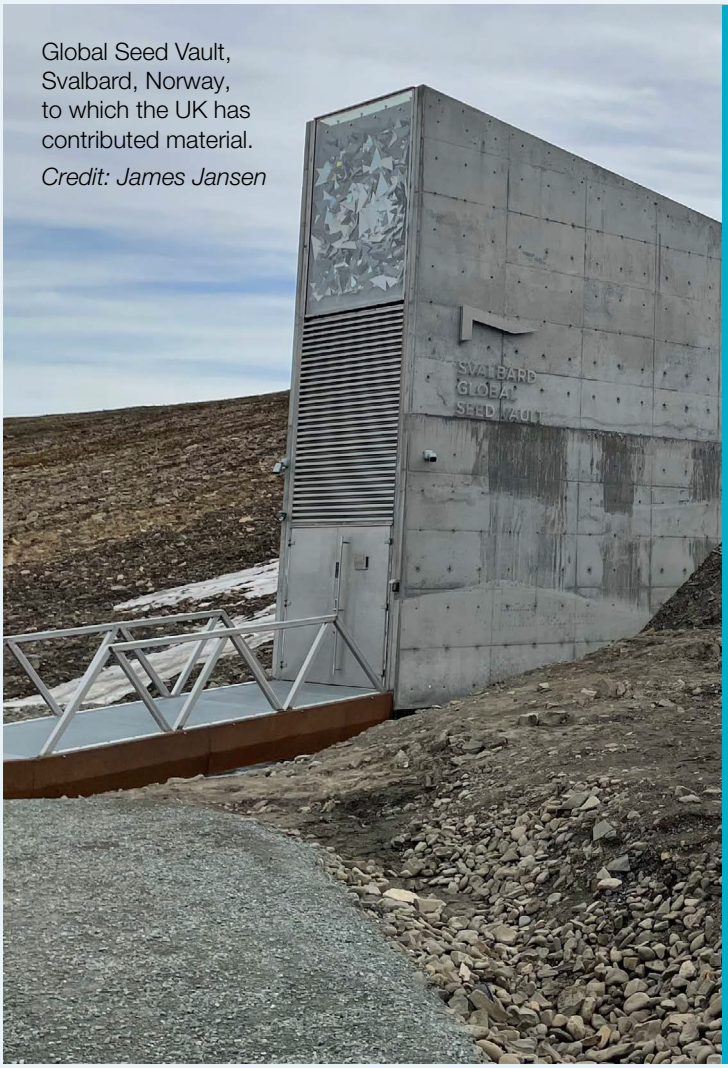
our Arctic partnership. With Sweden's accession to NATO in March 2024 and its longstanding membership of the JEF we have strengthened our relationship on Arctic defence and security. UK forces regularly train in Sweden and with Sweden. We will continue to deepen that partnership. We also have strong shared interests in science and research. In 2025, the UK and Sweden signed a Research and Innovation Memorandum of Understanding, which supports ongoing cooperation in Arctic research, including new technologies like AI. We are also considering how we could strengthen collaboration in the space domain. Sweden will assume the Arctic Council Chairship from 2027 to 2029, and we look forward to working closely with them to advance the Council's objectives.

United States

The UK and the United States are long-standing partners and NATO Allies, and are working together in NATO's Arctic Sentry mission. We share the US's concerns about Arctic/High North Security and are responding to that with the US and other Allies. We have strengthened our joint military training, exercises and personnel exchange programmes with the US, and worked alongside the US Marine Corps to strengthen NATO regional plans. We are enhancing interoperability and interchangeability so that we are better prepared to respond to any military eventuality. And we are working closely with the US Navy to co-operate on advanced anti-submarine warfare technologies and cold weather military doctrines. As the US' Arctic State, Alaska and the communities and Indigenous Peoples who live there, are at the forefront of Arctic security concerns. The UK and Alaska have many shared interests and there are opportunities to work together to address these concerns and deepen our collaboration on issues such as energy, investment, logistics and transport, research and trade.

Russia

The UK recognises that, as an Arctic State, Russia has a legitimate presence in the region, and we know that the region is of growing economic, political, and security importance to it. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the UK has suspended all engagement with Russia unless necessary to preserve vital UK foreign policy and security interests. The relationship we have with the Russian Government is not the one we want. But for that to change, the Russian Government must act differently. Yet its activities in the Arctic over the past 3 years, including the use of sanctioned shadow fleet vessels, are adding further risks to the security and stability of the region, as well as to the maritime environment, and undermined regional co-operation. For now, therefore, our engagement with Russia in the Arctic must remain limited.



Global Seed Vault, Svalbard, Norway, to which the UK has contributed material.
Credit: James Jansen

References

[1] AMAP, 2024. AMAP Arctic Climate Change Update 2024: Key Trends and Impacts. Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP), Tromsø, Norway. 122pp. ISBN 978-82-7971-203-9

[2] Druckenmiller, M. L., R. L. Thoman, and T. A. Moon, Eds., 2025: Arctic Report Card 2025. M. B. Armstrong and C. Garcia, Coordinating Eds., https://doi.org/10.25923/nrzf-j897.

[3] Blockley, E.W., Aksenov, Y., Campbell, K., Hewitt, H.T., Oltmanns, M., Screen, J.A. and Tsamados, M. Impacts of Climate Change on Arctic Sea Ice. MCCIP Science Review 2023, 17pp., https://doi.org/10.14465/2023.reu12.ice.

[4] Rantanen, M., Karpechko, A.Y., Lipponen, A. et al. The Arctic has warmed nearly four times faster than the globe since 1979. Commun Earth Environ 3, 168 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-022-00498-3

[5] Druckenmiller, M. L., R. L. Thoman, and T. A. Moon, Eds., 2025: Arctic Report Card 2025. M. B. Armstrong and C. Garcia, Coordinating Eds., https://doi.org/10.25923/nrzf-j897, p7.

[6] Druckenmiller, M. L., R. L. Thoman, and T. A. Moon, Eds., 2025: Arctic Report Card 2025. M. B. Armstrong and C. Garcia, Coordinating Eds., https://doi.org/10.25923/nrzf-j897, p3.

[7] Moen, J., Forbes, B.C., Löf, A. & Horstkotte, T.2022. Tipping points and regime shifts in reindeer husbandry. A system approach. Chapter14 in book*. pp. 265-277. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003118565-20.

[8] Geoffroy, M., Bouchard, C., Flores, H., Robert, D., Gjøsæter, H., Hoover, C., Hop, H., Hussey, N.E., Nahrgang, J., Steiner, N. and Bender, M., 2023. The circumpolar impacts of climate change and anthropogenic stressors on Arctic cod (Boreogadus saida) and its ecosystem. Elem Sci Anth, 11(1), p.00097. https://doi.org/10.1525/elementa.2022.00097.

[9] Bergmann, M., Collard, F., Fabres, J. et al. Plastic pollution in the Arctic. Nat Rev Earth Environ 3, 323–337 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-022-00279-8.

[10] Lenton, T. M., Milkoreit, M., Willcock, S., Abrams, J.F., Armstrong McKay, D.I., Buxton, J.E., Donges, J.F., Loriani, S., Wunderling, N., Alkemade, F., Barrett, M., Constantino, S., Powell, T., Smith, S. R., Boulton, C.A., Pinho, P., Dijkstra, H.A., Pearce-Kelly, P., RomanCuesta, R.M., Dennis, D. (eds), 2025. The Global Tipping Points Report 2025. University of Exeter, Exeter, UK.

[11] GOV.UK, June 2026, UK launches first ever taskforce to strengthen climate security. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-launches-first-ever-taskforce-to-strengthen-climate-security

[12] Aksnes, D.W., Danell, R., Kullerud, L. and Nilsson, L.M., 2024. Arctic research trends: external funding 2016-2022. Umeå University. 28pp. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10521422.

[13] Arctic Council Working Groups – UK Engagement Scheme 2024/2025. https://www.arctic.ac.uk/research/arctic-research-bursaries/arctic-council-working-groups-uk-engagement-scheme/

[14] United Kingdom and Iceland Arctic Science Partnership Scheme 2024/2025. https://www.arctic.ac.uk/research/arctic-research-bursaries/united-kingdom-iceland-arctic-scheme/

[15] United Kingdom and Greenland Arctic Science Partnership Scheme 2024/2025. https://www.arctic.ac.uk/research/arctic-research-bursaries/uk-greenland-arctic-bursaries-2024-2025/

[16] United Kingdom and Japan Arctic Bursary Scheme 2024/2025. https://www.arctic.ac.uk/research/arctic-research-bursaries/uk-japan-arctic-research-bursaries-scheme-2024-25/

[17] Hay, S., Blockley, E., Catto, J.L., Hewitt, H., Eunice Lo, Y.T., Screen, J.A., Smith, D. and Yu, H., 2026. The impact of Arctic sea-ice loss on winter weather in the British Isles. Quarterly Journal of the Royal Meteorological Society, 152(774), p.e70012. https://doi.org/10.1002/qj.70012.

[18] UK Arctic Code of Conduct, 2025. https://www.arctic.ac.uk/uk-arctic-code-of-conduct/

[19] China's Arctic Policy, 2018. https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm

[20] Sander , G., & Mikkelsen , E. (2025). Arctic shipping 2013–2022: the traffic has grown, with big variation between regions, seasons and ship types. Polar Research, 44. https://doi.org/10.33265/polar.v44.10978

[21] UK Ports Industry - British Ports Association. https://www.britishports.org.uk/about-us/the-uk-ports-industry/

[22] AMAP, 2021. AMAP Assessment 2020: POPs and Chemicals of Emerging Arctic Concern: Influence of Climate Change. Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP), Tromsø, Norway. 134pp. ISBN 978-82-7971-110-0.



Signpost in Svalbard, Norway.
Credit: James Jansen





© Crown copyright 2026

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3.

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us via the GRTD website: www.grtd.fcdo.gov.uk/contact-us

Printed in the UK by ACS Print, ideas@acsprinting.co.uk