



Metis

Study

Maritime strategic thinking: The GIUK example

No. 17 | June 2020

The views expressed in Metis Studies are those of the authors. They do not reflect the opinion of the Bundeswehr, the Federal Ministry of Defence, or the Bundeswehr University Munich. The primary target audience of Metis Studies are practitioners. Metis Studies are based on analyses of scholarly literature, reports, press articles and expert interviews with academics, think tank analysts and policy-makers. References are omitted. Inquiries about sources can be directed at the author(s) via email.

Institute for
Strategy & Foresight

Summary

After years of neglect, the GIUK Gap is now once more receiving the attention it deserves from the security community. Although its significance with regard to the Arctic is likely to change in

the future, this area in the North Atlantic remains a strategically important line of communication and transportation for the US and Europe. This study anticipates possible strategic courses of action for NATO.

The GIUK Gap

The North Atlantic Ocean is an important transit area for maritime traffic on both a transatlantic and a global level. It is also of prominent strategic relevance as a key supply channel for NATO and the EU in times of conflict and crisis. The important – and vulnerable – undersea cables laid on the seabed of the North Atlantic only increase this relevance.

The GIUK Gap is a maritime area that extends along a straight line from Greenland via Iceland to the United Kingdom, hence its name. It thus forms the connecting corridor between the North Atlantic and the Norwegian Sea and from there to the Arctic Ocean. The Arctic region as a whole also includes territories belonging to the United States (Alaska), Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and Finland.

During the Cold War, the GIUK Gap was the key to Europe's maritime defence. Soviet naval forces would have had to push their way through this choke point to reach the Atlantic and prevent US forces from crossing the sea to reinforce their European Allies. The Soviet nuclear-armed forces stationed on submarines also had to navigate the area to conduct operations. Accordingly, NATO stationed maritime units in the region to deter the USSR and protect the transatlantic sea lines of communication (SLOCs). It did this by establishing defence lines, which included permanently stationing forces with antisubmarine warfare capabilities.

After the Cold War ended, the GIUK Gap disappeared from NATO's maritime consciousness and became "forgotten waters". The US armed forces left Iceland in 2006 and, as a result of defence budget cuts, the

United Kingdom withdrew its fleet of maritime patrol aircraft in 2010. The Netherlands had already discontinued these patrols in 2003. Submarine warfare and the North Atlantic became less and less relevant within the NATO framework. The Alliance began to focus more on peacekeeping, counterinsurgency and anti-piracy operations. Its areas of operation shifted to Bosnia, Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa.

The Gap is back

With Russia's resurgence as a military power to be reckoned with, the GIUK Gap has once more taken on a new meaning for NATO. For some years, the Russian Federation has been a peer competitor again, particularly in the maritime sector.

As part of its 2013 strategy for the Arctic, the Russian Federation initiated extensive measures and created new structures, which included building and operating maritime military bases and airfields. For some time, Russia has also shown a strategic interest in the Far North as a deployment area for its strategic submarine fleet. The new Russian Arctic Strategy of 2020 and the creation of a fifth military district in the North (Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command) in April 2019 have further highlighted the significance of the Arctic and the Far North. The Northern Fleet of the Russian Federation (in the Port of Murmansk) encompasses what is by far the largest number of combat vessels of all the Russian fleets, the only aircraft carrier, and strategic nuclear submarines.

Russia's northern flank is protected by air defence systems and anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capacities on islands and peninsulas in the country's Arctic region



Fig. 1 The GIUK Gap: Greenland, Iceland, United Kingdom.

(e.g. the Kola Peninsula). In addition, Russia has repeatedly staged operations involving strategic bomber aircraft, fighter jets and reconnaissance planes along the Norwegian coast and the Baltic Sea. In the event of a crisis, Russia would now very likely be able to cause considerable disruption of at least some of the sea and air lines of communication between North America and Europe.

For both the Russian Federation and NATO, the significance of the GIUK Gap is different from what it was during the Cold War, not least because of new developments in Russian weapon technology and in the Russian Navy's equipment.

Russian long-distance weapon systems that can be fired from submarines allow the Russian Federation to shift the balance of military power in a conflict scenario without necessarily having to cross the GIUK Gap. From a safe position in the Barents Sea or the Norwegian Sea,

Russian forces would now be able to attack targets in Northern and Central Europe such as Bremerhaven. NATO's capability to deploy forces and assets from the US to Europe could also be severely disrupted.

While the GIUK Gap plays a less important role in a more strictly military sense, its geostrategic significance is likely to increase in view of climate change and Arctic ice melt.¹ In the future, a majority of maritime trade between Asia and Europe will pass through this region.

To date, strategic analyses have focused on the transatlantic paradigm in the GIUK region. The emphasis has been on the SLOCs and the degrees of latitude running

¹ See "The Impact of Climate Change on the Arctic", Metis Study No. 2 (March 2018).



from east to west between North America and Europe. As the Arctic opens, however, the emphasis will shift to the transpolar paradigm and the longitudinal lines that run between the North Pacific and the North Atlantic. Sea boundaries that have not been conclusively demarcated, exclusive economic zones and competing territorial claims in the High North will provide fuel for future conflicts. With its dominant and advantageous geographical position in the Arctic, Russia is in a position to dictate the rules. Also China is aiming for a more influential role in the Arctic.

NATO, Germany and the GIUK-N region

Several NATO states have recognised the renewed significance of the GIUK and the adjacent Norwegian Sea (GIUK-N region). Accordingly, the United States have now returned to the region and have used some of the funds earmarked for the European Reassurance Initiative to modernise facilities in Keflavík, Iceland. The UK recently rebuilt its fleet of maritime patrol aircraft, purchasing nine Poseidon maritime reconnaissance aircraft to conduct patrols in the North Atlantic and the Arctic. In addition, the Royal Air Force is planning for the squadron stationed in Lossiemouth in Moray to be fully operational by 2024. Norway is also currently considering its options with regard to the future of its maritime patrol aircraft and is seeking to purchase a new class of submarines. Only recently, the country also upgraded its SIGINT vessel – mainly designated for operations in the vast maritime areas of the Far North – with new sensors.

Traditionally, Germany does not play a key role in GIUK issues but it has taken note of the renewed significance of part of the northern flank of the Alliance territory. It is in Germany's interest, as a leading trading power, to ensure freedom of the sea routes, unhindered movement of goods as well as access to raw materials and markets. Since this route will become increasingly relevant for German ports, Germany's economic interests will also be affected by developments relating to the GIUK-N line.

The GIUK-N issue was placed on the agenda when Germany chaired the Northern Group² in 2019. The aim was to emphasise the importance of this maritime area

for NATO's defence and to increase maritime awareness among the Northern Group member states.

Possible courses of action

In light of the GIUK-N region's changed but nevertheless significant role in transatlantic security, there is a whole range of possible measures that could help NATO and its member states "close the gap", so to speak. They include:

- Revising and – in view of the renewed significance of the GIUK-N region – expanding NATO's Alliance Maritime Strategy.
- Once again showing a permanent presence in the region, seeing as occasional freedom of navigation patrols neither deter potential Russian aggression nor do they serve to assure allied countries of the degree of security they need to navigate the waters.
- Establishing enhanced cooperation between JFC Norfolk and NATO's Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM) in terms of the North Atlantic, the Far North and the Arctic.
- Exploring options for maritime surveillance more vigorously.
- Reinforcing amphibian landing forces both on the brigade and division levels.
- Establishing a third NATO Standing Naval Group (made up of NATO member states that have a particular interest in the Far North) for the region.

The Northern Group could serve to present these proposals to the responsible NATO bodies collectively, which would lend them additional weight. Initiatives that complement rather than duplicate the necessary alliance initiatives could also be taken in the context of the Northern Group. Such measures could include:

- Drawing up a joint assessment of the situation regarding the GIUK-N region, including an analysis and evaluation of both Russian and own maritime capabilities.
- Working together to identify maritime deficits with regard to the tasks to be accomplished in the GIUK-N region.
- Establishing a joint maritime observation post for the GIUK-N region.
- Intensifying maritime cooperation between the members of the Northern Group.

² The Northern Group (NG) is an informal, non-institutionalised forum for consultation and pragmatic cooperation on matters of security and defence policy among the countries that border the North and Baltic Seas. It was established in 2010 on the initiative of the UK. The list of member states includes the members of the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) – Denmark, Norway, Finland, Sweden and Iceland – as well as the UK, the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Poland, the Netherlands and Germany. The aim of the Northern Group is to provide a consultation and cooperation format that a) exhibits a clear regional perspective and b) facilitates cooperation between NATO and non-NATO countries.



Fig. 2 Meeting of NATO Foreign and Defence Ministers in Brussels, 2010.

- Establishing a Centre of Excellence (CoE) to coordinate training and research for Northern Group member states to meet the challenges posed by the Russian Navy in the Far North, in the North Atlantic, and in the Arctic (alternatively: strengthening the CoE for Operations in Confined and Shallow Waters in Kiel).

There is also a need to reflect on the extent to which the threat posed by Russian long-distance systems to Northern and Central European facilities calls for the development of a new generation of antisubmarine

warfare capabilities. Such potential systems most notably include large unmanned underwater vehicles that can be deployed for long periods to detect submarines. In addition, the navies will need a new family of expendable antisubmarine warfare payloads with acoustic sensors. An important element would be small expendable UUVs and unmanned surface vessels which can quickly be deployed to an area by boat, aircraft or large UUV to provide sustained antisubmarine warfare coverage in that area over an extended period of time. 📌

IMPRINT**Publisher**

Metis Institute
for Strategy and Foresight
Bundeswehr University Munich
metis.unibw.de

Author

Prof. Dr. Carlo Masala
metis@unibw.de

Creative Director

Christoph Ph. Nick, M.A.
c-studios.net

Cover image

imago images/ITAR-TASS

Original title

*Maritimes strategisches Denken:
Das Beispiel GIUK*

Translation

Federal Office of Languages

ISSN-2627-0609

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons
Attribution 4.0 International License.

