Strategy changes gradually before it changes suddenly. Geography, including oceans, does not change; the political weather, and responses to it, do.

The disappearance of the Soviet Union removed the organising threat around which NATO maritime planning had revolved for four decades. Russia in the 1990s faced economic collapse, institutional turmoil and a navy struggling to keep vessels seaworthy. Patrol rates fell sharply, maintenance backlogs accumulated, and Western attention shifted towards expeditionary operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq. Force structures contracted across the Alliance. Escort numbers fell, and maritime focus drifted away from the North Atlantic and the High North that feeds into it.

The arithmetic of presence became increasingly stark. Modern warships are far more capable than their predecessors, yet a warship can only be in one place at one time, however sophisticated its sensors or weapons. The operational canvas itself never shrank: the core waters of the Greenland-Iceland-UK corridor cover on the order of 600,000 square miles — an area larger than France and Germany combined — far beyond the reach of continuous physical presence by even a substantial escort fleet.

**The Logic That Never Left**

Reinforcement logic nevertheless endured. The Cold War concept embodied in Operation REFORGER — that Europe's security ultimately depends upon the ability to move forces and materiel across the Atlantic — did not vanish with the Warsaw Pact. The credibility of NATO's collective defence guarantee still rests on secure transatlantic lines of communication, a truth that the Alliance's growing focus on the Indo-Pacific has complicated but not extinguished.
As former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen later observed, the Alliance had

spent years assuming "the Euro-Atlantic area was at peace" — a judgement that in retrospect understated the persistence of structural risk. The infrastructure of deterrence, once allowed to atrophy, does not reconstitute quickly.

**Two Decisions That Sent a Signal**

Few decisions illustrated the drift more clearly than the retirement of the United Kingdom's Nimrod maritime patrol aircraft. At peak, the RAF operated 46 Nimrod MR2 aircraft configured for the anti-submarine warfare role in the North Atlantic. Their retirement in 2010, without immediate replacement, left Britain with no sovereign fixed-wing maritime patrol capability for the better part of a decade — a period during which Russian submarine activity in the approaches to the GIUK Gap was steadily increasing. Allied cooperation partially mitigated operational risk, yet the symbolic effect was unmistakable: a gap in coverage where continuity had once been assumed, in precisely the domain where continuity matters most. The parallel with the Falklands Islands is uncanny.

The closure of the long-standing United States military presence at Keflavik in Iceland in 2006 carried similar resonance. Keflavik had been the principal NATO air base for maritime patrol operations over the northern approaches throughout the Cold War. Its closure reflected a judgement that the North Atlantic no longer demanded the same level of permanent attention. History offers consistent reminders that visible retrenchment is read by others as reduced resolve. Keflavik would later re-emerge as a rotational hub as Russian activity increased — underscoring that geography had not altered even if political focus had.

**Russia's Steady Climb**

Meanwhile, Russia's maritime posture evolved with a consistency that Western attention intermittently noticed but never sustained. Following the severe contraction of the 1990s — symbolised most brutally by the loss of the submarine Kursk in August 2000, which exposed the full depth of the fleet's decline — investment in the Northern Fleet resumed as state revenues recovered under Putin. The Borei-A class ballistic missile submarine and the Yasen-M class cruise missile submarine represent the qualitative step-change of this rebuilding: quieter, better

armed, and designed specifically for operations in and beyond the Norwegian Sea. The Northern Fleet today hosts the majority of Russia's nuclear-powered submarines, constituting the sea-based leg of its nuclear deterrent and the primary instrument of maritime pressure in the High North.

Long-range aviation patrols into the North Atlantic approaches resumed, frequently shadowed by NATO aircraft. The string of Arctic bases along the Northern Sea Route — many of which had fallen into disrepair in the 1990s — was progressively refurbished and in some cases rebuilt from scratch, forming what Russian doctrine conceives as a protective dome over the northern approaches. This infrastructure is described in full in the supporting paper Zashchitnyy Kupol: Russia's Protective Three-Ocean Dome along the Northern Sea Route.
President Putin's characterisation of the Soviet collapse as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" was not nostalgia. It was a strategic programme statement — and the Northern Fleet's rebuilding was its most consequential expression.

**China: Beyond the Scientific Observer**

China's engagement with the Arctic has moved well beyond the posture of scientific observer it maintained for much of the previous decade. Having declared itself a "near-Arctic state," Beijing commissioned its third polar icebreaker, Jidi, in 2024, joining the Xuelong and Xuelong 2 in a fleet that now exceeds the combined icebreaker capacity of most NATO allies. China and Russia concluded a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2024 that explicitly references Arctic cooperation, and joint Russian-Chinese naval exercises in Arctic-adjacent waters took place in 2023. Chinese investment in port infrastructure in the Russian Far East — directly relevant to Northern Sea Route access — continues to expand.
The long-term implications are addressed in the ICE10 supporting paper on EU Arctic policies and other nations' Arctic strategies. The immediate point is that the strategic context of the GIUK corridor now includes an actor whose Arctic ambitions were negligible when NATO's maritime retrenchment began.

**The Seabed: A New Dimension**

The undersea environment has become more crowded and more consequential in ways that Cold War planners did not anticipate. Subsea communication cables now carry 99 per cent of global internet traffic, international financial transactions, and the military communications of every NATO member. Offshore energy infrastructure — pipelines, interconnectors, offshore wind arrays — has expanded across the North Sea and Baltic. Their vulnerability has passed from theoretical concern to demonstrated reality.

Since 2022, approximately ten subsea cables have been cut in the Baltic and North Sea region, with seven cuts occurring between November 2024 and January 2025 alone. The Baltic Connector gas pipeline between Finland and Estonia was severed in October 2023. The Estlink 2 power cable was cut on Christmas Day 2024 and was not repaired until August 2025 — a seven-month outage. Russian naval research vessels, most notably the Yantar operated by the Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research (GUGI), have conducted sustained operations in British, Irish and Norwegian waters, loitering over cable routes with transponders off. The full record of incidents, their legal implications, and the limits of current response options are set out in the supporting paper The Seabed as a Battlefield: Subsea Infrastructure and the New Domain of Hybrid Competition.

T**he Western Response: Necessary but Incomplete**

Western responses have been gradual rather than abrupt, and the gap between what has been done and what the threat requires remains significant.Â The United Kingdom's introduction of nine P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft restored a sovereign fixed-wing anti-submarine capability lost for nearly a decade — and the RAF now operates within a growing multinational P-8 community that includes Norway's fleet based at Evenes, Germany's aircraft deploying from Lossiemouth and Keflavik under the Trinity House Agreement, French maritime patrol contributions, and US Navy P-8s forward-based across the theatre. The capability holiday was substantially a British one. The recovery is genuinely multinational. The density problem nonetheless persists — the combined NATO maritime patrol presence in the North Atlantic remains well below Cold War levels, and nine British aircraft against the former 46 Nimrods still illustrates the scale of the gap that better individual platforms alone cannot close.

The Type 26 frigate programme will deliver eight hulls optimised for anti-submarine warfare across the 2030s — replacing a Type 23 fleet that itself numbered only 16 ships, a fraction of the Cold War frigate strength. Across NATO, exercises focused on undersea warfare have

regained prominence, and Finland and Sweden's accession to the Alliance in 2023 and 2024 respectively has transformed the security geometry of the High North in ways that partially offset the capability shortfalls.

Technology extends reach. It does not eliminate the requirement for presence. Mass, in maritime terms, remains a form of deterrent in its own right, even in an era of networked sensors and space-based surveillance.

History does not repeat mechanically; it behaves more like a structure subjected to cyclical stress, where familiar pressure points reappear unless the design adapts. The North Atlantic is one of those enduring pressure points. Periods of calm can obscure structural realities. They do not erase them.

*In the next article we will examine how renewed Russian activity, the vulnerability of seabed infrastructure, and the changing balance of maritime capability are bringing the GIUK corridor back to the forefront of strategic planning.*

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