If you travel on the London Underground you will hear the familiar instruction: "Mind the gap." It is not theatrical. It is not alarmist. It is a reminder that space exists between platform and carriage, and that inattention carries consequences.

In the North Atlantic there is another gap — between Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom — that shaped Cold War strategy and continues to shape European security today.

This article sets the historical baseline for a series examining that maritime corridor: how it functioned during the Cold War; how attention to it diminished after 1991; and why it has re-emerged as a strategic concern in an era of renewed great power competition, technological change, and a transforming Arctic. It should be read alongside the supporting analytical papers in this series, particularly Zashchitnyy Kupol: Russia's Protective Three-Ocean Dome along the Northern Sea Route, which includes details on Russia's Arctic base network.

An Island Nation's Structural Reality

The United Kingdom is, and always has been, a maritime power. We depend on sea-borne trade not only for energy and raw materials but for the mundane comforts of modern life — including, as is often remarked, the Christmas presents on our shelves. Over 90 per cent of global trade by volume travels by sea. That reality is structural, not cyclical.

Globally there are roughly nine major maritime chokepoints through which disproportionate volumes of trade and naval traffic must pass — the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, the Panama Canal, the Malacca Strait, Bab-el-Mandeb and others. The GIUK Gap belongs in that company, not because of commercial density in peacetime, but because of its decisive military significance in crisis or conflict.

History is geography, and geography is history.

During both World Wars, Germany sought to exploit Britain's dependence on maritime supply. In 1917 U-boat operations brought the country close to economic paralysis before convoy systems reversed the tide. The lesson was not forgotten. In the Cold War, reinforcement of Europe was central to NATO planning. Operation REFORGER — the reinforcement of West Germany from North America — assumed that men, materiel and above all armour would cross the Atlantic at speed in the event of a Warsaw Pact offensive on the Central Front. The arithmetic of that front required it. Soviet planners understood this equally well.

The Gap as Strategic Fulcrum

Submarines based on the Kola Peninsula were not positioned to roam aimlessly in the Atlantic. Their deployment logic was precise. Forward movement into the Norwegian Sea offered opportunities to intercept reinforcement convoys early. Others could threaten assembly areas and sea lanes further west. The objective was attrition and disruption at decisive points, not symbolic presence.

To reach the wider Atlantic from northern waters, however, Soviet submarines faced an unavoidable geographic constraint. Between Greenland and Iceland — roughly 480 miles. Between Iceland and the Faroe Islands — 250 miles. Between the Faroes and the Scottish mainland — 220 miles. Through these corridors, covering in total on the order of 600,000 square miles of ocean — an area larger than France and Germany combined — all Soviet submarine transits from the Northern Fleet to the Atlantic must pass.

That predictability was both risk and opportunity. NATO chose to treat it as opportunity.

Across the seabed were laid fixed hydrophone arrays — the Sound Surveillance System, or SOSUS. These installations did not remove uncertainty from undersea warfare, but they reduced it materially. Acoustic signatures detected in the Gap could be passed to maritime patrol aircraft and to surface escorts and nuclear-powered hunter-killer submarines. At peak, the RAF operated 46 Nimrod MR2 maritime patrol aircraft specifically configured for this role,

working in conjunction with US P-3 Orions permanently based at Keflavik in Iceland. The Royal Navy maintained over 50 frigates and destroyers, heavily configured for anti-submarine warfare, operating alongside the Invincible-class carriers whose Sea Harriers provided air cover while embarked helicopters prosecuted submarine contacts.

These were not prestige assets. They were instruments of containment, and their numbers mattered as much as their individual capability.

The Nuclear Dimension

The contest beneath the waves intensified as Soviet naval doctrine evolved. By the 1970s, ballistic missile submarines had become central to Moscow's strategic deterrent. The bastion strategy — described in detail in the companion paper Zashchitnyy Kupol — aimed to protect SSBN patrol areas in the Barents and Kara Seas with layered naval and air defences extending outward from the Kola Peninsula. The GIUK Gap remained the outer gate of that system.

If NATO could detect and track submarines transiting through the Gap, it could hold at risk not merely merchant shipping but elements of the Soviet nuclear deterrent itself. Anti-submarine warfare therefore sat at the intersection of conventional operations and nuclear stability — a complexity that has not diminished with time. Persistent tracking of ballistic missile submarines carries implications for crisis escalation that prudent planners must never ignore. If one side concludes that its second-strike capability is vulnerable, calculations change rapidly and dangerously.

By the late 1980s, NATO possessed considerable confidence in its ability to monitor submarine movements through the GIUK approaches. Soviet submarine design had improved markedly in quieting and endurance — the Akula class in particular forced a significant reassessment of Western acoustic advantage — yet layered surveillance still provided strategic reassurance.

After 1991 — The Dividend and Its Cost

The disappearance of the Soviet Union removed the organising threat around which NATO

maritime planning had revolved. What followed was not a considered strategic rebalancing but a gradual and largely unexamined drift. Force structures contracted. Escort numbers fell. Maritime focus shifted towards expeditionary operations in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Few decisions illustrated this drift more clearly than the retirement of the Nimrod fleet — 46 aircraft reduced to zero without immediate replacement, leaving the United Kingdom with no sovereign fixed-wing maritime patrol capability for the better part of a decade. The closure of the US military presence at Keflavik in 2006 carried similar resonance. 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.

Geography did not alter. Political focus did.

The Environment Has Changed — The Geography Has Not

Today the strategic environment is evolving on multiple axes simultaneously, all of which increase rather than diminish the significance of the GIUK corridor.

Russia has rebuilt. Following the severe contraction of the 1990s, investment in the Northern Fleet resumed under Putin. New submarine classes — the Borei-A ballistic missile boat and the Yasen-M cruise missile submarine — have entered service. Arctic infrastructure has been refurbished and expanded, with a string of bases, radar sites and airfields extending along the Northern Sea Route forming what Russian doctrine calls a protective dome over its northern approaches. This is described in full in the supporting paper Zashchitnyy Kupol.

The seabed has become contested in new ways. Subsea communications cables now carry the majority of global internet traffic, financial transactions, and military communications. Their vulnerability is no longer a theoretical concern. The Baltic Connector gas pipeline between Finland and Estonia was severed in October 2023 — subsequently attributed to the anchor of a Chinese-flagged vessel. The C-Lion1 data cable between Finland and Germany was cut in November 2024. The vessel Eagle S, flagged to the Cook Islands but assessed as part of Russia's shadow fleet, was seized by Finnish authorities in January 2025 following further cable damage. Meanwhile, vessels with ambiguous civilian status have been reported conducting

seabed survey activity in the North Sea — echoing, in updated form, the Soviet-era use of intelligence-gathering trawlers in the same waters. A dedicated paper on subsea infrastructure vulnerability is in preparation as part of this series.

China has moved well beyond its earlier posture of scientific observer. Having declared itself a "near-Arctic state," Beijing commissioned its third polar icebreaker, Jidi, in 2024, and has concluded a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Russia that explicitly references Arctic cooperation. Joint Russian-Chinese naval exercises in Arctic-adjacent waters took place in 2023. The long-term implications for access, infrastructure and the balance of influence along the Northern Sea Route are addressed in Mind the Gap IV and in the ICE10 supporting paper on EU Arctic policies and other nations' Arctic strategies.

Western responses have begun but have not yet matched the scale of the challenge. The United Kingdom's introduction of nine P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft restored a sovereign fixed-wing anti-submarine capability — but nine against the former 46 illustrates the density problem that technology alone cannot solve. The Type 26 frigate programme will deliver eight hulls optimised for anti-submarine warfare, with HMS Glasgow expected to enter service later this decade — replacing a Type 23 fleet that itself entered service in 1990. Eight hulls against a Cold War frigate fleet of over 50. A warship, however capable its sensors, can only be in one place at one time.

Technology extends reach. It does not eliminate the requirement for presence. Mass, in maritime terms, remains a form of deterrent in its own right.

The Gap Is Still There

The London Underground announcement is understated for a reason. It assumes attentiveness.

The GIUK Gap has not moved. The Kola Peninsula has not moved. The logic of bastion defence, maritime chokepoints and the protection of transatlantic sea lines of communication has not expired. What has changed is the context in which that logic operates — more actors, more domains, a transforming Arctic, and a seabed that has become a theatre of competition in its own right.

The gap is still there. The question this series addresses is whether Western attention is.

In the next article we examine how strategic amnesia after 1991 allowed the structural risks of the North Atlantic to accumulate unseen — and what the return of Russian maritime ambition means for an Alliance that spent a generation looking elsewhere.

Curated by Robin Ashby, Director General, U K Defence Forum. Drafted by ChatGPT 5.2 and Claude.ai