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For much of the three decades after 1991, NATO's response to the High North was characterised by the same strategic amnesia described in the second paper in this series — retrenchment dressed as reassurance, and an assumption that the Arctic flank could be managed at lower cost and lower presence than the Cold War had demanded. That assumption has now been comprehensively abandoned. What has replaced it is not merely a return to Cold War postures but something structurally new: a genuinely integrated Nordic defence architecture embedded within an Alliance command structure redesigned specifically for the northern theatre.

The pace of change has been remarkable. Three developments in the fourteen months between October 2024 and February 2026 — each significant in its own right, together transformative — define the new landscape.

## **Norfolk Takes the North**

On 5 December 2025, at a ceremony hosted by the Finnish Defence Forces in Helsinki, NATO Joint Force Command Norfolk formally welcomed Denmark, Sweden and Finland into its Joint Operating Area Northwest. JFC Norfolk's area of responsibility now includes Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom, in addition to the Atlantic — and now encompasses the Alliance's longest land border with Russia.

The significance of this cannot be overstated. JFC Norfolk now oversees seven of the eight Arctic nations, giving NATO something it desperately lacked: a unified, single operational picture. For the first time, what happens in the GIUK Gap, the Norwegian Sea, the Barents approaches and the Arctic land border with Russia falls under a single operational command —

the same command responsible for securing the transatlantic sea lines of communication on which Europe's reinforcement depends. JFC Norfolk is responsible for the defence of NATO territory stretching from Florida to the North Pole, and its commander described it as "the strategic bridge between North America and Europe."

This matters operationally as well as symbolically. The command doubled in size during 2025, with military and civilian personnel from 26 Allied nations joining JFC Norfolk. A Combined Air Operations Centre opened at Bodø in Norway in October 2025, providing coordinated command of air operations across the entire northern theatre. The transfer of Denmark, Finland and Sweden from JFC Brunssum — previously responsible for NATO's eastern flank — to JFC Norfolk reflects a deliberate strategic choice: the northern theatre is not a subset of the eastern flank problem. It has its own logic, its own geography, and now its own command.

## **Arctic Sentry**

In February 2026, NATO launched Arctic Sentry — its first dedicated military activity specifically focused on the High North. Arctic Sentry reflects Allies' collective understanding that NATO must do even more as an alliance to ensure security in the Arctic and the High North, and to further strengthen its ability to operate in the region. It is led by JFC Norfolk, with overall strategic direction provided by Allied Command Operations, coordinating with NORAD, US Northern Command and US European Command.

Arctic Sentry is classified as an enhanced vigilance activity. Its primary function is consolidation — taking the disparate national patrols and bilateral training exercises that have characterised Allied activity in the High North and weaving them into a single, cohesive operational framework. It is not, in NATO's own framing, about building ice fortresses or deploying a standing polar army overnight. It is about coherence — ensuring that what Allied nations are already doing in the High North is coordinated, mutually supporting, and visible to a unified command rather than lost in the gaps between national reporting chains.

## **The Nordic Transformation**

Underpinning both developments is the most significant structural change in European regional defence cooperation since the Cold War — the transformation of NORDEFECO from a

resource-pooling arrangement into a genuinely integrated operational architecture.

Finland and Sweden's NATO accession in 2023 and 2024 respectively removed the one obstacle that had always prevented full Nordic military integration: the impossibility of making national defence plans dependent on the forces of non-allied states. That obstacle no longer exists. The Nordic Chiefs of Defence signed a joint defence concept in September 2024, synchronising national defence plans and facilitating joint military exercises, capacity building and joint operations.

The practical expression of this integration is moving at pace. Norway, Denmark and Finland have all adopted the F-35A as their sole combat aircraft — the foundation of what will increasingly function as a single Nordic air force operating under the new CAOC at Bodø. In August 2025, Norway signed a contract for five Type 26 frigates — the same platform being built for the Royal Navy — creating a shared maritime capability whose implications extend well beyond the hulls themselves: common training, shared logistics, interoperable doctrine, and the ability to operate as a genuinely integrated naval force rather than parallel national ones. Combined with the Lunna House Agreement of December 2025, under which Britain committed to arming Royal Navy vessels with Norwegian missiles, the UK-Norway bilateral relationship has become the operational core of northern maritime defence in a way that formal Alliance structures alone could not have produced.

A Multi-Corps Land Component Command has been established on Finnish territory under JFC Norfolk, with Allied Forward Land Forces deploying to northern Finland — in Rovaniemi and Sodankylä — modelled on the Enhanced Forward Presence already on NATO's eastern flank. Sweden leads the framework nation, with the core of the battlegroup provided by the 19th Arctic Mechanised Brigade. A Joint Logistics Support Group Headquarters is being established at Enköping in Sweden by 2027, and a new signal battalion spanning all Nordic countries reaches full capability by 2029.

The lowest level of integration is in the maritime domain, where Norway and Denmark focus on the North Sea and Arctic while Sweden and Finland concentrate on the Baltic. This is directly relevant to the series' central concern: Norwegian Sea and GIUK Gap operations remain primarily a Norwegian and Allied — principally British and American — responsibility rather than a fully Nordic one.

## **Britain Returns to the Arctic**

The United Kingdom's contribution to northern defence has been rebuilt around a single institutional commitment: Camp Viking, established in March 2023 at Øverbygda, 40 miles south of Tromsø. Under the terms of a lease signed by the Norwegian and UK governments, Camp Viking will remain open for ten years as the UK's main operations hub for the High North.

The Royal Marines' Arctic specialism dates to the Second World War and the commando raids on occupied Norway. It survived the Cold War intact. What it did not survive undamaged was two decades of hot, high and sandy operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, where Arctic warfare training was systematically deprioritised in favour of counter-insurgency, and where the institutional knowledge of cold weather warfighting — navigation in whiteout conditions, equipment operation at extreme temperatures, the specific physical demands of sustained Arctic operations — quietly atrophied. Camp Viking is the structural acknowledgement that this must be rebuilt, and that rebuilding requires a permanent hub rather than an annual training visit.

Nearly 2,000 personnel from across the UK Commando Force deployed to northern Norway during Winter Deployment 25, operating across the mountainous terrain with new equipment including the L403 rifle and snowmobiles. Around 1,500 personnel are currently deployed for Cold Response 2026, training alongside Norwegian units and Dutch marines to demonstrate NATO's ability to operate and deter threats in the High North. The exercise cycle now includes Joint Viking, Nordic Response — which replaced Cold Response to encompass Sweden and Finland — and the annual Operation Clockwork helicopter training at Bardufoss, where Commando Wildcat and Merlin crews maintain their Arctic aviation capability. Approximately 3,000 US Marines from Camp Lejeune are also currently deployed to Norway for Cold Response 2026, alongside contributions from the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland and Norway. The exercise pattern that once brought tens of thousands of troops to the region annually during the Cold War is being rebuilt — not yet at the same density, but with greater integration and a clearer operational purpose.

## **The Honest Assessment**

The Alliance's northern response is real, it is accelerating, and the command architecture now in place is more coherent than anything that existed during the Cold War. But intellectual honesty requires noting what remains underdone.

The numbers gap has not been closed. Nine P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft against the former 46 Nimrods. Eight Type 26 frigates to be delivered across the 2030s against a Cold War fleet of over 50 escorts. A warship, however capable, can only be in one place at one time — and the operational canvas of the Norwegian Sea and GIUK Gap covers 600,000 square miles. Technology extends reach. It does not substitute for mass.

The maritime domain remains the least integrated element of the Nordic architecture. The division of naval responsibilities between the North Sea and Arctic on one hand and the Baltic on the other reflects geographic and political realities but means that the Norwegian Sea — the most strategically consequential stretch of water in the northern theatre — does not benefit from the same integration now visible in the land and air domains.

And the pace of Alliance reconstitution, welcome as it is, must be set against the timeline of Russian recovery. The NMD briefing paper in this series documents a conventional Arctic ground capability that has been largely spent in Ukraine and cannot be rebuilt before the mid-2030s at the earliest. NATO's window of conventional advantage in the High North is real — but windows close.

*The next paper in this series examines the specific capability programmes, equipment, and technology investments that will determine whether the Alliance's northern reconstitution matches its ambition — or falls short of what the threat requires.*