

## THE NATO WEST NORDIC SECURITY ZONE 2025

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Policy brief no. 3 | June 26, 2018

Small States and the New Security Environment Reykjavik, Iceland

### Abstract

To meet emerging hard security challenges created by the Trans-Polar Route opening by 2025, NATO should create a sub-unified command in the region; here termed the “West Nordic Security Zone” (WNSZ), under a restructured Nordic Defence Command. The newly created command could control ground and maritime forces from small states and autonomous areas in the North Atlantic, including a newly constituted Icelandic security force.

### Key findings

- Byers (2009) hypothesized three sub-strategic future hard security threats related to global environmental change including terrorism, new territory/resource claims by Arctic Council member nations and rogue states, terrorism facilitated by mass movement of people in the Arctic, and criminal activity such as drug and human trafficking. The North Atlantic contains a variety of security policies, objectives, and structures focusing mainly on the strategic operations such as air policing, which makes the Arctic vulnerable to future hard security challenges below that level
- Multiple command structures in the Arctic limit effective hard security relationships in the North Atlantic; the U.S. alone has several commands that control the region including the Northern Command, Pacific Command, European Command, and Coast Guard.
- To increase command efficiency over forces confronting future sub-strategic hard security threats, NATO should divide the North Atlantic into security zones, with



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the Western Security Zone protecting the Trans-Polar Route under the command of the Nordic Defence Command and consisting of troops from small-states and autonomous zones in the region.

## Executive summary

This paper proposes that NATO create a WNSZ to meet sub-strategic Arctic threats using security forces from small-states and autonomous areas in the North Atlantic. While Cold War strategic defence structures remain in the region (e.g. NATO), which are focused upon territorial sovereignty and access to resources, new security relationships must evolve to meet other challenges to the region created by global climate change. To meet emerging hard security threats, in 2016 the Norwegian Defence Minister called for increased command and control over NATO forces by attaining a “regional orientation to our command structure to better utilize situational awareness and operational insights” (Søreide 2016: 55). To develop that increased command and control, the author recommends that NATO divide the North Atlantic into two security zones: the East Nordic Security Zone including Denmark, Finland, Sweden and the Baltic States, and the West Nordic Security Zone comprising the small-states of Iceland, northern Norway and Scotland, along with the autonomous areas of the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Nunavut. As part of that force structure, the author developed an order of battle for a proposed First Icelandic Security Force (FISF) comprised of Reservists who form a battalion (minus) above the police but below an army, similar to a constabulary (Norway) or the former armed federal border guard (Germany – *Bundesgrenzschutz*).

## What is the problem?

Tom Clancy’s World War III scenario in *Red Storm Rising* (1986) laid out a frightening future for the Greenland, Iceland, United Kingdom (GIUK) Gap and especially Iceland, which saw the Keflavik base destroyed by a fictional cruise missile attack followed by the Soviet invasion of the Reykjanes Peninsula. While Clancy’s book was disturbing enough by itself, the release three years later of the computer simulation, *Harpoon* made the nightmare seem real. The simulation designer and *Red Storm Rising* coauthor, Larry Bond, had been a naval officer involved with the 1970’s actual war game SEATAG. SEATAG, like the 1980’s land-based exercises REFORGER (Return of Forces to Germany) staged the planned NATO military response to a Soviet invasion of Western Europe during

the Cold War. By the end of the 1980’s, NATO was “loaded for bear” literally and figuratively to meet the threat. The Warsaw Pact was apparently fully prepared to defeat NATO as indicated in the U.S. Department of Defense’s (1990) annual interagency publication *Soviet Military Power* that predicted the U.S.S.R. would be a formidable military machine well into the next century. At that time, few “experts”



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could have anticipated the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which led to the so-called “Peace Dividend” that saw defence funding collapse and militaries be gutted (e.g. Sweden ended universal conscription and deactivation of units hundreds of years old).

The problem is that some scholars (e.g. Bailes 2015) and government officials today proclaim the Arctic peaceful, with conflicts between member states handled by the Arctic Council. Statements like the one from the current Norwegian Defence Minister “[c]ompared to most quarters of the world, the Arctic is a region of stability, respect for international law, and well-functioning multilateral institutions (Søreide 2016: 49)” are commonplace. In that view, there is no need to improve small- states’ hard security policies and structures since there is no threat to territorial integrity in the North Atlantic. Yet, nation-states pursue their own interests in the Arctic, especially Russia and the U.S. as articulated in their national policies and demonstrated in competing land claims over area like the Lomonosov Ridge or the U.S. insistence that the Northwest Passage is open to international shipping. That one-sidedness could increase following the polar ice cap melting leading to small-scale skirmishes involving member states, rogue or out-of-area states, NGO’s, private corporations, and criminal organizations. For example, with the opening of the Trans Polar Route and the presence of unregulated maritime traffic it will permit, national sovereignty claims could lead to skirmishes such as occurred in the Cod Wars between Iceland and Great Britain in the 1970s. While it may seem a simple solution to say that international bodies like the Arctic Council serve to reduce tensions in the region, the problem is that unless they can be convinced otherwise, unilateral actions by nation-states and other actors will determine what form security structures in the Arctic will take. Ultimately, the Arctic Council is not an effective body for responding to hard security challenges in the North Atlantic because its founding declaration prevents it from discussing military issues. In addition, larger states subordinate small states in the region by dictating policy and operations there.

## What should be done?

NATO should develop a new command structure focused on regional risks to meet sub-strategic hard security challenges there quickly and effectively. A future NATO regional command structure should place responsibilities for sub-strategic security into the hands of Nordic policy-makers’ who control most of the surface and maritime territory in the region. The new headquarters could provide operational command over forces contributed by small-states and autonomous areas in the region. A regional headquarters structure utilizing local forces as part of multi-national coalitions could facilitate rapid response to sub-strategic threats, while conforming to individual states’ national Arctic policies.



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The specific command structure would start with NATO Headquarters in Brussels. Member states could adapt the Nordic Defence Cooperation to include command capabilities, which could be located in one of the Scandinavian capitals from which it would control both the West and East Nordic Security Zones. The WNSZ could have two operational commands forming a territorial security force. The two include the HQ, Joint Arctic Command (Ground), Nuuk, Greenland, and the HQ Joint Arctic Command (Maritime), Keflavik NATO base. The NATO air policing and air defence system could continue as NATO's Combined Air Operations Center and higher commands, just as NATO commands multi-national naval and ground forces at the strategic level.

Two Arctic Council states should alter their national security policies to accommodate such a structure. Denmark could allow Greenland and the Faroe Islands to develop external security apparatus and experience while maintaining the homeland control of all the Kingdom's territories. Second, Iceland would have to create a homeland security force – which existing policies and tradition may allow. Additionally, others within Iceland are calling for the country to “strengthen its domestic institutions for security and defence, such as the Icelandic Coast Guard (Thorhallsson 2017: 1).” In order to test that proposal we must first look at Iceland's existing hard security capabilities as

in the author's opinion, at present the country's inability to protect itself from sub-strategic threats creates a weak spot in the North Atlantic. That weakness exacerbates future threats unanticipated in the 2009 Risk Assessment Report, which drove most of the country's current hard security policies and structures (Bailes 2013).

## Analysis

Iceland does not need to wait until 2025 to see sub-strategic hard security threats and their defence structure's inability to meet them. The devastating murder of Birna Brjánsdóttir in 2016 illustrated how competent Iceland's police and Coast Guard are; however, it also showed how unable they would be in countering a more involved (i.e. larger or multiple simultaneous events) hard security threat. In brief, a crewmember on a Greenlandic trawler murdered Birna and subsequently departed with his ship in the North Atlantic. To prevent his escape, the Icelandic Coast Guard airlifted the Viking Squad to intercept the Polar Nanoq, where they boarded the vessel while underway to search it and arrest two suspects. While an outstanding operation, it completely taxed the Icelandic security apparatus such that a simultaneous event happening elsewhere requiring similar efforts would have been difficult to engage.

As an experienced military planner, former NATO officer, and Icelandic Defence Force member, in order to develop the WNSZ command structure and TO&E (table of organization and equipment) for the First Icelandic Security Force, the author created four fictional scenarios. While beyond the scope of this paper to present them fully here, the scenarios addressed Byers' sub-strategic hard security threats in the Arctic the following. These were 1. Terrorists hijacking a large cruise ship in



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Akureyri Harbour, 2. A multi-national criminal organizations engaging in human trafficking in Seydisfjordur, 3. A rogue Pacific power attempting to seize Kolbeinsey Island to build a base. 4. An Arctic Council member state conducting an unauthorized amphibious landing near Thorlakshofen to provide search and rescue following an earthquake. Each of those scenarios required a multi-national response from small states and autonomous areas in the region, including Iceland.

The focus in this paper is on ground-based security capabilities only, but small-states forces in the region comprising the WNSZ could use organic and joint airmobile and naval transport. Thus, the Patrol Group in Nunavut and North West Territories, could provide winter open-range security throughout the region (approximately 500 combat troops). The Sirius Dog Sled Patrol assigned to the Danish military training base in Greenland have the capability for overland reconnaissance (14 combat troops, plus any troops undergoing training at the facility). The Maritime Rescue Coordination Center in Torshavan could facilitate transport or search and rescue operations using maritime resources, along with police units to assist in security under local circumstances. Although slightly out of area, the Norwegian Coastal Rangers in Trondenenes have their own combat boats and could respond to a WNSZ mission given enough advance warning (86 combat troops). Lastly, the proposed First Icelandic Security Force headquartered in Keflavik, could provide three infantry companies (light, airborne/airmobile, mechanized) using C-130 and helicopter transport, along with Coast Guard maritime transport and local ground transport supplied by the Icelandic Association for Search and Rescue units (400 combat troops). Thus, the total number of hard security troops capable to support operations in the WNSZ would be approximately 1,500 should the proposed structure be created.

### **Background information on Icelandic culture and attitudes toward defence**

The author makes the policy recommendation above based upon over thirty years' experience in Iceland. With the exception of organizations like *Varðberg* (Organization for Western Cooperation and International Affairs) or the Centres for Small State Security and Arctic Policy Studies at the University of Iceland, few Icelanders have considered the issue of their nation's hard security (although many condemn the NATO mission and other efforts). That dearth of public discussion led

the former U.S. Ambassador to Iceland, Robert C. Barber, to make the following address to *Varðberg* entitled "Iceland, the United States, and North Atlantic and European Security"

The state of the world today presents many challenges to the rule of law, to peace and stability, and to the happiness, which we all deserve and strive to achieve. That is the harsh reality, it is staring us right in our faces, and it means tough decisions lie ahead...for the U.S., for NATO, for the Nordics, and for Iceland. ... I would like to urge all Icelanders ... to participate in a national discussion about security. Have the conversation. Have the conversation amongst yourselves about Iceland's role and responsibilities in its own security and in North Atlantic and European security more broadly. How will Iceland as a whole bear the costs, economic and otherwise, of its collective defense commitments, in a changed and ever-changing security environment, especially if the costs fall disproportionately on particular geographic areas or sectors of Icelandic society? What will Icelanders accept, and what will you not accept? Have the conversation. I would further urge you -- take collective responsibility as citizens of this country to have the conversation. Do not, through lack of participation make just a few people within your government responsible for these decisions (November 19, 2015).



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Rejecting the story line in Halldór Kiljan Laxness' *The Atom Station*, Ambassador Barber exhorted Icelanders to become involved in the "difficult" conversation about the country's future hard security needs and ways to meet them. That fictional account from 1948 predicted the secret dealings between a few Icelandic and American government officials to join the newly forming North Atlantic Treaty Organization and build base(s) in Iceland for use in a global thermonuclear war. Laxness' characters included the prime minister (based on the actual prime minister at the time of writing, Ólafur Thors) who engaged in secret, late night meetings with US military and members of parliament at the home of his brother-in-law, who was also an MP. The result was the decision to create what became the real military policy that in Laxness' view put the country at risk in atomic war, which the Nobel winner described as the "land being laid to waste". As the first book in Iceland to sell out in one day, Laxness' fictional scenario may have influenced the anti-NATO demonstrations that followed in 1949.

Although diplomatic, Barber asked the public to make their voices heard above the din of intellectuals or a few vocal members of parliament to create a secure nation in a world based on the reality of desperate countries desiring access to Arctic resources, or criminals and terrorists seeking plunder and chaos in the north. The 2016 announcement about the U.S. Navy re-opening the NATO Base in Keflavik seemingly without consultation with the Icelandic Government showed how controversial small-group decision making in the country remains today. Two other recent events illustrated how a culture with no military, no war monuments, no changing of the palace guard, lacks support for hard security. The first event in 2014 was the Norwegian government supplying the Icelandic police with machine guns, which resulted in demonstrations, new civic groups, and petitions against the action. The second event was a poll following the 2017 Independence Day celebrations that included armed police covering the event, which less than half of Reykjavik's residents supported. Thus, without the participation of citizens, the Iceland people may meet decisions about hard security measures with resentment and distrust, and they may fail ultimately as a result.

This proposal is an attempt to begin that conversation among Icelanders by presenting a model for Icelandic territorial security based upon the current situation in the post-Keflavik period, where the Justice Ministry controls the intelligence, police, and the Coast Guard. Although a Security and Defense Department remains within the Foreign Ministry, its responsibilities largely lie with supporting external (i.e. NATO) military operations at the strategic level and training. According to Thorhallsson, "Iceland needs to strengthen its domestic institutions dealing with security and defense and fully utilize its present defense and security agreements with neighboring states (2017: 1)". The first step for Iceland is that it must meet its commitments to NATO in treasure AND blood by creating an armed force below the level of an army but above the police. Iceland could model such a force on modern constabularies or border patrols that would prepared the country to better respond to sub-

strategic level hard security threats, but not represent a military force such that the country would reject it.

## Policy advice points/ What should [small state] do?



The proposed First Icelandic Security Force would be comprised exclusively of reservists who train regularly but who have no responsibilities outside of the country, thus preventing the security force from becoming involved in foreign entanglements. The intent is to provide a short-term response to hard security situations beyond the scope of police forces including Viking Squad and/or the Coast Guard (i.e. because they involve ground combat). The security force would not be a viable military unit capable of sustained combat operations against a determined enemy presenting overwhelming odds. Consequently, its limited mission would be to eliminate threats to national security beyond the scope of police and the Coast Guard. These missions could include conducting limited anti-armor and air defense operations, maintaining or restoring territorial integrity in cooperation with other Icelandic government agencies and allies, and performing a delaying action to allow NATO or Partnership for Peace forces (e.g. Sweden, Finland) to conduct follow-on operations that eliminate a larger threat. In addition, the recommendation incorporates the opposite policy for American defence as established by the U.S. Constitution, which forbids using federal troops against domestic threats except when martial law is declared. Conversely, the proposed FISF would address threats only within the country's territory, not external ones. Future laws creating it (not addressed here) could restrict the security force from engaging in operations (other than training) outside the country.

## Conclusion

Global climate change could present new hard security challenges in the Arctic and the North Atlantic required changes in existing policies and structures by 2025 when new transport corridors should present easier movement into and out of the region. The author's recommendation is to create regional NATO commands including one for a proposed West Nordic Security Zone that provide small-states with the ability to participate in decisions and control of forces to protect their own

territorial integrity. In addition, to meet NATO obligations, along with making required spending contributions, small-states should increase their hard security capabilities in the North Atlantic. Specifically, Iceland could develop the First Icelandic Security Force to improve the country's ability to respond quickly and appropriately to hard security threats. To do so, leaders should involve the public in discussions about what the future challenges could be, what policies and entities the country should create to meet those challenges, and under what circumstances the government would be able to utilize them. The proposal comes at a time when NATO and aspirant members are increasing their defence spending and militaries.



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