

CHACR *DIGEST* #51



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The conclusion to the year sees not just the continuing conflict in Ukraine as the primary focus but also mounting anxiety about the longer term security intentions of US president Donald Trump. With a detailed examination of how Britain is preparing – or not – for any future conflict and renewed warnings by senior NATO officials that Russia could attack before the end of the decade, there remains no shortage of discussion about what are the greatest areas and regions of concern and what steps need to be taken in response. And increasingly, reference is growing not just to the potential threat to Eastern Europe and the Baltic States but also NATO's northern flank extending into the Arctic. This comes with a warning of the danger of basing assessments on outdated criteria and thinking, rather than reflecting more on how Russia views the strategic environment and what really drives its goals and ambitions.



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EUROPE

The BBC security correspondent Frank Gardner has written a [lengthy piece](#) (also available as a spoken version) considering the impact of war on Britain and how the country might respond. Drawing on current events and the conflict in Ukraine as its background, the writer references Vladimir Putin's comment made earlier in the month that: "We are not planning to go to war with Europe. But if Europe wants to, and starts, we are ready right now." In anticipating how a still "extremely unlikely" war might begin, Gardener suggests the opening phase would involve a significant increase in hybrid activity with disruption to energy, communication and essential food and fuel supplies with potential efforts to disable undersea cables and pipelines and satellites in space. He refers to the recent RUSI 'Fighting the Long War' conference and draws on some of the organisation's analysts for detail, one of whom points out there is little evidence that Britain has a plan to fight a war lasting more than a few weeks such is the lack of depth in current force design. Another analyst highlights the 'shortfalls' which exist in personnel and equipment, particularly when compared to Russia. While its army is described as being of "generally of a very low quality" with poorly equipped, poorly led and poorly fed troops, the country's war economy means it can produce equipment as levels far beyond what is possible in Britain. The respected analyst Keir Giles explains that Ukraine has demonstrated "that mass is absolutely vital for anybody that is going to face Russia on land" but what is referred to as "a cultural thing within the UK" suggests that any move to introduce some form of military service – such as has been recently announced in both France and Germany – would be resisted. With it being argued that the actual deployable strength of the British Army is only 54,000, the suggestion is that in the event of a war it would most likely be degraded within weeks, although with the caveat that much depends on the intensity of the fighting. There is also a lengthy discussion about current UK defence spending levels and lengthy procurement programmes, including reference to the Ajax armoured vehicle project. And some consideration of where a Russian attack may occur with the Suwalki Gap, the Baltic States (noted as including in Estonia a UK battle group) and the Arctic archipelago of Svalbard the three highlighted examples. Add to this the possibility for attacks against the homeland such as the 2006 assassination of former KGB officer Alexander Litvinenko and the 2018 Salisbury attack. While the value of membership of the NATO alliance is asserted – the conclusion being the country would be unlikely to have to fight alone – the essay concludes with the warning that British society "is unquestionably not ready for war".

The potential for widening conflict or war in Europe remains a commonly discussed concern. [Speaking in Berlin](#) in the middle of December, NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte warned "Russia has brought war back to Europe, and we must be prepared for the scale of war our grandparents and great grandparents endured". Repeating the commonly referenced timeline of a potential Russian attack within five years, he welcomed NATO members' commitment to increase overall military spending to five per cent of gross domestic product annually by 2035 but argued more has to be done and a "wartime mindset" was needed. He also highlighted Russian links with China and the increasingly critical role its technology plays in the production of weapons targeting Ukraine. Related to this is the debate about how President Donald Trump's recent actions

are forcing European leaders to plan for a regional-led security order. With many of the most important decisions regarding Ukraine already being undertaken by a loose 'coalition of the willing', a [report](#) has noted that "EU policymakers are exploring deeper coordination through the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force" alongside calls for a stronger 'European pillar' inside NATO, long popular in France but now also gaining support in Germany. The publication of the US National Security Strategy, and what were seen as attacks on various European political leaders, has only strengthened concerns about the continuing applicability of Article 5 and its underpinning guarantee of collective security. The pattern of events throughout the year points to a conclusion offered by current and former security



Picture: NATO

officials that it is no longer a question of if Europe would take over primary responsibility for its defence and security but when. And even questions about a potential exit from NATO although, as the report notes, this would need endorsement from Congress which, in the subsequently approved and extremely significant [National Defense Authorization Act](#), has reinforced the control it exerts over both this decision and the level of defence and military support the US will continue to provide to regional partners.

Nonetheless, concerns about longer term American intentions in regard to Europe's security have grown in recent months, perhaps most acutely in Denmark which has now classified the US as a [potential security risk](#) following its agitation to take control of Greenland. The recently released National Security Strategy has shifted significant focus to the Western hemisphere and countering China in the Indo-Pacific with a corresponding shift by the US Army to adjust its force posture in Europe. Following the October announcement that a rotational brigade previously stationed in Romania would not be replaced once it returned home, further force reductions are planned in Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia. Air defence and intelligence resources remain unaffected as do commitments to NATO's Mihail Kogălniceanu (MK) Air Base and the Deveselu ballistic missile defense (sic) site and no adjustments are planned in Poland or the Baltic States. An article in [RealClear Defense](#) argues that any further troop reductions must be offset by "sustained technological and logistical support" with capabilities that are sufficiently agile and scalable to augment regional NATO forces in the event of a crisis. The proposal is that small, inexpensive counter-unmanned aircraft systems operated by reserve troops be employed "as a force multiplier" demonstrating US support for NATO. To not do so runs the risk of convincing Russia and China that Ukraine and Taiwan would go similarly undefended at a point when the organisation's frontline is being redefined. Led by senior researcher Matti Pesu, a [briefing paper](#) published by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs has provided a regional view of what are viewed as three critical subregions, the European Arctic, the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. Each is seen as facing the threat of potential Russian aggression and heightened risks of spillover from the war in Ukraine. And as the writers warn, "Russian military dominance or aggression in one area would affect the security of other frontline states and alter the strategic dynamics along the entire frontline and beyond".

THE AMERICAS

While America's National Security Strategy, which was published in early December, was widely commented upon, particularly across Europe following the criticism of the region it contained, another longer [draft version](#) has also received some attention. In particular two sections, the first of which expanded upon how the US viewed future relations with Europe and the second a proposal for a revised global political framework. Working from what has become the controversial premise that Europe is facing "civilizational erasure" because of its immigration policies and "censorship of free speech", the full version proposed to focus future relationships with European countries on a few nations with like-minded current administrations and movements – Austria, Hungary, Italy and Poland were specifically listed and where the intent was to collaborate more "with the goal of pulling them away from the [European Union]" – offering support for "parties, movements, and intellectual and cultural figures who seek sovereignty and preservation/restoration of traditional European ways of life" but whilst also remaining "pro-American". Even more far-reaching was the suggestion that a 'Core 5' or C5, made up of the US, China, Russia, India and Japan, should be created which, as its first objective, would work on Middle East security. Although it also noted that China and Russia "should not be allowed to replace US leadership", the expanded strategy suggested partnering with "regional champions" to help maintain global stability. While the Trump administration subsequently denied the existence of any version of the National Security Strategy other than the one published online, the leaked draft is being viewed by some as an indication of how US security and defence policy may continue to evolve.

INDO-PACIFIC

The recent conclusion of Operation Highmast, and the return to home waters of a Royal Navy Carrier Strike Group, has once again highlighted the importance of the Indo-Pacific region to British defence planning. As an article in the US defence magazine [National Defense](#) has examined, this is a highly complex region which presents a series of complicated challenges and where a number of smaller countries increasingly rely upon partnerships to safeguard security. While the focus is the maritime domain (one source quoted refers to approximately 67 per cent of global maritime trade, valued at over \$16 trillion passing through the region), the article also demonstrates how "international teamwork" has a key role to play in collective security and the role played by collaboration, transparent information exchange and regional exercises to tackle apparently growing criminality. In 2024, Southeast Asian waters saw a 68 per cent increase in piracy incidents and drug seizures increased 25 per cent to a record 236 tons. Although not mentioned, the more specific threat by China is the focus of a Pentagon study which



reportedly shows the country could use hypersonic weapons to defeat US aircraft carriers. According to [Interesting Engineering](#), a leaked internal assessment known as the ‘Overmatch Brief’ has concluded that the People’s Liberation Army could potentially neutralise or sink the Navy’s newest Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carriers. The suggestion is that this would not be achieved through relying on a single weapon or tactic but instead by employing a layered campaign combining missiles, cyber operations and attacks on US space assets. In the simulations, Chinese attacks on US satellites used for surveillance, communication and navigation greatly reduced the ability to track targets, coordinate movements and manage maritime battles. The study also highlighted the complementary nature of China’s missile forces with lower-cost anti-ship missiles, which can be produced in large quantities, being fired in large numbers to saturate and exhaust a carrier group’s defences. With up to 600 hypersonic missiles which are extremely difficult to intercept, these advanced systems would deliver decisive blows. The article warns of broader structural challenges facing US power projection, both in the Indo-Pacific and even globally as high-value assets such as aircraft carriers, fifth-generation fighter jets, and large satellites become increasingly vulnerable to relatively inexpensive weapons. With the most modern Gerald R. Ford-class carriers described as especially critical and vulnerable platforms, the assessment concludes “once key nodes are damaged or destroyed, the effectiveness of the entire force can rapidly degrade”.

DEFENCE

In a lengthy article published in the [Small Wars Journal](#), while his focus is based around a discussion of irregular warfare in the Arctic, Stephen Gagnon offers a detailed critique of current US strategic and defence thinking. He raises a number of concerns about apparent American failings and proposes a series of recommendations for action that needs to be taken. He notes that, with Russian and Chinese forces being able to approach across the polar route, the region represents the northern flank of the country’s defence and is the location of critical missile defence bases (specifically Fort Greely’s Ground-based Midcourse Defense site which featured prominently in the recent film *House Full of Dynamite*). It is also the chokepoint



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to new sea lanes, with maritime corridors such as the Northern Sea Route and Northwest Passage opening to regular navigation and vast untapped reserves (an estimated 13 per cent of the world’s undiscovered oil and 30 per cent of its natural gas) which merely serve to “amplify the region’s geostrategic value, heightening the risk of competition among major powers for access and control”. The writer highlights the challenges of securing regional domain awareness which potentially leaves the US vulnerable and an environment “that can disable equipment and personnel as effectively as an adversary” not helped by a security presence which remains “intermittent and reactive, signaling (sic) awareness but not control”. To support the argument, there are a wide-ranging series of examples referenced, ranging from the 1962 intelligence mission Operation Coldfeet through to the early 2023 Chinese high-altitude balloon which was detected drifting over Alaska. From these he offers the conclusion that the theme common to each example is clear: “Irregular methods thrive in the Arctic not because they are exotic, but because the environment punishes rigidity and rewards adaptation.” Highlighting the investment being made by Russia and, increasingly, China, he records that the 2024 Department of Defense Arctic Strategy acknowledges US shortfalls – limited infrastructure, fragile logistics and incomplete domain awareness – but questions the level of action being taken to remedy the situation and a resulting “patchwork” response. As an example, he refers to the 11th Airborne Division (Arctic) which is based in Alaska, but has a largely Pacific-oriented focus and, with a posture that remains rotational and exercise-based, it “risks being more symbolic than transformative”. He warns that there is a lack of willingness to apply irregular warfare doctrine in the Arctic while ignoring that Russia and China “already operate year-round in ambiguous ways that elude this intermittent form of deterrence”. With detailed discussion of logistic challenges particular to the region – and how these can be overcome – he concludes with four ‘shifts’ that need to be undertaken if the US is to “keep pace in Arctic irregular warfare”. These will require “institutional courage” and he encourages the Department of Defense to do more and adapt faster, “linking doctrine to geography, investment to endurance, and legitimacy to deterrence”. Failure to do this will lead to the northern flank being lost “not through defeat in battle but through absence”.

COMMENTARY/ESSAY

Writing for [Engelberg Ideas](#), Andrew Monaghan’s new essay examines the ‘1937 moment’, raised by former Chief of the General Staff General Sir Patrick Sanders, and considers it in light of current NATO strategic thinking. Drawing on an historical parallel, the writer examines the confusion that surrounded inter-war British planning for a future defence of Singapore, then a key link in the globally dispersed system which underpinned the British Empire. Central to his arguments is an appreciation produced in 1937 by Colonel Arthur Percival which warned the naval base at Singapore could no longer be considered an impregnable fortress and would be in imminent danger in the event of war. With the subsequent Japanese attack four years later, Percival was now commanding officer but failed to heed his own advice, instead losing the initiative at the outset by not committing his numerically superior forces to seek a decisive battle. It is this failure that forms the key thesis to his argument, warning that “scenarios of how Russia might attack NATO too often reflect questions and answers that were originally formulated and took shape some 20 years ago despite the evolving characteristics of Russian power”. This, in turn, leads him to extol the merits of what he describes as ‘empowered red teaming’ and genuinely thinking laterally to assess how adversaries see and plan for the future. His conclusion draws upon this to further warn that NATO needs to avoid the failures of 1937 to correctly anticipate Nazi Germany’s intentions. Although recent [US intelligence reports](#) continue to warn that Russia has not abandoned its aim of capturing all of Ukraine and reclaiming parts of Europe that belonged to the former Soviet empire, the writer cautions becoming fixed on “the long-serving baseline scenario” of a Russian attack against the Baltic States. This he notes “appears to be the most complex and potentially costly of options open to Moscow given the terrain and NATO’s defensive preparations”. Instead the goal should be to consider possible alternatives which better reflect Russian drivers, such as its changing international partnerships.