



# The British Isles and the Arctic Circle: Episodes from the Past and Present

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**Abstract.** This study deals with aspects of Britain's engagement with the region of the Arctic Circle, both in times past and during the present period. With regard to the past, it specifically looks at English and Scottish engagement with the area of Spitsbergen (present-day Svalbard, Norway), with a focus on exploration and whaling activities, and the competition that subsequently ensued with other European powers as a result. This also involves looking at legal issues that arose over time with regard to the archipelago. Furthermore, it examines how Svalbard has now once again become a source of contention, specifically between the European Union and Norway as a result of the allocation of fishing quotas that came about due to Brexit. This has caused tensions between the two entities, with both sides utilizing legal arguments to justify and bolster their positions. This incident is yet another example of the far-reaching impact that the restructuring of EU–UK relations has had as a result of the latter's departure from the former. Lastly, the article also surveys British engagement with the Arctic region at the present time, including Scotland's attempt at articulating an independent policy of engagement for itself with regard to the area.

**Keywords:** Arctic Circle, England, European Union, Scotland, Spitsbergen (Svalbard), United Kingdom

## 1. Introduction

The region of the Arctic Circle is a vital theatre of economic exploitation and geopolitical competition, a state of affairs that will only intensify in the future. As shall be seen in this study, our era is not the first period of history where such competition has occurred in that area. Here British (specifically English and Scottish) commercial activities in the Arctic region in the past will be examined,

specifically whaling in the Spitsbergen (now Svalbard)<sup>1</sup> archipelago in the present-day Kingdom of Norway. This involves a survey of the exploration of the region by the English Muscovy Company, attempts by the English Crown to exert sovereignty over the area, various rival claims that arose, and the archipelago's legal status. Furthermore, it shall be seen how Svalbard has now become once again a cause of contention and competition, specifically relating to the issue of fishing quotas, with tensions having arisen between the European Union and Norway in relation to this issue. It shall be seen that this issue is connected to Brexit, thus providing an example of the impact on the region of the UK's decision to leave the European Union. Additionally, certain modern developments regarding the UK's relations to the Arctic Circle shall be explored here, including an exploration of the United Kingdom's general attempt to engage with the Arctic Circle and articulate a policy with regard to it. Furthermore, Scotland's attempt to map out a distinct Arctic policy separately from the UK as a whole shall also be surveyed, which must be seen in the broader context of Brexit and the debate regarding possible future Scottish independence.

## 2. The English Muscovy Company

Originally, it was the Muscovy Company that established an English presence in the Arctic Circle. As to the background of its foundation, from the period of the early 1550s, there had been an attempt to obtain new markets due to a decrease in the export of cloth, which led in 1553 to the foundation of a company to look for passage to Cathay via a North-East route.<sup>2</sup> An expedition was led in the same year by Sir Hugh Willoughby, and it included three ships, with the merchants of London funding this project, though King Edward VI also gave his support to the mission.<sup>3</sup> Though this venture failed in its ultimate aim, it was of great importance as it established contact between England and Russia.<sup>4</sup> Richard Chancellor, who was the pilot for Willoughby's 1553 expedition, managed to get to the White Sea, and then later arrived in Moscow,<sup>5</sup> meeting Tsar Ivan IV in December 1553.<sup>6</sup> Before this meeting, Anglo-Russian relations practically did not exist, and each society knew little of the other.<sup>7</sup> Chancellor bore a letter from King Edward VI, addressed

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1 The author shall refer to the area in question as Spitsbergen until the time of the full recognition of Norwegian sovereignty over the archipelago in 1920, and from then on he will use its official Norwegian name of Svalbard. See Churchill–Ulfstein 2010. 552.

2 Canny 1998. 60.

3 Gross 2019. 942.

4 Canny 1998. 60.

5 Kenyon 1994. 70.

6 Mund 2008. 351.

7 Ibid.

‘to the Kings, Princes, and other Potentates, inhabiting the Northeast partes of the worlde, toward the might Empire of Cathay’.<sup>8</sup> The letter stated that ‘certaine men of our Realme, mooued heereunto... have instituted and taken vpon them a voyage by sea into farre Countries, to the intent that betweene our people and them, a way may bee opened to bring in, and cary out marchandises, desiring vs to further their enterprise’.<sup>9</sup> The letter also went on to express the wish that there be ‘an indissoluble and perppetuell league of friendship betweene us both’, and that ‘We therefore desire you kings and princes..., to permit vnto these our seruants free passage by your regions and dominions’.<sup>10</sup> Tsar Ivan responded favourably to the letter, writing in return to the English sovereign (who by this time was Queen Mary I)<sup>11</sup> that ‘if you send one of your Majesty’s council to treat with us, whereby your country merchant’s may with all kinds of wares, and where they will, make their market in our dominions, they shall have their free mart with all free liberties through my whole dominions with all kinds of wares, to come and go at their pleasure’.<sup>12</sup> In 1555, King Philip and Queen Mary issued the Charter of the Merchants of Russia, thus establishing the English Muscovy Company.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, the Muscovy Company sent Chancellor to Russia with two ships.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. British Whaling around Spitsbergen

Later, in 1577, the English Muscovy Company was granted by the English crown a monopoly for twenty years, which authorized it to engage in the hunting of whales ‘within any seas whatsoever’.<sup>15</sup> However, at this time, the Muscovy Company did not engage in whaling in the Arctic Circle,<sup>16</sup> rather initially being focused on fin whales in Iceland’s vicinity.<sup>17</sup> The development of England’s whaling industry well reflected the growing mercantilist spirit in the country at the time, as well as the desire to increase its self-sufficiency.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the Dutch, setting their sights beyond Western Europe and being desirous of a sea route to Asia, like the English, explored the possibility of finding such a route to

8 Quoted in Hakulyt 1886. 27.

9 Id. 28.

10 Ibid.

11 Gross 2019. 944.

12 Quoted in Hakluyt 1889. 60–61.

13 Hakluyt 1886. 101–112; Alan Day 2006. 205.

14 Gross 2019. 944. It is worth noting that Chancellor is considered to be the founder of Anglo-Russian relations, with 2021 having marked the 500<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of his birth, with various events organized to celebrate this across the Russian Federation. See Cork 2021.

15 Howard 1995. 39.

16 Jacob–Snoeiijing 1984.

17 Jackson 2005. 2.

18 Id. 3.

their north<sup>19</sup> and also wished to gain a foothold with regard to Arctic trade.<sup>20</sup> This received official governmental support, with the States of Holland and Zeeland and the City of Amsterdam in 1594 subsidizing voyages in search of a northern passage.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, Dutch explorer Willem Barentsz managed to reach Novaya Zemlya,<sup>22</sup> and in 1596 he also discovered the Spitsbergen archipelago,<sup>23</sup> an area in the Arctic located between the North Pole and Norway.<sup>24</sup> Later, in 1607, Henry Hudson, while in the service of the Dutch East India Company,<sup>25</sup> discovered the existence of whales and walrus in the vicinity of Spitsbergen.<sup>26</sup> In 1611, Jonas Poole, having been sent by the English Muscovy Company in search of the North-East passage and also land animals, spotted whales there, leading to the commencement of whaling at Spitsbergen,<sup>27</sup> a development which, according to one commentator, made ‘Spitsbergen one of the most talked-of places in western Europe’.<sup>28</sup> English success eventually attracted others to the area, in particular the Dutch and Denmark–Norway, leading to fierce competition in the region. With regard to the latter, there were specific claims of sovereignty made with regard to the territory. King Christian IV of Denmark and Norway claimed that Spitsbergen belonged to the latter kingdom, a claim that was based on the false premise that Spitsbergen and Greenland were connected and also on the idea that the Arctic Ocean could be considered a closed sea (*mare clausum*).<sup>29</sup>

Due to this situation and in order to strengthen its claims in the area, the English Muscovy Company obtained from King James I a royal charter in 1613, which granted it exclusive rights to whale in Spitsbergen’s waters.<sup>30</sup> In 1613, King James, given that Spitsbergen was in fact part of Denmark–Norway’s Greenland territory, even offered to buy the archipelago from Christian IV.<sup>31</sup> Then, in 1614, King James I, though never acknowledging the Danish–Norwegian king’s claims to Spitsbergen, offered to pay the latter rent in exchange for a shared monopoly for English subjects with Danes and Norwegians with regard to whaling in the area.<sup>32</sup> Eventually, however, in that same year, King James attempted to claim sovereignty over the territory.<sup>33</sup> Two explorers, William Baffin and Robert Fotherby were charged with this

19 Hacquebord 1995. 249.

20 Rudmose Brown 1919. 311.

21 Schilder 1984. 493.

22 Id. 496.

23 Hacquebord–Steenhuisen–Waterbolk 2003.

24 Churchill–Ulfstein 2010. 552.

25 Rossi 2015. 113.

26 Rudmose Brown 1919. 312.

27 Rudmose Brown 1919. 312; Hacquebord–Steenhuisen–Waterbolk 2003. 117.

28 Rudmose Brown 1919. 312.

29 Knaplund 1926. 386.

30 Dolin 2007. 24.

31 Rossi 2017. 152.

32 Rabot 1919. 225.

33 Mühlenschulte 2013. 5.

task.<sup>34</sup> They raised King James' standard and placed a cross on the territory, and also, in order to show that they had taken lawful possession of Spitsbergen on behalf of the king, removed earth from the area.<sup>35</sup> In response to King James's attempt to claim Spitsbergen in 1614, Christian IV sent warships to the archipelago and continued to do so until 1643.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, he even sent diplomatic missions to various European courts in order to promote his claim, but these were unsuccessful.<sup>37</sup>

Ultimately, England's attempts at gaining control over the archipelago did not succeed.<sup>38</sup> Various incidences took place in the area between the English, Dutch, and Denmark–Norway,<sup>39</sup> these together being described by one commentator as 'the first colonial conflict among European nations'.<sup>40</sup> None of these states were able to maintain exclusive control over Spitsbergen and its waters,<sup>41</sup> and eventually the Dutch view,<sup>42</sup> that is, *mare liberum*, or freedom of the seas, prevailed, as opposed to the concept of *mare clausum*, that is, the idea of a closed sea, thus opening up the waters of the area to all whalers.<sup>43</sup> Various agreements between different whalers regarding the sharing of the area come into being, though even then tensions continued to persist.<sup>44</sup> Eventually, by the middle of the seventeenth century, the Dutch came to dominate whaling in the Spitsbergen area.<sup>45</sup> Part of the Dutch success was connected to the model of free enterprise which they followed, while British whaling interests relied upon being granted royal charters and the creation of monopolies, which included attempts to exclude not only foreign but also domestic rivals, making it difficult to successfully compete against the Dutch in whaling around Spitsbergen.<sup>46</sup>

It must also be added here that from among the constituent nations of the present-day United Kingdom, not only the English but also the Scottish attempted to become involved in Spitsbergen whaling. Scots themselves participated in whaling expeditions of the Muscovy Company in the earlier part of the seventeenth century and were also involved in Dutch expeditions.<sup>47</sup> With regard to the attempt

34 Rudmose Brown 1919. 314.

35 Mancall 2018. 87.

36 Rossi 2015. 118.

37 Richards 2003. 593.

38 Mühlenschulte 2013. 5.

39 It should also be noted that the French and Spanish-Basques lacked state support and capital in pursuing their interests in the region. See Richards 2003. 593.

40 Rabot 1919. 225.

41 Grant 2010. 75.

42 Dutch naval superiority played a decisive role in thwarting English ambitions in the area. See Mühlenschulte 2013. 5.

43 Richards 2014. 131. For further information regarding these concepts and the historical context, see Haitas 2019. 74–75.

44 Grant 2010. 75.

45 Ibid.

46 Sanger 1995. 15.

47 Sanger 2007. 162.

to establish an independent Scottish presence in this trade, King James VI and I, in his capacity as King of Scotland,<sup>48</sup> granted a patent in 1618 to a group of English, Scots, and Zealanders, which aimed to ‘make the whale-fishery trade more general’.<sup>49</sup> The patent provided for ‘all power and freedom to trade to all those countries which the English [East India] Company previously earlier has been privileged’, granting the company rights to trade at Spitsbergen, as well as in the Levant and Muscovy.<sup>50</sup> However, this was subsequently annulled as it was seen as detrimental to the Muscovy and East India companies’ privileges, thus allowing these companies to continue their monopoly in this area.<sup>51</sup> Later, in 1625, a certain Nathaniel Edwards, along with his partners, was granted a royal licence to whale in the vicinity of Spitsbergen, a move which was also resisted by English whalers, with the Muscovy Company seeing it as infringing upon its own rights and privileges, with tensions and even physical altercations taking place.<sup>52</sup> There were also other seventeenth-century attempts by the Scots to establish themselves in the Spitsbergen whale trade, but these were ultimately unsuccessful.<sup>53</sup>

## 4. Svalbard and Fishing Quotas

As a result of the unregulated nature of whaling in the area, the Spitsbergen archipelago’s resources became greatly depleted over time.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the whaling industry in the area began to wane eventually, specifically from around the late eighteenth to around the middle of the nineteenth century, and interest in the area was lost.<sup>55</sup> From a legal perspective, Svalbard gained the status of a *terra nullius*.<sup>56</sup> However, in the twentieth century, the area was eventually brought into focus again as a result of mineral interests in the region.<sup>57</sup> Norway, which had gained its independence in 1905, proposed a new legal framework with regard to the archipelago, and eventually, after World War I, the Spitsbergen Commission decided that the area should come under Norwegian sovereignty.<sup>58</sup> Subsequently, in 1920, the Spitsbergen/Svalbard Treaty was signed, coming into force in August 1925.<sup>59</sup> Presently, Norway, 22 of the European Union’s Members States, plus

48 Sanger 1995. 18.

49 Scoresby 1820. 33–34.

50 Wagner 2020. 582.

51 Scoresby 1820. 33–34.

52 Sanger 1995. 19.

53 Sanger 1995. 21.

54 Churchill–Ulfstein 2010. 552.

55 Rossi 2015. 118.

56 Churchill–Ulfstein 2010. 552.

57 Rossi 2015. 118.

58 Churchill–Ulfstein 2010. 553.

59 Jensen 2020. 82.

23 other states adhere to this treaty.<sup>60</sup> The Treaty finally brought Spitsbergen/Svalbard's *terra nullius*, or no man's land status, to an end.<sup>61</sup> The Spitsbergen/Svalbard Treaty recognizes 'the full and absolute sovereignty of Norway over the Archipelago of Spitsbergen'.<sup>62</sup> However, the Treaty also stipulates that 'ships and nationals of all High Contracting Parties shall enjoy equally the rights of fishing and hunting' in the archipelago, though at the same time 'Norway shall be free to maintain, take or decree suitable measures to ensure the preservation and, if necessary, the re-constitution of the fauna and flora' of the region.<sup>63</sup>

Recently, Svalbard has once again become a bone of contention, this time within the broader context of Brexit and due to the need to redefine the relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union.<sup>64</sup> The issue specifically relates to the determination of fishing quotas in the Svalbard area. On 18 December 2020, Norway allocated to the European Union 17 885 tons of cod in the Fisheries Protection zone in Svalbard's vicinity.<sup>65</sup> However, the European Union allocated to itself 28 431 tons of Arctic cod in the archipelago in late January 2021.<sup>66</sup> In response to this action, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that 'The European Union has no right under international law to establish fishing quotas in waters under Norwegian jurisdiction in contravention of Norwegian regulations. Any internal regulations of the EU cannot under international law exceed the relevant quotas accorded to EU vessels by Norway as the coastal state'.<sup>67</sup> More specifically, according to Norway, the EU's actions in this matter are contrary to the sovereign rights of the Kingdom of Norway according to the law of the sea.<sup>68</sup> As to the background to this issue, in 1977, a fisheries protection zone of 200 nautical miles was established, and from that time Norway allocated fishing quotas for third countries.<sup>69</sup> Norway claimed that in its calculation for the European Union's 2021 quota as a result of Brexit, UK fishing activities could no longer be taken into account and that instead the quota was based on the fishing patterns of the remaining 27 Member States.<sup>70</sup>

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60 European Commission. Fisheries in Svalbard.

61 Jensen 2020. 82.

62 Treaty of 9 February 1920 relating to Spitsbergen, Article 1.

63 Treaty of 9 February 1920 relating to Spitsbergen, Article 2.

64 It should be mentioned here that another controversy regarding Svalbard between the European Union and Norway in recent times has involved the issue of fishing for snow crabs. See The Supreme Court of Norway 2021.

65 Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021. 1.

66 Council Regulation (EU) 2021/92 of 28 January 2021 fixing for 2021 the fishing opportunities for certain fish stocks and groups of fish stocks, applicable in Union waters and, for Union fishing vessels, in certain non-Union waters.

67 Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021. 1.

68 Bates 2021.

69 Ibid.

70 Annex: Svalbard, the 200-Mile Fisheries Protection Zone and Norway's Fisheries Regulations. 5.

However, the European Union emphasizes that the abovementioned Article 2 of the Treaty of Spitsbergen also states that measures for the preservation of the flora and fauna are to ‘always be applicable equally to the nationals of all the High Contracting Parties to the Treaty without any exemption, privilege or favour whatsoever, direct or indirect to the advantage of any of them’.<sup>71</sup> The European Union claims that it has been discriminated against by the Norwegian government, which they claim is giving special treatment to Norwegian and Russian fishers<sup>72</sup> and that Norway’s setting quotas in the region without the involvement of the states concerned is in contravention of international law.<sup>73</sup> The European Union argues that Norway has set the quota ‘on a purely arbitrary basis’, having done so without consulting the European Union.<sup>74</sup> It has also argued that it has concerns about the depletion of Arctic cod stock due to Norway’s (and Russia’s) fishing practices in the waters of Svalbard and Norway’s north.<sup>75</sup> It was reported that the European Union has considered placing sanctions on Norway due to this disagreement<sup>76</sup> and that the EU’s fishing industry is preparing to take Norway to court over its actions regarding the quota cut in relation to cod fishing in the waters of Svalbard.<sup>77</sup>

Norway has now passed legislation<sup>78</sup> that still allows EU vessels to fish in the Svalbard area, but any cod they catch is to be subtracted from the permitted amount established for fishing in the economic zone of Norway.<sup>79</sup> Norway has claimed that if fishers from the EU exceed the quota it has set on fishing, then this action will be considered illegal.<sup>80</sup> The geopolitical context of this issue must also be acknowledged, which relates to the opportunities arising in the area of resource exploitation and shipping in this region as a result of global warming, and Norway’s fear that as a result the EU is utilizing a legal mechanism in order to do this.<sup>81</sup>

Regarding the United Kingdom, in December 2021, it managed to reach an agreement with Norway concerning mutual access to each other’s fisheries and quotas for the next year, this being these two countries first fishing deal after Brexit.<sup>82</sup> As part of this deal, for the year 2022, the United Kingdom was allocated 6,550 tonnes of cod by Norway around Svalbard.<sup>83</sup> On a final note, it has also been reported that the UK government had attempted to persuade Norway to allow it

71 European Commission. Fisheries in Svalbard.

72 Moens–Galindo 2021.

73 European Commission 2021.

74 European Union – Delegation of the European Union to Norway 2021. 2. 26 February 2021.

75 European Commission 2021.

76 *The Fishing Daily* 30 July 2021.

77 Feijóo 2021.

78 J-165-2021: Regulation on stopping cod fishing for vessels flying the flag of Member States of the European Union (EU) in the fisheries protection zone off Svalbard in 2021.

79 *The Fishing Daily* 12 September 2021.

80 Moens–Galindo 2021.

81 Ibid.

82 AFP News 2021.

83 Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs 2021.



to buy part of the Svalbard archipelago for 250 million pounds with the aim of increasing the country's fishing waters.<sup>84</sup> Such an attempt by the United Kingdom in modern times is quite interesting to consider when one keeps in mind the earlier efforts by the English crown to establish a presence or even sovereignty in the area.

## 5. The Arctic Circle, Present UK Policy, and Scotland

Now we shall move beyond the issue of Svalbard and onto the matter of the United Kingdom's general engagement with the Arctic Circle at the present time. In 2013, the British government launched its Arctic policy framework with the document *Adapting to Change: UK Policy towards the Arctic*.<sup>85</sup> In fact, this was the first time that a British government had attempted to articulate a detailed policy regarding the region.<sup>86</sup> It is interesting to note that the document links the UK's present interests in the region to the past connections the country once had to the area, stating that 'This closeness, combined with a long tradition of exploration, has given the UK a historic interest in the Arctic that dates back to the voyages of discovery.'<sup>87</sup> The document acknowledges that though technically the UK is 'not an Arctic State... we are the Arctic's nearest neighbour'.<sup>88</sup> This policy includes maintaining support for the sovereignty of Arctic States, their populations, and the natural environment, while at the same time being committed to British interests in the region.<sup>89</sup> It states that 'The inextricable links between the Arctic and global processes means that non-Arctic States such as the UK have legitimate interests and roles to play in finding solutions to many of the most pressing issues facing the Arctic'.<sup>90</sup> It is also interesting to note that the document makes specific mention of a UK-based research located on the island of Svalbard, which was established in 1991 and which engages in various research projects, focusing on such areas as atmospheric physics, geology, glaciology, hydrology, or marine and terrestrial biology.<sup>91</sup>

This has been described as the first such document by an Arctic Council observer state.<sup>92</sup> The United Kingdom obtained observer status in the Arctic Council in 1998.<sup>93</sup> As to the background of this organization, it came into being in 1996 with the *Ottawa Declaration* of 19 September 1996, its members being Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the

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84 Hope 2021.

85 HM Government 2013.

86 HM Government 2013. ii.

87 HM Government 2013. 7.

88 HM Government 2013. ii.

89 Ibid.

90 HM Government 2013. 7.

91 HM Government 2013. 11.

92 Arctic Office. Arctic Policy Framework.

93 Arctic Council 2020.

United States.<sup>94</sup> According to the *Ottawa Declaration*, the Arctic Council was established in order to ‘provide a means for promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, with the involvement of the Arctic indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues, in particular issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic’.<sup>95</sup> The organization claims to be ‘the leading intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, Arctic Indigenous peoples and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues’.<sup>96</sup> The *Ottawa Declaration* makes provisions for granting observer status to countries that fulfil the stipulated criteria, which include non-Arctic states, global and regional inter-governmental and inter-parliamentary organizations and non-governmental organizations that the Arctic Council determines are able to contribute to the work of the organization.<sup>97</sup>

With the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union, it has had to formulate a foreign policy as a non-Member State of the latter. The Arctic Circle is one area where a policy has been articulated within this broader context. For example, the UK government’s policy document *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, which sets out the government’s vision for the United Kingdom in international relations, reiterates this interest in and commitment to the Arctic region, stating that ‘The UK is the nearest neighbour to the Arctic region. Through our role as a State Observer to the Arctic Council, we will contribute to maintaining the region as one of high cooperation and low tension’.<sup>98</sup> It goes on to say that the UK will continue to contribute to scientific endeavours related to the Arctic, with particular regards to the study of climate change, and that it will work with its ‘partners to ensure that increasing access to the region and its resources is managed safely, sustainably and responsibly’.<sup>99</sup>

Scotland, though a constituent nation of the United Kingdom, has also focused more attention on the Arctic region in an attempt to create a foreign policy distinct from and more independent of the UK government in London.<sup>100</sup> Of course, this should also necessarily be viewed within the broader context of the issue of the possibility of a future independent Scotland.<sup>101</sup> The Scottish government launched its policy document in 2019, entitled *Arctic Connections: Scotland’s Arctic Policy Framework*.<sup>102</sup> The Ministerial Foreword to the document explicitly states that

94 *Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council* 1996.

95 *Id.* Article 1.

96 Arctic Council. About the Arctic Council.

97 *Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council* 1996. Article 3.

98 HM Government 2021. 64.

99 HM Government 2021. 64.

100 *Over the Circle* 2019.

101 *Ibid.*

102 Scottish Government 2019.

‘The United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union puts our international partnerships, including with Arctic countries, at risk. We are determined to protect Scotland’s reputation as an open and outward-looking nation and we are re-doubling our efforts at promoting Scotland as a good global citizen’.<sup>103</sup> It claims that ‘Scotland’s northernmost islands are closer to the Arctic Circle than they are to London’.<sup>104</sup> It wishes to place this Arctic connection within its broader historical framework, stating that ‘For centuries, Scotland and the Arctic have enjoyed close links that have had a lasting impact on our cultural, economic and social fabric. While most visible in our northernmost areas, these bonds are evident across the country and lie at the heart of our valued relationship with Arctic states. Scotland is among the Arctic region’s closest neighbours; we share many features and outlooks and have long looked to each other for inspiration, solutions and ideas.’<sup>105</sup> The document refers to ‘consolidating Scotland’s position as a European gateway to the Arctic’.<sup>106</sup> The initiative makes it clear that this is completely complimentary to Scotland’s connections to the European Union.<sup>107</sup> Additionally, there have even been suggestions of Scotland playing a role in the development of shipping lanes and of the Orkney islands becoming the ‘Singapore of the North’.<sup>108</sup> However, it has been pointed out that Scotland’s ability to be an influential player in the Arctic region acting in its capacity as a devolved nation of the United Kingdom is limited due to the key roles of defence and security in the region, these being competences firmly in the hands of Westminster.<sup>109</sup> On a final note, it is also interesting to consider that if Scotland does one day attain independence how this will in fact impact the United Kingdom’s Arctic policy and its ability to project its power and pursue its interests in that region. For example, in the abovementioned 2013 *Adapting to Change*, it is stated that ‘The UK is the northernmost country outside of the eight Arctic States; the northern tip of the Shetland Islands being only 400 km south of the Arctic Circle’.<sup>110</sup> If indeed Scotland one day attains independence, this would obviously no longer be the case.

## 6. Conclusions

As seen in this study, Britain played an important role in the Arctic Circle in the past, specifically with regard to whaling around the Spitsbergen/Svalbard

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103 Id. 3.

104 Id. 5.

105 Id. 3.

106 Id. 3.

107 Id. 6–7.

108 Somyne 2017.

109 Ibid.

110 HM Government 2013. 7.

archipelago, which was a theatre of competition between various European powers. Now, once again, Svalbard is a scene of competition within the broader Arctic Circle, once again relating to the exploitation of its marine life, a state of affairs intensified and precipitated as a result of the realignment of the relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union. Thus, the present ‘cod war’<sup>111</sup> taking place between the European Union and Norway can be seen as one of the consequences of Brexit, with the realignment and readjustment of EU–UK relations having a knock-on effect in other areas. With regard to the Arctic Circle more broadly, the United Kingdom has attempted to articulate a policy in the light of the growing geopolitical importance of this region. With the country’s need to establish an international identity for itself as a state now outside of the European Union and with the region’s growing importance as time passes, one can imagine that this will only intensify in the future. Additionally, Scotland now seeks to establish an Arctic policy and vision for itself, a process that must also necessarily be seen within the context of the debate surrounding Scotland’s status and future regarding its place within the United Kingdom.

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