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The Royal Marines in the High North: Shaping the Maritime Battle

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RUSI

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Methodology

This paper is informed by secondary literature, desk-based operational analysis and interviews with a broad cross-section of officers within the commando force at both the operational and programmatic levels. The officers, interviewed in early 2026, include the commanding officers of 45 Commando, 40 Commando, 42 Commando, 47 Commando, 29 Commando, the Commando Helicopter Force and the Staff Officer (SO)1 Directorate, as well as the Deputy Commander of Maritime Forces and the Senior Responsible Owner for the Commando Force Transformation Programme. Some individuals have moved on from their roles since these interviews were conducted.

The paper also draws on previous work conducted for both the Royal Marines and Allied forces. The paper is part of a series of papers being produced for the Royal Navy by RUSI in support of the Atlantic Series. The previous paper addressed the Atlantic Bastion anti-submarine warfare concept. The present paper entered the editorial process on 31 May 2026.

Executive Summary

This paper supports RUSI's work on the UK's Commando Force (UKCF) and the wider hybrid fleet. It focuses on stand-in forces in the High North in the context of the 2025 Strategic Defence Review. It specifically explores how an evolving Russian maritime threat could push NATO to contain Russian submarines forward, especially near the Bear Island–Norway gap.

At the outset of a campaign, it is likely that maritime forces would have to operate within the weapons engagement zone to create pulses of effect within a defined period and to set the conditions for more steady state follow-on activity. In addition, maritime forces will increasingly rely on distributed assets which can be employed forwards in a weapons engagement zone when more expensive platforms cannot be used. Success in this operating environment will depend on three factors:

1. which side can 'preset' the board by setting the conditions to maximise its own situational awareness and constrain that of an opponent;
2. the exploitation of synergies between different force elements to prevent a strike campaign from becoming a munition-heavy effort aimed at battering down a prepared integrated air defence system (IADS); and
3. the capacity to sustain an increasingly distributed force in theatre in order to support operations within an adversary's weapons engagement zone.

A force like the Royal Marines, which can be postured in a theatre either ahead of a conflict or at its outset, can play an important role in achieving these wider force outputs. It can contribute to a counter-IADS effort both through the generation of situational awareness and the creation of alternative vectors of attack, contributing to maximising the effect of initial force pulses. It can deny key terrain to Russian forces that might wish to use this terrain to push their anti-access bubble further out, and facilitate the use of this terrain to support the distributed component of the maritime force. And it can be used in the transition between a crisis and a conflict to constrain the freedom of action of adversary maritime auxiliaries.

Consequently, for the UK to envision the UKCF as subordinated to several distinct maritime functions, rather than an amphibious force with its own separate doctrinal roles, this would necessitate the force being restructured into three distinct subcomponents:

1. a Special Operations Task Force (SOTF) that could be persistently forward deployed to set the conditions for attacks on key nodes in Russia's anti-access / area denial (A2/AD) architecture on the Kola Peninsula;
2. a Specialised Advanced Amphibious Force (SAAF), which would be best used to secure offshore islands and ensure its subsequent use to support crewed and uncrewed systems associated with the hybrid fleet in a manner analogous, although not identical, to the US Marine Corps' concept for expeditionary advanced bases; and
3. a capacity for special maritime operations, which would allow the force to be employed to constrain Russian efforts to shape the theatre through ISR gathering and sabotage during the transition between a crisis and a conflict.

Introduction

This paper examines how the evolving concept of operations of the UK's Royal Marines and the UKCF might be applied to the High North – an area comprising the Arctic, the Barents Sea and the Norwegian Sea. This theatre has strategic significance for both the UK and Russia. As described in the UK's most recent Strategic Defence Review,[1] the High North is central to delivering the core tasks carried out by the Royal Navy in the Euro Atlantic, partially due to the threat posed by the Russian Northern Fleet's submarines to both critical infrastructure and the at-sea deterrent. Equally, for Russia, the protection of its submarine bastions (on which its second strike largely depends), as well as other sensitive infrastructure in the north, is a precondition for having the freedom to act elsewhere in Europe. In effect, both sides can lose a wider campaign purely based on what happens in the High North.

This paper seeks to answer two key questions:

1. How can the UKCF contribute to a multidomain campaign which will be dominated by an air and maritime battle?
2. How convincing is the UKCF's proposed Concept of Operations and what might its delivery entail in terms of how the force is built and employed?

At the heart of the paper is the UKCF's proposed 'split offer' to NATO, which will see different elements of the force supporting specific lines of effort. The three lines of effort are special operations to support joint targeting of the Russian A2/AD network, holding and enabling the use of key littoral geography, and maritime special operations. The division of the traditional brigade into specialised units would allow the UKCF's constituent elements to build deep specialist skills. These units could be trained in a focused manner relevant to maritime warfare in the contemporary High North rather than the more generic offer of an amphibious light brigade. The ability to contribute to a maritime campaign should not be viewed as synonymous with amphibious operations, which are one way in which the force can contribute to a wider maritime effort.

1. Ministry of Defence, 'The Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: Secure at Home, Strong Abroad', 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-strategic-defence-review-2025-making-britain-safer-secure-at-home-strong-abroad>, accessed 29 April 2026.

The paper is divided into three chapters. The first describes the structure of the UKCF and the factors driving changes to its concept of employment. The second chapter examines the operational significance of the High North and the ways in which operations conducted in and from key littoral points can support the maritime battle. The third chapter examines the UKCF Concept of Operations and assesses the extent to which it is aligned with the aim of making the UKCF an important enabler for the wider Royal Navy.

The Maritime Battle and the Evolving UK Commando Force Model

Key Features of Maritime Operations in the North

During the Cold War, NATO planning assumed the possibility of large Soviet ground offensives through Finnmark, Norway's border region with Russia, potentially reaching as far as Evenes.[2] In this context, the Royal Marines were expected, along with the Royal Netherlands Marine Corps (RNLMC), to rapidly reinforce NATO's northern flank to set the conditions for follow-on land forces. Amphibious reinforcement was a specific line of effort in a joint campaign.

Today, however, large Russian armoured offensives pushing deep into northern Norway appear less plausible. Even before the war in Ukraine, Russia maintained only three brigades in the north, and these have been heavily attritted. Rebuilding Russia's cold-weather capabilities will take time. Russian plans to create a combined-arms army in the newly formed Leningrad military district are probably aimed primarily at contending with Finland becoming a NATO member, while over the next decade Russian forces in the north will probably at best only regenerate to pre-war levels.[3] Thus, the scale of possible Russian ground and amphibious operations in the region will probably be limited.

2. Milan Vego, 'The Soviet Envelopment Option on the Northern Flank', *Naval War College Review* (Vol. 39, No. 4, 1986), pp. 26–38.
3. Troy Beufford et al., 'Russian Arctic Land Forces and Defense Trends Redefined by NATO and Ukraine', US Army War College, 16 September 2025, <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/News/Display/Article/4305125/russian-arctic-land-forces-and-defense-trends-redefined-by-nato-and-ukraine/>, accessed 18 June 2026.

The changing character of the threat requires changes to the role of the UKCF. Instead of having its own doctrinally distinct role, it should be subordinated to the wider naval functions of sea control, sea denial and strike. Amphibious insertion is part of, but not synonymous with, the role that the force should play in the future maritime force.

The logic of a maritime campaign in the High North begins with the Alliance's overarching objective: containing the Russian air and (in particular) submarine threat at or beyond the Norwegian Sea, the gateway to the Atlantic. If Russian submarines break into the north Atlantic, they can target key military infrastructure with low-warning precision strikes and threaten Allied sea lines.[4]

At the same time, NATO would seek to create the conditions to pressure Russia's position in the Barents Sea. At a minimum, this would draw Russian resources away from the central front, and more ambitiously, it could help set the conditions for war termination on favourable terms by presenting Russia with a credible threat to its bastions – an outcome to which both Soviet and Russian leaders have historically attached outsized importance.[5]

Russia is, of course, aware of this challenge and has erected a layered anti-access capability built largely around the logic of damage limitation. The Russian navy and aerospace forces do not need to win to achieve Russian operational and strategic aims – they need to limit the impact of maritime inferiority on Russia's wider strategic position and to impose costs where possible. Russian planners do not expect to keep Allied navies at bay indefinitely, but in areas defined as the near seas (out to 1,000 km from Russian coasts) and far seas (out to 2,000 km), the navy and the wider Russian military intend to achieve temporary sea control and sea denial, respectively.[6]

While a formidable Russian suite of air-, surface- and subsurface-launched missiles is somewhat constrained by limited ISR capabilities, it is still likely to pose a threat sufficient to change Allied calculations. The platforms that pose this threat to surface forces will be shielded by Russia's imposing air defence network on the Kola Peninsula. This is also true of the platforms in Russia's north which can launch land attack missiles at parts of Europe.

Russia could exacerbate the problem by occupying key features, such as Bear Island, to emplace both sensors and anti-access capabilities further forward. This would both increase Russia's situational awareness in the Norwegian Sea and present the Alliance

4. Sidharth Kaushal, 'An Integrated Air and Missile Defence Architecture for the UK', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (August 2025), <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/integrated-air-and-missile-defence-architecture-uk>, accessed 15 June 2026.
5. Jacob Borresen, 'Alliance Naval Strategies and Norway in the Final Years of the Cold War', *Naval War College Review* (Vol. 64, No. 2, 2011), pp. 1–20; John Lehman, *Ocean Ventured: Winning the Cold War at Sea* (New York, NY: W W Norton, 2018).
6. Sidharth Kaushal and Edward Black, 'The Atlantic Bastion', *RUSI Research Papers* (December 2025), <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/research-papers/atlantic-bastion>, accessed 18 June 2026.

with another defended target to overcome – with an attendant cost in both time and the expenditure of scarce precision-guided missiles (PGMs). During the transition between a crisis and a conflict, Russia will also probably use special forces and maritime auxiliaries to target sensor networks such as the Integrated Undersea Surveillance System (IUSS), a US acoustic intelligence network. Russia may also use special forces and maritime auxiliaries to track Allied vessels to provide useful (if transient) targeting information at the outbreak of hostilities.

Since the Alliance must achieve a victory in the north that is not so resource-intensive or time-consuming as to be Pyrrhic, it requires the ability to degrade Russian capabilities rapidly and efficiently. This, in turn, depends on two factors. First, synergies between different force elements must be established to speed up the tempo and efficiency of the counter-A2/AD battle. A purely standoff-led campaign could prove prohibitively costly in terms of munitions, with prior modelling suggesting that a strike campaign against China's islands in the South China Sea (which are much less robustly defended than the Kola Peninsula) would require up to 2,100 PGMs.[7] This challenge could be avoided through the imposition of multiple dilemmas that would stress both the human and technical components of Russia's A2/AD capability. A substantial body of evidence shows that complex attacks often achieve results with significantly lower levels of resource expenditure than single-vector attacks.[8] For example, the single-vector suppression of enemy air defences (SEAD) campaign in Vietnam using Shrike anti-radiation missiles involved far more resources allocated to targets than the Israeli SEAD effort in the Bekaa Valley in 1982, when UAVs were used to force emissions and conduct battle damage assessment.[9] The Israeli SEAD effort against Iran in 2024, where air operations and special operations were integrated, is another example of the efficient results of complex attacks.[10]

Second, pre-conflict shaping activity to identify targets, disrupt adversary efforts to achieve situational awareness and secure situational awareness of friendly forces will determine the tempo of activity with the same speed at which Israel was able to

7. Tyler Hacker, 'Beyond Precision: Maintaining America's Strike Advantage in Great Power Conflict', Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA), 2023, p. 43, <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/beyond-precision-maintaining-americas-strike-advantage-in-great-power-conflict>, accessed 15 June 2026.
8. Bryan Clark, Daniel Patt and Harrison Schramm, 'Mosaic Warfare: Exploiting Artificial Intelligence and Autonomous Systems to Implement Decision-Centric Operations', CSBA, 2022, pp. 54–56, <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/mosaic-warfare-exploiting-artificial-intelligence-and-autonomous-systems-to-implement-decision-centric-operations/publication/1>, accessed 15 June 2026.
9. On the Vietnam campaign, see John Stillion and Bryan Clark, 'What It Takes to Win: Succeeding in 21st Century Battle Network Competitions', CSBA, 2015, p. 83, <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/what-it-takes-to-win-succeeding-in-21st-century-battle-network-competitions>, accessed 15 June 2026; on the Israeli campaign, see Sidharth Kaushal, Justin Bronk and Jack Watling, 'Pathways Towards Multi-Domain Integration for UK Robotic and Autonomous Systems', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (October 2023), p. 10, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/pathways-towards-multi-domain-integration-uk-robotic-and-autonomous-systems>, accessed 15 June 2026.
10. David Deptula, 'Israel and the New Air Superiority: The Real Lessons of the Strikes on Iran', Foreign Affairs, 11 August 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/israel-and-new-air-superiority>, accessed 15 June 2026.

prosecute a large target set in Iran – based on its early situational awareness, cultivated over years.[11] These early advantages can rapidly compound, as illustrated by, for example, Israel's successes in the 12-Day War, which were partially enabled by infiltrators on the ground.[12]

In addition to suppressing the A2/AD threat, the Alliance will have to circumvent its strengths in other ways. One approach would be to rely on a larger number of attritable maritime platforms which can be employed in high-threat areas at the outset of a conflict. A major potential bottleneck is that the limited endurance of some candidate platforms can impose requirements for motherships with deck and hangar space – with these vessels then becoming high-value targets.[13] A distributed support infrastructure in the north will thus be important to the operation of a hybrid fleet. Access points in the littorals will probably be key to introducing complexity and redundancy into the fleet's support architecture.

It is within this context that the UKCF must be reorganised to more directly support three fleet-level lines of effort. It should be capable of:

- supporting joint strikes against the Kola Peninsula by adding a new dimension – and thus greater complexity – to the defenders' challenge;
- securing the offshore geographical features which can act as lynchpins for the operations of a hybrid fleet; and
- constraining the freedom of action of Russian auxiliaries in the transition between competition and conflict to protect NATO's relative command and control advantage in the Norwegian Sea.

This set of priorities demands a reorganisation of the force in line with these tasks. While the UKCF was already developing in a manner that was tactically aligned with a strike-centric approach, supporting the three fleet-level lines of effort requires that the previous construct based around two littoral response groups be replaced with one that more closely aligns force design with the need for role specialisation.

In the emerging construct being developed to meet this requirement, the UKCF will be organised around three lines of effort for which 45, 42 and 40 Commando will be the framework organisations. In addition, fleet protection will remain a fourth core line of effort under the remit of 43 Commando.

11. David Deptula, 'Israel and the New Air Superiority: The Real Lessons of the Strikes on Iran', *Foreign Affairs*, 11 August 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/israel-and-new-air-superiority>, accessed 15 June 2026.
12. Deptula, 'Israel and the New Air Superiority'.
13. Kaushal and Black, 'The Atlantic Bastion', p. 25.

- 45 Commando will form an SOTF operating under SOFCOM,[14] whose function will be to support joint fires in engaging key elements of the Russian A2/AD network.
- 40 Commando will integrate with the Royal Netherlands Marine Corps (RNMC) to form a Specialised Advanced Amphibious Force (SAAF) as part of the NATO Regional Plan North West's Amphibious Task Group.[15] In the authors' assessment, the best role for the SAAF will be securing critical offshore terrain and enabling its exploitation, although this depends on partner sensitivities given the Svalbard Treaty.
- 42 Commando will focus primarily on maritime operations and special maritime operations including counter-hybrid operations, that directly support fleet activities.[16] This role is expected to contribute to limiting Russia's own shaping efforts prior to a conflict.

These framework elements will be supported by specialists from the other commando units. This includes 47 Commando, which manages surface connectors and in the future will provide expertise in the operation of uncrewed surface vehicles (USVs); 29 Commando, which provides fire support and targeting expertise, including fires controllers; 30 Commando Information Exploitation Group, which will provide intelligence, surveillance, communications and electronic warfare capabilities as well as connecting the UKCF to Allied intelligence networks;[17] and Commando Helicopter Force (CHF), which will provide both logistical support and attack aviation. 24 Commando Royal Engineers and the Commando Logistics Regiment will also play an important role in sustaining a distributed force in a large theatre.

The shipping that will support the amphibious element of this force is also expected to evolve. The force will initially be supported by up to 12 100-m littoral ship mediums which are roughly analogous to the US Marine Corps' light amphibious vessels.[18] The next phase in recapitalising the force is planned to be the fielding of four 160-m flat-top vessels which will primarily support fixed-wing uncrewed assets. The force will also be equipped with a future surface connector, the Commando Insertion Craft (CIC), which is expected to be capable of transiting ranges of close to 400 nautical miles.[19] Finally, the force is expected to be supported by a range of uncrewed assets, starting with 12 USVs, which will be employed by 47 Commando towards the end of this decade.

14. Author interview with Staff Officer (SO)1 Generate, online, 24 February 2026. SO1 Generate covers force generation in support of the NATO force model.
15. Author interview with commanding officer (CO) 40 Commando, Norton Manor, 24 February 2026.
16. Author interview with SO1 Generate, online, 24 February 2026.
17. Royal Navy, '30 Commando IX Group', <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/organisation/units-and-squadrons/commando-brigade/30-commando-information-exploitation-group>, accessed 3 April 2026.
18. Author interview with Colonel David Spink, Head of Commando Force Futures within the Navy Develop Directorate of the Royal Navy, online, 12 February 2026.
19. Author interview with Captain Charles Collins, Deputy Commander Maritime Forces, Stonehouse Barracks, 23 February 2026; author interview with Senior Responsible Owner (SRO), Commando Force Transformation Program, online, 13 March 2026.

The Geography of the High North and Its Critical Littoral Terrain

The High North is fundamentally a maritime theatre. Mountainous terrain, marshland, extreme weather and limited infrastructure severely constrain the movement of large land forces, a reality reflected in historical campaigns such as the Soviet Petsamo–Kirkenes Offensive. Finnmark exemplifies these challenges: poor road networks and difficult terrain canalise movement, exposing forces to air attack and fires, while defenders face similar difficulties reinforcing the region from southern Norway through the Lyngen Alps.[20]

Although large-scale manoeuvre is difficult, limited ground operations can have disproportionate effects on the wider maritime and air campaign. Finnmark could provide NATO with a base for raids against Russian sensors on the Kola Peninsula, while Russia might seek to suppress key Allied systems, or deploy anti-access capabilities in forward areas.

Similar constraints apply to Spitsbergen, Bear Island and Jan Mayen island, where limited infrastructure and harsh terrain make sustained operations difficult. Their importance derives not from their intrinsic value but from their ability to support wider operations. Allied access could enable forward-basing for uncrewed systems and communications infrastructure supporting activity in the Norwegian Sea, while Russian control of locations such as Bear Island could enhance maritime domain awareness through the deployment of ground-based sensors.

In short, the High North's geography limits the utility of its large land formations and elevates the importance of light forces operating from key littoral positions to shape the maritime and air battle. Combined with the capabilities and vulnerabilities outlined previously, this suggests that competition in the High North will centre on controlling terrain that enables effects in other domains rather than on holding territory for its own sake.

20. James F Gebhardt, 'The Petsamo-Kirkenes Operation: Soviet Breakthrough and Pursuit in the Arctic, October 1944', Leavenworth Papers, No. 17, 1989, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/combat-studies-institute/csi-books/Petsamo-Kirkenes-Operation.pdf>, accessed 30 June 2026; Sverre Diesen, 'Hvordan kan Nord-Norge forsvares?' ['How Can Northern Norway be Defended?'], Civita, 3 September 2020, <https://civita.no/notat/hvordan-kan-nord-norge-forsvares/>, accessed 25 November 2024.

Russia's Capabilities in the High North

This chapter examines in greater detail the strengths and weaknesses of the Russian force against which the Royal Marines will operate as part of a wider Allied and joint force. The key issues on which it seeks shed to light are:

- the structural vulnerabilities within the Russian system which can be exploited to produce cascading failures;
- the ways in which geography will shape the employment of land forces in the north; and
- the importance of offshore littoral terrain to both Russian A2/AD and the future use of a hybrid fleet.

Russia possesses a layered set of capabilities with which it would contest Allied forces in the northern theatre, but it is also vulnerable in several respects. Among its capabilities at longer ranges, Russia has an outer anti-ship layer which would include long-range aviation aircraft, such as the Tu-22M3M strategic bomber;[21] heavily armed but ageing surface combatants, such as the *Kirov*-class cruisers; and elements of its nuclear submarine and nuclear-powered guided-missile submarine force. Closer to Russia's coastline, shore-based coastal defence complexes such as the Bastion-P, equipped with the supersonic P-800 Onyx cruise missile,[22] would place NATO maritime platforms operating within the coastal defence zone at risk. The longer-range P-800M variant, with an estimated range of up to 800 km,[23] would influence factors such as the distances from which carrier aviation could be launched, especially if emplaced in positions such as Bear Island.

21. Logan Pierce, 'Russian Tu-22M3 Bomber: Specs, Capabilities, and Modern Upgrades', *Defense Feeds*, 19 September 2025, <https://defensefeeds.com/military-tech/air-force/bombers/tu-22m3-bomber/>, accessed 18 June 2026.
22. *Global Defence News*, 'Focus: Russian Navy Demonstrates P-800 Onyx Supersonic Cruise Missile Power During Mediterranean Drills', 5 December 2024, <https://www.armyrecognition.com/archives/archives-naval-defense/2024/focus-russian-navy-demonstrates-p-800-onyx-supersonic-cruise-missile-power-during-mediterranean-drills>, accessed 30 June 2026.
23. *Deagel*, 'Onyx', <https://www.deagel.com/Weapons/Onyx/a001021>, accessed 30 June 2026.

Russia does not enjoy the same levels of space-based ISR as China's People's Liberation Army does, but it can compensate for such limitations both through the use of auxiliary vessels equipped with sensors and by degrading NATO's own ISR with probable targets, including radar, satcom terminals and cables underpinning networks such as the IUSS.[24] Future Russian access to Chinese ISR, either state-owned or commercial, cannot be entirely ruled out.

However, the Russian defensive system in the north has several vulnerabilities. The air defence network that defends Russia's anti-surface capabilities (among other things) against low-observable standoff is dependent on potential single points of failure. The climatic conditions of the region make the employment of some sensors more complicated, necessitating both networking to produce multiple observations of a given target and a reliance on static high-power sensors as key nodes within the system. For example, guidance and meteorological facilities on Franz Josef Land and on the Kola Peninsula play a key role in vectoring aircraft like the MIG-31, as observed in exercises such as *Umka-2021*.[25] In the absence of ground control, flights in certain areas would become riskier and more infrequent, compromising the airborne layer of Russia's cruise missile defences.[26]

The Russian system in the north also appears to depend on a relatively small suite of fixed installations for early warning against targets such as cruise missiles. Russia has a chain of Rezonans-N over-the-horizon (OTH) radar, capable of tracking hypersonic and stealth targets.[27] These large fixed-radar installations are at Rogachevo, Olenegorsk, Ostrovnoy, Cape Kanin and Indiga (see Figure 1), and more are being installed.[28] Many of these key nodes, as well as key naval facilities like Severomorsk, are within, or modestly beyond, 300 km of the Norwegian border and potentially within commando raiding or Special Operations Forces (SOF) range. These provide much of Russia's early-warning capability against low-radar cross-section threats, such as low-flying cruise missiles and stealth aircraft. They also encompass the mast-mounted Lira IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) radar, which assists airspace

24. Sidharth Kaushal, 'Stalking the Seabed: How Russia Targets Critical Undersea Infrastructure', *RUSI Commentary*, 25 May 2023, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/stalking-seabed-how-russia-targets-critical-undersea-infrastructure>, accessed 15 June 2026.
25. Daniel Snell, 'The Sopka-2 Radar System and "Aviation Guidance Points" in the Russian Arctic', EW Analytics, August 2020, <https://www.ewanalytics.llc/>, accessed 30 June 2026; on the sensor network, see Sidharth Kaushal et al., *The Balance of Power Between NATO and Russia in the Arctic and High North*, RUSI Whitehall Paper 100 (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2021), pp. 54–60; *Naval News*, 'Arctic Exercise Umka-2021 Shows Russian SSBN Can Deliver Massive Strike', 10 April 2021, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2021/04/arctic-exercise-umka-2021-shows-russian-ssbn-can-deliver-massive-strike/>, accessed 15 June 2026.
26. Snell, 'The Sopka-2 Radar System and "Aviation Guidance Points" in the Russian Arctic'.
27. Drago Bosnic, 'Russia's Rezonans-NE Radar, Capable of Tracking Hypersonic and Stealth Targets', *Signs of the Times*, 18 September 2020, <https://www.sott.net/article/441650-Russias-Rezonans-NE-Radar-capable-of-tracking-hypersonic-and-stealth-targets>, accessed 30 June 2026.
28. Tong Ong, 'Russia's Anti-Hypersonic Missile Radar to Deploy in Arctic by June', *Defense Post*, 15 April 2021, <https://thedefensepost.com/2021/04/15/russia-anti-missile-radar-arctic/>, accessed 30 March 2026.

management and integrates with surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems such as the S-400.[29] The reliance on OTH radar is compounded by Russia's limited airborne early-warning and control system capability.[30]

Figure 1: The Russian OTH Radar Network in the North

Source: Daniel Snell, 'The Sopka-2 Radar System and "Aviation Guidance Points" in the Russian Arctic', EW Analytics, August 2020, <https://www.ewanalytics.llc/>, accessed 15 June 2026.

Russia is reliant on a relatively small number of launch platforms for anti-surface warfare at longer distances. Roughly a third of Russia's launch capacity for anti-ship cruise missiles in the north is held on the fleet of roughly 50 operable Tu-22M3/M3M backfire bombers,[31] and the fleet's two Oscar-class submarines together hold another 30% of the throw weight. The 536th Coastal Defence Brigade operates Bal and Bastion-P anti-ship missile systems, but Russia's anti-surface warfare is concentrated on high-value platforms such as bombers. Bombers are a necessity due to the need for mobility in the north, the size of the theatre and the challenges of distributing ground-based

29. Daniel Snell, 'Resonating with Rezonans in the Arctic', EW Analytics, 2022, <https://www.ewanalytics.llc/>, accessed 15 June 2026.
30. Illia Volynskyi, 'A Dying Breed: Can the Russians Rebuild Their Strategic Aircraft After Ukraine's Operation Spider's Web?', *Ukrainska Pravda*, 26 June 2025, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/articles/2025/06/26/7518841/>, accessed 30 March 2026.
31. Kaushal et al., *The Balance of Power Between NATO and Russia in the Arctic and High North*, pp. 69–75.

systems (given the climatic conditions).[32] This level of consolidation is a vulnerability which would become acute if the robust IADS around Russian anti-surface platforms was either degraded – enabling air and maritime strike – or circumvented, as it was during Ukraine's Operation *Spider's Web*, which targeted four strategic air bases and delivered a major blow to Russia's long-range bomber fleet.[33] The creation of gaps in the Russian IADS could also enable the targeting of missile depots and loading infrastructure.[34]

Russia also faces other constraints: it has few cold-weather troops and limited amphibious lift. Pre-Ukraine, only Russia's 80th and 210th brigades existed alongside the 61st naval infantry; both these and the VDV have taken heavy losses in Ukraine.[35] Rebuilding specialist Arctic and mountain units may take up to five years after the war, based on what is known about specialist training in Russia.[36] Even then, a unit which is certified for a given environment is not quite the same as one with deep environmental expertise. What this means is that if Allied forces begin operating in the region more regularly, they can use the head start conferred by Russia's commitments in Ukraine to build a structural advantage with regard to environmental expertise that the Russians will find difficult to close.

Russia's anti-access system in the north is built on the assumption that the Allied way of war is dependent on concentrated high-value targets. Consequently, key elements of this system would be of more limited value against a more distributed naval force. The Russian anti-access system is well optimised against certain parts of the threat spectrum, but this also renders it inflexible; a more complex and heterogenous naval force, of which the marines can be an important part, could readily exploit this fact.

32. Lucy Pakhnyuk, 'Ukraine's Military Destroys Russian Zircon Missile Launcher in Occupied Crimea', *Kyiv Independent*, 24 March 2026, <https://kyivindependent.com/ukraines-military-destroys-russian-missile-launcher-occupied-crimea/>, accessed 18 June 2026.
33. Kateryna Bondar, 'How Ukraine's Operation "Spider's Web" Redefines Asymmetric Warfare', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2 June 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-ukraines-spider-web-operation-redefines-asymmetric-warfare>, accessed 16 June 2026.
34. Sidharth Kaushal, 'Conventional Prompt Strike in European Military Power', *RUSI Research Papers* (February 2026), p. 30, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/research-papers/conventional-prompt-strike-european-military-power>, accessed 17 June 2026.
35. Sidharth Kaushal, 'Optimising the Royal Netherlands Navy for Its Role within NATO', *Whitehall Report*, 3-24 (December 2024), <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/whitehall-reports/optimising-royal-netherlands-navy-its-role-within-nato>, accessed 19 June 2026.
36. Based on training times. See Lester W Grau and Charles K Bartles, *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics and Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016), p. 25.

Assessing the UK Commando Force Concept of Operations for the North

Within the context described, the overarching function of the UKCF in the north could be subdivided into three areas:

1. **Preventing Russia from securing key terrain sufficient for emplacement of sensors and A2/AD systems that affect the maritime battle**. While this might ideally entail the denial of terrain entirely, the objective could also be met if Russia held terrain but could not safely deploy sensors. Relatedly, the UKCF should enable UK and Allied air and maritime forces to exploit key terrain as logistical nodes, for example through the operation of forward arming and refuelling points (FARPs). 40 Commando has exercised aspects of setting up FARPs under contested conditions and both 47 Commando and CHF hold relevant equipment engineering expertise.[37] The UKCF will be required to both secure and provide necessary environmental expertise to support the operation of FARPs.[38]
2. **Contributing to efforts to degrade Russia's sensor architecture on the Kola Peninsula**. This function will probably be central to the function of the SOTF formed around 45 Commando to support deep operations.
3. **Conducting maritime special operations and interdicting vessels at sea during the transition from crisis to conflict**. Russia will probably use auxiliary vessels for tasks such as tracking high-value maritime assets, or movement of containerised missiles, which Russia first achieved with the Klub-K during the last decade.[39] In peacetime, maritime special operations forces, which enjoy close bilateral relationships with their counterparts in states such as Norway, can contribute to situational awareness

37. Author interview with CO 40 Commando, Norton Manor, 24 February 2026; author interview with CO 47 Commando, online, 3 March 2026; author interview with CO Commando Helicopter Force (CHF), online, 15 February 2026.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Globalsecurity.org, 'Klub-K Container Launched 3M-54 Klub / Caliber - SS-N-27 Sizzler', <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/club.htm>, accessed 3 July 2026.

regarding the location and intent of auxiliaries. Boardings during a crisis prior to conflict will probably be non-compliant (where the ship is doing nothing to enable boarding, such as slowing down or providing ladders) or opposed (where the crew are actively trying to stop the boarding, potentially including the use of lethal force). They would be the preserve of 42 Commando or other specialised SOF units. Interdiction at scale would probably demand a high tempo of activity of 42 Commando, which will lead on maritime special operations.

Each aspect of this tripartite offer to the wider joint force is now examined in greater depth.

The Function of the Special Operations Task Force: Countering Russia's A2/AD Architecture on the Kola Peninsula

The formation of the SOTF based around 45 Commando, and including the surveillance and reconnaissance squadron that sits within 30 IX Commando, has the potential to provide the joint force in the north with a force with considerable capacity for deep operations. To this end, the SOTF is being forward deployed in Norway with the aim of reinforcing regional and target-specific knowledge and tactics.[40] If gaps in the Russian IADS on the Kola Peninsula can be created, components of Russia's anti-surface warfare capability – including bombers, missile storage sites and handling capabilities, and vessels in port – can be targeted. This, in turn, can set the conditions for naval vessels to operate forward with greater – if not absolute – safety, and can enable the more effective containment of Russian submarines, thus reinforcing deterrence.

While special operations-capable units cannot win a counter-IADS battle, they can provide a joint force commander with both a persistently forward-deployed source of information and a different vector of attack which involves fewer risks than the use of high-value platforms for similar functions. While SOF have supported joint SEAD (J-SEAD) operations for some time, this has been on a task- and target-specific basis. The SOTF, as envisioned, would represent a standing capability specialised against the IADS target set. Functionally (if not tactically), this would be closer to the SOTFs that developed deep expertise on specific human networks during the war on terror, albeit with a focus on the sociotechnical network that is the Russian IADS.[41]

There are several specific contributions that the SOTF can make to a counter-IADS battle; these are explored in the following sections.

40. Author interview with CO 45 Commando, online, 18 February 2026.
41. On the former, see Linda Robinson, *One Hundred Victories: Special Ops and the Future of American Warfare* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2013), p. 30.

Stimulation and Overload

From positions on the Norwegian border, SOF capable units can orchestrate the employment of medium-range kinetic and non-kinetic effects from the Norwegian side of the border to degrade the effectiveness of Russian air defences. In Ukraine, for example, the employment of Storm Shadow has typically been preceded by, on average, 7–10 days of UAV activity to unmask and displace systems.[42] Similarly, Russian Geran UAVs are often employed to stimulate Ukrainian radar ahead of cruise missile strikes.[43]

The medium-range strike capability being procured by the Royal Marines can be used as a direct attack capability using either kinetic or non-kinetic payloads.[44] Examples of the latter type of capability – albeit not ones specifically employed by the marines – include high-power microwave payloads that have a demonstrated 'area effect', and loitering munitions that can enable line-of-sight insertion of cyber effects through electronic warfare. Systems capable of such effects include Suter 2,[45] which is hosted on larger fixed-wing platforms but can be carried on loitering munitions. A diversification of effector payloads may be warranted to offset the challenge of probable dense point defences near key targets.[46] Non-kinetic payloads can also be carried by fully autonomous systems given both fewer policy (as well as legal and moral) constraints – which would limit the risk of detection of a crew by adversary electronic warfare. Since munitions must trade range for weight, all other things being equal, effectors launched from relative proximity can carry heavier payloads.

While the Russian IADS on the Kola Peninsula is sufficiently robust to allow for the engagement of one-way attack capabilities, radar must emit to engage them, and this allows other platforms, including air assets, to better map the system. Persistence can also impose costs on operators themselves. Studies of operator stress show that

42. *Black Sea News*, 'Database of Ukrainian Attacks on the Occupied Crimea, Russian Ships and Facilities on the Black Sea Coast in January–October 2024', 26 November 2024, <https://www.blackseanews.net/en/read/226359>, accessed 25 May 2026.
43. Vlad Litnarovych, 'Air Defences at Risk? Russia May be Arming Shaheds with New Guidance Tech', *United24 Media*, 30 March 2026, <https://united24media.com/latest-news/air-defenses-at-risk-russia-may-be-arming-shaheds-with-new-guidance-tech-17387>, accessed 16 June 2026.
44. Author interview with SRO Commando Force Transformation Program, online, 2 April 2026.
45. Abhinav Yadav (ed.), 'Does the US have the Technology to Hack Iran's Air Defence Sensors and Radars?', *WION*, 26 January 2026, <https://www.wionews.com/photos/does-the-us-have-the-technology-to-hack-iran-s-air-defence-sensors-and-radars-1769435017524/1769435017525>, accessed 3 April 2026.
46. Jack McGonegal, 'High Power Microwave Weapons: Disruptive Technology for the Future', Air Command and Staff College, 2020, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1107488.pdf>, accessed 16 June 2026; Sidney E Dean, 'Killer Code: Cyber-Supported SEAD', *European Security and Defence*, 16 August 2021, <https://euro-sd.com/2021/08/articles/exclusive/23246/cyber-supported-sead/>, accessed 18 June 2026; Clint M Bramlette, 'Cyber-Attack Drone Payload Development and Geolocation via Directional Antennae', thesis, Air Force Institute of Technology, March 2019, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1074625.pdf>, accessed 16 June 2026.

persistent activity and sleep deprivation over time can result in decision errors rising by up to 86%, as well as issues with regard to spans of attention.[47]

Direct Attack on Key Nodes

The Russian layered air defence network around the Kola Peninsula is currently built around static high-power OTH radar, interceptor aircraft such as the MIG-31, long-range SAM systems such as the S-400 and shorter-ranged systems set up to engage Western cruise missiles.[48] SOF directly targeting elements of this system from closer distances, against which those elements are less well set up to defend, could partially ameliorate the IADS challenge. Man-portable tactical precision strike capabilities can prove useful in this role. Both fighting in Ukraine and combat in the Middle East has demonstrated the value of SOF capable units and light infantry more generally as a means of introducing another vector of attack against high-value targets at comparatively low risk to the wider campaign plan.

Ukrainian special forces have achieved a number of high-profile successes against key Russian radar, including Nebo-M systems that are integral to the S-400 and the Mount Ai-Petri radar in Crimea. These successes correspond to increases in the number of successful deep strikes in the sectors that these radar covered.[49] Israeli infiltrators similarly achieved early successes against key Iranian radar during the early stages of Operation *Rising Lion* and Hezbollah has been able to strike both Israeli IAMD launchers and key radar at Mount Meron using the Kornet anti-tank guided missile.[50] The utility of SOF as a means of engaging high-value targets is demonstrated historically: for example, between 1945 and 1992, roughly 2,000 aircraft were destroyed on the ground by raiders. This figure spans conflicts including the Vietnam War (which saw 493 such attacks) and the Falklands War.[51]

47. Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, 'Comprehensive Fatigue Management: Maintaining Cognitive Dominance and the Tactical Advantage in Multi-Domain Operations', p. 1, <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Jul/26/2003268441/-1/-1/1/comprehensive-fatigue-mgmt-relevance-doc-wrair-v1.pdf>, accessed 17 June 2026; Tomi Passi et al., 'Effects of Overnight Military Training and Acute Battle Stress on the Cognitive Performance of Soldiers in Simulated Urban Combat', *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 13, July 2022, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35959037/>, accessed 17 June 2026.
48. On the subject of missile expenditure in a broader sense, see Jack Watling and Justin Bronk, 'Rebalancing European Joint Fires to Deter Russia', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (April 2025), <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/rebalancing-european-joint-fires-deter-russia>, accessed 17 June 2026.
49. Kaushal, 'Conventional Prompt Strike in European Military Power', p. 27.
50. Guy Plopsky, 'Rising Lion's Air Offensive: Part 1', Foreign Policy Research Institute, 12 March 2026, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2026/03/rising-lions-air-offensive-part-i/>, accessed 17 June 2026; Arie Egozi, 'Israeli Radar Station Attacked by Russian-Made Kornet Anti-Tank Missile', *Defence Industry Europe*, 9 January 2024, <https://defence-industry.eu/israeli-radar-station-attacked-by-russian-made-kornet-anti-tank-missile/>, accessed 16 June 2026.
51. Alan J Vick, *Snakes in the Eagle's Nest: A History of Ground Attacks on Air Bases* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1995), p. 60.

Developing Situational Awareness Along PGM Ingress Routes

The employment of effectors such as cruise missiles is dependent on the careful mapping of both terrain and adversary air defence networks to enable the planning of attacks. The process involves air, space and naval assets and a spectrum of sensors. Special forces can play an important role in this wider effort through the ability to patrol forward.

Deep operations by SOF capable units can contribute to the generation of situational awareness regarding the locations of both mobile A2/AD capabilities and, crucially, decoys. In previous conflicts such as the Kosovo War, the latter have significantly increased munitions expenditure but can often be identified through direct observation since they are optimised to defeat specific sensor types rather than nearby human observers.[52] SOF can also identify elements of a system which might otherwise have been unobserved because they were not emitting. This is a particular concern with Russian short-range air defence systems, which can draw data from the radar of longer-ranged SAM systems further to the rear and thus avoid emitting themselves.[53]

SOF can cue the use of fires (for example, multiple-launch rocket systems) and fast air against non-emitting components of the A2/AD architecture which sit along a planned route of ingress without taking on the risks of direct attack. The UKCF has, proportionately, a larger number of joint tactical air controllers than any other element of the UK joint force, mainly drawn from 29 Commando. It is expected that these controllers will be mixed into strike teams, with two controllers per team managing direct fires and air attack.[54]

While none of these functions are exactly new, linking them in spatial and functional terms to the employment of PGMs represents an adaptation of SOF capabilities to a counter-A2/AD fight.

Since the SOTG is best envisioned as a task-oriented capability – which distinguishes it from an SOF unit intermittently supporting J-SEAD – it can specialise its operational planning and tactics, techniques and procedures to align with this role. This entails specific choices with respect both to constituent tasks such as insertion and sustainment and to the tempo and planning of operations.

52. Sidharth Kaushal and Juliana Suess, 'Net Assessment of NATO and Russian Capabilities in a Modern Strike Campaign', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (February 2025), <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/net-assessment-russian-and-nato-capabilities-modern-strike-campaign>, accessed 30 June 2026.
53. Justin Bronk, 'Modern Russian and Chinese Integrated Air Defence Systems: The Nature of the Threat, Growth Trajectory and Western Options', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (January 2021), pp. 11–12, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/modern-russian-and-chinese-integrated-air-defence-systems-nature-threat-growth-trajectory-and>, accessed 16/06/2026.
54. Author interview with CO 29 Commando, Royal Citadel, Plymouth, 23 February 2026.

Deep Penetration

The capacity of the UKCF to achieve deep penetration has been demonstrated, albeit only partially. In the recent Exercise *Arctic Fox*, marines from 45 Commando patrolled across 1,200 km using skis and skidoos over a period of 45 days, allowing a team of 12 with a mix of specialisms to operate on the last 300 km with at least 10 days of self-sustainment.[55] The 12-man teams will rely on insertion by multiple modes, but will have to employ skidoos and then skis for the last stage of its movement on land. Developments in the rations available to the force involving small, calorie-dense packs mean that operators would be able to meet the 8,000-calorie-per-day threshold for survival in the north without the requirement of carrying large food stores.[56] During the Petsamo–Kirkennes Offensive in 1944, mounted by the Red Army against the Wehrmacht, Soviet SOF conducted raids on a self-sustained basis for 17 days carrying 42 kg per operator.[57] With lighter-weight equipment and rations and better scientific analysis of human performance, and through the use of new technologies, it is reasonable to assume that the UKCF can outdo this historical benchmark. Furthermore, it is anticipated that resupply through UAVs would further extend the potential duration of patrols.[58]

Coast-to-coast movement by sea is also possible, given the complexities associated with target discrimination in littoral clutter and the impact of climatic phenomena like subrefraction in the High North, which restrict Russia's ability to discriminate smaller watercraft.[59] This could involve long-range surface connectors such as the planned CIC or uncrewed systems, which can act as launch platforms for short-ranged munitions against coastal targets, and has been demonstrated in the Ukraine war.[60] Russia will devote significant resources to preventing coastal infiltration, with each Russian naval infantry brigade expected to have an attached boat division by the 2030s for this purpose, and additional overwatch is likely to be provided by UAVs and helicopters.[61] Even so, the limited fields of view of many sensor types make detection by radar a critical first step, and Arctic phenomena such as super refraction (which creates false positives) can hinder this. The recent deployment of Royal Marines from a German

55. Author interview with CO 45 Commando, online, 10 February 2026.
56. Author interview with Brigadier Chris Haw, SRO Commando Force Transformation Programme, online, 15 March 2026.
57. Gebhardt, 'The Petsamo-Kirkenes Operation', p. 100.
58. Sidharth Kaushal and Mark Totten, 'Amphibious Futures: The Royal Marines in Contested New Operating Environments', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (January 2024), pp. 42–44, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/amphibious-futures-royal-marines-contested-new-operating-environments>, accessed 16 June 2026.
59. On target discrimination in littoral clutter, see Sebastiaan P van den Broek, Henri Bouma and Marianne A C Degache, 'Discriminating Small Extended Targets at Sea from Clutter and Other Classes of Boats in Infrared and Visual Light Imagery', *Proceedings of SPIE Defense and Security Symposium* (Vol. 6969, 2008).
60. Dymytrio Shumlianskyi, 'Russia Claims Ukrainian Naval Drones Now Armed with Guided Missiles', *Militarnyi*, 2 May 2025, <https://militarnyi.com/en/news/russia-claims-ukrainian-naval-drones-now-armed-with-guided-missiles/>, accessed 30 June 2026.
61. See, for example, Shangling Yuan et al., 'Small Target Detection in Sea Clutter Based on Lightweight Multi-Dimensional Adaptive Network', *Digital Signal Processing* (Vol. 175, May 2026).

diesel electric submarine is also illustrative of the fact that Allied capabilities can enable new modes of insertion.[62]

Operational Tempo

Several features characterise deep operations against high-value targets. First, they have a relatively low tempo; this is especially true of direct attack. The highest tempo of activity for Ukrainian SOF (in September 2025) saw four high-value radar struck in the course of a month, closely mirroring data from SAS raids on German airbases in North Africa and Viet Cong attacks on US airbases in Vietnam.[63] This reflects the levels of coordination and planning in attacking high-value targets.[64] However, the impact of attacks can be disproportionate: for example, the September 2025 Ukrainian SOF destruction of a Podlet K1 and Nebo-M radars corresponded with a threefold increase in the number of reported successful Ukrainian UAV and cruise missile strikes in the affected sector.[65] Activity such as the discovery of gaps in an IADS can occur at a somewhat higher but still limited tempo – US SOF in Vietnam averaged 25 reconnaissance patrols a month on the Ho Chih Minh trail, though this represented a high point and numbers soon dropped significantly as reconnaissance patrols had to be carefully planned (and often aborted) in the face of adversary countermeasures.

In effect, the SOTF can have disproportionate effect but will not re-engage quickly and may become more difficult to employ as a campaign continues. This is acceptable since outsized value in the first battle can be a valuable contribution. The assumption that this would be the core role of the force should shape planning – specifically, the SOTF should plan its activity in concentrated pulses aligned with the probable early rhythm of the wider air and maritime strike campaign, rather than operating at a steady tempo. In the authors' view, this would entail the front-loading of a large part of the force's capacity in several waves to maximise early effect, even at a cost in endurance.

Spatially, the force's efforts should focus less on searching for elusive mobile targets within broad operating areas – as during the largely unsuccessful Scud hunts – and more on identifying and clearing specific corridors along the preplanned ingress routes of long-range PGMs.[66]

62. *Navy Lookout*, 'Royal Marine Commandos Deploy from a German Submarine During NATO Exercise in the Arctic', 11 March 2026, <https://www.navylookout.com/royal-marine-commandos-deploy-from-a-german-submarine-during-nato-exercise-in-the-arctic/>, accessed 30 June 2026.
63. Data on Ukraine compiled by the author using multiple news articles; Vick, *Snakes in the Eagle's Nest*, p. 60.
64. For a useful overview of SOF preparation, see Sean Naylor, *Relentless Strike: The Secret History of Joint Special Operations Command* (New York, NY: St Martin's Griffin, 2016).
65. Kaushal, 'Conventional Prompt Strike in European Military Power', p. 26.
66. William Rosenau, *Special Operations Forces and Elusive Enemy Ground Targets: Lessons From Vietnam and the Persian Gulf War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1991), pp. 29–44.

In the authors' view, a narrow spatial and temporal focus would better align SOTF activity with air operations (defined here as including maritime strike), which are likely to continue operating on a 24–72-hour air tasking cycle, and may not always be responsive to unplanned calls for fire, particularly when the Russian IADS threat constrains time on station.[67] Munitions agnosticism and the ability to call on fires from both the Royal Navy and Allied forces dynamically is often presented as an ideal by interviewees – the so-called 'any sensor, any shooter' model. However, the tempo and planning requirement may favour more specific, well-rehearsed procedures whereby the SOTG's activity is aligned with dedicated munitions from the air and maritime component, which it will either enable or be supported by. This preplanning can also allow the force to skip several echelons in requests for munitions support from other elements. The force should still be capable of integrating with a wide range of prospective partners, but it does not need a truly dynamic kill web to be effective.

A pulse-based model which is biased towards the first battle rather than endurance over a longer period has ramifications for procurement. Specifically, when considering where on the high–low mix of capabilities the effectors sought by the force should sit, there is a strong case for focusing on multiple modes of attack and a high probability of penetration, even if this entails cost and thus limited magazine depth. A first-battle, pulse-based approach prioritises high-penetration, multivector effectors over magazine depth.

Organisation

Another consideration with respect to the SOTG relates to the organisation of strike teams. While it has been suggested that these teams should be task-organised, the very specific targets that will probably be involved provides a rationale for standing, rather than task-organised, subunits. 45 Commando will benefit considerably from a planned three-year drafting cycle designed to provide sufficient time for operators to specialise. Maximal value would be gleaned from the specialisms relevant to a specific target being available to and integrated into target-specific teams. As a comparator, the preparation of US SOF for targeting nuclear facilities in the 1990s required US SOF to develop expertise with respect to both the facilities themselves and specific breaching techniques.[68] While not strictly analogous, this example is illustrative of the need to maintain the ability to engage certain target types as a standing competence. Of note, this thinking is familiar to the UKCF in terms of the specificity of training required by 43 Commando in their defence of the UK's strategic deterrent.

67. Charilaos Nikou and David Tucker, 'The Challenge of Symbiosis: Synchronizing Kinetic and Non-Kinetic Ops', *Journal of the JAPCC* (Vol. 36, 2023), pp. 75–83.
68. Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, p. 75.

The model of air planning cells having a special operations liaison element was arguably better suited to a period when SOF were consumers of air power. Different elements of the force will manage the governance of requests for strikes and the production of information for other components, with the former task being managed by 29 Commando while elements such as 30 IX[69] will feed into the latter. Given the changing relationship with the components that will drive SOTF activity, there is a requirement for a single interface with air and maritime components. This can be a useful role for the 1* headquarters.

Survival and Sustainment

The risk of rapid detection and engagement will be considerable in most SOTF activity. Ukraine has underscored this lesson, where any kinetic movement or communications transmission risks immediately making forces a target for enemy counterfire. As one interviewee put it, 'When you press the presell [on a radio], you will become a target.'[70] More pervasive airborne ISR, including both helicopters and UAVs, will exacerbate this challenge even if climatic conditions in the north constrain the effectiveness of UAVs. Mitigations to these challenges exist: the UKCF has embraced a range of counters to adversary surveillance, including thermal camouflage nets and multispectral camouflage, and communications can also be made safer using modes such as tropospheric scatter and elevated relays (either UAVs or stratospheric balloons) to allow for communication using directional emissions rather than broadcasting.[71] A pulse-based model would imply a requirement to assure communications in specific windows of time, partially mitigating this challenge.

There is also the question of resupply and exfiltration, with plans currently being drawn up with Norwegian partners, since the SOTF could not operate on an entirely self-sustained basis indefinitely. There is some potential for capabilities such as UAVs and coastal manoeuvre craft to support this, at least relatively close to the Norwegian border. Narcotics-smuggling criminal networks have used autonomous semi-submersibles for movement of significant volumes of illicit goods,[72] which illustrates how similar vessels could be used to move supplies or stores, particularly low-value consumables such as food and fuel. This has inspired the development of autonomous

69. Otherwise known as the 30 CDO information exploitation group.
70. Author interview with CO 29 CDO, Royal Citadel Plymouth, 23 February 2026.
71. On relays, see Howard Altman, 'Russia Eyes Balloon Communications System to Fill Massive Gap Left After Losing Starlink', *The War Zone*, 18 February 2026, <https://www.twz.com/news-features/russia-eyes-balloon-communications-system-to-fill-massive-gap-left-after-losing-starlink>, accessed 16 June 2026; on camouflage, see Kaushal and Totten, 'Amphibious Futures'.
72. Victor Gonzáles, Lenin Naranjo and Jennifer Scotland, 'Uncrewed and Under the Radar: How AUVs Transform Drug Smuggling', *RUSI Commentary*, 25 November 2025, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/uncrewed-and-under-radar-how-auvs-transform-drug-smuggling>, accessed 16 June 2026.

low-profile vessels by the US Marine Corps as logistic support vessels.[73] This ability to carry significant amounts of stores autonomously could be a force multiplier but might come at the cost of procuring other planned USVs.[74] Since 47 Commando cannot reasonably operate all USV types within its manpower limitations, stronger links with Royal Navy USV programmes to establish a division of labour would be beneficial, along with ongoing work in this area.

In the authors' view, having and hiding caches on the Russian side of the border might be considered. While it is likely that the details of how this might be achieved will be highly context-specific, the expanse of the frontier in the north, the many sparsely populated areas on the Kola Peninsula and the possibility of exploiting societal factors, such as Russia's high Corruption Perceptions Index according to Transparency International, suggest that the idea is viable, albeit with considerable preparation and some risk.[75]

Special operations-capable forces can contribute to the generation of complexity for an adversary IADS built to intercept long-range capabilities. They can also be used in ways that enable greater risk acceptance on the part of the joint force commander and thus play an important role in a wider multidomain effort.

The Specialised Advanced Amphibious Force as a Tool to Secure Key Littoral Terrain

The second component of the UKCF is the SAAF, which will be formed around 40 Commando and the RNMC. The SAAF is a very high-readiness rapid response force which can be deployed either in Norway or on key islands within the High North. To this end, 40 Commando is in the process of building its experience with self-sustaining operations in the High North, beginning with a process of six-month rotations to the theatre.[76] The force is eventually expected to be able to sustain itself for 10 days in a manner comparable to 45 Commando.[77] This section examines the roles to which the SAAF is best suited, along with the ramifications for how it operates. The core contention is that while a rapid reaction capability has value in multiple areas, the capacity to deny offshore littoral terrain in Svalbard should be the core task for the SAAF. Moreover, the

73. Defense Visual Information Distribution System, 'Stern Landing Vessel Arrives at Naha Military Port', 9 October 2024, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/8703798/stern-landing-vessel-arrives-naha-military-port>, accessed 4 April 2025.
74. John Grady, 'Marines Testing Low-Profile Vessels, Oil Industry Support Ships to Resupply Distant Outposts', *US Naval Institute News*, 4 September 2024, <https://news.usni.org/2024/09/04/marines-testing-low-profile-vessels-oil-industry-support-ships-to-resupply-distant-outposts>, accessed 16 June 2026.
75. *Trading Economics*, 'Russia Corruption Perceptions Index', <https://tradingeconomics.com/russia/corruption-index>, accessed 16 June 2026.
76. Author interview with CO 40 Commando, Norton Manor, 24 February 2026.
77. *Ibid.*

authors argue that in time the emphasis of the force should shift from denying terrain to Russia to enabling its employment to sustain the wider hybrid fleet.

In the short term, the decision to retire the UK's landing platform docks (LPDs) from service, and the limited availability of the landing ship dock (amphibious) (LSD(A)) fleet will mean a requirement to aggregate 40 Commando with the RNMC on the Netherlands' *Rotterdam*-class LPDs. In the medium term, the force afloat will comprise the littoral lift medium (LLM), a smaller, more easily dispersed class of amphibious vessel than the multirole support ship whose delivery remains uncertain.[78] The expectation is that the LLMs will have the aggregate lift of an LSD(A), with a future heavy lift capability becoming available in the longer term.[79] The force afloat would also be supported by a 150-m UAV-carrying vessel in the 2030s.[80]

Offshore Islands and the Role of the SAAF

In the authors' view, the role to which the SAAF is likely to be indispensable is the reinforcement of critical islands such as Spitsbergen and Bear Island. This could set the conditions for the deployment of a heavier force, such as II Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), which can deploy ground-based air defences such as the medium-range intercept capability and perhaps anti-ship missile systems such as ROGUE-Fires, an uncrewed, semi-autonomous missile launcher currently in service with III MEF.[81] This could contribute to the challenge facing Russian air and surface assets in the western Barents Sea. Secure islands could also serve as forward arming and refuelling points for uncrewed assets, allowing them to avoid either lengthy transits to refuelling points further afield or an over-reliance on motherships and thus increased time on station.

Given the relative lack of airports and maritime ports both in Svalbard and on Bear Island and Jan Mayen island, there are a small number of critical points in these locations which would be vital to the ingress of a Russian force. For example, in Svalbard a point of particular concern would be the port and helipad within Barentsburg, which could in theory allow a Russian amphibious force uncontested ingress if it was deployed in the vicinity of Svalbard before a conflict broke out.[82] Russian amphibious forces could be postured near Svalbard perfectly legally in a crisis and could (at least during certain months) simply unload in Barentsburg port. Because the Svalbard Treaty prohibits the maintenance of military infrastructure on the

78. Richard Thomas, 'Royal Navy's Multi-Role Strike Ship Not Due Until 2033 at the Earliest', *Naval Technology*, 6 December 2024, <https://www.naval-technology.com/news/royal-navys-multi-role-strike-ship-not-due-until-2033-at-the-earliest/>, accessed 4 April 2026.
79. Author interview with Colonel Spink.
80. *Ibid*.
81. Ashley Roque, 'Marines Eye 2025 Fielding of 3 New, Mobile Air Defense Systems', *Breaking Defense*, 3 May 2024, <https://breakingdefense.com/2024/05/marines-eye-2025-fielding-of-3-new-mobile-air-defense-systems/>, accessed 23 March 2026.
82. See Henrik Larsen, 'Russia's Growing Interest in Svalbard', GIS, 11 March 2026, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/russias-svalbard/>, accessed 23 March 2026.

archipelago, an Allied amphibious force that can be counterpostured in a crisis would represent a significant asset. This force could be poised to reinforce the archipelago as a crisis escalated into a conflict, without an early and overt breach of the treaty.

Should Russian forces occupy these access points, the Russian A2/AD bubble could be extended considerably. From Bear Island, for example, a ground-based system such as the 800-km P-800M could, in theory, strike targets towards the middle and southern parts of the Norwegian Sea – areas that can currently only be contested by a finite number of air and maritime assets. The Monolit-B radar organic to the Bastion-P would also substantially improve Russia's (possibly) limited ISR in these areas.[83] Air defence systems emplaced on Bear Island or Spitsbergen would further complicate air operations, committing NATO to additional time- and munitions-intensive SEAD operations. Cumulatively, this would make the already risky task of operating at the Bear Gap even more complicated. Early activity to deny limited operations to seize these key nodes will probably have a knock-on effect on how quickly anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities can be moved forward.

In Allied hands, these areas could serve as a means of mitigating the threat posed by Russian A2/AD. A significant component of future forward ASW will probably revolve around uncrewed assets both in the air and on the water's surface. For example, the Royal Navy will operate 12-m USVs under Project Beehive and the Royal Netherlands Navy (RNLN) will operate similar platforms from its future frigate.[84] While useful in adversary weapons engagement zones, vessels of this type are limited by endurance and will take damage in rough sea states, creating a maintenance requirement. Meeting this requirement purely through motherships risks creating single points of failure – the risk which a hybrid fleet is intended to mitigate. This challenge might be mitigated if FARPs were set up on forward-positioned islands after the initial phase of a conflict. Similarly, given the limitations of deck space within the maritime domain, ASW helicopters and future uncrewed systems such as the Proteus UAV might use areas like Bear Island as lilypads.[85] This was a role that the commando forces played in the past, supporting for the Harrier during the Cold War, as part of Exercise *Teamwork*.[86] For the most part, operating FARPs would probably be a naval function, although experience to support the preparation of ice runways is held within 24 Commando and elements of 47 Commando

83. Kaushal et al., *The Balance of Power Between NATO and Russia in the Arctic and High North*, p. 45.
84. Project Beehive is a £12.3-million Royal Navy programme to acquire and rapidly deploy 20 uncrewed surface vessels (USVs). These modular 'drone boats' act as floating testbeds, enabling sailors and Royal Marines to experiment with autonomous maritime technology and develop new tactics for the future. See Royal Navy, 'Navy to Buy 20 Uncrewed Boats as Testbeds for Future Operations', 11 March 2026, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news/2026/march/11/20260311-kraken-usv-procurement-announcement>, accessed 30 June 2026; Sidharth Kaushal, 'Optimising the Royal Netherlands Navy for Its Role Within NATO', *Whitehall Report*, 3-24 (December 2024), <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/whitehall-reports/optimising-royal-netherlands-navy-its-role-within-nato>, accessed 30 June 2026.
85. 'Lilypad' refers to a temporary, ad hoc landing deck on a ship that does not have an assigned helicopter.
86. Eric Grove with Graham Thompson, *Battle for the Fiørds: NATO's Forward Maritime Strategy in Action* (London: Phoenix, 1991), p. 59.

could support maintenance for surface craft.[87] The SAAF would not perform this role, but could set the conditions for it to be performed by securing key terrain.

The function of the SAAF, then, might be understood as both denying Russia the ability to bolster its sensor network and A2/AD capability while setting the conditions for littoral features within the adversary's weapons engagement zone to be employed in support of a hybrid fleet.

The Utility and Feasibility of Denying a Russian Air and Amphibious Assault

Based on what is known about the Russian Naval Infantry and the VDV, it is likely that the first elements of an island assault under contested conditions would be air assault. They would have the task of setting the conditions for heavier follow-on forces. Each Naval Infantry brigade contains an air assault battalion, and the VDV (which structures its air assault battalions in an identical way) could add more capacity to this role. The two forces often operate in tandem, and the secondment of officers between them is common.[88] While Russian amphibious vessels such as the *Ivan Gren* and *Ropucha* classes can unload significant numbers of troops into Barentsburg, this would require the area around it to be secured either by air assault units or SOF. Distance represents a constraint on Russia, since Bear Island and Svalbard are too far from the Russian mainland for a heliborne air assault to be launched from ground-based MI-8 and MI-26 helicopters.[89] The *Ivan Gren* class has a limited capacity to carry helicopters, which would probably slow the rate at which a force could be deployed, although the addition of the Project 23900 helicopter carrier to the Russian fleet will change this.[90] The VDV also trains for parachute operations, although Russian authors associated with the VDV's command school are clear that this is only possible during three months of the year and requires relatively low-altitude drops due to wind conditions.[91] Ship-to-shore movement from vessels such as the *Ivan Gren* class is theoretically possible, though the lack of a well dock means that these vessels must usually unload directly ashore.

Doctrinally, Russia does not envision opposed amphibious landings – lodgements must be secured by air mobile elements to enable uncontested offloading.[92]

87. Author interview with CO 40 Commando, Norton Manor, 24 February 2026; author interview with CO 47 Commando, online, 3 March 2026.
88. Charles Bartles, 'Change is Coming for the Russian Naval Infantry', *OE Watch*, January 2010, pp. 5–10.
89. Grau and Bartles, *The Russian Way of War*, p. 26.
90. Joseph Trevithick, 'Russia's New Helicopter Carrier is Taking Shape in Crimea', *The War Zone*, 4 April 2025, <https://www.twz.com/sea/russias-new-helicopter-carrier-is-taking-shape-in-crimea>, accessed 18 June 2026.
91. Boris V Satin et al., « Методы и особенности развертывания и поддержки воздушных десантов в экстремальных арктических условиях » ['Methods and Features of Airborne Deployment and Airborne Support in Extreme Arctic Conditions'], *ORIS* (No. 1, 2020), pp. 21–31.
92. Bartles, 'Change is Coming for the Russian Naval Infantry', p. 5.

Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that any Russian threat to Svalbard, including Bear Island, depends on either SOF already on the island (in the case of Spitsbergen) or a relatively light airborne first wave. This wave might be equipped with BMP-4s (air-deliverable armoured fighting vehicles) and mortars such as the 2S9 Nona 120-mm mortar (although even BMPs could only be moved with difficulty during most months of the year). The first wave may also be equipped with loitering munitions such as the Lancet, based on Russia's experience in Ukraine, but is unlikely to have armour or heavy artillery. Moreover, in the absence of the extra helicopter lift provided by the Project 23900 ship, the force will be able to concentrate more slowly than Allied units operating from LPDs, mirroring the challenge faced by elements of 3 Commando during the Falklands War.[93] If this force can be defeated, the rest of a Russian amphibious force becomes effectively undeployable – a point illustrated in Ukraine, where a planned amphibious landing near Odesa was abandoned after its forward reconnaissance element was destroyed.[94]

Given the Russians' own limitations in amphibious assault, an early response role for the SAAF appears eminently achievable. This role might be analogised to the concept of operations of the US Marine Corps during the Second World War, a major component of which related to securing advanced bases for fixed-wing aircraft which could then contest the central and western Pacific.[95]

Implications of the Proposed Role for the SAAF

The adroit deployment of the SAAF ahead of a Russian air assault battalion would leave some capabilities and specialisations held within both 40 Commando and the RNLMC surplus and potentially available for other roles such as plugging in to Norwegian land forces. An example would be anti-armour capabilities, since the Russian assault element is unlikely to contain armour.

Consequentially, this might incentivise role specification within 40 Commando and the RNLMC. On consultation with Dutch partners, the SAAF might be re-envisioned as comprising a split offer of its own: first, a rapid reaction component aimed at contending with (probably) battalion-sized assault units in the island chains, and second, a surge component deployed alongside the Finnmark Brigade and 45 Commando that might contain specialisms such as anti-armour capability.

93. Grau and Bartles, *The Russian Way of War*, p. 26; Julian Thompson, *No Picnic: 3 Commando Brigade in the South Atlantic, 1982* (London: Fontana Press, 1985); Trevithick, 'Russia's New Helicopter Carrier is Taking Shape in Crimea'.
94. Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi et al., 'Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022', RUSI, November 2022, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/preliminary-lessons-conventional-warfighting-russias-invasion-ukraine-february-july-2022>, accessed 30 June 2026.
95. Earl Ellis, 'Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia, US Marine Corps, US Department of the Navy, 21 August 1992, <https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USMC/ref/AdvBaseOps/index.html>, accessed 20 May 2026.

Also, especially when amphibious lift is limited to two Dutch LPDs and the UK's LSD(A)s, the requirement to reinforce multiple islands simultaneously will require careful planning. For example, Bear Island could theoretically be reinforced by rotary-wing aircraft from the Norwegian mainland if sealift is not available.

The conditions in areas such as Svalbard and the requirement for rapid response would represent a strong use-case for CHF's capabilities. Climatic factors such as ice-covered seas, coupled with a relatively limited adversary air defence capability on key islands, mean that helicopter insertion would be recommended. The Merlin Mk4 helicopter would probably remain critical to this lift capacity, particularly when surface manoeuvre is constrained by sea ice. Where there are limited Russian air defences, helicopters would also provide fire support to distributed ground units. CHF's 847 Wildcat Helicopter squadron has a relatively well-developed suite of countermeasures against man-portable air defences and these islands are not covered by the type of Russian IADS liable to be encountered on the Kola Peninsula.[96] Additionally, if one of the functions of positions in areas such as Bear Island and Svalbard is to support forward ASW, then CHF has the qualified personnel to provide maintainers for forward operations from islands given the platform similarities between the Merlin Mk2 (ASW) and Mk4. Although there are differences between Mk2 and Mk4, CHF personnel have the environmental expertise that could be a significant asset.[97]

Moreover, the presumed role of CHF in resupply operations near Finnmark would appear to run at cross purposes with 45 Commando's focus on the advantages of being pre-positioned in Norway. The flat geography towards Finnmark's east makes resupply here (to say nothing of Kola) highly challenging for CHF.

Given the probable difficulties of using CHF in the more heavily defended Kola Peninsula, a closer pairing of CHF with the amphibious force might be appropriate. The reliance on shipping Dutch support is somewhat balanced by CHF's higher helicopter readiness.[98] However, the Royal Navy's shift to the LLM for UKCF support, and the RNLN's move from LPDs to lighter amphibious transport ships,[99] would result in a reduced capacity for carrying vertical lift capabilities into the 2030s, other than the Netherlands' joint support and combat support ships. The utility of helicopters in early island-hopping campaigns should inform requirements for future amphibious operations, especially as the planned 150-m UAV carrier is not currently envisioned as being capable of supporting sustained rotary-wing operations. This requires planning in terms of how high-tempo rotary-wing activity can be achieved with a distributed fleet. There are complementarities which can be achieved with larger Allied ships as

96. Author briefing received at CHF Yeovilton, 2019.
97. Author interview with CO CHF, online, 16 February 2026.
98. Author interview with Colonel Will Penkman, CO CHF, online, 15 February 2026.
99. *Naval News*, 'Dutch Navy to Replace OPV and LPD with a Single Class of Ships', 7 March 2024, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/03/dutch-navy-to-replace-opv-and-lpd-with-a-single-class-of-ships/>, accessed 30 March 2026.

well as those from the wider force: UAV carriers might, for example, be used to lilypad helicopters operating from larger vessels further afield. There is precedent for lilypads supporting high-tempo rotary-wing activity at reach, with examples including the US special forces' use of the converted cargo ships *Hercules* and *Wimbrown 7* for interdiction during the 'Tanker War' in the Persian Gulf in the late 1980s.[100] This could mitigate the vulnerabilities inherent to the probable primary reliance of the SAAF on two large Dutch assets for rotary-wing support and also provide additional arming and refuelling points for uncrewed systems.

There are also specific implications of the proposed role for the SAAF for 29 Commando. The first regards the role of the 120-mm mortar as opposed to a combination of mortars and a 127-mm tube artillery piece which will succeed the 105-mm light gun. A major consideration is the ability of the UKCF to aggregate to help slow an opponent. However, on the islands to the north, the movement of the 127-mm will prove difficult. Experience from the Pacific War suggests that mortar fire was considerably more important in the early stages of an amphibious operation.[101] The probable Russian opponent will also be restricted to mortar such as the 2S9 for area fires, meaning there is no range premium in this context. A focus on 120-mm mortar opens the possibility of munitions-sharing with the RNLN,[102] as well as the use of more advanced munitions types being developed, such as precision and loitering fires.[103] The role of the SAAF would thus make a strong case for an all-mortar capability in 29 Commando, within this specific warfighting context.

While the air defence troop held within 29 Commando has utility in both Finnmark and the islands, the fact that the success or failure of an airborne wave will determine the outcome of an attempt on the islands makes the allocation of resources from the troop towards the SAAF a reasonable choice. By contrast, in Finnmark and on the Kola Peninsula, survival for the SOTF will depend to a greater extent on efforts being made to avoid detection, given the limited air defences available in areas where 45 Commando will operate.[104]

100. Sidharth Kaushal, 'Lessons Learned from the Black Sea and Red Sea on the Use and Design of Fleets', *RUSI Commentary*, 9 August 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/lessons-black-and-red-sea-use-and-design-future-fleets>, accessed 18 June 2026.
101. Chris Hemler, *Delivering Destruction: American Firepower and Amphibious Assault from Tarawa to Iwo Jima* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2023), p. 120.
102. Kaushal, 'Optimising the Royal Netherlands Navy for its Role Within NATO'.
103. Paolo Valpolini, 'UVision to Provide its HERO-120 Organic Precision Fires-Mounted (OPF-M) Aerial Loitering Munition Systems to the US Marine Corps', *European Defence Review*, 21 June 2021, <https://www.edrmagazine.eu/uvision-to-provide-its-hero-120-organic-precision-fires-mounted-opf-m-aerial-loitering-munition-systems-to-the-us-marine-corps>, accessed 3 May 2026.
104. Tim Sigsworth, 'Royal Marines to Use "Invisibility Cloak" on Battlefield', *The Telegraph*, 6 September 2025.

Maritime Special Operations in Pre-Conflict Shaping

The ability to conduct opposed boardings would be particularly important during the transition from crisis to conflict, when hostile activity at sea may occur below the threshold at which civilian vessels can legally be sunk. Russia could employ ostensibly civilian vessels for a range of functions. As during the Soviet period, 'tattletale' vessels operating under naval or intelligence control could track Allied naval movements.[105] Merchant ships equipped with containerised systems, such as Klub-K missiles, unmanned underwater vehicles, mines or other payloads, could also be used to threaten maritime infrastructure and shipping while preserving ambiguity.[106] There is historical precedent for this type of activity: Iraqi forces concealed mines aboard civilian tugs in 2003,[107] while French forces in 2025 boarded merchant vessels suspected of supporting UAV operations targeting Danish airports.[108]

Prior to open conflict, hostile intent must be demonstrated while escalation and civilian casualties are managed. Maritime special operations forces can play an important role in contributing to the wider situational awareness that enables this, through persistent forward presence and links to partner units in Allied states. Once war begins, civilian vessels departing Russian ports would probably be treated as suspect by default. Before that point, interdiction would often require boarding operations capable of gathering evidence and seizing vessels intact. The US seizure of the Iranian minelayer *Iran Ajr* during the Tanker War illustrates this logic.[109] While the US Navy could have readily sunk the vessel, the fact that the US was not in a state of war with Iran and was merely seeking to protect shipping required the use of special forces to seize it and document its role.

As a corollary to the Hybrid Navy's force multiplying potential for boarding operations, 42 Commando may also be required to directly protect hybrid assets. The future navy vision is one in which multiple USVs will be controlled and supported by a Common Combat Vessel (CCV). A concern is the potential vulnerability of such USVs to physical interference and hijacking, in certain operating theatres. Where the CCV will be

105. Bernard M Kassell, 'The Fishing Fleet of the Soviet Union', *US Naval Institute Proceedings* (Vol. 87/11/705, 1961).
106. On the types of unmanned underwater vehicle that can be deployed from containers, see Sidharth Kaushal and Edward Black, 'Russian Maritime Sabotage: From Subcomponent of Special Operations to Evolving Form of Irregular Warfare', Irregular Warfare Initiative, 18 December 2025, <https://irregularwarfare.org/articles/russian-maritime-sabotage-from-subcomponent-of-special-operations-to-evolving-form-of-irregular-warfare/>, accessed 30 June 2026.
107. GlobalSecurity.org, 'Mine Tugs', <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/mines.htm>, accessed 30 June 2026.
108. Dan Sabbagh, 'French Military Detain Two After Boarding Russia-Linked Oil Tanker Suspected of Launching Drones', *The Guardian*, 1 October 2025.
109. Kaushal and Totten, 'Amphibious Futures', p. 35.

required to provide rolling maintenance through deployable engineering teams, it might have to carry a contingent of Royal Marines from 42 Commando.

Old doctrine had the Royal Navy able to conduct compliant boardings, with the Royal Marines required for non-compliant. Opposed boarding was historically the preserve of more specialised forces, but 42 Commando are now trained to conduct it.[110] The basic unit of force in these contexts is the Special Operations Maritime Task Unit (SOMTU), a 16-person unit divisible into two eight-person teams, including snipers and coxswains, drawn from 47 Commando.[111] In boardings involving larger vessels, multiple SOMTUs would be required in addition to specialist support from 47 Commando and CHF. The likely use of Russian SOF to protect vessels involved in shaping activity makes opposed boardings at this stage of a crisis more probable.[112]

The Challenge of Capacity

One major challenge is that the number of prospective targets for interdiction significantly exceeds available numbers of personnel within 42 Commando, CHF and 47 Commando (who support maritime interdiction with specialist elements), although these elements will be operating alongside partners such as Norway's Kystjegerkommandoen, a marine commando unit trained to operate in littoral combat theatres. An opposed boarding is orders of magnitude more resource-intensive than compliant boarding. Around 40 personnel might be involved in the boarding of a large vessel, along with supporting air and maritime elements.[113] This limits the tempo of activity the force can achieve.

However, there are ways in which the tempo of activity of the maritime special operations force might be increased. The first is to be specific about threat types that require 42 Commando's attention – for example, in the transition from crisis to conflict, vessels might be prioritised based on the threat to militarily vital targets and the assessed likelihood of an opposed boarding.[114] Greater use could be made of Royal Navy searchers for non-compliant boardings, which currently also sit within 42 Commando's remit. Since training for boarding takes around nine weeks, the option to build this specialism might be offered to commandos from beyond the Royal Marines as navy commandos might be better employed against less-defended targets.[115]

110. Author interview with CO 42 Commando, Bickleigh Barracks, 24 February 2026.
111. *Ibid.*
112. *Moscow Times*, 'Armed Guards Spotted on Russian "Shadow Fleet" Vessels, Sweden Says', 17 December 2025, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/12/17/armed-guards-spotted-on-russian-shadow-fleet-vessels-sweden-says-a91467>, accessed 16/06/2026.
113. Author interview with CO 42 Commando, Bickleigh Barracks, 24 February 2026.
114. *Ibid.*
115. *Ibid.*

The potential to reduce the size of boarding teams would also come from improved intelligence and tracking and a robust recognised maritime picture. The size of boarding parties is, to some extent, a function of uncertainty; many prospective targets may require far fewer personnel than are used.[116] Better intelligence can enable more adequate tailoring of boarding parties to requirements. A certain amount of algorithmic analysis and even non-agentic AI is already being used in this capacity.[117] Many vessels of interest will not be armed, thereby presenting a non-compliant rather than opposed-boarding challenge, which could require far fewer personnel if the scope of the threat is understood ahead of time.

USVs with integrated radars and sensors can improve the Special Operations Maritime Task Group's recognised maritime picture even further, or even be used in direct surveillance and 'escorting' of suspect vessels.[118] The Hybrid Navy is still in its relatively early stages, with some notable exceptions, but this prompts the question as to whether autonomous systems may be employed to reduce the resource demands of opposed boarding. Where specialist Royal Marine snipers often provide overwatch or are used for shooting the engine blocks of 'go-fasts' in drug interdiction operations, there is potential for UAVs to eventually be used in similar roles. USVs can also be used in force protection roles, when fitted with counter-uncrewed aerial system or close-in weapon systems. Although the maintenance burden of uncrewed assets is considerable – with eight maintainers to a USV – they can reduce the requirement for scarce specialist operators within CHF and 47 Commando.[119]

Preventing Russia from both unmasking key Allied capabilities and degrading critical sensor networks prior to the transition from crisis to conflict will require the ability to constrain the freedom of action of ostensibly civilian Russian auxiliaries while clearly attributing hostile intent. In practice, this necessitates an expanded capacity to conduct opposed boardings of vessels suspected of supporting hostile activity and an early focus on identifying and potentially interdicting these vessels.

116. Professional experience of one of the authors.
117. Edward Black, 'UK Critical Undersea Infrastructure Sabotage: Threat and Response', RUSI Newsbrief, 18 December 2025, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-newsbrief/uk-critical-undersea-infrastructure-sabotage-threat-and-response>, accessed 30 June 2026.
118. Author interview with Deputy Commander Maritime Force (Royal Navy), Stonehouse Barracks, 24 February 2026.
119. Author interview with CO 47 Commando, online, 3 March 2026.

Conclusion: Helping the Maritime Component Fight a Theatre Battle

The re-envisioning of the offer provided by the UKCF to the maritime component in the High North suggests that there is considerable value in divorcing the maritime role of the Royal Marines from amphibious assault. Despite its limited size, the maritime force as envisioned can offer a range of options to a maritime component both during a transition to conflict and during a conflict itself. In effect, the force would remain conceptually maritime in that its role would be tied to the function of ultimately enabling maritime objectives, even if amphibiosity is only part of its offer.

The fundamental challenge for Allied naval forces – pushing forward into the heart of a heavily defended bastion – depends on several force-level outputs:

- the rapid degradation of the Kola Peninsula IADS to target the ASW threat, thus enabling theatre entry for naval assets;
- the maintenance of superior maritime situational awareness; and
- the ability to operate new capabilities within the adversary's weapons engagement zone.

These outputs should serve as the orienting function for both the maritime force at large and the commando force within it. There are a number of roles which the commandos can play in support of these aims, including:

- the imposition of additional dilemmas on Russian air defenders;
- denying key offshore terrain to Russia and enabling its use to support the hybrid fleet; and
- constraining Russia's shaping of operations, short of war.

Re-envisioning the commandos as components of a maritime and air battle rather than as a force delivered into the theatre by the maritime component would entail a degree of role specialisation across the force, which may evolve differently in line with their functions.

The evolving offer of the Royal Marines is broadly aligned with the requirements of a theatre battle, although, as has been discussed, each component of the offer requires specific choices regarding how the force operates and how it is organised. The redesign of the force will also entail a shift in the role of the 1* headquarters, which is liable to act primarily as a node to feed nationally sensitive data to units divided under three distinct commands as well as a theatre headquarters in miniature, adjudicating the movement of specialists across the three lines of effort.

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