Briefing Note

The Gang That Can't Shoot Straight – Iceland's Security Failure

Robert P. Wheelersburg

For over 50 years, the US provided internal security for Iceland as part of the Keflavik Naval Air Station, but that protection ended when the Americans pulled their forces out of the country in 2006. While NATO has continued to support Iceland's strategic-level security through its air policing missions, the ability of the country to defend itself from threats below the level needed to activate NATO Article 5 is non-existent. Iceland has failed to provide for its internal security due to structural problems within the government, which are reviewed here, followed by my recommendations about how the country's security management could become stronger.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio's visit to Iceland in October, 2026, showed that the defenseless country's security blanket may be disappearing. Rubio was asked why, for the first time in the 44-year history of Northern Viking exercises in Iceland, U.S. participation did not include combat aircraft or naval vessels. Rubio replied that commitments in the Middle East and the Pacific required a reallocation of American military assets. That response should warn Iceland that in a future two-front war, which is entirely possible given the potential for multiple conflicts around the globe, there may be no American cavalry to ride to Iceland's rescue.

Despite being a founding member of NATO, Iceland alone is without a military. Historically, for 750 years, Iceland fell under the military protection of the Norwegians, the Danes, and the Americans. Thus, neither the country nor its populace developed the will or the ability to defend itself. Modern Icelanders do not want a national military as shown in a 2025 Gallop poll, with 72% of respondents answering "no" to that question (Tómas, 2025). Instead of providing or contributing to their own security, Iceland has depended upon the American military since signing a bilateral defense treaty in 1951. While there is little that Iceland can do to overcome threats to its strategic-level security, a significant threat to the country's internal security comes from the opening of the Transpolar Sea Route and the emergence of grey-zone threats in the North Atlantic. Those threats include rogue nations seeking resources in Icelandic territory including its fishing

Wheelersburg, Ph.D, is a retired anthropology professor and Army Reserve intelligence officer. Much of the research for this piece was obtained during his National Science Foundation-Fulbright Scholar assignment at the University of Iceland's Center for Arctic Policy Studies

grounds, terrorist and criminal organizations, drug and human trafficking networks, and limited border incursions like seizing abandoned islands or uninhabited areas.

This briefing reviews structural problems with the Icelandic government's security management, especially with the foreign ministers and director generals the country has had since the American military left in 2006. Unfortunately, whether the 1951 Defence Treaty with the U.S. would be honored if a security situation occurred that did not trigger Article 5 is unanswerable today due to an unpredictable and incompetent individual who was elected to a second term as U.S. president in 2024. As two former defense secretaries wrote, appropriately enough on April Fool's Day 2026, Trump's impetuous decision to go to war against Iran like an insulted child

> shows both our allies and our adversaries that impulsive and unilateral decisions are driving our foreign policy objective … and has further undermined the credibility of the United States to maintain the rules-based international order that we helped establish after World War II (Hagel and Panetta 2026).

Trump has made no secret he views NATO as "a paper tiger … that would not be there for us if we needed them" (Manchester, 2026). Given his statement that the US would not protect member countries that did not meet their 2% GDP defense spending commitment, if Trump learned that Iceland contributes no military funding because it has no military, he could insist the country be removed from the alliance. If Trump believed he could take Greenland from Denmark even with the kingdom's strong military, he would think he had no trouble annexing Iceland or occupying the country. In May of 2025, John Bolton, former National Security Advisor during Trump's first administration, said "I'm a little worried that one day [Trump] will discover that [the country] does not have a military and therefore Iceland's contribution to military spending is about 0.0 of GDP" (Alexandersson, 2025).

With two years remaining on Trump's term, his policies remain a threat to Iceland's future security. Yet, the largest threat to Icelandic security is not an unstable US president – it is the "gang who couldn't shoot straight." The "gang", charged with the country's protection, is made up of Icelandic elected politicians who serve as foreign ministers and political appointees who serve as director generals of the Icelandic defense directorate; virtually none of whom is experienced or perhaps even interested in the country's security and defence.

The defence directorate comes under the foreign ministry, making the foreign minister the country's senior security official. Yet, instead of being considered a primary duty for Icelandic politicians, it can be argued that the foreign minister position is viewed as a lesser post compared to other ministries such as fisheries or tourism. Since its independence, there have been 30 foreign ministers, with nine foreign ministers following U.S. withdraw in 2006, whose terms lasted an average of two and a half years before they moved on to another ministry. Almost none of those previous ministers had any military or security experience. My purpose here is not to criticize the individuals serving as foreign ministers, but rather to emphasize that placing security under the foreign ministry makes it secondary to finding a place to "park" Althing members until they can get a more important ministry position. To make matters worse, the defense directorate is led by a director general, a position that has also been filled by appointed bureaucrats or by ambassadors who are awaiting their next diplomatic assignment, virtually none of whom had any security or military experience prior to taking their positions.

Starting with the first foreign minister after the U.S. withdraw, Valgerður Sverrisdóttir was a career politician with no military or security experience. She was foreign minister from 2006 until 2007, serving for 343 days. Earlier she was minister for industry and commerce and minister for Nordic cooperation. Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir was a career politician (former mayor of Reykjavik) who was foreign minister from 2007 to 2009, later assuming positions in European and United Nations organizations involving security issues. Össur Skarphéðinsson was a career politician and party chairman who served as minister of foreign affairs from 2009 to 2013, previously appointed as minister for the environment, minister for Nordic cooperation, and minister for industry, energy and tourism. Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson is a career politician serving as foreign minister from 2013 to 2016, when he became minister of fisheries and agriculture before changing parties. Like Össur before him, Gunnar had no background in military or security affairs prior to becoming foreign minister. Lilja Dögg Alfreðsdóttir is an international banker and career politician who has also been her party's chairperson. She served as foreign minister for nine months in 2016 and 2017, later appointed as the minister for tourism, trade and culture, and subsequently as minister of education, science and culture. Career politician Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson earlier served as health minister, becoming foreign minister from 2017 to 2021, after which he was appointed minister for the environment, energy and climate. Þórdís Kolbrún Reykfjörð Gylfadóttir, is a lawyer and former academic who served as foreign minister from 2021 to 2023, and in 2024 when Bjarni Benediktsson resigned to assume prime minister. Her other ministry postings included finance minister, justice minister, and tourism and labor minister. Þórdís had a very limited background in foreign affairs or security issues when she first became foreign minister, although she carried that experience into her second, but limited term. Bjarni Benediktsson was foreign minister for 178 days in 2023 and 2024, served as prime minister twice, and as minister of finance and economic affairs – despite several scandals that removed him from various offices. The current foreign minister, Þorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir, has been in the position since the end of 2024. She is a lawyer and career politician who was a member of the Althing's foreign affairs committee and the NATO parliamentary committee, and therefore had extensive knowledge of defence and security matters prior to assuming office.

The position of Director General of the Directorate for Defence has mostly been a civilian of ambassador rank who is appointed until an Icelandic embassy becomes open. Yet, unlike American or other Western ambassadors who must deal with military issues while leader of their national delegations in a foreign country, essentially Iceland has no security matters involving their own troops to manage in a foreign country. Instead of surveying previous ambassadors' experience and terms, I'll use an ambassador who was a previous director general, holding that position twice, who I know socially, and who I interviewed for my book on Icelandic security. Benedikt Ásgeirsson was an Icelandic ambassador to Russia and the United Kingdom. Between those various assignments, from 6/94 to 1/95 and from 4/99 to 3/01, the defence position gave him a job by making him the country's senior defense official.

While competent to be an ambassador, it became clear to me that Ásgeirsson neither knew nor cared about actual military matters. Instead, he focused his defence office time on base community issues or obtaining massive American funding to improve the country's infrastructure. During his tour in 1994, Ásgeirsson emphasized such non-security issues like US service members being allowed to spend more time off base, able to take more food and alcohol with them. In addition, Ásgeirsson worked to construct an oil and gas fuel depot at Helguvik using millions of US dollars,

despite America providing ten percent of Iceland's national income and hundreds of high-paying jobs for natives. In 2022, Ásgeirsson told me that security was no longer important to Iceland since "Russia's military might consists of rusting Navy hulks sinking in Murmansk harbors." Wow, he must have been surprised when Russia invaded Ukraine!

Other defence director generals have also not been experienced security officials. The current director general, Jónas G. Allansson, has no military nor security experience, mostly serving as a political advisor to the UN, NATO, and to the Icelandic Crisis Response Unit, a roster of medical, logistics, and other specialists for non-security matters (NATO, n.d.). Staffing the senior official responsible for day-to-day military coordination with NATO and other allies by bureaucrats who have no security or military experience is a serious problem for Iceland. The equivalent would be having a director of fisheries who never caught a fish or rode in a boat. That deficiency was not a problem for several decades when Arnór Sigurjónsson held the position of Special Advisor to the Permanent Secretary of Foreign Affairs because he had decades or military and security experience (e.g., founding the Icelandic Police's Viking Squad). I worked with Arnór during the 1990s when I was a member of the Icelandic Defence Force and interviewed him several times from 2015 to 2021. Since his retirement, inexperienced bureaucrats have been special advisors, making the defence directorate even more ineffective.

Given these structural problems in defence administration, how has Iceland responded to increased security requirements demanded by Russian aggression and Trump incompetence? A recent article (Arvidsson 2026) suggested that Prime Minister Kristrún Mjöll Frostadóttir has established a BLAZING Icelandic Defense Strategy! Does that mean Iceland will finally have some role to play in its own defense - of course not. Instead, the PM's new security policy consists of "increasing defence-related spending, improving infrastructure, and supporting regular NATO air policing missions." In addition, she wants to "talk" about security partnerships and hold an EU referendum to participate in the union's "protection of critical infrastructure and cyber resilience, as well as to strengthen cooperation on environmental challenges in the region." The "new" security is an evolution because it relies less on allies like NATO and the US and more on diverse partnerships. Unbelievably, Arvidsson makes the following claim

> The shift in the Icelandic approach to defence further indicates how present-day dynamics have evolved. Security influence in the Arctic region is no longer determined solely by military capacity, but rather by collaboration and connectivity. *Nonetheless, building strong partnerships, maintaining strong communications, and sharing intelligence have become just as vital to regional stability as traditional military strength* [emphasis added].

Icelanders must demand better in two ways if the country is to remain independent. First, a law must be written requiring the foreign minister to have some experience in military and security matters other than merely financial or cyber security. Second, in the short run, the foreign ministry must hire a former general or admiral from one of the Nordic countries to serve as defense director until an Icelander can gain enough actual military experience in a NATO country to operate effectively in that position.

Icelanders could hope that with Trump leaving in two years, the impetuous and personally-motivated decisions being made about NATO and North Atlantic security will go away. History, however, has shown that not to be the case as an incompetent U.S. secretary of defense can do

damage as well. The 2006 decision to remove the remaining American troops from Keflavik and abandon the base, shocked Icelanders who actually cared about the country's security. Yet, according to a statement made to me by a senior Icelandic defence official working at that time, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld decided to close the base because of a personal slight the Icelanders gave him. Rumsfeld was fired less than two months later for incompetence.

That decision effectively ended the defense relationship with the U.S. established with the bilateral treaty in 1951; i.e., that America was for all practical purposes Iceland's department of defense. Prior to 2006, it is understandable that Iceland's foreign ministers and defense general directors were not really qualified to perform their duties, nor interested in their positions, which essentially held no meaning in larger Icelandic politics. Now, however, most of the NATO members are repositioning their own countries and the alliance generally so that Europe can be less dependent on (and subservient to) America. Iceland needs to do the same but first it must get a grey-zone security apparatus, starting by improving its security management at the ministerial level. Icelanders must demand that those charged with their security be competent and interested in accepting those positions, keeping them, and prepared to create and execute a plan to completely overhaul Iceland's security apparatus to provide for its own internal defence.



Soldiers from the U.S. 187th Separate Infantry Brigade disembark a U.S. Army CH-47 Chinook at Akureyri airport during Northern Viking 1995. Photograph by Major Robert Wheelersburg.



U.S. Marines prepare to assault the Keflavik NATO Base Combat Information Center during Operation Northern Trident 2018. Photograph by Robert Wheelersburg.

References

Arvidsson, Iris (2026). Frostadottir's BLAZING Rewriting of Icelandic Defence Strategy. *Hot or Not*. Research and Advisory on International Affairs (RAIA), February 24, 2026. Accessed on April 2, 2026, https://raiagroup.org/frostadottir-icelandic-defence-strategy

Alexandersson, Bjartmar Oddur Theyr (2025). Interview. John Bolton on Iceland: Don't let Trump notice you. *Heimildin*, May 23, 2025. Accessed April 2, 2026, https://heimildin.is/3a566/john-bolton-um-island-ekki-lata-trump-taka-eftir-ykkur/

Hagel, Chuck and Leon E. Panetta (2026). This War is Bad for America. *The New York Times*, Opinion, Guest Essay, April 1, 2026. Accessed on April 1, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/01/opinion/iran-war-military-us.html

Manchester, Julia (2026). Trump rips NATO, says US membership 'beyond reconsideration'. *The Hill*, April 1, 2026. Accessed April 2, 2026, https://www.icelandreview.com/news/poll-shows-most-icelanders-reject-national-military/

NATO (n.d). Jónas G. Allansson. Chief of Defence, Iceland, Oct. 2022 – Present. Accessed April 4, 2026, https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/organization/who-we-are/military-representatives/chief-of-defence-iceland

Tómas, Ragnar (2025). Poll Shows Most Icelanders Reject National Military. *Iceland Review*, April 16, 2025. Accessed April 3, 2026, https://www.icelandreview.com/news/poll-shows-most-icelanders-reject-national-military/