

GUGI's Arctic rehearsal, the Svalbard cables, and what the September report actually established

On 10 September 2026 Reuters published an exclusive by Sarah McFarlane and Gram Slattery that put a sharper edge on a story British and Norwegian ministers had already told, in public, five months earlier. In the spring, the piece said, Russia's Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research — GUGI — used deep-diving submersibles in waters off Svalbard to rehearse the deployment of a covert means of putting undersea cables out of action. The officials who spoke to Reuters described the device, such as it is, as sophisticated, destructive and intended to leave no fingerprints. A joint British, Norwegian and American operation tracked the vessels, confronted them and turned them back before the exercise was finished. No cable was cut. No pipeline was touched. The rehearsal was interrupted, and London and Oslo then took what they knew to Moscow.

That last point matters more than the language of “secret weapons” that has attached itself to the story. What happened in the High North this spring was, on every account now available, a training evolution that never reached its target. It is still a serious episode. The cables that run from Longyearbyen to the Norwegian mainland carry more than the internet traffic of a few thousand islanders. They carry the downlink from SvalSat, the densest commercial polar ground station in the world and a node in NASA's Near Space Network. They sit in water as deep as 2,700 metres. And they lie across the same stretch of sea — the Bear Gap — through which Russian Northern Fleet boats must pass if they are to reach the Atlantic.

The Reuters piece did three things the April briefings had not. It named Svalbard as the scene of the rehearsal. It brought the United States into the interdiction. And it introduced the claim of a purpose-built, deniable cable weapon. Those three additions rest on two unnamed Western officials. Everything else in the public record — the existence of a month-long tracking operation, the mix of GUGI boats and an Akula-class decoy, the démarche to Moscow, the absence of physical damage — comes from named ministers speaking on the record. The distinction is not a pedantic one. It is the difference between a story that can be cited and a story that still needs to be confirmed.

What was said in April, and what was added in September

John Healey, then as now Britain's Defence Secretary, used a Downing Street press conference on 9 April to describe a month of work in British waters and the High North. Three Russian submarines had been involved: an Akula-class attack boat used, in his phrase, as a diversion, and two GUGI intelligence-gathering submarines. He addressed Vladimir Putin by name. “We see you,” he said. “We see

your activity around our underwater infrastructure. You should understand that any attempt to damage it will not be tolerated and would have serious consequences.” There was, he added, no evidence that cables or pipelines had been damaged. The boats had left the area.

The scale of the British effort was not small. Forces News reported Healey’s figures from the London Defence Conference: some 500 personnel, more than 450 flying hours, a Royal Navy warship covering several thousand nautical miles. HMS Mersey was shown in company with the frigate Admiral Grigorovich and the Kilo-class submarine Krasnodar. RAF Poseidon aircraft flew the maritime patrol task. Healey accused Moscow of using the world’s preoccupation with the Middle East as cover.

Tore O. Sandvik, Norway’s defence minister, confirmed that a Norwegian frigate and a P-8A had taken part. The activity, he said, showed Russia’s continuing effort to develop the means to map — and potentially to sabotage — Western critical infrastructure at significant depth. Oslo and London had made it “unequivocally clear to Russian authorities that any attempt to target our critical infrastructure will be detected and met with consequences.” In September he put it more bluntly still: the joint operation had sent a clear message that Russia could not operate covertly.

The Russian embassy in London dismissed Healey’s April account as neither credible nor verifiable, denied any threat to British undersea infrastructure, and repeated the Kremlin line that responsibility for Nord Stream lay with the West. TASS carried the rebuttal on 9 and 10 April. That remains the last substantial on-the-record Russian reply to the episode. Reuters recorded that neither the Defence Ministry nor the Kremlin answered the September story. NATO pointed the agency back to London and Oslo. The White House did not respond. The CIA declined to comment.

Reuters was explicit about what it was adding. “Britain and Norway disclosed in April that they had uncovered a covert Russian operation in Arctic waters. But the discovery of the new weapon, the location of the operation and the U.S. involvement have not been reported.” The agency also placed the episode in a wider intelligence argument: some American analysts, three U.S. officials said, now worry that Russia may test NATO’s Article 5, and that cutting cables would be a useful part of any such probe. In late August the CIA director, John Ratcliffe, travelled unannounced to Moscow, in part to warn against a further rise in sabotage across Europe. Reuters could not establish whether he raised the subsea file. CBS, CNN and the Wall Street Journal reported the trip as a warning not to attack or test the Alliance, with particular concern for the Baltic states. Dmitry Peskov confirmed contacts “through the intelligence services” and said Ratcliffe did not meet the President.

The cables, the station and the gap

Two fibre-optic cables, of roughly 1,375 and 1,339 kilometres, have linked Longyearbyen to Andøya and Harstad since 2004. They are owned and run by Space Norway. From a few hundred metres off the Spitsbergen coast they drop, in the Greenland Sea, to some 2,700 metres. They serve the island's 2,500 or so residents. Their larger purpose is SvalSat, the plateau above Longyearbyen that has grown from about a hundred antennas in 2021 to more than 150. Kongsberg Satellite Services calls it the only commercial ground station able to support all fourteen orbits of a polar-orbiting satellite. It sits at 78°N and forms part of NASA's Near Space Network. Lose the cables and you do not merely darken an Arctic town. You interrupt a downlink that a good many civil and scientific programmes, and some that are not only civil, have come to treat as routine.

On 7 January 2022 one of the two cables lost power. The fault was found 130 to 230 kilometres from Longyearbyen, where the seabed falls away from 300 to 2,700 metres. Norwegian police concluded that the damage was caused by "external influences" but was probably not deliberate. Trawler gear remains the leading innocent explanation. The incident occurred weeks before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and has since been folded, sometimes too neatly, into a pattern of suspected Russian interference. It was never proved. It is a useful reminder of how hard these cases are to close.

The existing pair is approaching the end of a twenty-five-year design life. In February 2025 Space Norway signed SubCom to supply the Arctic Way Cable System: a 2,350-kilometre trunk-and-branch route from Bodø to Jan Mayen and Longyearbyen, to enter service in 2028, at a cost framework of 2.8 billion kroner. Cable is being made at SubCom's plant in Newington, New Hampshire. Rune Jensen, Space Norway's director of subsea systems, has said the old cables will be kept as a reserve for several years after 2028. Until then the archipelago's digital life, and a good deal of polar satellite traffic, hangs on two ageing lines and the hope that whatever happened in January 2022 does not happen twice at once.

One of the Western officials who spoke to Reuters dwelt on the Bear Gap, the four-hundred-mile stretch of water between southern Svalbard and the Norwegian mainland. Russian nuclear boats based on the Kola Peninsula must transit it, and pass Jan Mayen, to reach the North Atlantic. In late August Britain put forces onto Jan Mayen itself. Operation Atlantic City, running from 26 August to 4 September as part of NATO's Arctic Sentry activity, brought Royal Marines and RAF LXX Squadron together with the Royal Norwegian Navy, the Home Guard and the U.S. Marine Corps. They practised the integration of sensors into what the Ministry of Defence called a joint "kill web". Wes Streeting, speaking as Defence Secretary, called it a signal of enduring commitment to the Alliance's northern flank. The

timing, a few months after the spring interdiction and a few weeks before the Reuters story, was not accidental.

GUGI: a directorate, not a navy

GUGI — Glavnoye Upravleniye Glubokovodnykh Issledovaniy — reports to the Ministry of Defence, not through the ordinary naval chain. Forces News has named Vice-Admiral Vladimir Vladimirovich Grishechkin as its head. Its lineage runs back to late-Soviet work on nuclear-powered deep stations. Through the lean 1990s, when much of the fleet rusted, seabed warfare was one of the few specialisms Moscow continued to fund. Washington and London have both sanctioned the directorate.

The base is at Olenya Guba on the Kola Peninsula, about a hundred kilometres from the Norwegian frontier. Deep-diving boats are kept under covered floating docks. The oceanographic ship Yantar berths there. The Barents Observer was among the first to describe the place in any detail.

Three platforms dominate the open literature. Losharik (AS-31, Project 10831) is a titanium boat built as a string of spheres, designed to work at depths that ordinary attack submarines cannot reach. Published estimates run from 2,000–2,500 metres to figures closer to 6,000. A fire in a battery compartment on 1 July 2019 killed fourteen of her hydronauts. Sea trials after the refit were reported in 2025; by April 2026 her return to service was still described as unconfirmed. Belgorod (K-329, Project 09852), delivered in July 2022, is a lengthened Oscar-II, some 184 metres and 30,000 tonnes submerged, the longest submarine afloat. She is a mothership for smaller special-purpose craft and can carry the Poseidon nuclear-powered torpedo. Yantar, GUGI's most visible surface ship, is regularly photographed near cables. She carries manned submersibles said to be good for 5,000 metres, and remotely operated vehicles. Russian state media has boasted of her ability to connect to seabed communications lines. Other names in the same stable include the Delta-IV conversion Podmoskovye and Evgeny Gorigledzhan.

H.I. Sutton, quoted by Forces News after the April disclosure, called GUGI an elite unit and noted that having an Akula at its disposal said something about its standing. Damage inflicted at several thousand metres, he pointed out, is a good deal harder to mend than the shallow faults that cable ships deal with as a matter of routine.

What the “secret weapon” actually is remains the thinnest part of the September account. Reuters said the officials declined to explain how it worked. No named naval writer — not Sutton, not anyone at RUSI — has since offered a public reconstruction. “No fingerprints” suggests something other than an anchor drag or an obvious charge: a cut, a tap or a tamper at a depth where inspection is slow and expensive. That is inference. It is not evidence. The Chinese Ship Scientific

Research Centre's March 2025 display of a compact cutter rated to 4,000 metres, a diamond-coated wheel turning at 1,600 rpm, shows that other states are working the same problem. TeleGeography and others have argued that such tools add less than they appear to, given that grapnels already work at extreme depth. The Chinese device is a separate development. It is mentioned here only to mark the wider race.

A pattern, and the limits of a pattern

The Svalbard rehearsal sits in a run of incidents that Western governments now treat as a campaign rather than a coincidence. Three of the four Nord Stream strings were destroyed by underwater explosions near Bornholm on 26 September 2022. German prosecutors have since pursued Ukrainian nationals. Serhii Kuznietsov, a former officer, was arrested in Italy in August 2025, extradited that November and indicted on 30 June 2026 as an accomplice. A second man, a diver identified as Vladimir Z., was arrested in Croatia on 19 August 2026. Kyiv denies any state role. Moscow cites the case whenever it is accused of seabed sabotage. The investigation has made the simplest version of the Nord Stream story harder to tell.

In the Baltic, Windward counted at least eleven cables damaged or cut between October 2023 and the end of 2024. The Balticconnector and the Estonia–Finland data links in October 2023 were associated with the Newnew Polar Bear and Yi Peng 3 and with anchor drags. On Christmas Day 2024 the tanker Eagle S, part of what Western officials call the shadow fleet, was suspected of cutting Estlink 2 and four data cables. Finnish forces boarded the Fitburg on 31 December 2025. Surveying in international waters is legal. The volume of slow, loitering transits over infrastructure is what analysts watch. Reuters, again citing Windward, reported that “drifting” in the North Sea rose 52 per cent year on year, to 13,079 vessels; in the South China Sea the figure jumped 88 per cent, to 18,401. Baltic drifting was slightly down. NATO answered with Baltic Sentry in January 2025. The Joint Expeditionary Force launched Nordic Warden the same month. Britain has put £1.5 billion into Atlantic Bastion, a programme to track Russian submarines in the approaches.

Norway's security service, the PST, warned in its February 2026 annual assessment that Russian intelligence would increase its work in the north this year, with Svalbard and the northern counties of particular interest, and that civilian and third-flag ships would be used. Beate Gangås presented the assessment. It reads, in hindsight, as a notice of the spring operation rather than a coincidence with it.

American and European officials have begun to talk, more openly than they did two years ago, about a possible probe of Article 5. Destroying cables would not, by

itself, be an armed attack of the sort the treaty was written to meet. It could be a way of testing how far the Alliance will stretch the article, and how quickly it can restore the services that modern militaries and markets now assume will be there. That is an assessment, not a finding. It should be treated as such.

The Leipzig episode belongs in this file only as a marker of temperature. On the night of 4–5 August a drone carrying explosives was found inside the secure area at Leipzig/Halle, near a Ukrainian Antonov. A robot removed the detonator. Further devices turned up later, one of them, according to subsequent reporting, carrying 50 grams of RDX. On 1 September the interior minister, Alexander Dobrindt, attributed the attempt to Russia, citing police work, pattern and intelligence. A U.S. defence official in Europe had already told CNN that Washington assessed the drone as belonging to a Russian service. Germany summoned the ambassador, announced the closure of the Bonn consulate-general and ended the lease on the Russian House in Berlin. Putin called the response a serious mistake and suggested the evidence had been fabricated. Kaja Kallas said the episode had “all the hallmarks of state-sponsored terrorism.” The maritime story does not need Leipzig to stand. Leipzig does show how crowded the hybrid file has become.

Demarches, denials and the uses of publicity

The most interesting Western move in this affair may not have been the tracking itself but the decision to tell Moscow, privately, that the technology had been seen. Reuters says British and Norwegian officials did exactly that. The April press conference then made the same point in public, without the weapon and without Svalbard. Ratcliffe’s August visit belongs to the same family of signals: a warning delivered through intelligence channels rather than a communiqué. Whether it changed any Russian calculation is not known.

Moscow’s method is consistent. Specific new claims are left unanswered. Older claims are waved away as unverifiable. Responsibility for the most spectacular seabed attack of the decade is pushed onto Ukraine and, by extension, onto Kyiv’s sponsors. Ambiguity is not a by-product of this style of work. It is one of its instruments. A rehearsal that is stopped before it does damage can always be described, if it is described at all, as oceanography. A cable that fails at 2,000 metres can be a trawl, a fault, or a cut. The state’s interest is served so long as the victim cannot prove the difference at a speed that politics requires.

Bruce Jones of Brookings, quoted in the Reuters piece, put the European predicament in a sentence that has been circulating ever since. In the last twenty-five years Europe expanded its reliance on the seabed and shrank the forces that might protect it. It is rebuilding now, late, against a Russian threat that is no longer theoretical. Ami Daniel of Windward made the same point from the

commercial side: Russia and China, in the present estimation, are the most active underwater threats that ship-tracking firms are paid to watch.

What holds, and what does not

Three claims in the September story should still be carried as single-source and anonymous: that a new weapon was being rehearsed, that the rehearsal took place off Svalbard, and that American forces took part in turning the boats away. They may all be true. They have not been repeated on the record by the ministries that would know. Until the Ministry of Defence in London, the Norwegian ministry, or an American official speaking with authority names the place and the device, a careful reader will keep those three items on a shorter leash than Healey's and Sandvik's April statements.

No damage was done. The vocabulary of plots and foiled attacks is dramatic clothing on a training serial that was interrupted. That does not make the serial harmless. A service that practises a covert cut at 2,000 metres is a service that expects, one day, to do it in earnest. The right inference is not that war is imminent. It is that Moscow is stocking a particular kind of option and testing whether NATO will notice.

Attribution in this domain will remain messy. Nord Stream is now a Ukrainian prosecution as well as a Russian accusation. The 2022 Svalbard fault was officially judged more likely to be an accident. Losharik's operational status is still, in the open literature, unconfirmed. Depth figures and cable lengths wander from source to source because the systems in question are classified and the cables were laid twenty years ago by contractors who did not publish every sounding. Anyone writing about this subject who does not leave room for those uncertainties is writing propaganda.

The practical watch-list is short. First, any on-the-record confirmation that names Svalbard or describes the mechanism. Second, imagery, a technical note from a house such as RUSI or a sanctions listing that identifies a specific GUGI system rather than the directorate as a whole. Third, the fate of the 22nd European sanctions package, and whether GUGI or its officers appear on it. Fourth, the Arctic Way timetable. A 2028 in-service date slipping to 2029 or 2030 would leave the old pair as a single point of failure for longer than Oslo currently admits. Fifth, the next time a GUGI hull is seen in the Bear Gap, and whether the response is another discreet turn-back or something noisier.

Europe has spent a generation assuming that the seabed was a commons and that cables failed for the usual reasons. That assumption is finished. What replaces it will be a mixture of patrol aircraft, cable ships held at higher readiness, legal work on shadow-fleet tankers, and the unglamorous business of laying more fibre than an adversary can conveniently cut. GUGI's spring outing off Svalbard, if the

September account is broadly right, was a rehearsal for a war that has not started. The proper Western answer is not a matching piece of theatre. It is to make the rehearsal look, in hindsight, like a waste of a very expensive boat.

/Staffan Scherloff

Footnotes

1. GUGI is the Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research (Glavnoye Upravleniye Glubokovodnykh Issledovaniy). It answers to the Russian Ministry of Defence rather than the ordinary naval chain of command and specialises in deep-water reconnaissance, seabed mapping and, in Western assessments, sabotage of undersea infrastructure. Its main base is at Olenya Guba on the Kola Peninsula.
2. Svalbard is a Norwegian archipelago in the High Arctic, administered from Longyearbyen. Under the 1920 Svalbard Treaty it is demilitarised in a formal sense, but the waters around it sit on the route Russian Northern Fleet boats must take if they are to reach the North Atlantic.
3. The two existing fibre cables, laid in 2004 and owned by the state company Space Norway, run from Longyearbyen to Andøya and Harstad. They drop, off the west coast of Spitsbergen, to about 2,700 metres. Their civilian traffic is modest; their strategic value is the downlink from SvalSat.
4. SvalSat, on the plateau above Longyearbyen, is run by Kongsberg Satellite Services. At 78°N it can see every pass of a polar-orbiting satellite. It forms part of NASA's Near Space Network and serves a long list of civil and scientific programmes. Cut the cables and you do not merely isolate a town of 2,500 people.
5. The Bear Gap is the stretch of water, some four hundred miles across, between southern Svalbard (Bear Island) and the Norwegian mainland. Russian nuclear boats leaving the Kola Peninsula must pass through it, and then by Jan Mayen, to reach the Atlantic.
6. John Healey, Britain's Defence Secretary, gave the first public account of the spring tracking operation at a Downing Street briefing on 9 April 2026. He named an Akula-class boat used as a diversion and two GUGI submarines, said there was no evidence of damage to cables or pipelines, and addressed Putin directly: "We see you."
7. An Akula (Project 971) is a nuclear-powered attack submarine of the Russian Navy, not itself a GUGI special-purpose craft. Healey's point was that one had been put at GUGI's disposal as a decoy.

8. Tore O. Sandvik, Norway's defence minister, confirmed that a Norwegian frigate and a P-8A had taken part. In September he said the joint operation had shown Russia it could not work covertly in those waters.

9. HMS Mersey, a River-class offshore patrol vessel, was photographed in company with the Russian frigate Admiral Grigorovich and the Kilo-class submarine Krasnodar. The figures Healey later gave — some 500 personnel and more than 450 flying hours — came from remarks at the London Defence Conference.

10. On 7 January 2022 one of the two Svalbard cables failed between 130 and 230 kilometres from Longyearbyen, where the seabed falls from 300 to 2,700 metres. Norwegian police found “external influences” but judged the damage probably not deliberate. Trawler gear remains the leading innocent explanation. The case was never closed.

11. Arctic Way is Space Norway's replacement system: a 2,350-kilometre trunk-and-branch route from Bodø to Jan Mayen and Longyearbyen, contracted to SubCom in February 2025 and due in service in 2028 at a cost framework of 2.8 billion kroner. The old pair is to be kept as a reserve for several years after that.

12. Jan Mayen is a Norwegian volcanic island with no permanent civilian population. In late August 2026 British forces landed there for Operation Atlantic City, part of NATO's Arctic Sentry activity, practising the integration of sensors with Norwegian and American units. Wes Streeting, speaking as Defence Secretary, called it a signal of commitment to the northern flank.

13. Losharik (AS-31, Project 10831) is a titanium deep-diving boat built as a string of spheres. Published working depths run from 2,000–2,500 metres to figures nearer 6,000. A battery-compartment fire on 1 July 2019 killed fourteen of her hydronauts. Open-source reporting in 2025–26 still treated her return to service as unconfirmed.

14. Belgorod (K-329, Project 09852), delivered in 2022, is a lengthened Oscar-II, about 184 metres and 30,000 tonnes submerged. She is a mothership for smaller special-purpose craft and can carry the Poseidon nuclear-powered torpedo.

15. Yantar is GUGI's most visible surface ship, regularly photographed near cables. She carries manned submersibles said to be good for 5,000 metres, and remotely operated vehicles. Russian state media has boasted of her ability to connect to seabed communications lines.

16. H.I. Sutton is an independent naval analyst who writes on Russian special-purpose submarines. RUSI is the Royal United Services Institute in London. Neither has published a reconstruction of the device Reuters' sources declined to describe.

17. Three of the four Nord Stream strings were destroyed by underwater explosions near Bornholm on 26 September 2022. German prosecutors have since pursued Ukrainian nationals. Serhii Kuznietsov was arrested in Italy in August 2025, extradited that November and indicted on 30 June 2026 as an accomplice. A second man, identified as Vladimir Z., was arrested in Croatia on 19 August 2026. Kyiv denies any state role. Moscow cites the case whenever it is accused of seabed sabotage.

18. Windward is a commercial maritime-intelligence firm. Its counts of damaged Baltic cables and of “drifting” — slow, loitering transits over infrastructure — are the figures Reuters used. NATO answered the Baltic incidents with Baltic Sentry in January 2025; the Joint Expeditionary Force launched Nordic Warden the same month. Britain’s Atlantic Bastion programme is a £1.5 billion effort to track Russian submarines in the approaches.

19. The PST is Norway’s Police Security Service. Its February 2026 annual assessment, presented by Beate Gangås, warned that Russian intelligence work in the north would increase that year, with Svalbard and the northern counties of particular interest, and that civilian and third-flag ships would be used.

20. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty treats an armed attack against one ally as an attack against all. Cutting a cable is not, on its face, the sort of attack the article was written to meet. Some American analysts, according to Reuters’ sources, now worry that Russia may use such an act to test how far the Alliance will stretch the language.

21. On the night of 4–5 August 2026 a drone carrying explosives was found inside the secure area at Leipzig/Halle airport, near a Ukrainian Antonov. Further devices were found later. On 1 September the interior minister, Alexander Dobrindt, attributed the attempt to Russia. Germany summoned the ambassador, closed the Bonn consulate-general and ended the lease on the Russian House in Berlin. Kaja Kallas, the EU’s high representative, said the episode had “all the hallmarks of state-sponsored terrorism.”

22. John Ratcliffe, then CIA director, travelled unannounced to Moscow in late August 2026. CBS, CNN and the Wall Street Journal reported the trip as a warning not to attack or test the Alliance. Dmitry Peskov confirmed contacts “through the intelligence services” and said Ratcliffe did not meet the President. Reuters could not establish whether the subsea file was raised.

23. Bruce Jones, of the Brookings Institution, was quoted in the Reuters piece to the effect that Europe had spent a generation expanding its reliance on the seabed while shrinking the forces that might protect it. Ami Daniel is the chief executive of Windward.

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