Throughout the Second World War the British strategic interest in Scandinavia focused on three areas. Firstly, the region’s abundant supply of raw materials was of vital importance to German industry. Primarily this meant Swedish exports of iron ore, but after the occupation of Norway in April 1940 it included other vital raw materials, like aluminium. Secondly, the region was important as a means of reaching and sustaining other theatres. Briefly during the winter of 1939 the Allies considered dispatching a large force to Finland through northern Norway and Sweden to assist the Finns against the Soviet invasion. After the invasion of the Soviet Union by German forces in June 1941, the route around the North Cape was the most direct way by which the Allies could supply the Soviets with raw materials, armaments and other supplies. Finally, the Baltic Sea itself was important because it was utilised by the Kriegsmarine as a training ground for its submarine arm.\(^1\) Andrew Lambert has examined the role of Scandinavia in pre-war British strategy and the initial implementation; this chapter considers the range of options available to the British for intervention in Scandinavia between April 1940 and June 1941.

The period between the fall of France and Barbarossa marked the lowest point in Britain’s wartime fortunes, thus it is important to consider the wider strategic context. Following the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) from France in June, the possibility of a German invasion of Britain, and the need to counter this threat, dominated British strategy until the close of the year. The Italian declaration of war on 10 June opened a second front in the Mediterranean that was a vital transit route to Britain’s colonial empire in India and its Dominion allies in the Pacific. Unable to engage with Germany in north-western Europe, the emphasis of British strategy moved into the Mediterranean theatre and although the British army successfully destroyed the Italian army in

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\(^1\) Later in 1944 an aerial mine-laying campaign was launched to disrupt this training at source, S.W. Roskill: *The War At Sea 1939–1945*, vol. 3, part 1 and part 2, HMSO (London 1961).
the Western Desert, German reinforcements in early 1941 prevented an outright victory. Prime Minister Winston Churchill's decision to send an expeditionary force to Greece in April ended in failure and by the summer of 1941 all British successes had been reversed. In the Atlantic the British were faced with a dangerous combination of German submarines, surface raiders and air power which came close to cutting Allied supply lines. Finally, since the outbreak of war, Britain had redistributed and reduced the size of its forces in the Far East. Japan had capitalised on this and the French collapse to augment its position, forcing the British to reinforce its garrisons in south-east Asia. In sum, the British were stretched and on the defensive in every theatre.²

The operational implementation of the economic blockade in September 1939 followed on from its conduct and the experience gathered during the First World War. The naval blockade continued to be conducted as a distant rather than a close blockade, made more necessary by the development of air power during the interwar era. The guarantor of the blockade was the Royal Navy's (RN) Home Fleet which moved up to its wartime anchorage at Scapa Flow in the Orkneys, from where it commanded the northern exits of the North Sea. The Home Fleet, with the assistance of auxiliary cruisers, was to prevent the break-out of German surface raiders into the Atlantic and intercept German maritime imports. The *Kriegsmarine* would be contained in the North Sea by sealing the Dover Straits with mines. Immediately on the onset of hostilities both sides declared defensive minefields protecting their coastlines and began to lay offensive minefields.³ The first British mines were laid by destroyers in areas off the German coast known to have been used as transit routes into the North Sea during the First World War.⁴ In November the Admiralty commenced preparations for the laying of a large defensive minefield across the North Sea to Norway, emulating the Northern Barrage scheme of 1918. As Lambert has shown, the implementation of the scheme, in addition to the technical and logistical problems associated with the vast undertaking, was caught up in the political debate surrounding the issue of Norwegian neutrality.

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³ BS No. 30 Naval Operation English Channel and Southern North Sea Sept. 1939–Apr. 1940. The National Archives (TNA) Kew Surrey ADM 234/351.