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ARTICLE



## Norway's Arctic policy: still high North, low tension?

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### ABSTRACT

For Norway, the Arctic is an integral part of the country in terms of both economic development and security considerations. Since 2005, consecutive governments in Oslo have made use of this fact, in combination with international attention given to the north, to foster a High North policy framed around regional economic development, climate issues and international cooperation (especially vis-à-vis Russia). However, over the last few years, challenges have emerged. Focusing on the foreign and security policy aspects of Norway's Arctic approach, this article defines Norway's Northern engagement and how this engagement has evolved since 2005. Then, the challenges currently facing Norway in the domain of foreign and security policy are discussed in terms of the new Arctic policy document released in late-2020. These challenges are broadly surmised as relating to Russia's military posture and the use of the Arctic as an arena for a China–US tug of war.

### KEYWORDS

Norway; arctic; arctic policy; russia; high north

## Introduction

In 2005, the then Norwegian foreign minister Jonas Gahr Støre urged the people to ‘Look north.’<sup>1</sup> Speaking in Tromsø, the self-proclaimed Arctic capital of Norway, he launched what was to become Norway's new foreign policy flagship: the High North policy (*nordområdepolitikken*).<sup>2</sup> With one-third of the landmass and 80% of its maritime domain located north of the Arctic Circle, it is no wonder that Norwegian politicians have been quick to seize the opportunity to promote a hybrid mixture of foreign and regional policy tools as the world has turned its attention northwards. Other Arctic countries – like Denmark, Sweden and the USA – have been much slower to embrace the Arctic as a foreign policy priority, if at all.

In part, Norway's orientation towards the Arctic occurred as the result of a domestic initiative because economic opportunities were increasingly becoming apparent in the North. In part, international conditions were ripe as climate awareness, resource

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<sup>1</sup>Quoting a poem by Roy Jacobsen.

<sup>2</sup>Note that a distinction is made between the High North and the Arctic here. The High North (*nordområdene* in Norwegian) has in many contexts been used to denote the immediate areas in the North that are part of, or are adjacent to, Norway. This includes the Barents Sea and the archipelago of Svalbard but not the entire polar region. The Arctic, on the other hand, refers to the entire circumpolar region (i.e., the entire area north of the Arctic Circle). However, it should be noted that such a separation is not necessarily unequivocally accepted, as the terms are often used interchangeably. See Skagestad, ‘Where Is the “High North”?’ for a longer discussion on the use of these terms.

potential and Russian re-emergence started to appear on the agenda. Lastly, the new majority government in office beginning in the autumn of 2005 acted as policy entrepreneurs, building on the discrete Northern policy steps taken by the previous government.<sup>3</sup>

When the Norwegian High North policy saw the light of day 15 years ago, it was an optimistic promise of increased attention to the North, new economic opportunities and the strengthening of dialogue and cooperation with Russia.<sup>4</sup> In the beginning, it looked hopeful: after the rather significant maritime boundary agreement with Russia regarding the Barents Sea was enacted in 2010, Russia's then President Medvedev declared a 'new era' of relations between Norway and Russia.<sup>5</sup> A border regime was created in 2012 so that the inhabitants of north-eastern Norway could travel visa free across the border to northwest Russia. The Arctic Council, created in 1996 to ensure cooperation on a range of issues in the Arctic, rose in stature and Norway managed to get the secretariat to Tromsø in 2011.

However, in 2014, the mood soured. First and foremost, the Russian annexation of Crimea contributed to changing the political climate in the North. Falling oil prices also led to the disappearance of many of the economic interests associated with the High North and to projects being placed on hold. Those who had expected (or hoped for) a Klondike in the North were disappointed, and the enthusiasm for the entire High North policy began to cool. It went from being an 'priority' to a 'responsibility'.<sup>6</sup>

In late-2020 the government in Oslo, which has held office for almost eight years, released the third Arctic policy of Norway (the first came in 2005 and the second in 2011). In terms of foreign policy, this signalled a third phase of the Norwegian High North policy: a phase that has been characterised by great power rivalry and harsh rhetoric outside Norway's borders.<sup>7</sup> Of the various parts of the Arctic, challenges are the greatest in the European part – Norway's northern areas. Here, the military presence and provocative exercise activities have been increasing the most.<sup>8</sup> *Aftenposten* – Norway's largest printed newspaper – describes this development as a 'power struggle on Norway's doorstep'.<sup>9</sup> Although researchers have largely rejected the idea of a budding resource war in the North,<sup>10</sup> the view of and discourse about the Arctic has changed. More countries are now looking North and seem eager to use the Arctic as an arena for foreign policy influence and symbolic politics.

In the last decade, the Norwegian government has made use of the phrase 'High North, low tension' to highlight that the Arctic, despite fantastical claims by some scholars and media outlets,<sup>11</sup> is a region characterised by amicable affairs. However, the question remains as to whether this is still an accurate portrayal of the current state of affairs and – crucially – Norway's Arctic approach. This article examines and reviews

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<sup>3</sup>The first policy documents concerning the 'new' Arctic were written in 2003 and 2005 by the previous government.

<sup>4</sup>Medby, 'Arctic State, Arctic Nation?'

<sup>5</sup>'Grenselinjeavtalen undertegnet.'

<sup>6</sup>The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs changed its description in Norwegian from '*satsning*' to '*ansvar*'.

<sup>7</sup>For example, in the autumn of 2019, the French Minister of Défense quoted a statement that referred to the Arctic as 'the new Middle East': French Ministry of Armed Forces, *New Strategic Challenges*, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup>Bruland and Bendixen, 'Amerikanske bombefly,' Norum, 'Russland simulerte angrep.'

<sup>9</sup>I. Moe, 'Arktis smelter.'

<sup>10</sup>Byers, 'Crises and International Cooperation,' Claes and A. Moe, 'Arctic Offshore Petroleum'.

<sup>11</sup>For an analysis, see Klimenko, Nilsson, and Christensen, 'Narratives in the Russian Media,' Padrtova, 'Frozen Narratives,' Nilsson and Christensen, *Arctic Geopolitics*.

Norway's Arctic endeavours, not only limited to the official policy documents but also taking into consideration wider security concerns and interests.

The focus is on foreign policy dimensions, with an explicit emphasis on security policies. The article examines what defines Norway's Northern engagement and how that engagement has evolved since 2005. Furthermore, how priorities have shifted in terms of security policy in the North is examined. The discussion then turns to the challenges that Norway is currently facing in the domains of foreign and security policy in 2021 and that it may face in the future. These challenges are broadly categorised as relating to Russia's military posture – as is typical in Norwegian foreign and security policy outlooks – and the use of the Arctic as an arena for a China–US tug of war, which has emerged as an entirely new dimension of Arctic politics.

### Norway and the high North (*nordområdene*)

The Norwegian definition of the Arctic includes everything north of the Arctic Circle (66° 34 N). In Norway – a unitary state structure – this includes Nordland county, Troms and Finnmark county, the Svalbard archipelago and the island of Jan Mayen. The largest cities are Tromsø, Bodø and Harstad. The population of almost half a million in the Norwegian Arctic alone is relatively high compared to the North American Arctic, though it is sparsely populated by European standards. Of these, around 40 000 are Sami – the indigenous peoples of Norway that primarily resides in the two northern counties, albeit with some exceptions. The Sami have their own Parliament, located in Karasjok in Troms and Finnmark county, which has some political and administrative responsibilities.

In Norway, a distinction is generally made between the Arctic (referring essentially to the Arctic Ocean and the largely uninhabited territories of the High Arctic) and the High North (*nordområdene* in Norwegian). The High North is generally defined as the more hospitable and populated parts of northern Norway and Svalbard as well as the adjacent maritime and land areas in the European part of the Arctic (Figure 1).<sup>12</sup>

Looking broadly at Norway's foreign and security approach to the Arctic, one-third of Norway's territory and 80% of its maritime zones are found within the region; thus, the Arctic is clearly not isolated from larger national security and defence policies. Rather, the High North is central to Norway's security considerations, the primary concern being its shared land and sea border with Russia.<sup>13</sup> Since the end of World War II, Norwegian security policy has concentrated on managing its relationship with its eastern neighbour. In what is generally termed an asymmetric relationship, Norway has endeavoured to balance its military inferiority to Russia through its membership in NATO and a bilateral relationship with the US.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, Norway has been a strong supporter of multilateralism and cooperative solutions in its foreign policy.<sup>15</sup> This has created a situation in which, on the one hand, Norway has sought the active presence of and engagement with the US and its European allies, with the aim of deterring Russia. On the other hand, Norway has pursued multilateral cooperation with Russia through both international and regional organisations, including the UN, the Arctic Council and regional cooperation in the Barents area.

<sup>12</sup> Støre, 'High North and the Arctic,' Skagestad, 'Where Is the "High North"?'

<sup>13</sup> Tamnes, *Oljealder*.

<sup>14</sup> Tamnes, 'Arctic Security and Norway,' Tamnes, *Oljealder*.

<sup>15</sup> Neumann et al., *Norge og alliansene*.



**Figure 1.** Map of Norway, with the Arctic Circle highlighted. [Image courtesy of Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arctic\\_Norway](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arctic_Norway)].

### *The special case of svalbard*

A special note on Svalbard is needed due to its rather unique status. In the early twentieth century, when promising discoveries of coal were being made and mines opened, specific steps were taken to establish an administration of this northern archipelago. Post-war negotiations resulted in a treaty that gave sovereignty over Svalbard (then called Spitsbergen) to Norway.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Svalbard Treaty.

The treaty also aimed to secure the economic interests of nationals from other countries. This was done by including provisions on equal rights and non-discrimination in the most relevant economic activities; Norway could not treat other nationals less favourably than its own citizens, and taxes levied on Svalbard could be used solely for local purposes. Moreover, the islands could not be used for ‘warlike purposes’.<sup>17</sup>

International economic interest in Svalbard plummeted before World War II, and soon only Norwegian and Soviet mining companies had activities there.<sup>18</sup> Consecutive Norwegian governments in Oslo sought to maintain the Norwegian population on the islands, predominantly through subsidising coal mining and supporting the largest community, Longyearbyen.<sup>19</sup> Today, with the increased attention given to the Arctic region, the Svalbard archipelago has taken centre stage in regional relations. Although there is no dispute over the sovereignty of Svalbard, there is an ongoing disagreement over the status of the maritime zones around the archipelago.<sup>20</sup>

As coastal state rights expanded with the development of the Law of the Sea in the 1960s and 1970s, Norway – like most other states – declared an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of 200 nm off its coast in 1976.<sup>21</sup> According to the Norwegian government, Norway, as the coastal state of Svalbard, was entitled to establish an EEZ around the archipelago, as the non-discriminatory provision in the treaty referred only, and explicitly, to the islands themselves and their territorial waters.<sup>22</sup> Norway also considers the continental shelf to be under exclusive Norwegian jurisdiction. However, this view has been disputed by other states. To avoid further conflict, Norway established a Fisheries Protection Zone (FPZ) in 1977,<sup>23</sup> which grants access to fisheries based on historic activity. Moreover, although there has been no oil or gas exploration in the area, the prospect of that activity, as well as the related dispute between Norway and the EU over rights to snow crab fisheries on the shelf,<sup>24</sup> has brought the status of the zones to the forefront of the Svalbard debates.

### **An arctic policy emerges: 2005–2013**

The Arctic moved to the forefront of Norwegian policymaking through a series of studies and parliamentary reports from 2003 to 2005 that highlighted the development potential of the region.<sup>25</sup> This interest was particularly spurred by economic pursuits in the Barents Sea from the petroleum sector, as fields further south in the North Sea were depleting. The first Arctic policy document – *Opportunities and challenges in the North* – was released in 2005 by the conservative coalition government.<sup>26</sup> The ‘red-green’ coalition government led by Jens Stoltenberg<sup>27</sup> took office a few months later and further emphasised Arctic affairs. Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre in particular led the government’s High North drive.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Svalbard Treaty*, Art. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Pedersen, ‘Politics of Presence.’

<sup>19</sup> Named after the American John Longyear, whose Arctic Coal Company began coal mining there in 1906.

<sup>20</sup> Østhaugen, Jørgensen, and A. Moe, ‘Svalbard Fisheries.’

<sup>21</sup> Norwegian Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries, *Økonomiske soneloven*.

<sup>22</sup> Ulfstein, *From Terra Nullius*; Pedersen and Henriksen, ‘Svalbard’s Maritime Zones.’

<sup>23</sup> Norwegian Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries, ‘Fiskevernsonen.’

<sup>24</sup> Østhaugen and Raspotnik, ‘Crab!’

<sup>25</sup> Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Muligheter og utfordringer*; Orheim et al., *Mot Nord!*; Brunstad et al., *Big Oil Playground*; ECON, *2025 ringer*.

<sup>26</sup> Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Muligheter og utfordringer*.

<sup>27</sup> Consisting of the Labour party (red), the Socialist Left party (red/green) and the Centre party (agrarian green).

<sup>28</sup> Jensen and Hønneland, ‘Framing the High North.’



During the Stoltenberg government, the elevation of the High North was part of the Norwegian Foreign Ministry's deliberate focus on circumpolar cooperation, which was designed to counterbalance the bellicose statements concerning the conflict potential in the North.<sup>29</sup> In both foreign and domestic media, Foreign Minister Støre and Prime Minister Stoltenberg frequently stressed the region's uniqueness as an area for cooperation.<sup>30</sup> Notably, when the Russian scientist and parliamentarian Artur Chilingarov planted a flag on the North Pole seabed in 2007 and helped draw worldwide attention to the region, Støre used the opportunity to emphasise multilateral cooperation.<sup>31</sup>

This culminated in a meeting between top-level political representatives of the five Arctic coastal states in Ilulissat, Greenland in 2008, where they publicly declared the Arctic to be a 'region of cooperation' while also affirming the centrality of the Law of the Sea-regime more generally in the north.<sup>32</sup> The deterioration of relations between Russia and its Arctic neighbours since 2014 as a result of Russian actions in eastern Ukraine and Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula did not change this.<sup>33</sup> Instead, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has continued to proactively emphasise the 'peaceful' and 'cooperative' nature of regional politics.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, Norway has actively pursued diplomatic and multilateral efforts to help ensure 'low tension' in the High North.<sup>35</sup> To this end, Norway has promoted the inclusion of other non-Arctic actors such as the EU and China in Arctic discussions<sup>36</sup> while also emphasising the primacy of Northern countries when dealing with Arctic issues. The emergence of the Arctic Council in the wake of the Cold War as the primary forum for regional affairs in the Arctic plays into this setting,<sup>37</sup> as Norway managed to get the secretariat permanently located in Tromsø.<sup>38</sup>

The renewed emphasis on the Arctic has also stressed the need to build a pragmatic bilateral relationship with Russia in order to manage cross-border issues, ranging from migration and trade to fish stocks, and to improve people-to-people cooperation at the local and regional levels.<sup>39</sup> A highlight of this cooperative Arctic focus came in 2010, when Norway and Russia agreed to settle their boundary dispute in the Arctic.<sup>40</sup> After four decades of negotiation, both sides agreed to delineate a maritime boundary in the Barents Sea. Russia's Foreign Minister Lavrov and his Norwegian counterpart Støre subsequently co-authored an op-ed in the Canadian newspaper *Globe and Mail*, in which they asked Canada to take note: 'if there is one lesson that the biting cold and the dark winters of the Arctic should teach us, it is that no one survives alone out there for long'.<sup>41</sup>

This message could be considered equally applicable to Norway's efforts to keep its allies engaged in Northern affairs. Emphasis on cooperation with Russia has not diminished the overarching security concerns regarding its eastern neighbour. These concerns never entirely disappeared after the end of the Cold War but were seen as less pressing in the early to mid-

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.; Grindheim, *Scramble*.

<sup>30</sup>A. Moe, Fjærtøft, and Øverland, 'Space and Timing,' Støre, 'High North and the Arctic.'

<sup>31</sup>Grindheim, *Scramble*, 6–10.

<sup>32</sup>See the statement here: [http://www.oceanlaw.org/downloads/arctic/Ilulissat\\_Declaration.pdf](http://www.oceanlaw.org/downloads/arctic/Ilulissat_Declaration.pdf).

<sup>33</sup>See Byers, 'Crises and International Cooperation.'

<sup>34</sup>Wilson Rowe, 'Analyzing Frenemies,' Heininen et al., *Arctic Policies and Strategies*.

<sup>35</sup>Keil and Knecht, *Governing Arctic Change*.

<sup>36</sup>Offerdal, 'Arctic Energy.'

<sup>37</sup>Rottem, 'Arctic Council.'

<sup>38</sup>Graczyk and Rottem, 'Arctic Council.'

<sup>39</sup>Hønneland, 'Miljø- og ressursforvaltning.'

<sup>40</sup>Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Delelinjeavtalen med Russland.'

<sup>41</sup>Lavrov and Støre, 'Canada, Take Note.'

2000s. Prior to 2005, and to a large degree from 2005 to 2007, traditional security aspects were almost absent from High North policy.<sup>42</sup> While cooperation continued to be highlighted in Norwegian foreign policy in general and the High North policy in particular, the years 2007 and 2008 witnessed a clear shift in Norwegian security and defence policy (and subsequently the High North policy to some extent). From 2007 to 2014, security was ‘enhanced’ in High North policy in the sense that concerns about Russia were framed as ‘the changing security environment in the Arctic/High North’.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, while continuing to emphasise the need for good neighbourly relations with Russia, the Stoltenberg government also made the decision to modernise the Norwegian military,<sup>44</sup> which was clearly motivated by the potential for military challenge from Russia. Since 2008, securing NATO’s and key allies’ attention regarding Norwegian concerns in the North became the core effort of Norwegian security policy. Norwegian efforts to increase the relevance of Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO) emerged around the same time, although these efforts have varied and at times floundered, as the Nordic countries have had diverging security approaches.<sup>45</sup> Russia was plainly the reason for Norwegian concerns, but Norwegian authorities rarely stated this explicitly, even in closed-door NATO settings.<sup>46</sup> Only after the change of government in 2013 and the Ukraine crisis in 2014 did the Norwegian authorities start to refer openly to Russia as a potential threat to be deterred<sup>47</sup> – a shift which in many ways was a return to normality in Norway–Russia relations.<sup>48</sup>

### Arctic shift: 2013–2014

After the new ‘blue-blue’ (conservative) coalition government took over in 2013, a recalibration of Arctic expectations occurred.<sup>49</sup> The drop in the price of oil and natural gas, combined with the dramatic events in Ukraine in spring 2014, were key reasons for this shift. As NATO gradually returned to emphasising collective defence at home starting in 2014, Norwegian security and defence policy became more detached from its High North policy as it shifted towards more traditional Cold War issues and geography.<sup>50</sup> Instead of promoting NATO engagement in the Arctic, Norway placed new emphasis on maritime issues, particularly in the North Atlantic/Barents Sea.<sup>51</sup>

As a result, Norwegian High North policy – as a specific portfolio under the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – became more concerned with soft security issues and regional development. Other engaged ministries, such as the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation and the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries, have taken on a larger role in Norway’s Arctic policy development. Norway’s relationship to

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<sup>42</sup>Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *High North Strategy*; Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Norway’s High North Strategy.’

<sup>43</sup>Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Norway’s Arctic Strategy*.

<sup>44</sup>Håkenstad and Bogen, *Balansegang*.

<sup>45</sup>Saxi, ‘The Rise, Fall and Resurgence of Nordic Defence Cooperation.’

<sup>46</sup>Østhagen, Sharp, and Hilde, ‘At Opposite Poles.’

<sup>47</sup>See Expert Commission, *Unified Effort*; Norwegian Intelligence Service, *Focus 2016*.

<sup>48</sup>Rowe, ‘Fra unntakstilstand.’

<sup>49</sup>The minority coalition consisted of the Conservative party (blue) and the Progress party (blue), which had the support of the Liberal party and the Christian Democratic Party in parliament.

<sup>50</sup>Expert Commission, *Unified Effort*.

<sup>51</sup>Søreide, ‘NATO and the North Atlantic.’



**Table 1.** Arctic policy documents released since 2003.

Year	Policy
2003	Mot Nord! Utfordringer og muligheter i Nordområdene [Towards North! Challenges and opportunities in the High North]
2005	Muligheter og utfordringer i Nord [Opportunities and challenges in the North] <sup>55</sup>
2006	Barents 2020 – Et virkemiddel for en fremtidsrettet nordområdepolitikk [Barents 2020 – A tool for a forward-looking High North policy] <sup>56</sup>
2006	Regjeringens nordområdestrategi [The Norwegian government's strategy for the High North] <sup>57</sup>
2009	Nye byggesteiner i Nord [New building blocks in the North] <sup>58</sup>
2010	Nordområdesatsingen – Status Oktober 2010 [The High North initiative – Status October 2010] <sup>59</sup>
2011	Nordområdene – Visjon og virkemidler [The High North – Visions and strategies] <sup>60</sup>
2014	Nordkloden [Norway's Arctic policy] <sup>61</sup>
2017	Nordområdestrategi – Mellom geopolitikk og samfunnsutvikling [Arctic Strategy] <sup>62</sup>
2020	Mennesker, muligheter og norske interesser i nord [The Norwegian Government's Arctic Policy – People, opportunities and Norwegian interests in the Arctic] <sup>63</sup>

Notes: Overview of the various policy and strategy documents released by the Norwegian Government between 2003 and 2021. Items in bold were reported to the Norwegian Parliament (Stortingsmelding).

the Arctic at large, however, is inherently intertwined with its relationship with Russia and will be determined to a large extent by Russian actions and development.<sup>52</sup>

In November 2020, after seven years in office, the conservative coalition launched its first (and only the third in history) report to the Norwegian Parliament on Norway's High North policy. This document built on the previous mixing of regional and economic development priorities as well as rather general foreign policy aspirations. Even more explicitly stated than previous iterations, it focuses on how value creation and regional growth in the North is a target in itself, which would in turn support not only the local and national economy but also the foreign and security policy goals of Norway.<sup>53</sup> The government also placed greater focus on some of the contentious issues that have arisen over the last three years concerning the role of China in the Arctic and the two-track relationship Norway has with Russia. These are addressed in more detail in the following section. **Table 1** presents a summary of all the various Arctic policy and/or strategy documents released by the three different coalition governments since 2003.

## Still high North, low tension?

### *Dancing with the bear*

In the confrontation between the two military blocs of the polar region during the Cold War, Norway was the only NATO country that shared a land border with the Soviet Union, which in turn defined Norway's Northern approach. From the mid-2000s

<sup>52</sup>Norwegian Intelligence Service, *Fokus 2016*; Tamnes and Offerdal, 'Conclusion.'

<sup>53</sup>Norwegian Ministries, 'The Norwegian Government's Arctic Policy: People, Opportunities and Norwegian Interests in the Arctic.'

<sup>54</sup><https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/nou-2003-32/id149022/>

<sup>55</sup><https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/stmeld-nr-30-2004-2005-/id407537/>

<sup>56</sup><https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/barents2020e/id514815/>

<sup>57</sup><https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/strategy-for-the-high-north/id448697/>

<sup>58</sup>[https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/north\\_blocks/id548803/](https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/north_blocks/id548803/)

<sup>59</sup><https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/nordomradesatsingen—status-oktober-2010/id620374/>

<sup>60</sup>[https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/high\\_north\\_visions\\_strategies/id664906/](https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/high_north_visions_strategies/id664906/)

<sup>61</sup><https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/nordkloden/id2076193/>

<sup>62</sup><https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/arctic-strategy/id2550081/>

<sup>63</sup>[https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/arctic\\_policy/id2830120/](https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/arctic_policy/id2830120/)

onwards, the Arctic regained strategic importance. Echoing the dynamics of the Cold War, this occurred primarily because Russia under President Vladimir Putin began to strengthen its military (and nuclear) prowess in order to reassert Russia's position in world politics.<sup>64</sup> In addition to the changing political circumstances in the Arctic, the region's growing importance was also the result of Russia's naturally (i.e., geographically) dominant position in the North and its long history of a strong naval presence – the Northern Fleet – on the Kola Peninsula. This peninsula houses Russia's strategic submarines, which are essential to the country's status as a major global nuclear power.<sup>65</sup>

With Russia's re-establishment of its Northern Fleet primarily for strategic purposes (albeit with an eye towards regional development as well), Norway – with its defence posture defined by the situation in its northern areas to a large degree – faced a more challenging security environment. In general, western security analysts have interpreted Norway's northern areas to be covered by a so-called Russian 'bastion concept' – a strategy developed during the Cold War in order to ensure access to and from the North Atlantic and to control access to the Northern Fleet's headquarters at Severomorsk.<sup>66</sup> Thus, military planning in Norway since the 1940s has been dominated by concerns over Russian military activity in the North – both as an extension of Russia's broader strategic plans and more recently in terms of other types of interference and destabilising measures vis-à-vis Norway's northernmost regions.<sup>67</sup>

Since 2014, defence aspects have made relations increasingly tense, with bellicose rhetoric and increased military activity, including military exercises, on both sides.<sup>68</sup> The recent 2020-long-term plan for the Norwegian Armed Forces re-iterates Norwegian concerns over an increasingly tense great-power rivalry in the High North, while adding plans to purchase new tanks, adding a new Army battalion in the north, acquiring new submarines and the phasing in of F-35 (replacing ageing F-16) aircrafts and P-8 (replacing ageing P-3) maritime surveillance aircrafts.<sup>69</sup>

One example of an Arctic-specific sensitive issue in Norway–Russia relations concerns the mentioned archipelago of Svalbard. The outlined FPZ arrangement satisfied several states that had voiced opposition to Norway's insistence on exclusive resource rights,<sup>70</sup> although the disagreement with Russia has continued to be a source of tension.<sup>71</sup> The Russian position, expressed in diplomatic notes, has been that Norway had no right to unilaterally establish an FPZ and that fisheries in the waters around Svalbard should have been the subject of bilateral negotiations between Norway and Russia.<sup>72</sup> The argument is that the waters are international, and regulations – which can be set only by international fisheries organisations – can be enforced by the flag state alone, in this case Russia.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Hilde, 'Armed Forces,' 153–5.

<sup>65</sup>Sergunin and Konyshov, 'Russia in Search,' 75.

<sup>66</sup>Kvam, 'Strategic Deterrence.'

<sup>67</sup>Rowe, 'Fra unntakstilstand,' Rowe, 'Fornuft og følelser.'

<sup>68</sup>Norwegian Intelligence Service, *Focus 2020*; Friis, 'NATO in the North.'

<sup>69</sup>See the whole document here: <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/81506a8900cc4f16bf805b936e3bb041/nofdfs/prp202020210014000dddpdfs.pdf>

<sup>70</sup>Pedersen and Henriksen, 'Svalbard's Maritime Zones,' 146.

<sup>71</sup>Østhagen, 'Managing Conflict at Sea.'

<sup>72</sup>Note from Russia to Norway, 18 August 1998, cited in Pedersen and Henriksen, 'Svalbard's Maritime Zones,' 146.

<sup>73</sup>Pedersen, 'Internasjonal Svalbard politikk,' 34.

With the strained Norway–Russia relations post-2014, further attention has been paid to the potential for conflict in the FPZ over fisheries.<sup>74</sup> Both countries deem this to be a part of the Arctic that holds economic and strategic importance.<sup>75</sup> In February 2020, in connection with the centenary of the *Svalbard Treaty*, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov sent a letter to his Norwegian counterpart listing Russia's complaints, including 'the unlawfulness of Norway's fisheries protection zone'.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, Norway and Russia, and earlier the Soviet Union, have a long history of cooperation in Arctic fisheries management. This has played a significant role in reducing tension in the Barents Sea and preventing small-scale incidents from escalating out of control.<sup>77</sup>

### Taming the eagle

The Arctic does not play the same seminal role in security and defence considerations across all Arctic countries. For the Nordic countries and Russia, certain parts of the Arctic are central to their day-to-day security concerns. In North America, however, the Arctic's importance in terms of national security has been lower, albeit increasing.<sup>78</sup> Security and – essentially – defence dynamics in the Arctic remain anchored at the sub-regional and bilateral level. Of these, the Barents Sea/European Arctic stand out. This has become apparent in the past decade as the number of military exercises in this part of the Arctic has increased, particularly with the engagement of the US.

For Norway, a close bilateral relationship with the US has been one of the pillars of Norwegian foreign and security policy in modern times. The US is seen as the ultimate guarantor of Norwegian sovereignty in balancing the security concerns regarding Russia.<sup>79</sup> However, Norway has always sought a balanced approach (albeit not neutral, as is the case with its neighbours Finland and Sweden) to US engagement in its northern domain, for example, by not allowing nuclear weapons to be stationed in its territory.<sup>80</sup> This approach has worked rather well, although concerns over too much US/NATO military activity was prevalent during the Cold War, with fears that Norway would get caught in between the two superpowers if conflict was to erupt.<sup>81</sup>

Although the same balancing act is still very much a cornerstone of Norway's security and defence posture in the North vis-à-vis Russia,<sup>82</sup> concerns over the US approach to Arctic or Northern European security have emerged as the Trump administration became more vocal about Arctic security issues from 2018–2019. On the one hand, Norway has long desired increased US and allied attention on the North,<sup>83</sup> starting with the Core Area Initiative launched by Norway through NATO in 2008.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, 2019–2020 saw increasingly alarmist statements from US officials concerning the

<sup>74</sup> Østhagen, 'High North, Low Politics.'

<sup>75</sup> Todorov, 'Russia in Maritime Areas off Spitsbergen (Svalbard): Is It Worth Opening the Pandora's Box?'

<sup>76</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, '100th Anniversary of the Spitsbergen Treaty.'

<sup>77</sup> Hønneland, *Making Fishery Agreements Work*; Stokke, 'Geopolitics, Governance, and Arctic Fisheries.'

<sup>78</sup> Greaves and Lackenbauer, 'Re-Thinking Sovereignty'; Conley et al., *America's Arctic Moment*.

<sup>79</sup> Rottem, 'Ambivalent Ally.'

<sup>80</sup> See Skogrand and Tamnes, *Fryktens likevekt*.

<sup>81</sup> Hilde, 'Forsvar vår dyd.'

<sup>82</sup> In Norwegian, this policy is referred to as *avskrekking og beroligelse* (deterrence and appeasement). See Tamnes, *Oljealder*.

<sup>83</sup> Hilde and Widerberg, 'NATO's nye strategiske konsept.'

<sup>84</sup> Haraldstad, 'Embetsverkets rolle'; Sørdeide, 'Security Situation in Europe.'

Arctic security environment,<sup>85</sup> and the US participated in multiple military exercises and ‘maritime security operations’ in the Barents Sea.<sup>86</sup> As a result, some have argued that Norway risks getting too much of what it asked for in terms of US–Arctic engagement.<sup>87</sup> These concerns are relevant not only to the discussion of traditional security and defence concerns in the High North/Barents Sea area but also in terms of the United States’ increasing obsession with China’s Arctic interests.

### Enter the dragon

In the past decade, China has emerged as a new Arctic actor, proclaiming itself as a ‘near-Arctic state’.<sup>88</sup> The Arctic is just one arena where China’s presence and interaction are components of an expansion of power in both soft and hard terms – be it through scientific research or investment in Russia’s fossil fuel and mineral extraction industries across Arctic countries.<sup>89</sup> Beijing has used all the correct Arctic buzzwords about cooperation and restraint in tune with the preferences of the Arctic states, and it has emphasised interests in a ‘Polar Silk Route’ and climate research.<sup>90</sup>

However, the US has explicitly rejected China’s Arctic engagement. The US Secretary of State Richard Pompeo warned in 2019 that Beijing’s Arctic activity risks creating a ‘new South China Sea,’<sup>91</sup> which is related to how the Trump administration saw the Arctic as yet another arena of emerging systemic competition between the two countries.<sup>92</sup> Despite President Biden taking office in 2021, the Arctic is likely to continue to be relevant in the global power competition between China and the US.

Unlike its neighbourly relations with Russia, Norway’s relationship with China is both more fragile and less immediately relevant. When the Nobel Committee – appointed by the Norwegian Parliament – awarded the Peace Prize to human rights activist and Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo in 2010, China punished Norway by limiting diplomatic contact and trade relations. Only in 2016 did relations between Norway and China normalise.<sup>93</sup> Critics have since argued that Norway’s kowtow to China to achieve resumption in relations went too far, especially as concerns over Chinese investments and intelligence gathering have increased post-2016.<sup>94</sup>

This feeds into fears across the Arctic concerned with the beginning of a more assertive Chinese presence where geo-economic actions<sup>95</sup> (i.e., financial investments motivated by geopolitical goals)<sup>96</sup> as part of a more ambitious political strategy aimed at challenging the hegemony of the ‘West’ and also the balance of power in the north.<sup>97</sup> North Norway is no exception, and debates in the country have emerged as regional and

<sup>85</sup>e.g., Office of the Under Secretary of Defence for Policy, *Arctic Strategy*; Humpert, ‘Russian Arctic Military.’

<sup>86</sup>US Naval Forces Europe-Africa, ‘Ships,’ Nilsen, ‘B-52.’

<sup>87</sup>Danilov, ‘Norwegian Participation,’ Danilov, ‘Northern Norway.’

<sup>88</sup>Kopra, ‘China’s Arctic Interests.’

<sup>89</sup>See Bennett, ‘Arctic Law and Governance,’ Sun, ‘Dragon and the Panda,’ Koivurova and Kopra, *Chinese Policy*.

<sup>90</sup>State Council of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Arctic Policy*.

<sup>91</sup>‘Beijing’s Arctic Activity.’

<sup>92</sup>Tunsjø, *Bipolarity in World Politics*.

<sup>93</sup>Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Normalization of Bilateral Relations.’

<sup>94</sup>Martinsen, ‘Knefallet for Kina.’

<sup>95</sup>See Lanteigne, ‘Role of China,’ Koivurova et al., ‘China’s Arctic Policy.’

<sup>96</sup>Sparke, ‘From Geopolitics to Geoeconomics.’

<sup>97</sup>Willis and Depledge, ‘China’s Admission,’ Lanteigne, ‘China’s Emerging Strategies.’

local actors grapple with China's more or less unfulfilled investment promises.<sup>98</sup> Yet the exact details of *which* investments *where* are often not specified and the 'China-fear' in the Arctic has for now been mostly rhetoric with few reference to actual Chinese actions in the north.

### **Future arctic security concerns for Norway**

Starting with regional (intra-Arctic) dynamics, the central question for Norwegian decision-makers in Oslo is how northern relations can be insulated from events and relations elsewhere, while still standing 'firm' vis-à-vis a resurgent Russian neighbour. Undoubtedly, the Arctic states – with Norway taking one of the leading roles – have managed to do a relatively good job at keeping relations civil in everything but military relations, despite setbacks due to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. This political situation is underpinned by the Arctic states' shared economic interest in maintaining stable regional relations. Also, shifting global power balances and greater regional interest from Beijing need not lead to tension and conflict in the Arctic. On the contrary, they might spur efforts to find ways of including China in regional forums, alleviating the Arctic states' geo-economic concerns.

Moreover, we cannot discount the role of an Arctic community of experts, ranging from diplomats participating in forums such as the Arctic Council to academics and businesspersons who constitute the backbone of forums and networks that implicitly or explicitly promote Northern cooperation. Norway has been a proponent of this through venues such as the annual Arctic Frontier (in Tromsø) and High North Dialogue (in Bodø) conferences that have emerged in the past decade.<sup>99</sup> Also noteworthy are new agreements and/or institutions that have been created to deal with specific issues in the Arctic as they arise, such as the 2018 'A5 + 5' (which includes China, Iceland, Japan, South Korea and the EU) agreement to prevent unregulated fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean as well as the Arctic Coast Guard Forum established in 2015.<sup>100</sup> In these avenues of cooperation, Norway has been a rather proactive instigator and participant.

Other Arctic-related issues have been more difficult for Norway to manage. In the Norwegian Sea, a decade-long dispute between Iceland, the EU, the Faroe Islands and Norway over the distribution of the total allowable catch for mackerel has led to concerns over the stock being depleted.<sup>101</sup> Climate change has led to shifts in the stock's distribution, and the ensuing disagreement over which principles should govern quota allocations has proven difficult to solve.<sup>102</sup> In the FPZ around Svalbard, another dispute has emerged between the EU and Norway concerning whether or not the *Svalbard Treaty* applies to the shelf surrounding the archipelago.<sup>103</sup> The instigator of this dispute has been snow crab fisheries – a new and potentially highly profitable resource in the Norwegian Arctic.<sup>104</sup> These examples indicate that there are indeed issues in the Arctic that are cause

<sup>98</sup>Gåsemyr and Sverdrup-Thygeson, 'Chinese Investments in Norway;' Sverdrup-Thygeson and Mathy, 'Kinesiske investeringer;' Lanteigne, 'China's Emerging Strategies.'

<sup>99</sup>Steinveg, 'Backdoor.'

<sup>100</sup>US Department of State, 'Arctic Nations;' Østhagen, 'Arctic Coast Guard.'

<sup>101</sup>MSC, 'Certificates Suspended.'

<sup>102</sup>Østhagen, Spijkers, and Totland, 'Mackerel Dispute.'

<sup>103</sup>Østhagen and Raspotnik, 'Crab!'

<sup>104</sup>Hansen, 'Snow Crab.'

for concern, although so far they have been compartmentalised and kept from influencing pan-Arctic cooperation.

For Norwegian foreign and security policy in the North, however, the most pressing daily challenge is how to deal with and talk about Northern security concerns. The Arctic-wide debate on what mechanisms are best suited for further expanding security cooperation has been ongoing for a decade.<sup>105</sup> The Northern Chiefs of Defence Conference and the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable initiatives were established in 2011 and 2012 to address this issue, but they fell apart after 2014. The difficulties encountered while trying to establish an arena for security discussions indicate the high sensitivity to, and influence of, events and evolutions elsewhere.<sup>106</sup> Any Arctic security dialogue is fragile and risks being overshadowed by the increasingly tense NATO–Russia relationship in Europe at large.

Still, Norway maintains bilateral security dialogue with Russia through a direct channel between the Norwegian Armed Forces Headquarters outside of Bodø and the Northern Fleet at Severomorsk. Neighbours, after all, are forced to interact regardless of the positive or negative character of their relations. Nevertheless, bilateral relationships are impacted by regional relations (say, a new agreement signed under Arctic Council auspices), which can in turn have an impact on the same relations (deterioration in bilateral relations might, for example, make it more difficult to reach an agreement in the Arctic Council). In other words, bilateral relations, especially those as delicately balanced as Norway's relations with Russia, can easily become funnels for issues and dynamics at different levels of international politics.

## Concluding remarks

Norway has been one of the most Arctic-focused of all the circumpolar countries in the past two decades. This is partly due to Norway's geographic position – located at the relatively temperate nexus between the North Atlantic, the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean – and partly a result of its political handywork starting in 2003-5 to elevate the importance of the High North on both foreign and domestic policy agendas. Norway's Arctic policy endeavour has undergone several phases since its creation over 15 years ago. Excitement and euphoria<sup>107</sup> dominated the first phase, while security issues and economic disillusionment dominated the second. Now we are in the third phase, which has been dominated by geostrategic concerns and symbolic chest thumping by global actors.

Although the Norwegian High North (or Arctic if you will) policy is a unique hybrid mixture of regional and foreign policy tools, this article emphasises the broader security dimensions of Norway's Northern policy approach over the last decades. As Arctic 'middle powers'<sup>108</sup> that are often free of broad international entanglements, countries like Norway, Canada and Denmark are likely to make use of their advantageous geographic positions to influence the near abroad. They are also concerned with upholding regional and global governance mechanisms (hereunder international law) that ensure

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<sup>105</sup>See Conley et al., *New Security Architecture*.

<sup>106</sup>Depledge et al., 'Military Code of Conduct.'

<sup>107</sup>From Hønneland, *Arctic Euphoria*.

<sup>108</sup>E.g. Crosby, 'Middle-Power Military.'



stability and cooperation in the North and are eager to avoid the Arctic getting dragged into global rivalries or conflicts originating elsewhere.

In any case, it appears that Norway will continue to pursue an active role in the North, regardless of changes in government or further deterioration of Arctic regional relations. That prediction comes from the simple fact that almost 10% of Norway's population and much more of its economic and resource potential lie north of the Arctic Circle: the region is not a periphery the same way that Alaska or Greenland are vis-à-vis Washington DC or Copenhagen. The Arctic is integral to Norwegian economic and security concerns, which Norway's Arctic policy in recent decades has both contributed to and been a consequence of. Norway's entry into the UN Security Council (from 2021 until 2023) and its increased engagement with global ocean politics are also linked to its Arctic policy priorities.<sup>109</sup>

The idiom 'High North, low tension' still very much describe how Norway would *prefer* Arctic relations to be – especially vis-à-vis its Russian neighbour. Whether this description will continue to apply is up for debate. Military activity in the form of exercises and – at times– provocative manoeuvres in the Barents Sea is nothing new to that part of the world. What has changed is how that activity is being interpreted and how certain political leaders make symbolic statements about Arctic geopolitics. The worry, however, is that such hype might spur further increases in military activity and thus fuel the very race that leaders are fearful of. Due to its role as both a NATO member and Russia's neighbour, Norway in particular has a special responsibility to convey a cooler message while also continuing to encourage cooperative measures in the North, especially in the domain of security politics.

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<sup>109</sup>Østhagen, 'Det nye havet.'

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