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## NORWAY AND THE HIGH NORTH: FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGIES SINCE THE COLD WAR

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### ABSTRACT

The High North is the number one priority in Norwegian foreign politics. The country's High North strategies have traditionally centred on its relationship with other states in the Barents Sea area, Russia in particular. During the Cold War, security interests dominated, while after the dissolution of the Soviet Union institutionalized cooperation with Russia became the hallmark of Norwegian High North politics, bilaterally and multilaterally through the Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAR) initiative. From the mid-2000s, the division between foreign and domestic policies gradually dissolved, while more recently the circumpolar dimension has grown in importance. Hence, balancing the domestic, regional and circumpolar aspects of its foreign policy is the main challenge in Norwegian High North policies. But this also makes it possible to cultivate different dimensions of these policies depending on the international political situation. Hence, both the circumpolar and national dimensions have become more important following Russia's annexation of the Crimea in 2014, at the expense of bilateral relations with Russia. These approaches converge, however, in the image of High North politics as a "national project."

**Keywords:** Arctic politics, High North, Barents region

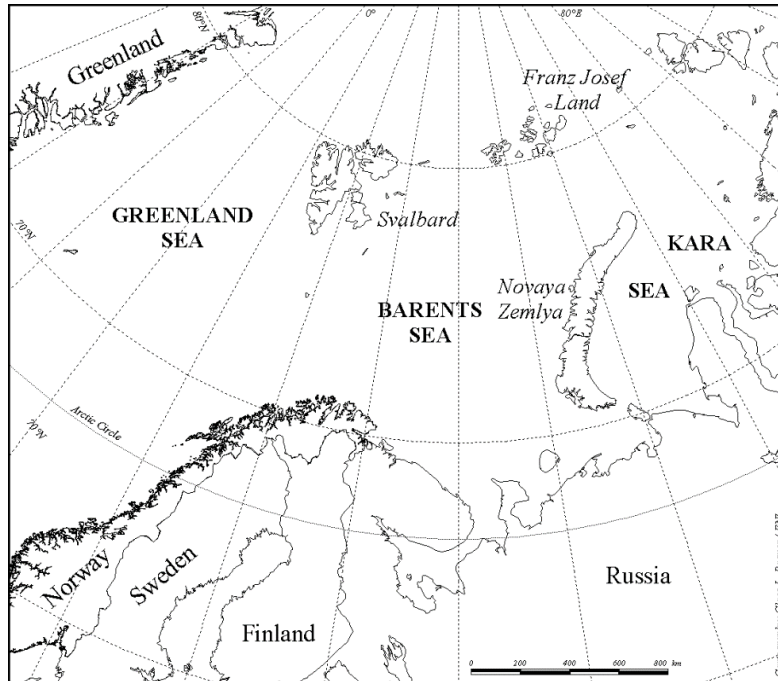
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## INTRODUCTION

As Norway is located on the Arctic rim of the European mainland, Arctic affairs are an integral part of the country's foreign policy. The strength of the Arctic component of Norwegian foreign policy has varied over time, as has its profile and formal designation. In general, the term "Arctic" was until recently seldom used in Norwegian foreign policy discourse, and then often referring to something farther off in either time (like polar explorations before the Second World War) or space (outside Norway's immediate sphere of interest, such as the North Pole area or the American Arctic). "The North" (in Norwegian: *nord*) or "the northern regions" (in Norwegian: *nordområdene*) have been the preferred terms for describing the foreign politics arena in the European Arctic. In practice, Norway's northern foreign policy is mainly about relations with other states in the Barents Sea region, including the Svalbard archipelago (see Map 1). Of particular importance are relations with Russia.

With the end of the Cold War, reference to "the northern regions" in Norwegian foreign policy discourse almost disappeared, since it smacked of Cold War tensions or even of Norway's earlier reputation as an expansionist polar nation. Norway was now building up a reputation as a "peace-building nation," heavily involved in mediating peace in various southern corners of the world. This did not mean that Norwegian foreign politics in the European Arctic no longer existed – only that the main focus was now on institutional cooperation with Russia, referred to as "strategies towards Russia," or "neighbourhood policies." In the mid-2000s, the northern regions (*nordområdene*, with "the High North" as the official English translation) were again explicitly defined as the number one priority of Norwegian foreign policy. Although this happened to coincide with the international buzz about a "rush for the Arctic," it can largely be explained, as will be shown below, by internal issues in Norwegian politics, and in the country's relationship with Russia. Above all, this new northern policy has seen the disappearance of the division between foreign and internal politics. While it encompasses both traditional security politics in the European Arctic and the "softer" institutional collaboration with Russia initiated in the 1990s, many see Norway's "new" northern policies as mainly an instrument for further developing business and science in the country's northern regions. Circumpolar Arctic politics, for its part, has always been included in Norwegian High North strategies, but it has gained an increasingly prominent place in these strategies in the second decade of the twenty-first century.



Source: Fridtjof Nansen Institute.

Map 1. The Barents Sea region.

This article presents these four layers of Norwegian High Arctic policies.<sup>1</sup> We start with the legacy from the Cold War, namely the European Arctic as a high-tension interface between East and West, with the Kola Peninsula considered to be the most heavily militarized region on the globe. The final decades of the Cold War also saw fundamental changes in the law of the sea, which placed most of the Barents Sea under Norwegian and Soviet jurisdiction but also left several jurisdictional issues unsettled. As a result of the same legal developments, Norway and the Soviet Union entered into a formal partnership to manage the rich fish resources of the area, a rare example of East–West collaboration in the Arctic during the Cold War era. This partnership set the

<sup>1</sup> The article draws on several years of research on Norwegian High North politics, published by the author in a series of books in Norwegian; see, in particular, Hønneland (2005, 2006, 2012), Hønneland and Jensen (2008), Hønneland and Rowe (2010). The BEAR collaboration is discussed in Stokke and Hønneland (2007). Reference to primary material in this article is generally limited to direct citations and the most central public documents. The article builds on Hønneland (2014a, 2014b), but is updated and heavily revised.

example for cooperation in several other areas after the Soviet Union fell apart, which is the topic of our next section. Then we examine the “new” Norwegian politics on the High North from the mid-2000s, briefly presenting the major public documents and discussing the driving forces behind this new policy, and recent years’ circumpolar turn. In the concluding section, we ask which legacies from the different layers of Norwegian High Arctic policies actually dominate. We also briefly discuss which interest groups are represented in the internal Norwegian debate on the High North.

### **THE COLD WAR LEGACY: SECURITY, JURISDICTION AND FISHERIES MANAGEMENT**

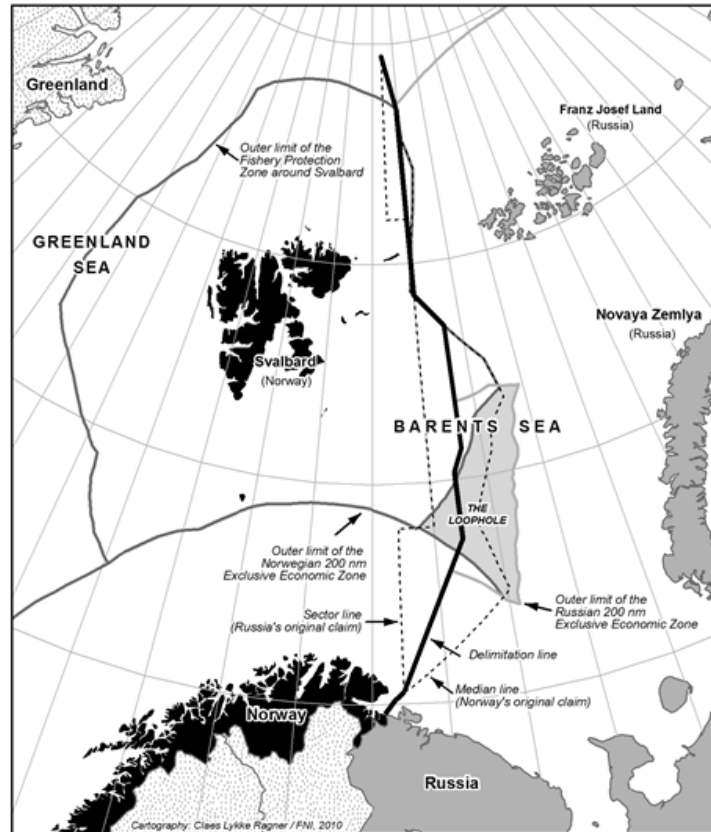
The Northern Fleet, established on the Kola Peninsula in 1933, remained the smallest of the four Soviet naval fleets until the 1950s, when a period of expansion set in. By then, the Soviet Union had entered the nuclear age: the country’s first nuclear submarine was stationed on the Kola Peninsula in 1958, close to the border with Norway. By the late 1960s, the Northern Fleet ranked as the largest of the Soviet fleets. In this situation, Norway chose the combined strategy of deterrence and reassurance. Deterrence was secured through NATO membership and by maintaining the Norwegian armed forces at a level deemed necessary to hold back a possible Soviet attack until assistance could arrive from other NATO countries. So that the Soviets should not misinterpret activities on the Norwegian side as aggressive, Norway emplaced a number of self-imposed restrictions upon itself. Notably, other NATO countries were not allowed to participate in military exercises east of the 24<sup>th</sup> parallel, which runs slightly west of the middle of Norway’s northernmost county, Finnmark. The border between Norway and the Soviet Union was peaceful, but strictly guarded. There was no conflict, but there was also little interaction across that border.

Besides regular diplomatic contact, management of the abundant fish resources of the Barents Sea was an area of particular joint interest for Norway and the Soviet Union. From the late 1960s, the two countries had informally discussed the possibilities of bilateral management measures. A window of opportunity came with the drastic changes in the law of the sea that were implemented in the mid-1970s. The principle of 200-mile exclusive economic zones (EEZs) was agreed upon at the third UN Conference on the Law of the Sea in 1975. The right and responsibility to manage marine resources within 200 nautical miles of shore was thus transferred to the coastal states. In 1975,

the two countries agreed to establish a joint fisheries management arrangement for the Barents Sea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1975), by which the most important fish stocks in the area are split 50–50. The bilateral fisheries management regime is generally deemed a success – the parties have managed to keep the fish stocks at a sustainable level, and the Northeast Arctic cod is currently the largest cod stock in the world. The cooperation atmosphere between Norway and Russia has also been good, characterized by pragmatism and willingness to compromise.

Both Norway and the Soviet Union established their EEZs in 1977 (see Map 2). However, the two states could not agree on the principle for drawing the delimitation line between their respective zones. The two had been negotiating the delimitation of the Barents Sea continental shelf since the early 1970s, and the division of the EEZs was brought into these discussions. The parties had agreed to use the 1958 Convention of the Continental Shelf as a basis. According to this convention, continental shelves may be divided between states if so agreed. If agreement is not reached, the median line from the mainland border shall normally determine the delimitation line, but special circumstances may warrant adjustments. In the Barents Sea, Norway adhered to the median-line principle, whereas the Soviet Union claimed the sector-line principle, according to which the line of delimitation would run along the longitude line from the tip of the mainland border to the North Pole. The Soviets generally held out for the sector-line principle, having claimed sector-line limits to Soviet Arctic waters as early as in 1928. Moreover, they argued that in the Barents Sea special circumstances – notably the size of the Soviet population in the area, and the strategic significance of this region – warranted deviation from the median line.

In 1978, a temporary Grey Zone agreement was reached, to avoid unregulated fishing in the disputed area (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1978). This agreement required Norway and the Soviet Union to regulate and control their own fishers and third-country fishers licensed by either of them, and to refrain from interfering with the activities of the other party's vessels, or vessels licensed by them. The arrangement was explicitly temporary and subject to annual renewal. The Grey Zone functioned well for the purposes of fisheries management, but the prospects of underground hydrocarbon resources in the area pressed the parties to a final delimitation agreement, which was reached in spring 2010 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2010). The agreement is a compromise, with the delimitation line midway between the median line and the sector line.



Source: Fridtjof Nansen Institute.

Map 2. Jurisdiction of the Barents Sea.

Another area of contention is the Fishery Protection Zone around Svalbard. Norway claims the right to establish an EEZ around the archipelago, but has so far refrained from doing so because the other signatories to the 1920 Svalbard Treaty have signalled that they would not accept such a move.<sup>2</sup> The Svalbard Treaty gave Norway sovereignty over the archipelago, which had been a no man's land in the European Arctic (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1920). However, the treaty contains several limitations on Norway's right to exercise this jurisdiction. Most importantly, all signatory powers enjoy equal rights to let their citizens extract natural resources on Svalbard. Further, the archipelago is

<sup>2</sup> For a thorough examination of the legal aspects of the Fishery Protection Zone, see Ulfstein (1995).

not to be used for military purposes, and there are restrictions on Norway's right to impose taxes on residents of Svalbard. The original signatories were Denmark, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the UK and the USA. The Soviet Union joined in 1935.

The other signatories (than Norway) hold that the non-discriminatory code of the Svalbard Treaty must apply also to the ocean area around the archipelago,<sup>3</sup> whereas Norway refers to the treaty text, which deals only with the land and territorial waters of Svalbard. The waters around Svalbard are important feeding grounds for juvenile cod, and the Protection Zone, determined in 1977, represents a "middle course" aimed at securing the young fish from unregulated fishing. As follows, the zone is not recognized by any of the other states that have had quotas in the area since the introduction of the EEZs. To avoid provoking other states, Norway refrained for many years from penalizing violators in the Svalbard Zone. Force was used for the first time in 1993, when Icelandic trawlers and Faroese vessels under flags of convenience – neither with a quota in the Barents Sea – started fishing there. The Norwegian Coast Guard fired warning shots at the ships, which then left the zone. The following year, an Icelandic fishing vessel was for the first time arrested for fishing in the Svalbard Zone without a quota.

### **THE LEGACY OF THE 1990S: INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION WITH RUSSIA**

Norway's foreign policy in the European Arctic during the 1990s was mainly about bringing Russia into committing collaborative networks. The idea of a "Barents region" was first aired by Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs Thorvald Stoltenberg in April 1992. After consulting with Russia and the other Nordic states, the Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAR) was established by the

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<sup>3</sup> The strongest opposition to the Protection Zone has come from the UK. The USA, Germany and France have formally just reserved their position, which implies that they are still considering their views. Finland declared its support to the Protection Zone in 1976, but has since not repeated it. Canada also expressed its support to the Norwegian position in a bilateral fisheries agreement in 1995, but this agreement has not entered into force. These other Western countries generally accept that the waters surrounding Svalbard are under Norwegian jurisdiction, but they claim that this jurisdiction must be carried out in accordance with the Svalbard Treaty (Pedersen, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2011). Russia, on the other hand, formally considers the waters around Svalbard to be high seas (Vylegzhanin and Zilanov, 2007). In practice, however, Russia has accepted Norwegian enforcement of fisheries regulations in the Svalbard Zone (Hønneland 1998a, 2012).

Kirkenes Declaration of January 1993, whereby Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia pledged to work together at both the regional and national levels (Barents Euro-Arctic Region 1993). The northernmost counties of the four countries are represented on the Regional Council of BEAR, as are the indigenous peoples of the region.<sup>4</sup> The Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), on which Denmark, Iceland and the European Commission sit in addition to the four core states, was created to promote and facilitate intergovernmental cooperation. A number of other countries have observer status in BEAC.

The BEAR was designed to promote stability and prosperity in the area. Its purpose is enshrined in the concepts of normalization, stabilization and regionalization. It works at reducing the military tension, allaying environmental threats and narrowing the East–West gap in standards of living in the region. It is also involved in the regionalization process underway in Europe as well as in the Arctic, turning previously peripheral border areas into places where governments can meet in a trans-national forum serving a range of interests. Areas of particular concern are environmental protection, regional infrastructure, economic cooperation, science and technology, culture, tourism, health care, and the indigenous peoples of region.

As a political project, BEAR has had its ups and downs.<sup>5</sup> While ambitions were high during the formative years, creating viable cross-border business partnerships in the Barents region proved more difficult than anticipated. Ostensible successes ended in failure. In some notorious cases, the Russians simply forced their Western counterparts out once the joint company started to make a profit. As a result, BEAR downgraded large-scale business cooperation as a priority in the late 1990s, devoting its energies instead to small-scale business and people-to-people cooperation: student exchange, cultural projects and other ventures bringing Russians and nationals of the Nordic countries together. BEAR set up a Barents Health Programme in 1999, focusing primarily on new and resurgent communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis.<sup>6</sup> Both people-to-people cooperation and the Barents Health Programme are generally judged to be successful, and cooperation between small businesses has also been growing.

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<sup>4</sup> The Sámi are the only indigenous people found in all four countries in the region. On the Russian side, the Nenets in Nenets Autonomous Okrug and the Vesps in the Republic of Karelia also enjoy status as indigenous peoples.

<sup>5</sup> A discussion of the BEAR cooperation at the time it was established is found in Stokke and Tunander (1994), while the achievements of the collaboration a decade later are discussed in Stokke and Hønneland (2007).

<sup>6</sup> See Hønneland and Rowe (2004, 2005).





Source: Fridtjof Nansen Institute.

Map 4. The Barents Euro-Arctic Region.

A Joint Norwegian–Soviet Commission on Environmental Protection was established in 1988 (Ministry of the Environment 1988). The previous year, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had held his famous “Murmansk speech,” where he urged the “civilization” of the militarized European Arctic in general, and wider international cooperation on environmental protection in particular.<sup>7</sup> The Soviet Pechenganikel nickel smelter had already ravaged the countryside on the Kola Peninsula (with visible damage also on the Norwegian side); the Joint Norwegian–Soviet Commission on Environmental Protection made it a top priority during the first few years of its existence to modernize Pechenganikel and reduce SO<sub>2</sub> emissions. By the early 1990s, nuclear safety had become the new priority. It was public knowledge that the Soviets had been dumping radioactive waste in the Barents and Kara Seas because they were overwhelmed by an ever-growing stockpile of spent nuclear fuel and radioactive waste on the Kola Peninsula. There was also mounting concern about safety at the Kola nuclear power plant, located in Polyarnye Zori in the southern parts of the Kola Peninsula. Norway launched a Plan of Action on nuclear safety in north-western Russia in 1995, and three years later a separate Joint Norwegian–Russian Commission on Nuclear Safety was established (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1998).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Gorbachev’s Murmansk initiative is presented in Åtland (2008).

<sup>8</sup> See Hønneland (2003) for a discussion.

While nuclear safety absorbed most of the funding earmarked for the environment under the bilateral environmental agreement between Norway and Russia, the Joint Norwegian–Russian Commission on Environmental Protection was promoting institutional cooperation between the two countries in areas such as pollution control, biodiversity and protection of the cultural heritage. *Institutional* cooperation became the hallmark of the Commission around the mid-1990s. Emphasizing not only solutions to urgent environmental problems, the Commission also tried to build a workable system of cooperation between Norwegian and Russian environmental institutions. Norway was eager to help Russia strengthen its environmental bureaucracy, not least as regards specialist competence. Since the early 2000s, protecting the marine environment of the Barents Sea has been the main objective of the Commission. Its initial main priority, the modernization of the Pechenganikel combine, has not materialized.

### **THE LEGACY OF THE 2000s: THE HIGH NORTH AS NATIONAL PRIORITY**

The first years after the turn of the millennium saw little attention to the north in Norwegian foreign policy discourse. The northern waters were still seen as mainly a scene for Cold War theatre. Moreover, the previous decade's institutional collaboration with Russia showed signs of wear. BEAR had not produced the results many had hoped for in large-scale business cooperation between East and West. Norway's plan of action for nuclear safety in north-western Russia was heavily criticized by the Norwegian public for spending too much money too quickly, again with limited practical results. When the Conservative Government in early 2003 appointed an expert committee to evaluate opportunities and challenges in the north, this received little media attention. By many, the act was seen as a sop to Cold War romantics in the armed forces and the right-wing political establishment, who regretted that Norway's foreign policy was now mainly directed southwards – to mediation for peace and humanitarian aid in the Third World. The committee was headed by the director of the Norwegian Polar Institute and had representatives from academia, the state bureaucracy, business, the environmental movement and indigenous peoples. Its report, published in December 2003, called for clarification in Norway's relationship with Russia through one overarching agreement that would solve all outstanding issues between the two countries – notably the delimitation line between their EEZs, and the status of the seas

around Svalbard (*Ekspertutvalg for nordområdene* [“Expert committee on the northern regions”] 2003). The committee also proposed removing the national tier of the BEAR collaboration, leaving only cooperation at the regional level, and instead strengthening bilateral collaboration with Russia and Norway’s participation in the Arctic Council. It further recommended a steep increase in funding to develop north Norwegian science and businesses, and suggested that money should be taken from the plan of action for nuclear safety in north-western Russia. In sum, then, the committee proposed a change of course away from the 1990s’ institutionalized partnerships with Russia, towards greater attention to circumpolar issues and the development of north Norwegian science, trade and industry. The report was sharply criticized by political actors in Kirkenes, the town in Norway’s north-eastern corner that had become the Norwegian “Barents capital” since the early 1990s. They condemned the scientific emphasis of the report, obviously fearing that funding and the political capital would be transferred to Tromsø, home to the Norwegian Polar Institute and the world’s northernmost university.<sup>9</sup>

In April 2005, the Norwegian government responded to the report through a White Paper on opportunities and challenges in the north, prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2005). It did not follow up the expert committee’s proposals. There was no mention of abolishing the national tier of the BEAR, nor of downsizing assistance to nuclear safety in north-western Russia. The White Paper paid considerable attention to the challenges associated with the latter, as well as to jurisdictional issues in the Barents Sea. It briefly mentioned circumpolar collaboration and indigenous issues, without indicating any change of course.

In the time between the appointment of expert committee committee and the publication of the government White Paper, a change had taken place in Norwegian public discourse. If the north had been considered “backwards” (linked to the Cold War and to Norway’s “polar past”) in early 2003, this was not the case two years later.<sup>10</sup> A mounting euphoria about new opportunities in the north had emerged, led by north Norwegian businesspeople, retired military personnel and the leading north Norwegian newspaper, *Nordlys*.<sup>11</sup> The latter

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<sup>9</sup> See Hønneland and Jensen (2008) and Jensen and Hønneland (2011) for an overview of the debate.

<sup>10</sup> A quantitative investigation of Norwegian newspapers during the 2000s shows that usage of the word *nordområdene* (the High North) grew fivefold from 2003 to 2004 (Jensen and Hønneland 2011, 41).

<sup>11</sup> The High North euphoria is discussed in Hønneland and Jensen (2008) and Jensen and Hønneland (2011).

regularly criticized the government for not recognizing the petroleum opportunities that were opening up in the Barents Sea, leaving the floor to political adversaries. Even worse, Norway's traditional allies had already established ties with Russia in the north, leaving Norway on the sidelines. The Russian gas monopolist Gazprom had started development of the gigantic Shtokman gas and gas condensate field in the Barents Sea together with American oil companies, the argument went. This was not actually true, but the Russians had indeed opened up in 2003 for foreign participation in the Shtokman development. The upbeat atmosphere in Norway was reinforced by the dramatically increased traffic of Russian oil tankers along the Norwegian coastline from autumn 2002. Many seemed to believe that the Russians had already started drilling in the Barents Sea, and those advocating a heightened focus on the northern waters silently let the public believe so through hints and half-truths. In fact, the tankers were transporting oil from land-based fields further east in Russia due to capacity problems in existing pipelines. Nevertheless, the north became a major issue in the campaign leading up to Norway's general elections in September 2005. While the northern waters had until then largely attracted the interest of right-wing politicians concerned with military security and economic interest (except the BEAR, which was the Labour Party's "baby"), now even the leader of the Socialist Left Party declared that Norway's most important foreign policy challenges were those in the north. The elections were won by a "Red-Green coalition" consisting of the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party, and rising star Jonas Gahr Støre (the preferred assistant of erstwhile prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, and the party's leader since 2014) became minister of foreign affairs. He had studied the challenges associated with the Shtokman development at the Oslo think-tank Econ, rode on a mounting wave of northern euphoria and used his excellent rhetorical skills to declare himself Mr. North of Norwegian politics. When Gahr Støre took office, it had just become known that the two major Norwegian oil companies, Statoil and Hydro, were on Gazprom's shortlist for the Shtokman project (in addition to American Chevron, ConocoPhillips and French Total). In what was arguably the most famous political speech in Norway since the turn of the millennium, Johan Gahr Støre, speaking in Tromsø, convincingly declared the North the number one priority of Norwegian foreign policy.

In early autumn 2006, events took an unexpected turn. Gazprom suddenly declared that it would not have any foreign partners in the Shtokman development, but would go it alone instead. When the Norwegian government announced its Strategy on the High North in December 2006, the Shtokman

issue did not figure prominently (Government of Norway and Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006).<sup>12</sup> Now the northern areas – or the High North, which became the official English translation of the Norwegian term *nordområdene* – are declared a “national priority.” The strategy lists all thinkable challenges in the region, ranging from environmental protection and indigenous issues to the business opportunities associated with future offshore petroleum extraction in the Barents Sea. Nevertheless, it erases the dividing line between foreign and national policies, and stresses the development of Norway’s northern regions mainly in terms of science and business.

This was followed up in the strategy’s “step two” in spring 2009, *New Building Blocks in the High North*, a purely domestic-policy document (Government of Norway 2009). The main topic in step two of the strategy was the establishment of a new scientific centre on climate change and the environment in Tromsø. Fram – The High North Research Centre for Climate and the Environment (the Fram Centre) was opened in 2010, with the Norwegian Polar Institute as its main constituent body. The 2014 Strategy, *The North Globe*, similarly focused on the domestic side of Norwegian High North politics, arguably with an even stronger emphasis on business development than its predecessors (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014).

## FROM “THE AGE OF THE ARCTIC” TO “THE SCRAMBLE FOR THE ARCTIC”

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<sup>12</sup> The Shtokman issue took yet another new turn in summer 2007, when Total was invited back in, and soon thereafter StatoilHydro (merged Statoil and Hydro, since 2009 operating under the name Statoil). Total and Statoil had no ownership to the resources, however: their role was limited to that of partners in the development project. In the end, nothing came out of that project. Changes in the international gas market have served to heighten insecurities in this respect. In the Norwegian public debate, the 2010 delimitation line has largely ousted Shtokman as the big promise for the future. Although it will take some time for things to actually happen, there are expectations that the former disputed area contains extractable hydrocarbon resources. So far, results on the Norwegian shelf in the Barents Sea have been rather disappointing and resources on the Russian side of the border are arguably much larger. So the Norwegians still place considerable hope on offshore petroleum collaboration in the Barents Sea, which has remained an important driving force in Norway’s High North policy.

“Quietly, and almost unbeknownst to the general public, the Arctic has emerged during the 1980s as a strategic arena of vital importance to both of the superpowers.” This is how Oran R. Young, generally considered to be the leading international expert on Arctic politics, opened his 1985 article “The Age of the Arctic” (160).<sup>13</sup> He was indeed right in his predictions about the world’s growing interest in the Arctic, even though the most ground-breaking event in this process – the dismantling of the Cold War – was yet to happen. Following the end of the Cold War, European governments were keen to draw the young Russian Federation into new forms of transnational institutional arrangements aimed at reducing the potential for future East–West conflict. As we saw above, BEAR was established on Norwegian initiative in 1993, and five years later the EU Northern Dimension was launched, on Finnish initiative. These regional collaborative arrangements spanned several functional fields, with infrastructure, business cooperation and environmental protection at the core. At the circumpolar level, the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) was created in 1990 by the “Arctic eight” (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Soviet Union and the United States). Canada soon proposed the establishment of an Arctic Council, to embrace policies on indigenous peoples in addition to the environmental focus of AEPS. The United States initially opposed this, but then agreed, on condition that the new council would be established through a non-binding agreement, that the states would not commit to financial contributions, and that secretarial functions would be reduced to a minimum. The Ottawa Declaration of 19 September 1996 created the Arctic Council, with the AEPS programmes subsumed under the new structure. Indigenous peoples’ associations representing several indigenous groups within one Arctic state or one indigenous people in several Arctic states were included in the Council as “permanent participants”.

Three years into the Arctic Council’s existence, Scrivener (1999, 57) concluded that creating the Council seemed “to have done nothing to increase the momentum of circumpolar cooperation on pollution and conservation issues and to assist the AEPS’s progression beyond monitoring and assessment into the realm of policy action.” By and large, Arctic cooperation – whether circumpolar or regional – was long considered to be “a thing of the early 1990s”: an immediate post-Cold War initiative that failed to spark sustainable high-level political interest. The Arctic Council remained a forum for coordinating Arctic environmental monitoring and science, with strong participation from the region’s indigenous peoples, while the regional BEAR collaboration and the EU

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<sup>13</sup> This section builds on Hønneland (2014b).

Northern Dimension were struggling to meet the initial expectations of thriving East–West cooperation on trade and industry.<sup>14</sup>

Much changed with the planting of a Russian flag on the seabed at the North Pole in August 2007. That action was performed by a Russian scientific expedition involved in collecting data for Russia’s submission to the Continental Shelf Commission – in accordance with the Law of the Sea – but was widely perceived as a Russian demonstration of power in the Arctic. The incident happened at the same time as the summer ice melting in the Arctic Ocean reached ominous proportions, and there was growing interest in the prospects of petroleum development in the Arctic. Borgerson (2008) famously captured the atmosphere in his seminal article “Arctic Meltdown”: “The Arctic Ocean is melting, and it is melting fast. [...] It is no longer a matter of if, but when, the Arctic Ocean will open to regular marine transportation and exploration of its lucrative natural-resource deposits” (63). Further: “The situation is especially dangerous because there are currently no overarching political or legal structures that can provide for the orderly development of the region or mediate political disagreements over Arctic resources or sea-lanes” (71); and “[T]he Arctic countries are likely to unilaterally grab as much territory as possible and exert sovereign control over opening sea-lanes wherever they can. In this legal no man’s land, Arctic states are pursuing their narrowly defined national interests by laying down sonar nets and arming icebreakers to guard their claims” (73–4).

Russia’s flag-planting and Borgerson’s article spurred a new wave of high-level political interest in the Arctic, even though the former had not been intended as a Russian “claim” to the North Pole. There emerged a global media buzz about a “scramble for the Arctic,” and a marked surge in political interest could be observed. In the Arctic Council, high-level participation from the member states gradually increased, and the 2011 biannual ministerial meeting in Nuuk was the first to which all eight countries sent their foreign affairs ministers. It was also the first Arctic Council meeting attended by the US Secretary of State; and here the first binding treaty negotiated under the Arctic Council – on search and rescue in the Arctic – was signed. The interest of non-Arctic states in Arctic affairs was also heightened, especially among Asian nations. In 2013, China, Japan, Singapore and South Korea, among others, were given status as permanent observers in the Arctic Council.

This story of the race to the Arctic ran at the same time as the most exhaustive scientific study of the Arctic seabed to date was under way. The

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<sup>14</sup> See Hønneland (1998b) and Browning (2010).

Arctic states had only a few years to spare before they had to submit their evidence and applications to the Shelf Commission. Expeditions were often portrayed in the media as the prelude to unilateral governmental action in the Arctic. “Denmark lays claim to the North Pole,” the Norwegian media told the public repeatedly in 2010–2011 (see, for instance, [www.nrk.no](http://www.nrk.no), 17 May 2011). Although the Arctic is not a barren wilderness without governance or rule of law, you could be forgiven for thinking it was from its portrayal in the media. In any event, this sort of publicity was unsettling for the five Arctic states – Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Norway, Russia and the United States (Alaska) – all of whom had a vested interest in making sure the existing Law of the Sea rules on continental shelves and their delimitation extended to the Arctic as well. That being the case, the Arctic shelf could only be divided among the five; no other state would have a rightful claim. As of writing, no government has said it will not respect the Law of the Sea in the Arctic, but specialists in ocean law and NGOs (such as WWF) have nevertheless urged the international community to adopt a dedicated Arctic treaty.<sup>15</sup> The European Parliament likewise floated the idea of a separate treaty, but later changed its mind. The “Arctic five” therefore held a summit at Ilulissat on Greenland in May 2008 where they declared that the extant Law of the Sea applies in the Arctic, as elsewhere – there is no need for a new Arctic treaty (Ilulissat Declaration 2008). Although no one had doubted their position, by issuing a formal declaration they managed to send a clear message to the outside world.

Hence, these developments at the international level triggered the most pivotal Norwegian national interest in the High North (besides security), namely marine jurisdiction. While Norway does not lay claim on the continental shelf in the Polar Ocean – and actually gained approval by the UN Continental Shelf Commission in 2009 for its rather modest claim of a sliver of the shelf north of the 200-mile limit from Svalbard<sup>16</sup> – any “internationalization” of the Arctic is viewed with scepticism. Therefore, Norway has been a fervent defender of the established Law of the Sea in the Arctic, arguing against a new overarching “Arctic treaty” that might question or modify the established order. At the same time, these developments have presented a new opportunity for Norway to establish itself as a regional power, thereby also polishing its old brand as a Polar nation. A clear expression of this was Norway’s efforts to have the newly established Permanent Secretariat of the Arctic Council located to Tromsø, Norway’s Arctic “capital”, which it achieved in 2013. The secretariats of three

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<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Rothwell (2008).

<sup>16</sup> See Jensen (2010) for a discussion of the Norwegian claim.



of the Council's working groups were also placed there. Everything Arctic is suddenly cultivated – the University of Tromsø accordingly changed its name to the Arctic University of Norway, also in 2013.

Furthermore, this new “Arctic wave” provided a vent for Norwegian High North ambitions in the aftermath of Crimea crisis and the following mutual sanctions between Russia and the West. Although both countries agreed to shield the established cooperation structures in the High North from the sanctions, high-level political contact was broken and bilateral trade hard hit. Hence, more attention was given to relations with other Arctic states, and the Arctic Council became an even more important platform for East–West dialogue as Russia remained a constructive partner there. Norway's renewed circumpolar brand was also reflected in the fact that a White Paper on Norwegian interests in the Antarctic was issued in 2015, the first one in three quarters of a century (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015).

## **THE FOUR LAYERS OF NORWAY'S HIGH NORTH POLICY**

Norway's current strategies on the High North contain elements of four layers that have predominated in various time periods during the last decades:

- the High North as an arena for great-power politics (mainly a legacy from the Cold War)
- the High North as an arena for institutionalized collaboration with Russia (mainly a legacy from the 1990s)
- the High North as a “national project” (mainly a legacy from the mid-2000s)
- the High North as an arena for circumpolar politics (present throughout the period, but increasingly important the last few years)

The relationship with Russia ranks above most other concerns in Norway's High North policy. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union represented the Russian bear, in whose company small-state Norway could never allow itself to feel secure. Nevertheless, a fruitful collaboration developed between the two parties in the management of marine resources in the Barents Sea, jurisdictional disagreement notwithstanding. In the 1990s, Russia became the impoverished recipient of humanitarian aid from Norway. Now, after the turn of the millennium, the Russian bear has re-emerged with both financial and military

clout. The internal debate in Norway towards the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century centred on the continuation of financial support to Russian institutions and civil society. Shouldn't a country that could manage to re-arm itself also be expected to take responsibility for its environment and health services? Moreover, Russia was assuming a new role as a potential market and business partner for Norway. Participation in the Shtokman development was arguably the main driving force behind Norway's "new" northern policies. Thus, we see that Russia played the main role in Norway's High North policies during the Cold War, in the 1990s and also in the main after the turn of the millennium.

Actors concerned with Norway's security have found common ground with those mainly interested in investments and better possibilities for north Norwegian business. These actors focus on Norway's "near abroad" in the Barents Sea region, generally seeing presence in the north – whether in the form of naval vessels or increased population – as a good in itself. Regional politicians, media and business representatives have found allies in national top politicians concerned about Statoil's access to new resources, preferably in the "near abroad" so that regional trade and industry can also achieve ripple effects. While there is a certain cleavage between actors located close to the border with Russia and elsewhere in northern Norway, mainly the regional capital of Tromsø, the common emphasis is on Norwegian interests. Norway's relationship with Russia is centre stage here, but also security- and economy-related relations with other states are considered important. The old jurisdictional conflict over the Fishery Protection Zone around Svalbard disrupted again in early 2017, when EU gave its vessels permission to fish the newly emerged Snow Crab in the zone, without Norway's consent. The oldest layer of modern Norwegian High North politics was thus reignited.

An interest group that in part competes with those primarily oriented towards security and economic interest (only to a limited extent, as the common interest is also highly visible) consists of those arguing for a greater focus on circumpolar cooperation, which thematically is often leaning towards science, environmental protection and indigenous issues. As noted, the 2003 High North Committee had proposed downplaying BEAR collaboration and nuclear safety projects in Russia (though it, too, favoured strong emphasis on relations with Russia and considerable new investments in northern Norway), and was criticized for being mainly concerned about "counting polar bears and ice flakes," as expressed by Finnmark District Governor Helga Pedersen to the regional newspaper *Nordlys* on 9 December 2003. The committee's report is often referred to – despite its explicit call for investments in northern Norway –

as a document that places the focus of Norway's foreign policy off in the distance, if not on humanitarian action in the Third World, then on indigenous and environmental concerns somewhere in the far-off Arctic. It is seen as defending the narrow interests of scientists from the Norwegian Polar Institute, keen to participate in Arctic Council-initiated activities across the circumpolar north. The establishment of the Fram Centre on Polar environmental and climate research in Tromsø in 2010 also led many to conclude that science was the winner in the "new" Norwegian politics of the High North. Whereas Russia (whether as regards delimitation line discussions, settlement of fish quotas or the opening of the Shtokman field – and eventually: aggressor in the Crimea crisis) was definitely a moving target, scientific infrastructure in the north was safely within the control of Norwegian central authorities. The international "Arctic wave" that followed the Russian flag planting on the North Pole in 2007, served to split Norwegian High North strategies into two even more clearly delineated geographical directions: on the domestic scene: away from the border town of Kirkenes to the new "Arctic capital" of Tromsø; on the international scene: away from Russia into the circumpolar world of the Arctic Council. Different dimensions of the Norwegian High North strategies are cultivated depending on the international political dimensions – but they all converge in the image of High North politics as a "national project."

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