

Norway's Arctic Policy: High North, Low Tension?

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In 2005, the then Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre urged people to 'look north.' 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*). With one-third of the landmass and 80 per cent 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.

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 change, resource potential and a resurgent Russia appeared on the agenda. Developments in the North have undergone several stages since. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 alongside a considerable drop in oil prices made the High North less 'hot' in a Norwegian context, despite the ice melting at record rates.

Around 2018, we can mark a new phase of Norwegian High North policy, in tandem with global changes in power politics. The efforts by the US administration under President Donald Trump to drag the Arctic into the wider systemic competition with China began around this time as China released its Arctic White Paper in 2018. Simultaneously, the US Navy's 2nd Fleet in Norfolk was re-activated with responsibility for the East and North Atlantic, after having been deactivated in 2011. This marks how the strategic and operational importance of those areas (which includes Norway's Arctic domain) has grown. The military presence and provocative exercise activities have been increasing here the most.

In the last decade, the Norwegian government has used the phrase 'High North, low tension' to highlight that the Arctic, despite claims by some commentators, is a region characterised by amicable affairs. However, the question is whether this is still an accurate portrayal of the state of affairs and – crucially – Norway's Arctic approach.

Although researchers have largely rejected the idea of a budding resource war in the North, the view of and discourse about the Arctic has changed.¹ This was underscored by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Although the Arctic has not been dragged into this conflict at the time of writing, given Norway's land border and maritime boundary with Russia, with the Russian Northern Fleet located about 100 kilometres from



Norwegian military personnel inspect equipment of the Russian 200th Motorized Infantry Division in Petsjenga near Murmansk on 7 December 2021. This annual inspection is an arms verification effort established under the 2011 Vienna Document and involves a reciprocal visit by Russian military officials to Norway's Brigade North.

Norway, this is a concern in the 'new' era of relations between Russia and the West.

The Russian Neighbour

In the confrontation between the two military blocs during the Cold War, Norway was the only NATO country that shared a land border with the Soviet Union in the North, which in turn defined Norway's security politics. After relatively good cooperation in the 1990s, from the mid-2000s onwards, the Arctic regained strategic and military importance. This occurred primarily because Russia under President Vladimir Putin began to strengthen its military (and nuclear) prowess in order to re-assert Russia's position in world politics. In addition to the changing political, climatic and economic circumstances in the Arctic, the region's growing importance was also the result of Russia's geographically dominant position in the North and its long history of a strong naval presence – the Northern Fleet – on the Kola Peninsula. This fleet houses Russia's strategic submarines which are essential to the country's nuclear deterrent vis-à-vis the West.

In general, Western security analysts have interpreted Norway's northern areas to be part of a so-called Russian 'bastion concept,' a strategy developed during the Cold War by the Soviet Union in order to ensure access to and from the North Atlantic and to control access to the Northern Fleet's headquarters at Severomorsk.² Thus, military planning in Norway since the 1940s has been dominated by concerns over Soviet/Russian military activity in the North – both as an extension of Soviet/Russian broader strategic plans and more recently in terms

of other types of interference and destabilising measures vis-à-vis Norway's northernmost regions. With Russia's redevelopment of its Northern Fleet primarily for strategic purposes (with an eye towards Arctic developments as well), and with its defence posture defined by the situation in its northern areas, Norway faced a more challenging security environment.

Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, relations have become increasingly tense, with bellicose rhetoric from Russia regarding the northern military posture of Norway and NATO, as well as increased military presence and exercises in the European Arctic by both Russia and NATO (or NATO countries). The 2020 long-term plan for the Norwegian Armed Forces reiterates Norwegian concerns over an increasingly tense great power rivalry in the High North. Given these concerns, Norway plans to purchase new tanks, adding a new army battalion in the North, acquiring new submarines and phasing in F-35 aircraft (replacing the ageing F-16s) and P-8 maritime surveillance aircraft (replacing the P-3s), while also replacing ageing Coast Guard vessels with three new ice-capable ships. In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, additional funds have been allocated to the Norwegian Armed Forces, specifically highlighting the need for capacity, readiness and surveillance in the North.

However, despite increasingly tense military relations, Norway and Russia, and earlier the Soviet Union, have a long history of cooperation in the Arctic. Especially after the fall of the USSR, regional and local cooperative schemes emerged that enabled businesses and people to cross the border in the North. In 2010, a longstanding maritime boundary dispute was settled in the Barents Sea, and in 2012, a visa regime for those living on both sides of the Norwegian-Russian border was implemented. On the state level, cooperation on maritime safety and emergency response, as well as fisheries management, have been ongoing despite tensions in the security relationship.

This has played a significant role in reducing tension in the Barents Sea and preventing small-scale incidents from escalating out of control. This has not – at the time of writing – been affected by Norway's sanctioning of Russia after the invasion of Ukraine.

The US Security Guarantee

For Norway, a close bilateral relationship with the United States has been one of the pillars of foreign and security policy in modern times. The United States is seen as the ultimate guarantor of Norwegian sovereignty in the face of security concerns regarding Russia. However, Norway has always sought a balanced approach (but not neutral, like its neighbours Finland and Sweden) to US engagement in its northern domain, for example, by not allowing nuclear weapons or foreign bases to be located on its territory. Still, concern over too much US/NATO military activity and Soviet reactions was prevalent in Norway during the Cold War, with fears that it would get caught in between the two superpowers if conflict were to erupt.

Although the same balancing act is still a cornerstone of Norway's posture in the North vis-à-vis Russia,³ concerns over the US approach to Arctic and northern European security emerged as the Trump administration became more vocal about Arctic security issues in 2018-2019. On the one hand, Norway has long desired increased US and allied attention on the North, starting with the Core Area Initiative launched by Norway through NATO in 2008. On the other hand, in 2019-2020 there were increasingly alarming statements from US officials concerning the Arctic security environment, and the United States increased its military activity in the Norwegian Arctic. As a result, some have argued that Norway risks getting too much of what it asked for in terms of US Arctic engagement.⁴ 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 increasing US obsession with China's Arctic interests.



Credit: Torbjørn Kjosvold, Norwegian Armed Forces

Norway's second P-8 Poseidon, Ulabrand, sits amidst heavy snow at Evenes Air Base on 25 March 2022 during NATO Exercise Cold Response 2022.



The American transport ship *MV Cape Race* prepares to unload military cargo at Harstad on 18 February 2022 for Exercise Cold Response 2022.

However, in 2022, these concerns are likely to take a back seat to the primary issues for Norwegian decision-makers – i.e., how to continue to engage the United States/NATO in the High North, while ensuring that they understand and care about Norwegian security concerns vis-à-vis Russia. The NATO exercise Cold Response 2022 in March – the largest Norway-led exercise since the end of the Cold War – brought more than 30,000 troops from 27 countries to the Norwegian Arctic in order to show NATO’s ability to operate in northern environments.

Future Arctic Security Concerns for Norway

The central question for Norwegian decision-makers is how northern relations can be insulated from events and relations elsewhere, while still standing firm vis-à-vis a Russian neighbour. The Arctic states – with Norway taking one of the leading roles – have managed to do a relatively good job of keeping relations civil in everything but military relations, underpinned by the shared economic interest of the Arctic states 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 geo-economic concerns of the Arctic states. 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 business-persons who constitute the backbone of 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. Also noteworthy are new agreements and 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 European Union (EU)) agreement to prevent unregulated fishing in the central Arctic Ocean, and the Arctic Coast Guard Forum established in 2015. In these avenues of cooperation, Norway has been a proactive instigator and participant.

However, events in Ukraine in 2022 have changed the situation. Trust between Norway and Russia is gone, and

any Russian military activity in the Arctic – most likely emanating from the Northern Fleet – is likely to be viewed with greater concern and suspicion than before. Potential disputes on or in waters around Svalbard – Norway’s northern archipelago – where a community of Russians reside due to provisions in the Svalbard Treaty of 1920 are seen as a possible liability. The forums and ‘softer’ mechanisms for dialogue that were developed in the Arctic have also been affected. The other seven Arctic countries have decided to suspend cooperation in the Arctic Council, at least as long as Russia has the chair (Norway takes over in spring 2023). Although there is no immediate concern of Russian aggression in the North, the region will undoubtedly be dragged into a wider NATO-Russia conflict, should it escalate over issues further South.

Still, Norway maintains dialogue with Russia through a direct channel between the Norwegian Armed Forces Headquarters outside of Bodø and the Northern Fleet at Severomorsk in Russia. Fisheries co-management, emergency response cooperation and interaction across the border still occur. Neighbours, after all, are forced to interact regardless of the positive or negative character of their relations. And the goal for any Norwegian government is to try to ensure that the statement ‘High North, low tension’ still describes affairs in the North. 🇳🇴

Notes

1. See, for example: Michael Byers, “Crises and International Cooperation: An Arctic Case Study,” *International Relations*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (2017), 375-402; Dag H. Claes and Arild Moe, “Arctic Offshore Petroleum: Resources and Political Fundamentals,” in Svein Vigeland Rottem, Ida Folkestad Soltvedt and Geir Hønneland (eds), *Arctic Governance: Energy, Living Marine Resources and Shipping* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 9-26f; and Andreas Østhagen, “Arctic Security: Hype, Nuances and Dilemmas,” *The Arctic Institute*, 27 May 2015.
2. Ina Holst-Pedersen Kvam, “‘Strategic Deterrence’ in the North. Implications of Russian Maritime Defence Planning and Seapower to Norwegian Maritime Strategy,” University of Bergen, 2018.
3. In Norwegian, this policy is referred to as *avskrekking og beroligelse* (deterrence and reassurance).
4. See, for example, Peter Bakkemo Danilov, “Northern Norway May Become Piece in Geopolitical Game,” *High North News*, 27 May 2020; and Peter Bakkemo Danilov, “Researcher Argues Norwegian Participation in Barents Sea Military Exercise Was Unfortunate,” *High North News*, 22 September 2020.

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