



ANALYSIS

HIGH NOON FOR THE HIGH NORTH? NORWAY, RUSSIA, AND THE SVALBARD STRONGHOLD

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1. A TANGLED WEB OF INTERESTS: THE SVALBARD TREATY

INTRODUCTION

78 degrees to the north, in the High Arctic, lies the archipelago of Svalbard. With a population of approximately 3 000 inhabitants, Svalbard stretches over an area far greater than that of Estonia. A two-hour flight away from the closest mainland airport, Svalbard's everyday life might seem distant, uneventful, and isolated. In the summer of 2024, Svalbard experienced its very first days of temperatures above the +20°C threshold, a testament to how

A great geopolitical game between the two Arctic states may unfold over the archipelago

global warming brings its strongest impact on the circumpolar regions. A process of conflict escalation between Russia and the west could go along similar pathways.

As Norway and Russia remain the two nations with a stable and permanent presence on Svalbard, a great geopolitical game between the two Arctic states may unfold over the archipelago. Amidst climate change, the entailing resource management considerations and Russia's isolation from the west, the security status of this Arctic territory is growing more relevant.¹ As Svalbard has a unique legal status, this may encourage interested actors to challenge the existing governance over the territory and the resource-rich sea surrounding it. With Russia as the main challenger, threat assessments by Norwegian secret service agencies expect an increase in hostile activity on Svalbard. Small power Norway must defend its domestic security against the intent of Moscow in an environmental and geopolitical habitat that for an inexperienced political leader may prove difficult to navigate.

¹ Svendsen Østhagen and Bergman, "[Arctic Geopolitics: The Svalbard Archipelago](#)," *CSIS Briefs* (September 2023).

The legal status and governance of Svalbard are unique in the sense that the 1920 Svalbard Treaty granted Norway sovereignty over a resource-rich polar area previously guided by *terra nullius* principles.² Reflecting those principles, Norwegian authorities do not have the right to deny individuals access to and residence on the archipelago, given that they are nationals of Svalbard Treaty signatory states. This historic custom allows such individuals to settle and pursue commercial ambitions on the islands.³ Fisheries and coal mining have been of historical economic interest, whilst tourism and environmental research are the main concurrent activities on land.⁴

Territorial sovereignty granted to Norway by the Svalbard Treaty is limited by two principles:

- discrimination on the basis of nationality for access, entry to and commercial pursuits by individuals is prohibited;
- the archipelago may not be used for war purposes by any state.⁵

² Ulfstein, Geir, "[Svalbard er ikke lenger et demokratisk samfunn](#) [Svalbard is no longer a democratic society]," *Uniforum*, 1 February 2023; Jørgen Holter Jørgensen, "How Normal can Svalbard be? A Small Part of Russia in Encounter with Norwegian Governance," *Nordisk Østforum* 27, no. 4 (2013): 327-51.

³ Svalbard Treaty signatory states are Afghanistan, Albania, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Czech Republic, Denmark, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Monaco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, North Korea, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Venezuela (as of May 2024).

⁴ Jørgen Holter Jørgensen, "[Svalbard and the Fishery Protection Zone: Russian Perceptions After the Cold War](#)," *FNI Report* 13 (2003); Det Kongelige Justis og Beredskapsdepartement [Ministry of Justice and Public Security], *St.Meld. 26. (2023-24), Melding til Stortinget. Svalbard* [St.Meld. 26. (2023-24), Report to the Storting (white paper). Svalbard] (Oslo: Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2024), 7-8.

⁵ Øystein Jensen, "[The Svalbard Treaty and Norwegian Sovereignty](#)," *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 11 (2020): 86; The [Treaty](#) between Norway, The United States of America, Denmark, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Great Britain and Ireland and the British overseas Dominions and Sweden, Opened for signature in Paris 9th February 1920 (University of Oslo, Faculty of Law Library).

As such, there are no military bases on the archipelago, nor does the Norwegian Armed Forces host exercises outside mainland Norway.⁶

These two overall principles dictate how Norway must govern Svalbard to maintain its sovereignty over the archipelago, a reference to Norway's duty to legislate.⁷ Russian authorities oftentimes challenge how Norway chooses to exercise this duty, with non-discriminatory arguments derived from the main principles of the Svalbard Treaty.⁸ Russia's rationale for doing so is often interpreted as bargaining to achieve a special bilateral status with Norway in all things related to Svalbard vis-a-vis other signatory states. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made this aim obvious in an open letter to his Norwegian counterpart, stating how Russia "calls for bilateral consultations" on matters relevant to the Russian settlements.⁹

Russia's rationale is often interpreted as bargaining to achieve a special bilateral status with Norway

Russian authorities have hinted that it was not a given that the archipelago would fall into the hands of Norway. A Russian diplomatic representative in the local village of Barentsburg opined that there was a 50/50 chance Svalbard would become either Norwegian or

Russian, and that, perhaps, the Bolshevik revolution "came in the way" for Russian interests to be voiced.¹⁰ Russian authorities are yet to challenge Norwegian territorial sovereignty with open military means, and it is mostly in rhetoric that Moscow lets its complaints be aired.¹¹

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Due to the non-discriminatory principles, Svalbard is not part of the Schengen area. This allows for a permanent Russian presence on the archipelago, even after the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The EU-imposed sanctions on the Russian Federation and Russian individuals due to the war in Ukraine do, however, apply to Svalbard.¹² Now, any transport with people and goods must come directly from mainland Russia, whereas transfers through Norway were previously common. Moreover, access to public goods and technologies is restricted, oftentimes excluding non-EEA nationals. This has sparked reactions in the local Russian community. For example, the ethnically Russian population claims that Norwegian national authorities have become more xenophobic and undemocratic by imposing restrictions without providing international residents sufficient explanations on why such new policies are warranted.¹³

⁶ Karen Frederikke Løvnskiold and Stine Mysager. "Svalbard og spørsmålet om norsk militær tilstedeværelse [Svalbard and the question of Norwegian military presence]," in *Sikkerhetspolitikk og militærmakt i Arktis*, ed. Njord Wegge. (Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2023), 176-9; John Berg, "Skal vi forsvare Svalbard? [Should we defend Svalbard?]," *Nordnorsk debatt*, 14 March 2023.

⁷ Jensen, "The Svalbard Treaty and Norwegian Sovereignty:" 90-1.

⁸ For instance, Atle Staalesen, "Lavrov attacks Norway, says relations on Svalbard should be better," *Barents Observer*, 19 October 2017; "О послании Министра иностранных дел С.В.Лаврова Министру иностранных дел Норвегии И.М.Сёрэйде по случаю 100-летия подписания Договора о Шпицбергене [On the message from Minister for Foreign Affairs Sergey V. Lavrov to Minister for Foreign Affairs of Norway I.M. Sørde on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Svalbard Treaty]," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 4 February 2020.

⁹ Atle Staalesen, "Amid jubilant celebration at Svalbard, Norway sends strong signal it will not accept encroachment on sovereignty," *The Barents Observer*, 9 February 2020.

¹⁰ Konstantin Volkov, "Шпицберген полит потом и кровью наших предков, [Svalbard is watered with the sweat and blood of our ancestors]" *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 21 March 2020; Svenden Østhagen and Bergman. "Arctic Geopolitics: the Svalbard Archipelago:" 3.

¹¹ Geir Ulfstein and Sven G. Holtmark, "Svalbardtraktaten [The Svalbard Treaty]," *Store norske leksikon*, accessed on 24 July 2024; Sunniva Leonora Brustind, *Hvorfor utfordrer Russland det norske regimet i Fiskevernsonen?* [Why is Russia challenging the Norwegian regime in the fisheries protection zone?] (UiT: Norges arktiske universitet, 2024); Lassi Heininen, Alexander Sergunin, and Gleb Yarovoy, *Russian Strategies in the Arctic: Avoiding a New Cold War* (Valdai Discussion Club, September 2014).

¹² Det Kongelige Justis og Beredskapsdepartement, *St.Meld. 26*, 23-4.

¹³ Eskild Johansen et al, "Jaroslava føler seg uønsket: Svalbard blir stadig mer lik Russland [Jaroslava feels unwanted: Svalbard is becoming more like Russia]," *NRK Troms og Finnmark*, 1 June 2024.

The Arctic region is widely known for its richness in natural resources, such as seabed oil and gas fields, in addition to great fish stocks. Critical minerals necessary for green technologies can also be found here. The open sea around Svalbard is no exception. In 1977, a fishery protection zone (FPZ) stretching 200 nautical miles around the archipelago was established following the principles of the UN Law of the Sea.¹⁴ Norway does not regard the FPZ as an exclusive economic area for its own commercial interests and does as such bring the non-discriminatory principles of the Svalbard Treaty to the sea surrounding the archipelago.¹⁵

As the government has opened the Norwegian continental shelf for deep sea mining of minerals, the incentives for Russia to challenge Oslo on the FPZ will persist

However, the continental shelf beneath the FPZ makes for an exception in which Norway claims exclusive rights.¹⁶ Signatory states such as Iceland, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Russia have contested the legality of the FPZ, arguing that the Svalbard Treaty also applies in maritime areas beyond the territorial waters and that Norway-set quotas and Norwegian coast guard patrols are in breach of non-discriminatory principles.¹⁷ Oslo's governance over resource management is being legally contested by fishing companies from signatory states at regular intervals.¹⁸

As the current government has recently opened the Norwegian continental shelf for deep sea mining of minerals, the incentives for Russia and other signatory states to challenge Oslo on the FPZ will persist.

¹⁴ Robin R Churchill, "[Law of the Sea, international law \[1982\]](#)," Britannica, last updated on 16 October 2024.

¹⁵ Rachel Gjelsvik Tiller, "[Having the cake and eating it too: To manage or own the Svalbard Fisheries Protection Zone](#)," *Marine Policy* 60 (October 2015): 141-8.

¹⁶ Robin Churchill and Geir Ulfstein, "[The Disputed Maritime Zones around Svalbard](#)" in *Changes In The Arctic Environment And The Law Of The Sea*, Panel IX (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2011), 564-6.

¹⁷ Churchill and Ulfstein, "The Disputed Maritime Zones around Svalbard," 564-5; Heininen et al, "Russian Strategies in the Arctic: Avoiding a New Cold War," 58.

¹⁸ Andreas Østhagen and Andreas Raspotnik, "[Crabtacular! Snow Crabs on their March from Svalbard to Brussels](#)," *The Arctic Institute*, 24 April 2018.

Apart from voices of discontent, Norwegian Svalbard management is yet to be challenged by other governments, both on land and at sea. As Svalbard and the FPZ have been of interest to private actors, the incentives for state institutions to follow up on commercial conflicts are low.¹⁹ Moreover, analyses of Russia's economic activities on Svalbard highlight that Russia benefits from the status quo in the FPZ, in which historical fishing rights in the area are taken into account by Norwegian authorities.²⁰ Norway and Russia do in this regard share interests vis-a-vis actors from other signatory states. Other actors, including EU and NATO members, have also expressed discontent over Norway favouring Russia on mainland Svalbard and in the FPZ, with non-discriminatory principles as the main arguments against Norwegian management.²¹ Regarding fishery in the FPZ, Russia may very well have been successful in establishing the special status it pursues.

The 1920 Treaty does not address the applicability of defence and security alliances such as NATO. The high north has long been a geopolitical low-tension zone, which all Arctic states have agreed upon.²² Norway has been a member of NATO since its inception in 1949,

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and Oslo's official point of view is crystal clear: the North Atlantic Treaty also includes the territory of Svalbard.²³ This claim grounds in

¹⁹ Jørgensen, "Russland og fiskevernsonen: russiske persepsjoner etter den kalde krigen," 9.

²⁰ Tiller, "Having the cake and eating it too: to manage or own the Svalbard Fisheries Protection Zone," 12-3; Andrey Todorov, "[Russia in Maritime Areas off Spitsbergen \(Svalbard\): Is it Worth Opening the Pandora's Box?](#)" *Marine Policy* 122 (December 2020).

²¹ Torbjørn Pedersen, "[Endringer i internasjonal Svalbard-politikk](#) [Changes in international Svalbard policy]," *Internasjonal Politikk* 67:1 (April 2009):31-44, 40-2.

²² See, for instance, the Ottawa declaration paragraph 1a, on military matters not being relevant for the Arctic Council; Allied Command Transformation, "[The Future of the High North](#)," NATO, 12 May 2023; Arne O Holm, "[Barely anyone talks about low tension in the Arctic anymore](#)," *High North News*, 17 March 2023.

²³ Løvenskiold and Mysager, "Svalbard og spørsmålet om norsk militær tilstedeværelse," 179.

NATO's Article VI, which refers to territorial sovereignty over islands in the North Atlantic Area.²⁴ There are speculations that an attack on Svalbard would not automatically launch a NATO operation to reclaim territory, and Oslo is concerned that NATO forces may have to be deployed elsewhere in a potential future conflict.²⁵

The Svalbard Treaty wording that “the islands may not be used for war purposes” leaves room for interpretation. The Russian viewpoint is that “all activity that can serve a military purpose is deemed illegal by the Svalbard treaty.”²⁶ The Norwegian position is guided by the main policy objective to ensure the correct application of the 1920 Treaty.²⁷ Considering the emphasis on “war purposes,” Oslo has interpreted it as an “offensive action as part of warfare, not a prohibition on activity that may serve a military purpose.”²⁸ Norwegian Coast Guard vessels and military personnel have visited the archipelago several times. As long as their agendas are strictly civilian, government authorities believe their presence is in accordance with the treaty.²⁹ There is, however, no expressed consensus between the main parties in the parliament over the correct conduct of Article IX of the Svalbard Treaty, which gives the opposition power to challenge the government. These are rare events, but they, nevertheless, do act against the interest of maintaining robust Norwegian management of Svalbard.

In 1997, the Kongsberg Satellite Services (KSAT) Svalbard Satellite Station (SvalSat) was established. It receives data from satellites in polar orbit and collects information for

customers from all around the world. This information is forwarded to mainland Norway through a seabed fibre cable. SvalSat is seen as an important symbol for Oslo's mission on Svalbard, as the station makes a “great international contribution.” In this, Norwegian authorities have been criticised by the opposition, investigative journalists, and Russian authorities for forwarding SvalSat data to US-led military operations in the Middle East.³⁰ The data in question were supposedly strictly civilian weather reports.³¹ In January 2022, a Russian trawler crossed the Svalbard fibre cable multiple times in a short period. Subsequently, it was cut off, and SvalSat data connection to mainland Norway was lost.³² Whether this was deliberate sabotage remains to be determined.

Overall, Norwegian defence and security strategies on Svalbard have always applied restrictive interpretations of the “war purposes” wording of the 1920 Treaty, with the strategic location and geopolitical sensitivity of the islands predating the main rationale for Oslo.³³ A less restrictive defence practice towards Svalbard is not in the interest of Norway, who, in the prelude to Russia's 2014 aggression against Ukraine, had achieved international recognition for neither its interpretation of the Svalbard Treaty nor its management of the Svalbard FPZ and continental shelf.³⁴

As the 1920 Svalbard Treaty reflects a historical context, it does not address present-day issues that are salient in the international environment in which current political actors operate

²⁴ NATO, *The North Atlantic Treaty* (Washington DC: NATO, 4 April 1949).

²⁵ Håvard Klevberg, “[Maktforskyvning i nordområdene - norske myndigheter på etterskudd?](#) [Power shifts in the High North – Norwegian authorities falling behind?],” *IFS Insights* 10 (2022): 5.

²⁶ Per Arne Totland, *Kald front - konfliktområdet Svalbard gjennom 100 år* [Cold Front – the conflict area of Svalbard through 100 years] (Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2016), 195.

²⁷ Det Kongelige Justis og Beredskapsdepartement, *St.Meld. 26, 5*; Løvenskiold and Mysager, “Svalbard og spørsmålet om norsk militær tilstedeværelse,” 180.

²⁸ Jonas Gahr Støre, “[Skriftlig spørsmål fra Bård Vegar Solhjell \(SV\) til utenriksministeren](#) [Written question from Bård Vegard Solhjell (Socialist Left Party) to the foreign minister],” Stortinget, 22 March 2010.

²⁹ Løvenskiold and Mysager, “Svalbard og spørsmålet om norsk militær tilstedeværelse.”

As the 1920 Svalbard Treaty reflects a historical context, it does not address present-day issues that are salient in the international

³⁰ Bård Wormdal, *Satellitkrigen – Norsk militarisering av polområdene og verdensrommet* (Oslo: Pax, 2011).

³¹ Støre, “[Skriftlig spørsmål fra Bård Vegar Solhjell \(SV\) til utenriksministeren](#).”

³² Håvard Gulldahl and Inghild Eriksen. “[This is what the damaged Svalbard cable looked like when it came up from the depths](#),” *NRK Troms og Finnmark*, 26 May 2024.

³³ Løvenskiold and Mysager. “Svalbard og spørsmålet om militær tilstedeværelse,” 181-2.

³⁴ Pedersen, “Endringer i internasjonal Svalbard-politikk.”

environment in which current political actors operate. Resource management on the open sea, NATO's high north presence, and the SvalSat space dimension were not issues in 1920. Signatory states are thus able to interpret the legal framework of the Svalbard Treaty according to their own interests. Different applications may lead to either willed or unintended conflict with Norwegian authorities.

2. A JEWEL IN THE ARCTIC CROWN

Svalbard is not intended for lifelong residency; the majority of the area on Svalbard consists of national parks in which human access is

Securing national presence and entitlement to Svalbard serves purposes of the strategic relevance of the archipelago's geographical location and the symbolic meaning of being an Arctic nation

restricted. Moreover, strict control of traffic on land, air, and sea is in place to avoid wildlife-human contact.³⁵ There is only one airport on Svalbard, and since 2022, control measures for the traffic of persons and goods have been enforced.³⁶ It is costly for authorities on the mainland to support the communities on Svalbard, and revenue from local commercial activity does not cover this expense.³⁷ The question as to why it is so important for Oslo and Moscow to sustain a presence thus arises.

For both Norway and Russia, securing national presence and entitlement to Svalbard serves purposes that fall into two overall categories: the strategic relevance of the archipelago's geographical location and the symbolic meaning of being an Arctic nation.

³⁵ Det Kongelige justis- og beredskapsdepartementet [Ministry of Justice and Public Security], *Meld. St. 26 (2023-24) Svalbard* (Oslo: Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2024), 34-5.

³⁶ Det Kongelige justis- og beredskapsdepartementet, *Meld. St. 26 (2023-2024)*, 48-9.

³⁷ Det Kongelige justis- og beredskapsdepartementet, *Meld. St. 26 (2023-2024)*, 7-8.

Both Norway and Russia have held ties to Svalbard for a long time, with historic trappers and fur hunters having spent winters on the archipelago since the beginning of the 18th century.³⁸ For Moscow, symbolism can relate to historical ties to the area. The Arctic conquistador identity is relevant to Russia's understanding of itself as a great empire.³⁹ A recent planting of the USSR flag on Pyramididen by the state-owned company Arktikugol brings about the newest addition of such nostalgic symbolist thinking.⁴⁰

Norwegians do not necessarily keep in mind the unique legal position Svalbard is in, as it is far away from the realities of life on the mainland. In addition to the SvalSat station, polar research is a main task of Norway's mission on Svalbard. More than 1/3 of the population in Longyearbyen and Ny-Ålesund are non-Norwegians, which makes for an international social environment.⁴¹ The promotion of multiculturalism, wildlife protection, and being perceived as a leading nation in climate change research are all priorities Norway wants to be associated with.⁴² Svalbard serves as a real-life embodiment of such values. The symbolic meaning of Svalbard is, for both Moscow and Oslo, important in their thinking.

A rip-up of the status quo in the Arctic could mean great strategic, economic, and symbolic losses for both nations, and it is for that reason

A rip-up of the status quo in the Arctic could mean great strategic, economic, and symbolic losses for both nations

Oslo and Moscow have a shared interest in keeping Svalbard, resource management in the FPZ, and related bilateral conflicts away from

³⁸ "Svalbard Museum tells you all about the archipelago," Nord Norge, accessed in October 2024.

³⁹ Pavel Baev, "Russia's Ambivalent Status-Quo/ Revisionist Policies in the Arctic," *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 9 (2018): 408-424, 411.

⁴⁰ Thomas Nilsen, "Moscow hoists Soviet flag on Svalbard," *Barents Observer*, 30 June 2024.

⁴¹ "Fakta om Svalbard [Facts on Svalbard]," Statistisk Sentralbyrå [Statistics Norway], last accessed in October 2024.

⁴² Det Kongelige justis- og beredskapsdepartementet, *Meld. St. 26 (2023-2024)*, 30.

the international discourse.⁴³ Cooperation in Arctic governance, rather than conflict, has been important even for Russia.⁴⁴ Climate change in the Arctic brings great economic potential for trade and resource utilisation, which, already pre-2022, were capable of challenging the shared dominance of Norway and Russia over the region. There is a sense of interest alignment between the two Arctic frenemies to preserve Svalbard governance as it is.

The strategic interests of maintaining control over Svalbard refer to security and claims to natural resources for economic gain. Both Norway and Russia are resource-based economies, and securing a territorial claim is important to both states.⁴⁵ Rather than the land territory of Svalbard, it is the FPZ and continental shelf below that defines economic interest. Ice melting exposes more area and natural resources on the seabed available for extraction. Green technologies require critical minerals which are not in sufficient supply today. In January 2020, Norwegian scientists located minerals in the continental shelf below the FPZ with an estimated value of more than 1 000 billion NOK.⁴⁶ Challenging Norway's right to natural resources in the FPZ and the continental shelf below thus became more lucrative to Moscow.

In the prelude to the 100th anniversary of the Svalbard Treaty in 2020, Russian authorities tested the FPZ regime and Norway's management of territorial Svalbard to a greater

extent than previously.⁴⁷ Both Russia and Norway benefit from the current arrangement in the FPZ, which may make it seem nonsensical for Russia to defy it. Moscow's sharper tone is, however, traceable to Norwegian petroleum projects stretching farther and farther into the north. Russian critique is not likely to

Russia pursues special status among the signatory states and seems to believe that it is also entitled to these territories

quiet down, as Moscow has emphasised the importance of enhanced presence on Svalbard in its recent strategic documents addressing the Arctic.⁴⁸ Russia pursues special status among the signatory states and seems to believe that it is also entitled to these territories because of its historical association with Svalbard.⁴⁹ Moreover, a 2023 Foreign Policy Document specifies how Russia seeks to undermine "illegal restrictive measures by unfriendly states on the Russian presence in Spitsbergen."⁵⁰

⁴³ Andreas Østhagen, "How Norway and Russia avoid conflict over Svalbard," *Prosjekt Utsyn*, 27 June 2018; Anne Kristin Jørgensen and Andreas Østhagen, "Norges vern av suverene rettigheter rundt Svalbard: Russiske persepsjoner og reaksjoner [Norway's protection of sovereign rights concerning Svalbard: Russian perceptions and reactions]," *Internasjonal Politikk* 78: 2 (2020): 167-192.

⁴⁴ Jørgensen and Østhagen. "Norges vern av suverene rettigheter rundt Svalbard: russiske persepsjoner og reaksjoner:" 185.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Markowitz, "Arctic shock: utilizing climate change to test theories of resource competition," *Sage Journals* 67:10 (February 2023): 1845-1872.

⁴⁶ Lars Egil Mogård and Tonje Hareland, "Har funnet mineraler verdt over 1000 milliarder utenfor Svalbard [Have found minerals worth over 1000 billion outside Svalbard]," *NRK Troms og Finnmark*, 21 July 2024; Malte Humpert, "Norway takes next step to mine seabed minerals to dismay of environmental groups," *High North News*, 28 June 2024.

⁴⁷ "О послании Министра иностранных дел С.В.Лаврова Министру иностранных дел Норвегии И.М.Сёрэйде по случаю 100-летия подписания Договора о Шпицбергене [On the message from Minister for Foreign Affairs Sergey V. Lavrov to Minister for Foreign Affairs of Norway I. M. Sørde on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Svalbard Treaty]," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 4 February 2020; Maria Zakharova, "Брифинг официального представителя МИД России М.В.Захаровой, Москва, 20 февраля 2020 года [Briefing by M.V. Zakharova, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Moscow, 20 February 2020]," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation; Halvor Tjønn, "Svalbard kan komme i spill [Svalbard could come into play]," *Aftenposten*, 6 February 2020.

⁴⁸ President and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Морская доктрина Российской Федерации Указом Президента Российской Федерации от 31 июля 2022 г. № 512* [Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation by Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 512 of 31 July 2022] (Moscow: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022).

⁴⁹ President of the Russian Federation, *Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 05.03.2020 г. № 164 Об Основах государственной политики Российской Федерации в Арктике на период до 2035 года* [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of 05.03.2020 No. 164 On the Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic until 2035] (Moscow: President of the Russian Federation, 2020).

⁵⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Внешиполитическая и дипломатическая деятельность Российской Федерации в 2022 году* [Foreign policy and diplomatic activities of the Russian Federation in 2022] (Moscow: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023).

Svalbard's location is on the gateway to the Barents Sea, where the Russian Northern Fleet with strategic second-strike capabilities is based. Therefore, the archipelago is of great military importance: in a bastion concept of defence, denying access to an area is a great asset to the Northern Fleet. Utilising Svalbard in wargames, the Russian fleet has demonstrated how it can enforce simultaneous blockades of the North, Barents, and Baltic seas.⁵¹ Since 2010, military infrastructure in the Russian Arctic has been modernised at a great financial cost.⁵² With Russian military exercises held more frequently near state borders in the Arctic, Norway has had to raise its military threat alert level.⁵³ Furthermore, security analyses conclude NATO Arctic states would need at least 10 years of military investments in order to catch up with Russian capabilities in the high north, if they were to choose so.⁵⁴

Russian hybrid operations seem to have intensified over the recent years, and they are unlikely to quiet down

Oslo's need to take firmer control over the archipelago comes two years after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. State security services highlight that alongside northern Norway, Svalbard is subjected to extensive Russian intelligence operations.⁵⁵ Moreover, it is publicly believed that Russian civilian trawlers have done the Kremlin's bidding by following NATO naval vessels, mapping, and

sometimes sabotaging seabed infrastructure in Norwegian territorial waters.⁵⁶ Russian hybrid operations seem to have intensified over the recent years, and they are unlikely to quiet down.

3. NORWAY'S RESPONSE TO RUSSIAN MILITARISATION

Svalbard is governed from Oslo as it does not have a regional or local administration like mainland Norway. Policies are dictated bureaucratically through the Svalbard White Paper, in which the Ministry of Justice and Public Security has the main authority.⁵⁷ The latest White Paper was published prematurely on 31 May 2024, with climate change and a changed security landscape as reasons to why this was necessary.⁵⁸ The new White Paper envisages firmer control of persons entering and leaving the archipelago. The residents' rights to public services and voting rights in the local council are increasingly based on nationality. Moreover, Oslo desires a greater Norwegian presence vis-a-vis international residents.⁵⁹ In recent years, Russia has had ambitions of hosting a BRICS+ research hub on Svalbard.⁶⁰ In the new White Paper, Norwegian authorities signalled that this was out of the question.⁶¹

⁵¹ Etterretningstjenesten [The Intelligence Service], "[Russlands varige brudd med vesten](#) [Russia's lasting break with the West]" in *FOKUS 2024: Russlands varige brudd med Vesten* [FOCUS 2024: Russia's lasting break with the West] (Etterretningstjenesten, 2024); Klevberg, "Maktforskyvning i nordområdene - norske myndigheter på etterskudd?"

⁵² Baev, "Russia's ambivalent status quo/ revisionist policies in the Arctic," 412-4; Klevberg, "Maktforskyvning i nordområdene - norske myndigheter på etterskudd?," 3; Etterretningstjenesten, *FOKUS 2024: Russlands varige brudd med Vesten*.

⁵³ Jacob Gronholt-Pedersen and Gwladys Fouche, "[Insight: NATO allies wake up to Russian supremacy in the Arctic](#)," *Reuters*, 16 November 2022; "[Norway raises military alert level after suspicious drone sighting](#)," *Euronews*, 31 October 2022.

⁵⁴ Jacob Gronholt-Pedersen and Gwladys Fouche, "[Insight: NATO allies wake up to Russian supremacy in the Arctic](#)," *Reuters*, 16 November 2022.

⁵⁵ Politiets Sikkerhetstjeneste [the Norwegian Police Security Service], "[Nasjonal trusselvurdering – 2024](#) [National threat assessment - 2024]," accessed in October 2024; Etterretningstjenesten, *FOKUS 2024: Russlands varige brudd med Vesten*.

⁵⁶ Berit Mørch Pettersen et al, "[Spionskipene](#) [The Spy Ships]," *NRK Nordland*, 19 April 2023.

⁵⁷ Det kongelige justis- og beredskapsdepartementet, *Meld. St. 26 (2023–2024)*.

⁵⁸ Det kongelige justis- og beredskapsdepartementet, *Meld. St. 26 (2023–2024)*.

⁵⁹ Det kongelige justis- og beredskapsdepartementet, *Meld. St. 26 (2023–2024)*; Ministry of Justice and Public Security, "[The Government wants to reinforce national control to strengthen the Norwegian community of families on Svalbard, press release no 49-2024](#) (Oslo: Government of the kingdom of Norway, 31 May 2024); Rebekka Ellingsen et al, "[Regjeringen vil ha sterkere nasjonal kontroll på Svalbard](#)" [The government wants stronger national control on Svalbard]," *NRK Troms og Finnmark*, 31 May 2024.

⁶⁰ Thomas Nilsen, "[Moscow continues to push for BRICS science centre at Svalbard](#)," *The Independent Barents Observer*, 15 June 2024.

⁶¹ Ingvild Vik et al, "[Strammer forskningsgrepet på Svalbard: - en markering](#)" [Tightens research hold on Svalbard – a signal]," *NRK Troms og Finnmark*, 2 June 2024.

Land ownership is an important tool for Oslo to ensure control of activity on land. The last privately owned property of Svalbard is currently on the market. The Nordic countries have experienced how actors with close associations with the Kremlin oftentimes purchase private property of strategic interest to Russian intelligence.⁶² In July, the Norwegian government ordered the most unusual prohibition on any potential sale under a judicial clause of national security.⁶³

Norway, by not addressing its geopolitical concerns, fuels misconceptions around Svalbard as well as Russia's ability to successfully execute hybrid activities on the archipelago

In recent years, there has been an upsurge in Russian hybrid activity on the archipelago.⁶⁴ Hybrid and intelligence operations are real threats on Svalbard to which Oslo needs to respond. How the government has communicated this to the general public is unsatisfactory. Norway, by not addressing its geopolitical concerns, fuels misconceptions around Svalbard as well as Russia's ability to successfully execute hybrid activities on the archipelago.⁶⁵ The most recent White Paper does not give attention to Russia, Russian settlements, or any reasons as to why a changed security landscape has made it necessary for Oslo to announce new priorities. This public behaviour falls in line with a political tradition among Norwegian officials of not discussing Svalbard-related issues publicly — neither

with a home audience nor abroad.⁶⁶ There is an elephant in the room, and no governmental authority is willing to clearly address it.

Norway's security policy approach towards Russia is partially a derived continuum from Cold War relations. Following NATO's inception in 1949, maintaining a military low profile on Svalbard has been a tool for Norway to reassure Moscow.⁶⁷ Russia's Arctic bastion defence concept and resentment of Norway's sovereignty over Svalbard come with an increase in hybrid operations.⁶⁸ Speaking to Norwegian audiences, then NATO Secretary General (and former prime minister of Norway) Jens Stoltenberg has communicated a changed threat landscape in Europe since February 2022. Norwegian political leadership has, however, not publicly acknowledged an increased threat.⁶⁹ In April 2024, a revised defence budget was presented, which introduced an expansion of national military presence on mainland Norway.⁷⁰ In the official document, "a more serious security situation" was the only reference point to Russian hostility towards the country. Notions of Svalbard as a shared space without a clear legal status still exist in both national and

⁶² Minna Ålander, "Finland: Holiday Homes with a View (over Strategic Infrastructure)," in *Tracking the Russian Hybrid Warfare – Cases from Nordic-Baltic countries* eds Minna Ålander and Patrik Oksanen (Stockholm Free World Forum, 2024), 13-14.

⁶³ Henrik Einangshaug and Erik Waagbø, "Regjeringen tar uvanlig grep - stanser omstridt Svalbard-salg [Government makes unusual move – stops disputed Svalbard sale]," *NRK Troms og Finnmark*, 1 July 2024.

⁶⁴ Karen-Anna Eggen, "Norway: Svalbard, the next arctic forewarning of the next front line," in *Tracking the Russian Hybrid Warfare – Cases from Nordic-Baltic countries*, 21-22.

⁶⁵ Birgitte Annie Molid Martinusse, "Myths of Svalbard Geopolitics Debunked by Researcher," *High North News*, 1 August 2024.

⁶⁶ Andreas Østhagen, "På tide å prate om Svalbard [About time to talk about Svalbard]," *Dagens Næringsliv*, 1 July 2024; Tjønn, "Svalbard kan komme i spill"; Ingeborg Moe, "Derfor frykter Norge for mye snakk om Svalbard [Why Norway fears too much talk about Svalbard]," *Aftenposten*, 6 February 2020; Rune Ottosen, "Svalbard under press – det vi snakker lite om [Svalbard under pressure – what we barely talk about]," *Forsvarets Forum*, 1 March 2021; Klevberg, "Maktforskyvning i nordområdene - norske myndigheter på etterskudd?"

⁶⁷ Klevberg, "Maktforskyvning i Nordområdene - norske myndigheter på etterskudd?," 13-15.; Rolf Tamnes, "Oljealder," in *Norsk utenrikspolitikk historie, bind 6*. (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1997), 100.

⁶⁸ Mathieu Boulègue, "The Impact of the War Against Ukraine on Russia's Arctic Posture: Hard Power on Vulnerable Ice," *Wilson Center Publication* (June 2024): 9; Eggen, "Norway: Svalbard - a new front line."

⁶⁹ Anna Skifjeld, "Stoltenberg – vi er i den farligste situasjonen vi har vært i siden andre verdenskrig [Stoltenberg – we are in the most dangerous situation we've been in since World War Two]," *NRK*, 4 August 2022; Mariann Strand et al, "Nato-toppmøtet i Madrid 2022: Støre - det oppleves som å bli terrorisert, [NATO summit in Madrid 2022: Støre – it feels like being terrorised]" *Nettavisen*, 28 June 2022.

⁷⁰ Forsvarsdepartementet [Ministry of Defence], "Forsvarsløftet – for Norges trygghet. Langtidsplan for forsvarssektoren 2025-2036, [The defence boost for the safety of Norway. Longitudinal plan for the defence sector 2025-2036]," (Forsvarsdepartementet, 2024)

international perceptions of the archipelago.⁷¹ This provides the Kremlin with the upper hand if it chooses to intensify Russian activity on Svalbard. Meanwhile, the threat of Russia to Norway's national security remains vaguely addressed by Oslo, and the general public is left to piece the puzzle together.

Threat of Russia to Norway's national security remains vaguely addressed by Oslo, and the general public is left to piece the puzzle together

CONCLUSION

The Norwegian government has failed to communicate the threat of Russia to the general public. This makes civilians vulnerable to Russian hybrid operations. Aggressive behaviour in the Russian settlements has been followed by misconceptions among Svalbard residents over the need to seize firmer national control, even in Norwegian-dominated communities. The Kremlin has already been alleging Russophobic tendencies in Norway's management of Svalbard. By insufficiently addressing the severity of the situation, the government gambles on the awareness in

Norwegian society, running an ultimate risk of giving the upper hand to the Kremlin. Oslo still has time to educate the general public on the threat from Moscow, and it ought to do so. This is a necessary step on the path towards generating public support for upholding national control, as well as a possible future defence of Svalbard.

Russian discontent over Svalbard's governance is not new, but in the current security situation, turning up the temperature towards Norway does not seem unlikely. Allegations of "Russophobic governance" are not far from "clear violations of the non-discriminatory principles of the 1920 Svalbard Treaty," which may ultimately lead to a direct challenge over the current Norwegian sovereignty on the archipelago. Rising tensions over Svalbard might be forewarnings of what can be expected of Russo-Norwegian relations in the future. Within the current legal framework, Norway, Russia, and their allies must follow the demilitarised non-discriminatory principles of the Svalbard Treaty, which both guide and limit Norway's toolbox for ensuring territorial control. It is for that reason public acknowledgement of the security situation in the high north would be a good place to start when adjusting its interpretation to the new geopolitical reality.

⁷¹ Birgitte Annie Molid Martinussen, "[Myths of Svalbard Geopolitics debunked by Researcher](#)," *High North News*, 1 August 2024.

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