

## **Arctic Council - what and where to?**

### **Arctic Council - too important to be squeezed between the great powers!**

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There are many reasons to pay close attention to what is happening in the far north. The Arctic is attracting strong international interest as global warming and melting ice open up for more fishing, more drilling of oil and gas and hunt for minerals on the seabed. In addition, there is increased shipping, especially in the Northeast Passage, with faster trade and transport opportunities between the West and the Far East.

The region's geographical proximity between the great powers and expanded access to a wide range of natural resources, cause increased geopolitical tension in the Arctic. Fortunately, there are no border disputes in the area, although the situation in and around Svalbard, and also around Greenland, has obvious underlying motives of power policy. The heavy militarization, which was strong during the Cold War, is now increasing exponentially.

This is happening in parallel with an ongoing weakening of ordinary, friendly, cultural, diplomatic and business cooperation between the US and Western Europe on the one hand, and Russia on the other. Norway participates almost fully in the sanctions that the US and the EU have implemented against Russia, especially after February 24, 2022. A new iron curtain with harmful effects has been established. In the North, this is not least evident in relation to the important cooperation between indigenous groups, security at sea and the protection of a vulnerable Arctic nature.

But we have the Arctic Council! A unique, and very important body. Imagine here are both the USA and Russia represented, together with the Nordic countries - and the indigenous groups of the North! What a meeting place full of opportunities! What does the Council do, and what can it do in relation to the existential environmental challenges, in a heightened geopolitical situation?

### **Membership**

The Ottawa Declaration of 1996 on cooperation in the Arctic forms the basis for the establishment of the Arctic Council. A long cold war was over. The opportunities for détente and cooperation were eagerly exploited.

The Arctic Council consists of the eight circumpolar countries Canada, Denmark (with the Faroe Islands and Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States. Membership is geographically determined, unlike in Antarctica, as well as partly also in Svalbard, where treaties regulate the use and where only scientific activity is accepted and military activity is prohibited.

Six international indigenous organizations have the status of permanent participants in the Council: (Arctic Athabaskan Council (AAC), Aleut International Association (AIA), Gwich'in Council International (GGI), Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) and Sami Council/Saami Council (SC)). The fact that representatives of indigenous peoples are fully involved in Arctic cooperation is unique. The Arctic Council's Indigenous Peoples Secretariat (IPS) has been moved from Copenhagen and is co-located with the Arctic Council secretariat in Tromsø, Norway. The Sami Parliament is part of the Norwegian delegation to the Arctic Council and participates in the various meetings. At ministerial meetings, it is a custom that the President of the Sami Parliament delivers part of the Norwegian speech. The Arctic Council recognizes the indigenous peoples' special knowledge of the area and how important it is to pass on this knowledge in order to understand Arctic societies.

38 non-Arctic states, international organizations and non-governmental organizations, including 13 countries, have been granted observer status, and more are interested in joining.

### **Tasks**

The Arctic Council deals with issues that are common to the Arctic countries and vital to the people of the North, with particular emphasis on the environment, climate and sustainable development. The ministerial meeting, which is usually held every two years, adopts work plans and projects. Decisions are made by consensus.

The professional work is carried out in six working groups, which deal with pollution, monitoring, flora and fauna, accident prevention and emergency preparedness, marine environment and sustainable development. At project level, work is carried out, among other things, on the conservation of Arctic biodiversity, integrated ocean management, climate change, pollution reduction, oil spill response and search and rescue. Efforts are being made to develop and follow up international environmental conventions.

### **Leadership and secretariat**

The leadership of the Arctic Council is on a two years' rotational basis between the member states. Norway has the leadership from May 2023 to May 2025. Denmark will then take over.

The Secretariat of the Arctic Council was established in 2013, in Tromsø, the "Gateway to the Arctic Ocean". The Secretariat is headed by Mathieu Parker from Canada. It is located in the Fram Center, where also several other Arctic institutions have established themselves. The fact that also the United States has established a consulate with three employees in the Fram Center shows that the United States is very interested in the political and economic development of

the area. One must be allowed to question how desirable this is for the integrity of the Arctic Council – and for a future peaceful Arctic.

### **Professional challenges**

Climate change in the Arctic is said to be three to four times faster than the global average. The melting of snow and ice is dramatic for people, fauna and flora. The Anthropocene era has certainly also come to the Arctic. Major environmental challenges are linked to increased human activity. Increased shipping activity, increased military activity and increasing exploitation of natural resources lead both to large-scale pollution and risks of accident. And what are the consequences for the people of the North?

The Arctic Council considers it a key task to get these dramatic changes properly on the agenda and to discuss how to handle the situation in the best manner. The 2017 Agreement on Strengthening Scientific Cooperation in the Arctic has been beneficial to scientific research cooperation. Data from the entire circumpolar region are needed to achieve the multilateral cooperation that is so important in combating climate change. It is obvious that Russia must be involved.

### **Political challenges**

The mandate of the Arctic Council specifically states that the Council shall exclude “geopolitical and military issues.” The work of the Council is based on consensus decisions. This is probably wise in order to establish a fruitful cooperation.

But how to deal with environmental challenges is seldom an apolitical issue. There are major interests involved in decisions about ownership as well as use or protection of natural resources. This was exemplified when the US, through Mr. Pompeo, US Secretary of State, refused to sign the final declaration in Rovaniemi at the end of the Finnish leadership in 2019. It was the first time that the Arctic Council was unable to produce a joint, binding final declaration. The US did not want any reference to “climate change”. It was not considered a relevant challenge. However, a short summary was issued that avoided the most controversial issues, and the Finnish leadership’s final document, which is not binding for the work of the Council, explained the different views and that the majority wanted to work to avoid warming beyond 1.5 degrees Celsius.

The major political challenge, however, came under Russia's leadership, from May 2021 to May 2023. When the country invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the other countries froze their cooperation with Russia. When Norway took over the leadership in May 2023, it was with a firm desire to revitalize the Council. At the same time, Norway chose to join almost all the US and EU sanctions against Russia and limit cooperation to a minimum. Fortunately, the Norwegian

government has maintained some cooperation on emergency assistance and fishing.

It is hard to imagine a vital Arctic Council without Russia, which owns half of the Arctic. Norway, as the leader of the Council, was facing a demanding dilemma - the risk of the Council becoming irrelevant or closed down.

### **Prioritizing people or exploiting natural resources?**

There are approximately four million people living in the Arctic area, many of whom are indigenous peoples. Throughout history and in a harsh climate, the peoples of the Arctic have been dependent on each other for their survival, which has involved trade and exchange as well as mutual care and assistance in emergency situations. At times, the borders have been quite porous. Different languages (Finnish, Kven, Norwegian, Russian, Sami and Swedish), different ethnic and religious backgrounds and a long coast with proximity to seafaring peoples, have made the North Calotte/High North an occasionally well-functioning multilingual and multi-ethnic area, which is historically quite different from the rest of Norway and the Nordic countries.

People in northern Norway benefit from the warming effect of the Gulf Stream, which makes life easier than for others at the same latitude. Access to rich fishing and hunting resources has been the main basis for settlement and life for generations. Now, global climate change is affecting the food supply, settlement patterns as well as living conditions and opportunities in the Arctic. In addition, people's livelihoods are deteriorating and are being destroyed as society increasingly prioritizes a so-called efficient use of natural resources, for example through large-scale trawling for fish, oversized salmon farming, expanded energy production, seismic shooting and mining. The result is a dramatic weakening of the regions, which in turn leads to displacement and thereby also weaker preparedness.

### **Norwegian leadership**

Norway, through its leadership of the Arctic Council, emphasizes four priority themes: oceans, climate and environment, sustainable economic development and people in the North. Norway underlined that "the work shall be done in accordance with long-term Norwegian priorities in the Arctic and Norwegian High North policy, based on knowledge and responsible, sustainable management and on paying special attention to youth and indigenous peoples in the Arctic". "The green shift, blue economy, sustainable shipping and Arctic food systems" are specific focus areas.

However, Norway has received criticism for lack of transparency, for keeping the cards too close, and for not complying with the requests from many parties, not least from the observers, for more participation and more information.

Former Norwegian ambassador to the Arctic Council and now head of the Council, Morten Høglund, has expressed a desire to find a form of cooperation that is comfortable to everyone in order to keep the Council operational. First, some written contact was opened up between all eight countries and in spring 2024, digital professional cooperation was allowed. The opportunity to meet virtually applies to all project level teams. Observers and external experts are also invited to participate in relevant meetings. Meetings at the diplomatic level between the Arctic officials remain on hold until consensus is reached on a re-opening. It must be appreciated that Norway has negotiated opportunities for cooperation with Russia at the professional level. This must however, be followed up at the political level.

### **Militarization – the big elephant in the room**

The strong militarization in the Arctic is the elephant in the room in the Arctic Council as well as in the Norwegian and Nordic public. In order for the Arctic Council to be able to meet the existential environmental challenges, politicians must contribute to ensure that the geopolitical conflict lines give way to practical cooperation.

The geopolitical situation in the Arctic has worsened dramatically by the Swedish and Finnish entry into NATO and the significant expansion of the number of US bases in the Nordic countries. And not far from the Norwegian border, Russia has its large military base on the Kola Peninsula with nuclear submarines and nuclear weapons.

Bilateral agreements have been signed on 47 American so-called joint areas in the Nordic countries; Sweden 17, Finland 15 and Denmark 3. In 2023, Norway got four such "joint areas" and in 2024 the government agreed to a further eight bases, almost without any protests from the Norwegian parliament.

Through this process, the Nordic countries have become part of a global network of around 900 American bases in over 80 countries. By comparison, Russia is considered to have eight bases on foreign soil and China one. In a short period of time Nordic defence has been Americanized - almost without debate. The US has actually taken over parts of Norway almost to full applause! This in addition to the fact that Norway for many years has been considered "NATO's eyes and ears in the North", with sophisticated American surveillance and espionage installations in the air, on land, at sea and probably also in cyberspace, allowed over time by shifting governments.

As an example, the new American bases allow the United States to attack Russia with nuclear weapons without the Nordic countries being aware of it. A potential war between the United States and Russia could take place on Norwegian and Nordic soil. Norway disregards Article I of the Constitution on Norwegian sovereignty as well as the traditional Norwegian policy that there should be neither foreign bases nor stored nuclear weapons on Norwegian soil in

peacetime. The almost total servility towards the United States is difficult to understand.

These decisions have only to a modest extent been made known to the public. Perhaps not even to the majority of the parliament? To the extent that people in Norway are informed, there is confusion about what is cooperation with NATO and what is cooperation with the USA. This confusion is probably intentional. For a long time, the public has been led to believe that NATO is absolutely essential to Norwegian security. At the same time, there is concern about the democratic collapse in the USA. There is reason to believe that people would be much more sceptical to these new bases if they had known that they were agreed upon on a bilateral basis between the USA and Norway, initiated by the USA and with no other connection to NATO than the US NATO dominance.

This heavy militarization of the Arctic will not contribute to increased security, as both the Norwegian and the other Nordic governments preach, quite the opposite. The escalation is by the Russian side considered as a serious threat to their security. If the security policy goal of the Russian president was to keep NATO away from the Russian border, he has achieved exactly the opposite.

Military environmental pollution and CO2 emissions are largely excluded from the climate accounts required by the UN climate agreements. Lack of knowledge about military ecological degradation makes it difficult to comprehensively and effectively combat both global warming and nature and environmental destruction. This of course also causes difficulties for the work of the Arctic Council. Norway is one of the few countries that produces a military climate budget, and should be applauded. But the budget does not deal with military climate and nature footprints of other countries in Norway, nor Norwegian footprints "out of area". With the new bases, increasingly frequent and larger allied military exercises in Norway and Norwegian participation in American and NATO "operations" in distant regions, these climate reports do not give an accurate picture of emissions and environmental destruction neither in Norway by foreign forces nor by Norway outside our borders.

The military, not least the American, causes enormous pollution around the world, as well as huge consumption of natural resources and the seizure of arable land. The bases constitute potential environmental disasters. Nuclear weapons can be brought to ports and bases and the activities on the bases pollute the air, soil and water. The bases are not covered by national law and protection, also not the Norwegian ones, but are in conflict situations subject to the control and jurisdiction of the United States. International law, formulated by the UN, is now being replaced by the so-called rules-based world order, which serves powerful Western powers, both nation-states and multinational corporations.

Norwegian politics was previously, at least in some periods, characterized by the belief that the best security guarantee was to be a friendly country with a good

welfare system, solidarity with the poor, generous development aid and strong support for the UN. The "Stoltenberg effect" on both the Norwegian government and the Norwegian people seems to have led to this foundation now being torn away by the mantra "Weapons are the way to peace". In recent years, the majority, at least among politicians, the media and many academics, seems to believe that peace should be achieved through military force and more deadly weapons.

Most people in Norway are opposed to nuclear weapons. This does not seem to stop politicians from supporting NATO, the world's largest and most over-sized military alliance, based on a nuclear strategy and with global ambitions far beyond its original scope. So far, no one has asked for a referendum on our NATO membership or insisted on enshrining in the constitution that there should be neither foreign bases nor nuclear weapons on Norwegian soil.

### **Peace and disarmament as environmental measures**

The consequences of both NATO's expansion in the north and of the broadened agreements on military cooperation (DCA:s) between the USA and Norway as well as the other Nordic countries are, however, increasingly a cause for concern. It is time to get out of this dangerous, polarized situation with one-sided enemy images of each other that only serve the military industry and its profiteers and that risks leading to a full-scale Third World War. Militarization must be reduced and diplomacy and cooperation supported! In this context, the Arctic Council, the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) and the UN are extremely important. Let us all reread the UN Charter on creating peace by peaceful means, bring up again Olof Palme's plan for "common security" and Mikhail Gorbachev's vision of a peace zone "from Vancouver to Vladivostok". We owe it to future generations in the Arctic region and elsewhere to change our priorities. Peace education and training in non-violent conflict resolution adapted to different stages of the school system would be a valuable step in the right direction, as would knowledge of international laws and institutions with visions of world peace.

Peace and disarmament are the world's best environmental measures!