

## The politics of research presence in Svalbard

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### ABSTRACT

Some of the international research presence in Svalbard has the ambience of foreign missions, representing state actors rather than individual researchers or research institutions. National posturing, e.g. through the naming and labelling of research facilities and the use of ensigns and other national symbols, points to the presence as national footholds in the Arctic region. Some capitals present this presence as a ticket to political influence on governance, both in Svalbard and the wider Arctic region. The aim of this study is to examine whether Norway, under no legal obligation to host international research infrastructure in Svalbard, could conceive cases of national posturing by visiting researchers as a security concern. First, the study finds that the posturing may fuel misperceptions about Norway's sovereignty and exclusive jurisdiction in Svalbard. Second, it suggests that the facilitation may help aspirational non-Arctic nations gain influence on regional governance at the expense of the central Arctic Ocean coastal states, including Norway's. The study accounts for recent Norwegian policy shifts, which seem to address these concerns without weakening international scientific cooperation or the pursuit of scientific knowledge about the changing Arctic environment.

### KEYWORDS

Geopolitics; Norway; polar research; presence; security policy; Svalbard

## Introduction

In early March 2016, a group of young Turkish high school students attached a box to a private garage in Longyearbyen, Svalbard. The box, smaller than a beer cooler, contained a few basic sensors, including a thermometer, barometer, hydrometer and magnetometer.<sup>1</sup> The device was solemnly named the «Bilfen Arctic Meteorological and Auroral Station», and the students celebrated the occasion by posing to their photographer while holding up giant Turkish flags and banners.<sup>2</sup> The high school experiment, presented to the public as a Turkish Arctic station and «the first and only station in the North Pole where the Turkish flag is flown»,<sup>3</sup> received national press coverage in the students' home country.<sup>4</sup>

A few years earlier, the entrance to a wooden barrack of cultural heritage status in Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard was decorated with two lions cut from solid marble. The building,

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<sup>1</sup>Emre Erbuga blog.

<sup>2</sup>Pictures posted to various online sites, e.g. at *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>Bilfen Research Station, «About station».

<sup>4</sup>See e.g. *Hurriyet*, «Lise öğrencileri kuzey ışıklarının peşinde» (11 March 2016); *Gazette Habertürk*, «Burada ölmek yasak!» (13 March 2016).

previously known as *Ungkarshøyen* («the bachelor home»), had just been leased by the Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration (CAA) and was being transformed into «The Chinese Yellow River Arctic Station». The Norwegian owner of the building had to cast pedestals to support the weight of the two sculptures that were shipped halfway around the world to ornament the station. The guardian lions, or *shishizi*, are closely associated with government buildings in China and gave the former miners' accommodation a distinct Chinese governmental look.

Research facilities in Svalbard, however austere, sometimes have the sheen of flag-showing foreign missions. A tiny hut, leased by the University of Groningen to support the monitoring of barnacle geese in the summer months, became «The Netherlands Arctic Station in Spitsbergen», decorated with wooden shoes, flags and other national symbols. Two steel containers – and a flagpole – sitting on the pier of one of the settlements in Svalbard became the conception of «The Czech Arctic Research Station».

National posturing by researchers working overseas is nothing new. Research stations in Antarctica, for instance, show the names and flags of numerous kingdoms and republics. Research vessels, surveying the oceans, usually have a government affiliation and are obliged to operate under the ensign of their flag state. However, in Svalbard, the remote and northernmost part of Norway, the national posturing of foreign researchers is more delicate. The Norwegian government already struggles to debunk misunderstandings related to the 1920 Treaty Concerning Spitsbergen (hereinafter the Svalbard Treaty), a post-World War I agreement which recognises Norway's sovereignty over the archipelago but also provides generous rights to foreign nationals with regard to e.g. immigration and various economic undertakings. While the fundamental principle of Norwegian sovereignty is not debated among legal scholars, common misperceptions among laypeople of Svalbard as an «international» or «internationalised» territory, open to foreign governments seeking a strategic foothold in the Arctic, are more than inconvenient to Oslo.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, this study *explores the national posturing by foreign researchers in Svalbard and examines ways it could be conceived as a security issue by the Norwegian government*. The findings here may explain Norway's increasingly proactive management of international research activities in the Svalbard archipelago.

«National posturing» can manifest itself physically, for instance through national symbols and characteristics attributed to research infrastructure in Svalbard, but also verbally and through various written statements from researchers and government officials alike. While posturing may seem as a vague concept, references to a *national* presence, or the strategic presence of a state or government actor, rather than the presence of *nationals* (scientists from research institutions of various nationalities), is a possible indication of such.

The empirical data in this study includes on-site observations, conducted over several years (2002–2019), primarily through multiple visits to the permanent research communities Longyearbyen, Barentsburg and Ny-Ålesund. In addition, various written sources have been systematically consulted. They include reports and information shared on the homepages of research institutions with a presence in Svalbard, Arctic and research policy documents and/or strategies of relevant governments, correspondence between

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<sup>5</sup>Pedersen, «The Politics of Presence».

relevant research actors, and public statements, posted on government pages or expressed via media outlets. In addition, evidence is gathered from Norwegian institutions involved in facilitating for, and/or coordinating, international research in Svalbard, notably the Norwegian Polar Institute (NPI), Kings Bay AS, and the Research Council of Norway, including its Svalbard Science Forum (SSF) and Research in Svalbard (RiS) database.

Most of the observations and statistics are pre-COVID-19 data and do not necessarily depict the research presence in Svalbard during, and potentially after, the global pandemic.

## Optics and previous studies

The sharp increase in international polar research in recent years can easily be explained as a sensible response to rapid climate change. The temperature in the Arctic rises faster than anywhere else on Earth, impacting not only the regional ecosystem and cryosphere but also shifting ocean currents and weather patterns, possibly posing a threat to food supply even in distant regions. The increased research efforts mediate mankind's need for scientific knowledge about the various elements of the Arctic environment and their interaction, by accumulating real-time *in-situ* data and refining assimilation schemes as well as climate, meteorological and oceanographic models.<sup>6</sup>

Another – supplementary – explanation for the surge in polar research is that more nations seek a strategic presence in a region in the process of opening up to a range of activities and opportunities, related to new sea lines of communication and offshore resource exploration.<sup>7</sup> As the sea ice recedes and a new and prospective region emerges, Arctic governance is in the mould.<sup>8</sup> Amid headlines such as «Who Owns the Arctic?»,<sup>9</sup> «Scramble for the Arctic»,<sup>10</sup> and «Polar Meltdown Triggers International Arctic Landgrab»,<sup>11</sup> vested stakeholders, with a presence in the region, are added to the Arctic Council as observers and get a seat at the table when new treaties, such as the 2018 Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement, are negotiated. Thus, some national presence in the region is a ticket to the venues of Arctic power and influence, where regional governance is shaped.<sup>12</sup> Research facilities in Svalbard, for instance, can be viewed as «more than facilities for conducting research: they are expressions of Arctic stakeholder status», some scholars suggest, adding that nations with a presence in Svalbard «enact not only their presence, but also their right to be present in the Arctic».<sup>13</sup> «Showing the flag» is a central element of strategic presence, and one of its effects is influence.<sup>14</sup>

Scientific research is, in this context, a potential source of «soft» and «smart» power, terms coined by Joseph Nye Jr.<sup>15</sup> Contemporary science diplomacy has «allowed for the

<sup>6</sup>Pedersen, «Polar Research and the Secrets of the Arctic».

<sup>7</sup>E.g. Borgerson, «Arctic Meltdown».

<sup>8</sup>Koivurova, «Limits and Possibilities of the Arctic Council»; Young, «Arctic Governance».

<sup>9</sup>*Time* (1 October 2007)

<sup>10</sup>*Financial Times* (19 August 2007)

<sup>11</sup>*Scientific American* (1 March 2009)

<sup>12</sup>Knecht, «The Politics of Arctic international Cooperation»; Koivurova, Joonas and Shnorro, *Arctic Governance*; Stokke, «Asian Stakes and Arctic Governance».

<sup>13</sup>Roberts and Paglia, «Science as National Belonging», 904.

<sup>14</sup>Hendrix and Armstrong, «The Presence Problem».

<sup>15</sup>Nye Jr, «Get Smart»; «Soft Power».

Arctic states to integrate China into Arctic science and education without [the] public displays of distrust»,<sup>16</sup> as other political instruments and forms of presence often precipitate. Some scholars have noted that «scientific research is often the only on-site activity that non-Arctic states could provide in the region».<sup>17</sup> In fact, for more than a century, governments have used polar research as an instrument to ensure a strategic presence in, and political influence over, the polar regions.<sup>18</sup>

While exploring the science-policy interface, the primary subject of this study is not «science diplomacy» as such. This term has surfaced in several recent Arctic-related studies and points to how scientific knowledge may serve foreign policy objectives and vice versa.<sup>19</sup> The UK Royal Society suggests that the fluid concept of science diplomacy may apply to the promotion of science-based policy decision-making, the facilitation for international research cooperation through diplomatic efforts, as well as the improvement of relations among nations through scientific cooperation.<sup>20</sup> The optics of this study, however, highlights a zero-sum aspect of scientific undertakings – that is, research as an activity that potentially advances relative national power and influence through strategic presence.

While not a legal paper, this study briefly touches on an ongoing debate among legal scholars on issues related to Svalbard, sovereignty and sovereign rights. The nature of Norway's sovereignty over Svalbard has been subject to several studies, particularly related to Norway's coastal state entitlements under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and sovereign rights outside the territorial waters surrounding the archipelago. Scholars widely agree that Norway's sovereignty over Svalbard is firmly established both by the 1920 Svalbard Treaty («... full and absolute sovereignty of Norway over the archipelago ... »)<sup>21</sup> and customary international law.<sup>22</sup> However, some of the same scholars debate whether the Svalbard Treaty provisions on fishing and mining should be extended beyond what is explicitly stated in the treaty («... on land and in their territorial waters ... »)<sup>23</sup> as new maritime concepts, such as the continental shelf and the 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone, have been introduced to international law and added to the exclusive jurisdiction of the coastal state. While Norway asserts that its sovereign rights as coastal state beyond the territorial waters of Svalbard are unconstrained by the Svalbard Treaty, some contacting parties, including Norwegian allies Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, have expressed the view that the treaty provisions should indeed apply to the maritime areas outside Svalbard.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Bertelsen, «Science Diplomacy and the Arctic», 242.

<sup>17</sup>Luszczuk, Padrtova and Szczerbowicz, «Political Dimensions of Arctic Research».

<sup>18</sup>Bones, «Science In-Between»; Drivenes and Jølle, *Norsk polarhistorie*; Sörlin, *Science, Geopolitics and Culture in the Polar Region*.

<sup>19</sup>Berkman et al., *Science Diplomacy*; Bertelsen, «Science Diplomacy and the Arctic»; Luszczuk, Padrtova and Szczerbowicz, «Political Dimensions of Arctic Research»; Royal Society, *New Frontiers in Science Diplomacy*.

<sup>20</sup>Royal Science, *New Frontiers in Science Diplomacy*: vi; also see e.g. Wagner, «The Elusive Partnership: Science and Foreign Policy».

<sup>21</sup>Article 1.

<sup>22</sup>Churchill and Ulfstein, «The Disputed Maritime Zones around Svalbard»; Churchill and Ulfstein, *Maritime Management in Disputed Areas*; Fleischer, *Petroleumstrett*; Ulfstein, «The Svalbard Treaty»; Andenæs, *Statsforfatningen*; Anderson, «The Status under International Law»; Rossi, «A Unique International Problem»; Pedersen, «The Politics of Presence».

<sup>23</sup>Article 3.

<sup>24</sup>Pedersen, *Conflict and Order in Svalbard Waters*; Pedersen, «The Dynamics of Svalbard Diplomacy»; Pedersen, «Denmark's Policies towards the Svalbard Area».

The 1920 agreement did not address scientific research the way it did commercial activities, and research is therefore not explicitly covered by the treaty's «same conditions of equality» provisions. Article 5 called for a convention that would lay down «the condition under which scientific investigations may be conducted» in Svalbard, but such a convention was never concluded. Hence, Robin Churchill and Geir Ulfstein, legal scholars and renowned critics of Norway's interpretation of the Svalbard Treaty in maritime matters, conclude that «[s]ince there is no provision in the Treaty dealing explicitly with discrimination in relation to scientific research, Norwegian sovereignty should accordingly prevail, at the expense of non-discrimination».<sup>25</sup> But even if Norwegian law and regulations make up the legal framework for research in Svalbard, they extend far-reaching and non-discriminatory opportunities to visiting researchers from around the world.

Although legal scholars do not question Norway's sovereignty, misunderstandings and misperceptions about the legal status of Svalbard are found to be widespread among laypeople.<sup>26</sup> Points often missed are that the state parties to the Svalbard Treaty can only claim extensive rights on behalf of their nationals and, moreover, that Norway's jurisdiction is exclusive. «No matter how strong Norway's sovereignty stands in legal theory; the mere conception of a political vacuum or dispute over sovereignty could certainly tempt others to assert more influence here,» concludes a previous study,<sup>27</sup> suggesting that legal misperceptions about Svalbard amounts to a security challenge to the Norwegian government.

## Research in Svalbard

For nations with polar aspirations, Svalbard represents easy access to the extreme latitudes. At 78 degrees north, the administrative capital Longyearbyen is closer to the geographical North Pole than the U.S. Antarctic McMurdo Station is to the South Pole. Getting there takes little effort. Norway requires no visa from visitors to Svalbard, and the Longyearbyen settlement can be reached by regular air liners on a daily basis. Accommodation includes high-end hotels and gourmet restaurants. International researchers with little or no experience from Arctic field work are offered training classes in polar bear protection, snowmobile handling, emergency camping, avalanche and glacier rescue, and Arctic first aid at the University Center in Svalbard (UNIS). All necessary equipment, including Iridium satellite phones, rifles and snowmobiles with sleds, aluminium storage boxes and jerry cans, can be rented at the local stores. Research institutions seeking a longer and more permanent presence have been able to lease huts, houses and other facilities, most notably from Kings Bay AS, a government-owned company managing the High Arctic research settlement of Ny-Ålesund, at 80 degrees north.

Each year, up to 1,000 researchers from approximately 30 different nations visit Svalbard to do scientific research.<sup>28</sup> As this study will demonstrate, some of this activity

<sup>25</sup>Churchill and Ulfstein, «The Disputed Maritime Zones around Svalbard»: 556. Also see Ulfstein, *The Svalbard Treaty*; Moe, «Forskningspolitik på Svalbard».

<sup>26</sup>Pedersen, «The Politics of Presence».

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.: 102

<sup>28</sup>Norwegian Government, *Svalbard*.

is framed in terms of a national presence in the Arctic, while taking place in leased facilities sometimes depicted as strategic structures or footholds.

While the Norwegian government increasingly refers to the research settlement of Ny-Ålesund as one Norwegian-run research base open to international researchers,<sup>29</sup> some capitals present the research community, and their presence there, differently.

London, for instance, perceives Ny-Ålesund as «an international research village».<sup>30</sup> An austere house, which the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) has leased since 1991, was initially named after the British explorer W. Brian Harland («The Harland House») but is increasingly referred to by British officials as the UK Arctic Research Station.<sup>31</sup> NERC maintains that it should stay free to determine the «identity and profile» of its own station.<sup>32</sup> The facility is operated by the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) and earned a separate textbox in the U.K. government's Arctic policy, which was adopted in 2013. The document, *Adapting to Change: UK Policy Towards the Arctic*,<sup>33</sup> spells out an explicit link between British research presence in the region and political influence. According to its author – the Polar Regions Department of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office – science «is the main currency for delivering many of the UK's objectives» in the region.

By its nature, science contributes directly to diplomacy, policy and our understanding of the Arctic, and is the basis for much of our co-operation with Arctic States, the Arctic Council and other actors.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, The Hague emphasised the role of the Dutch research presence in Ny-Ålesund in its first polar strategy, which was issued in April 2016.<sup>35</sup> Since the mid-1990s the University of Groningen has leased cumbersome huts, built around 1912, from Kings Bay AS, and the facility functions primarily as a summer field camp for research on bird ecology.<sup>36</sup> The presence there makes «Dutch research more visibly internationally», the strategy points out, while referring to the huts as the Netherlands Arctic Station in Spitsbergen. Anecdotally, the strategy refers to the archipelago as «Spitsbergen», the name given by Dutch explorer Willem Barentsz in 1596, and not Svalbard, which has been the official name since Norway assumed sovereignty over the islands in 1925. The presence is funded directly by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which coordinates Dutch polar policy.<sup>37</sup> The facility, which is frequently decorated with a generously sized Dutch flag, earned a visit from the Netherlands' foreign minister Bert Koenders in 2015. The University of Groningen logged a presence there of 362 research days in 2019, roughly the equivalent of one researcher present year-round.<sup>38</sup>

As for national decoration and symbols, the Dutch are outdone by the Chinese. The former *Ungkarshimmen* barrack, now referred to as the Chinese Yellow River Arctic Station, has the most eye-catching national profile with the massive *Shi* lions guarding

<sup>29</sup>The Research Council of Norway, «Ny-Ålesund Research Station».

<sup>30</sup>UK Arctic Office, «About Ny-Ålesund».

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>NERC's comments to draft Ny-Ålesund strategy. The Research Council of Norway, email to author, 13 March 2019.

<sup>33</sup>UK Government, *Adapting to Change*.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.: 9.

<sup>35</sup>Netherlands Government, *Nederlandse Polaire Strategie*.

<sup>36</sup>Research in Svalbard (RiS), database.

<sup>37</sup>Netherlands Government, *Nederlandse Polaire Strategie*: 45.

<sup>38</sup>Kings Bay AS. Email to author, 23 October 2020.

its entrance. The facility is frequently visited by Chinese official delegates, routinely lining up for a photo op in front of the guardian lions where they wave Chinese flags and display massive banners. The Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration (CAA) solemnly opened this facility as late as in 2004, but it is already one of the largest in terms of presence. The facility, managed by the Polar Institute of China (PRIC), is usually manned through most of the year and logged 1,221 research days in 2019 – or eight percent of the accumulated research presence in Ny-Ålesund that year.<sup>39</sup> In 2011 it received China's land and resource minister Xu Shaoshi in a visit unannounced to the Norwegian authorities.

When the Chinese managers were given the opportunity to comment on a draft Norwegian research strategy for Ny-Ålesund, Beijing responded by requesting «an international decision-making process considering the special features of Ny-Ålesund and Spitsbergen as a whole».<sup>40</sup> The Chinese government stated that it would not «accept that our station would be referred to as a certain building of facility belonging to the so-called Ny-Ålesund Research Station».<sup>41</sup> Rather, it requested more autonomy from the Norwegian government. Each country should decide over their own activity in Svalbard, and they «should not be interfered», the Chinese maintained.<sup>42</sup> It called for all research coordination to go through the Ny-Ålesund Science Managers Committee (NySMAC), where the involved «countries» would participate.<sup>43</sup>

In its 2018 Arctic policy, Beijing asserted that the Svalbard Treaty gives the contracting parties to the Svalbard Treaty (the treaty says their nationals) a set of liberties in the archipelago. In the same document, the Chinese government expresses growing ambitions in the wider region and maintains it will seek to «participate in the governance of the Arctic».<sup>44</sup> General Secretary Xi Jinping has described China as an emerging «polar great power», and China's People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) is one of the main planners of China's polar science programme.<sup>45</sup>

While the activity at the Chinese facilities in Ny-Ålesund is substantial, the activity is even larger at AWIPEV, a string of facilities operated jointly by the German Alfred Wegener Institut für Polar und Meeresforschung (AWI) and the French Institut Paul Énuke Victor (IPEV). The AWIPEV Arctic Research Base, as the two institutions have named their venture, has a permanent staff and counted 3,367 research days, or approx. 22 percent of the total Ny-Ålesund research presence, in 2019.<sup>46</sup> AWIPEV is the result of the merger of the German-run Koldewey Station and the French-run Charles Rabot and Jean Corbel Stations in 2003.

Although the Franco-German operation does not leave a national footprint *per se*, the undertaking gives little or no recognition to Norway as a host country or facilitator of international research in Svalbard. On its official webpages, AWIPEV presents Ny-Ålesund as «labs and stations operated by eleven countries»,<sup>47</sup> and nowhere is Norway

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<sup>39</sup>Kings Bay AS. Email to author, 23 October 2020.

<sup>40</sup>Chinese response to draft strategy. The Research Council of Norway, email to author, 13 March 2019.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>China State Council, *China's Arctic Policy*.

<sup>45</sup>Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*.

<sup>46</sup>Kings Bay AS. Email to author, 23 October 2020.

<sup>47</sup>AWIPEV, homepage.

acknowledged as a host country, facilitator, owner of infrastructure, or coordinator of research activities here.<sup>48</sup> In a comment to the draft Ny-Ålesund research strategy, the two institutions jointly claimed that Svalbard has the legal «status of protected territory, dedicated to science and open to the international community».<sup>49</sup> Alfred Wegener Institut (AWI) has played a prominent role in the development of the Ny-Ålesund Science Managers Committee (NySMAC), which evolved incrementally from an initial forum for research coordination into a *de facto* self-management of international research in the settlement in the 2010s.<sup>50</sup>

Seoul is another capital with polar aspirations.<sup>51</sup> One of the explicit missions of the Korean Polar Research Institute (KOPRI) has been to sustain «an active and influential regional presence» in the polar regions and seek «a leadership role in polar affairs».<sup>52</sup> Its presence in the Arctic region is first and foremost ensured by a Ny-Ålesund building leased from the Norwegians, which KOPRI has named after Korean thinker Dasan Jeong Yag-Yong. The Dasan Station was established in 2002 and logged a total of 416 research days in 2019, or nearly three percent of the research presence in Ny-Ålesund that year.<sup>53</sup> KOPRI is also a keen user of shared research infrastructures – themed facilities managed by Norway through Kings Bay AS and made available to all international researchers present in Ny-Ålesund, such as the Light Sensitive Observatory and the Amundsen-Nobile Climate Change Tower.

Some international researchers leave a more modest national footprint than others, although they operate research facilities of their own. The National Institute for Polar Research (NIPR) of Japan, and its Arctic Environment Research Center (AERC), have moved most of their research activity from the low-key Rabben Station, leased from 1991, to an equally low-key house section in the village named The Ny-Ålesund NIPR Observatory. It is equipped with a mere stamp-sized flag in the corner of a «NIPR Observatory» plaque.

Other modulated facilities in Ny-Ålesund include those run by India's National Center for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR) and The National Research Council of Italy (CNR), even if their research presence is considerable. NCPOR, operating the «Himadri» building, logged 1,302 research days in 2019 – a presence that has more than doubled over seven years, while CNR, running the facility named Dirigibile Italia, reported 1,103 research days the same year.<sup>54</sup>

In the mining settlement of Barentsburg, west of Longyearbyen, Moscow has invested heavily in modern research infrastructure. Russian researchers do not depend on Norwegian facilitation as most others do. Rather, the Russian state-owned coal company Trust Arktikugol has converted parts of its mining town into the Russian Scientific Center in Spitsbergen (RSCS). Over a 10-year-period, old buildings have been renovated and turned into meteorological and geophysical observatories, state-of-the-art laboratories, office space, accommodation and storage facilities.<sup>55</sup> The investments are called

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<sup>48</sup>Moe, «Forskningspolitikk på Svalbard»: 121.

<sup>49</sup>AWI and IPEV's joint comments to draft strategy. The Research Council of Norway, email to author, 13 March 2019.

<sup>50</sup>Pedersen, «Ny hodepine i nord».

<sup>51</sup>Korean Government, *Arctic Policy*.

<sup>52</sup>Originally on Korea Polar Research Institute, homepage. The page has later been removed.

<sup>53</sup>Kings Bay AS. Email to author, 23 October 2020.

<sup>54</sup>Kings Bay AS. Email to author, 23 October 2020.

<sup>55</sup>Nikulina, *Russian Scientific Center on Spitsbergen*; Svalbard Science Forum, «Barentsburg».

for by the high-level Russian Government Commission on Presence in the Spitsbergen Archipelago, established in the 2000s literally to «ensure Russian presence» in Svalbard.<sup>56</sup>

With the depletion of coal reserves under Barentsburg, Russia could no longer rely exclusively on mining to maintain the size of its settlement there, which in turn served to protect Russian strategic interests in the region.<sup>57</sup> Today, Barentsburg hosts an estimated 80–100 researchers from a handful of Russian research institutions, visiting the settlement mainly through the summer seasons.<sup>58</sup>

While the legal basis for running a Russian company town in the Norwegian islands derives from the Mining Code of 1925 and arguably necessitates an active mining operation, Trust Arktikugol has earned the permission of the Norwegian government, e.g. through revised land-use plans, to expand its activities in Barentsburg to include the new research facilities as well as tourism-related infrastructure.

Czech researchers from the University of South Bohemia operate what they refer to as the Czech Arctic Research Station, initially two steel containers and a flagpole sitting on the shore next to the former mining town of Pyramiden.<sup>59</sup> Over the last few years, the Czech station has been expanded to include a house in Longyearbyen and a field camp in Billefjorden, all decorated with Czech flags and an explicit national affiliation.

In the bay of Hornsund, Polish researchers have had a permanent presence since the 1950s. Polish foreign policy officials say the stand-alone station has provided Poland with a long-standing footprint in the Arctic,<sup>60</sup> and the presence in Hornsund earned Poland a permanent observer status in the Arctic Council as early as in 1998. The Hornsund station, originally named after the Polish explorer Stanisław Siedlecki, is increasingly referred to as the Polish Polar Station.<sup>61</sup>

While Poland is a non-Arctic state, its Ministry of Foreign Affairs is actively involved in Arctic politics. The ministry established its own Polar Task Force in 2011 and initiated the so-called Warsaw Contact Meetings, where observers to the Arctic Council and the EU were given a forum of their own to discuss Arctic matters that they deem problematic.<sup>62</sup> In 2019 participants of the Warsaw Contact Meetings called for «new forms of enhanced engagement» and a more meaningful and active role of the observers to the Arctic Council.<sup>63</sup>

## The politics of research presence

Norway, while under no apparent legal obligation to facilitate international scientific research infrastructure in Svalbard, has for decades welcomed researchers from across the world to its High-Arctic archipelago. In the early 1990s, as the liberal world order gathered steam, a government White Paper explicitly asserted that Norway, «in the spirit of» the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, would facilitate foreign research, primarily inside the Ny-Ålesund «international research base».<sup>64</sup>

<sup>56</sup>Russian Government, «Government Commission on Presence in the Spitsbergen Archipelago».

<sup>57</sup>Jørgensen, *Russisk Svalbardpolitikk*.

<sup>58</sup>Svalbard Science Forum, «Barentsburg».

<sup>59</sup>Observed also prior to more recent infrastructure expansions.

<sup>60</sup>Arctic Council, «Interview with Arctic Council Observer: Poland».

<sup>61</sup>See e.g. Hornsund Polska Stacja Polarna, «The Station's History».

<sup>62</sup>Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Address to the Chair of Senior Arctic Officials Group.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Norwegian Ministry of the Environment, *Norsk polarforskning*.

Since then, the international world order as well as the character of foreign research presence in Svalbard have changed. While the spirit of the Svalbard Treaty accommodates the *nationals* of the contracting parties but not the state parties themselves, some foreign capitals have come to cast the presence there as national stations and strategic footholds, potentially entitling them to political power and influence on the islands and in the wider Arctic region.

In naval strategy, «showing the flag» is a central element of strategic presence, which in turn is a decisive tool of statecraft and instrument of influence.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, some of the research presence in Svalbard may seem geopolitically motivated. This impression is reinforced by their relative underperformance in scientific output, including few publications in high-ranking journals.<sup>66</sup> The national posturing, through naming and labelling, ensigns and other national symbols, and even calls from capitals for a say in Svalbard policymaking, may be viewed by Oslo with justified scepticism. The strategic presence could potentially amount to a challenge for Norway, for two reasons:

*Firstly*, the posturing adds instability to Svalbard by fuelling misperceptions of the legal status of the archipelago. As pointed out in previous studies,<sup>67</sup> Svalbard's unique and international character has led some to believe it also has an international or internationalised legal status. While subject to the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, and kept outside of the European Economic Area (EEA) as well as the Schengen Area, the archipelago is fully integrated into the Kingdom of Norway. The exclusive character of Norway's jurisdiction is also underpinned throughout the Svalbard Treaty.<sup>68</sup>

National posturing by some international actors, as demonstrated above, could leave the impression of a strategic presence by multiple state or government actors, exercising some level of flag-state or Antarctica-like jurisdiction over autonomous enclaves, rather than individual researchers and research institutions, subject to the exclusive jurisdiction of the Norwegian government. If consolidated, the strategic presence could potentially embolden some state actors, including great powers, with regional aspirations – and become a real security challenge for host nation Norway.

Research-presence-framed-as-strategic-footholds is particularly troubling when coupled with calls by foreign capitals to have a say in Svalbard policymaking. China's insistence on «an international decision-making process» for research policy in Svalbard, and for autonomous national research stations in Svalbard devoid of Norwegian interference, tests Norway's full and absolute sovereignty over, and exclusive jurisdiction in, the archipelago.

*Secondly*, the posturing may add political instability to the wider Arctic region. As some international presence metamorphoses into embassy-like foreign missions to the Arctic region, governments that may potentially undermine the influence Norway and other coastal states littoral to the Arctic Ocean are emboldened.

In May 2008, in Ilulissat, Greenland, the five Arctic coastal states littoral to the central Arctic Ocean, including Norway, declared that they had a «stewardship role» on top of

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<sup>65</sup>Hendrix and Armstrong, «The Presence Problem».

<sup>66</sup>The Research Council of Norway, «Ny-Ålesund Research Station»; British Antarctic Survey's comments to draft Ny-Ålesund strategy. The Research Council of Norway, email to author, 13 March 2019; Aksnes, «Norwegian Polar Research & Svalbard Research».

<sup>67</sup>Pedersen, «The Politics of Presence», «Gravedrift og sikkerhetspolitikk»; Ulfstein, «The Svalbard Treaty».

<sup>68</sup>E.g. Articles 1–2, 4, 7–9.

the world «by virtue of their sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction in large parts of the Arctic Ocean».<sup>69</sup> They pledged commitment to the law of the sea and the orderly settlement of any overlapping claims.

The Ilulissat Declaration escalated the debate about who should be considered legitimate stakeholders and participants in venues of Arctic power and influence.<sup>70</sup> In a region that includes international waters, international seabed and high seas, some called for the inclusion of the entire international community in Arctic discussions to address «governance gaps»,<sup>71</sup> while others advanced the idea of an Arctic Treaty, inspired by the Antarctic Treaty.<sup>72</sup> Arguably, the perception of a political vacuum on top of the world, or a still-ungoverned common heritage of mankind, may have given rise to Arctic opportunism and/or encouraged non-Arctic states to increase their involvement and strategic presence in the region, including Svalbard. Hence, by facilitating for research that provides a *de facto* strategic presence in Svalbard, Norway may in fact be assisting non-Arctic nations' efforts (regardless of legal merits) to dilute the stewardship role of the central Arctic Ocean coastal states, including its own. In geopolitics, power and influence are relative sizes, or zero-sum concepts, where someone's gain is another one's loss.

Measuring out a balanced Norwegian policy response that would deduct some geopolitics from the foreign research presence in Svalbard while at the same time encouraging state-of-the-art international scientific research in the archipelago amid climate change, requires deliberate statecraft. It takes an appreciation of security policy challenges that national research authorities lack. Recent policy shifts by the Norwegian government can be seen as attempts to strike a more deliberate balance. The 2019 Research Strategy for Ny-Ålesund appears to be aimed at dissuading national posturing without diminishing the presence of international researchers in Svalbard. For instance, the research strategy calls for the hosting of international researchers inside common, theme-based infrastructure rather than facilitating a string of autonomous stations showing various flags.

Also, the new strategy seems aimed at diminishing the authority of the Ny-Ålesund Science Managers Committee (NySMAC), which had incrementally evolved into a *de facto* self-governance body for the Ny-Ålesund research community.<sup>73</sup> While originally designed as an information-sharing forum for international researchers, Beijing, for one, had come to regard NySMAC as a template «international decision-making process» for Svalbard-related issues.<sup>74</sup>

A more premeditated Norwegian research policy for Svalbard may be good for science, too. Today, stations showing various flags put up similar sensors and laboratories practically wall-to-wall,<sup>75</sup> and they underperform in scientific output.<sup>76</sup> The new policy for Svalbard will not only discourage national posturing and political opportunism, but also counter research duplication while at the same time advancing a more cost-efficient

<sup>69</sup>Ilulissat Declaration, 28 May 2008.

<sup>70</sup>Pedersen, «Debates over the Role of the Arctic Council».

<sup>71</sup>Koivurova and Molenaar, «International Governance and Regulation of the Marine Arctic».

<sup>72</sup>European Parliament, resolution of 9 October 2008 on Arctic governance.

<sup>73</sup>Pedersen, «Ny hodepine i nord».

<sup>74</sup>Chinese response to draft strategy. The Research Council of Norway, email to author, 13 March 2019.

<sup>75</sup>See e.g. frequency of weather sensors and optical instruments in the Research in Svalbard (RIS) database.

<sup>76</sup>The Research Council of Norway, «Ny-Ålesund Research Station»; British Antarctic Survey's comments to draft Ny-Ålesund strategy. The Research Council of Norway, email to author, 13 March 2019; Aksnes, «Norwegian Polar Research & Svalbard Research».

operation of research infrastructure. It will promote international research cooperation and data-sharing, but also preserve the treaty-given rights of visiting nationals from the contracting parties while at the same time emphasising the exclusive character of Norway's jurisdiction.

Notwithstanding, Norway is likely to continue to engage with foreign governments and encourage their contributions to polar research, promote science-based policymaking, and pursue international solutions to transboundary challenges in the Arctic region, which spans from climate change to long-range transported toxins and other pollutants accumulating in the ecosystem. But not by facilitating their strategic, foreign mission-like presence in the Svalbard islands, which would potentially add instability and insecurity to Svalbard and the wider Arctic region.

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