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Norway and Russia in the High North: Clash of perceptions

By Bendik Solum Whist

In the past five years, the High North has become subject to increased attention in Norway. The strengthened focus on the region has been characterized by a portrayal of Norway as a small actor that, faced with large powers such as Russia, the EU, and the United States, runs the risk of becoming marginalized. At the same time, there has been a widespread view in Russia that Norway has taken advantage of Russian weakness in the High North ever since the Cold War ended. These two views obviously rest on different assumptions. Proponents of the first view have referred to the major political, economic, and social changes in Russia from 1989 onwards, and some have even spoken of a paradigmatic shift in Russian foreign policy in the High North. The recent Russian-American energy cooperation has been used as an example to prove this point. Nonetheless, I will in this article argue that Russia still tends to view the High North from a Cold War perspective. Referring to specific Norwegian actions in the Barents Sea and adjacent areas, I will show that Cold War perceptions are still prevalent in Russia, and that Norway has frequently been assumed to be part of a larger context in which the United States and NATO are pulling strings. "Cold War" has been replaced by "cold peace", and Norwegian foreign policy is commonly assumed to have clandestine motivations.

A Change in the Geopolitical Climate

During the Cold War, the Norwegian-Russian border played a significant role internationally. Not only did it represent the border between two states, it was also a dividing line between the two power blocs of the Cold War, and NATO saw Northern Norway as vital for the security of the alliance as a whole. The situation today is quite different. During the 1990s, the High North changed from a military-strategic "hotspot" to a region of increased cooperation and optimism. One example of the changed "geopolitical climate" is the energy dialogue between Russia and the U.S., the result of which is that Russia will supply the U.S. with significant amounts of gas and oil in the decades to come. Much of this petroleum will have to come from the Arctic region, in which 25% of the world's undiscovered petroleum resources are assumed to be found (U.S. geological survey). Large natural gas fields have been discovered in both Russian and Norwegian parts of the Barents Sea, and the disputed area between the two states' economic zones – measuring 155,000 km^2 or half the size of Norway – is also assumed to have potential. The existence of oil and gas in such an area will undoubtedly give the High North a new strategic importance.

Norwegian actions in the High North

1) Fishery Protection Zone: First Round

Before 1925, Svalbard was *terra nullius* (no man's land), but with the Svalbard Treaty the archipelago was placed under Norwegian jurisdiction, limited by the following five principles on which there is an international consensus: 1) Norwegian sovereignty over the islands, 2) equal right of access to the islands for all signatory powers, 3) equal treatment for anyone fishing, hunting, mining, etc. on the islands, 4) local taxation (Norway is not to make a profit from taxation on Svalbard), 5) the archipelago cannot be used for warring purposes. Additionally, Article 2 of the treaty states that "Norway shall be free to maintain, take or decree suitable measures to ensure the preservation and, if necessary, the reconstruction of the fauna and flora of the said regions".

After the establishment of a 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around Norway, provided for by the Convention on the Law of the Seas, there was uncertainty as to what could be done with the waters surrounding Svalbard. Norway has claimed the right to establish an EEZ, but this view has not been shared by the other

signatory powers of the Svalbard Treaty. Therefore, to protect the fisheries around Svalbard without provoking a larger conflict, Norway established a nondiscriminatory Fishery Protection Zone (FPZ) of 200 nautical miles around Svalbard in 1977. The establishment of such a zone was unprecedented and must be seen in light of the geopolitical climate of the Cold War. In the event of a conflict in the High North, Norway could rely on NATO-support, but at the same time, the alliance had strong geostrategic interests in the region. It is possible that the increased geostrategic importance of the High North for Norway's allies made them more willing to refrain from protesting against Norwegian views. When the FPZ was established, NATO countries gave little explicit support, but neither did they protest. The NATO support that Norway could rely on back then may have led the Norwegians to pursue a slightly more aggressive stance in this case than they would have dared if entirely on their own.

2) Svalbard Environmental Protection Act

The Svalbard Environmental Protection Act of 2001 was an attempt to gather all the existing environmental prescriptions for Svalbard in one law, and to make sure that settlement, research, and commerce would not jeopardize the environment on the islands. The Norwegian argument for establishing such a law is based on Article 2 of the Svalbard Treaty (preservation of the wildlife nature), but Russia has nevertheless been skeptical about Norway's intentions. Indeed, the law has been seen as a strategy to oust the Russians from the islands, as large areas have been put under environmental protection, and costs for the mining industry have thus increased. The deputy Chairman of the Russian Duma International Affairs Committee, Konstantin Kosachev, went so far as to argue that "Norway's aim with this law is undoubtedly to push Russia out. A Svalbard without Russian presence can be used for military purposes. If Norway did not have such aims, there would be no reason to push Russia out. And if Norway really has military aspirations, it is NATO and the United States that are behind it". According to Norwegian research fellow, Geir Hønneland, such views are not only held by Russian nationalists; there is a general perception that preservation of the environment is not the only – or real – reason for introducing the law. There is little doubt that environmental issues play an important role in Norwegian politics; nevertheless, it is interesting to note that there is also much emphasis on how Norway can position itself in the High North. A result of the law is that Norway's position on Svalbard has been strengthened (relative to that of the Russians), at least if one compares the numbers of Russians and Norwegians living on the island. In 2006 NRK reported a historically low number of Russian and Ukrainian miners living on Svalbard. This may make it easier to understand the Russian skepticism, but one could, nonetheless, ask how likely environmental justifications are to sway a state in which environmental issues have lately been marginalized through various administrative reforms. The most glaring example here is the abolition of the State Committee of Environmental Affairs and its subsequent subordination under the Ministry of Natural Resources since 2000.

3) "Cold peace" in Northwest Russia

The end of the Cold War led to great optimism in Norway related to the possibilities in the High North, but simultaneously a glum image of Northwest Russia established itself in the Norwegian High North discourse. The Norwegian-Russian border was said to represent the world's greatest gap in living standards between two neighboring countries, and this, it has been argued, fuelled Norway's feeling of having to be the "good Samaritan". Increased Norwegian aid and investment in northern Russia was, however, not always well perceived on the receiving end. The Governor in Murmansk, for instance, stated that Norway's new cooperative approach was in fact aimed at taking advantage of, and gaining from, Russia's problems – Cold War had been replaced by "cold peace". Such statements were also made with regard to environmental issues. Official Norwegian documents had a strong focus on badly secured nuclear installations, outdated nuclear submarines, and radioactive waste, all of which represented a danger for the environment. The Russians, however, were skeptical about the Norwegian environmental commitment and presence in northwest Russia, and Norwegian actions labeled "environmental" were often, if not always, assumed to have secret motivations. The Russian Minister for nuclear energy stated in a 2000 interview that "70% of the information gathered by Alexander Nikitin for Bellona has nothing to do with securing the environment".

4) Fishery Protection Zone: Revisited

The Norwegian-Russian fishery cooperation is inter alia based on the Grey Zone Agreement, and the total fishing quotas are established in annual quota negotiations, based on recommendations from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES). Within the Russian fishery complex it has been commonly assumed that Norway, prior to the quota negotiations, has instructed ICES, which is dominated by Western powers, to a quota level that will hurt the Russians more than the Norwegians. This can be seen as a typical "cold peace" perception where negotiations are seen as zero-sum games and Russian loss means Norwegian gain; the situation is interpreted as a battle between states rather than a negotiation between the fishing industry and the government. The same dynamic has been present in issues regarding the FPZ surrounding Svalbard. The zone has never been acknowledged by Russia; thus, the Norwegian Coast Guard's seizure of Russian fishing vessels Tchernigov (2001) and Elektron (2005) both resulted in strong Russian reactions. Tchernigov was arrested for having broken the rules of the FPZ, and was then held in the port of Tromsø until the captain had accepted the fine. Elektron, by contrast, was not successfully arrested but headed towards Russian waters with two Norwegian inspectors aboard, both of whom were set free in Murmansk five days later. Even though force was not used to stop Elektron, and the captain was later tried and convicted in Russia, the reactions immediately after the incident were very harsh. Politicians in Murmansk were referring to the terror against Elektron, implying that Russian boats were discriminated against in the FPZ. As with Tchernigov, the Elektron-case revealed that the Russian fishing industry has effectively turned a question of environmental sustainability into an inter-state conflict, presumably to gain the support of Moscow. The Norwegian Coast Guard is frequently accused of discrimination against Russian vessels, and, interestingly, this is not an entirely false statement. However, when Russian vessels are occasionally treated differently it is probably not because the Coast Guard wants to discriminate; rather, it may be because Norway does not have sufficient guarantees from Moscow that fines issued to Russian boats will in fact be paid. Therefore, a Russian fishing boat that has broken rules in the FPZ may be held in a Norwegian port until the account has been settled, as the situation was with Tchernigov.

Conclusion: When the past is present

Although economic considerations play a relatively larger role today than before 1989, it is apparent that Cold War perceptions are still prevalent in Russia. Norwegian actions have often been assumed to be parts of a broader agenda, and intentions are frequently second-guessed. The cases mentioned in this article, or at least the Norwegian explanations, are all related to protection of the environment: protecting fisheries, preserving wildlife, cleaning up nuclear waste, and so on. I would argue that Norway has witnessed a politicization, if not a securitization, of the environment. This is why the Kola Peninsula in the 1990s could be presented as a "ticking bomb" in the Norwegian media, and why Norway has been willing to spend much time and money on "cleaning up" on Kola. A certain idealism in Norwegian foreign policy may also have played its part. Further, it is not unlikely that Norway's persistent focus on environmental issues results in a certain "moral power" internationally, and gives the otherwise small state a new "space" in which to maneuver. Even if this is the case, it seems apparent that Norwegian environmental arguments rarely convince the Russians.

An idealistic ambition in foreign policy may be positive, and can create a good international reputation, but in the relationship with Russia, pragmatism should always be at the core. One may, for instance, ask how wise it is by the Norwegian government to maintain its intentions to fund the modernization of a nickel plant in Petchenga, whose owners enjoyed a surplus of USD 3 billion in 2005. It seems that although the Russians are now financially capable of paying for such modernization, funding for this environmental measure is still expected to come from Norway. This, in turn, indicates that Norwegian policies may also be somewhat out of date. One could argue that by maintaining such policies, Norway implicitly tells Russia that Western countries will deal with the environmental problems, and that the Russian companies can keep their surpluses.

I am not arguing that Norway should uncritically cut all its financial support to environmental projects in northwest Russia; some of the funding may still be much needed. Rather, I am asserting that since there is often a clear discrepancy between Norwegian and Russian views, Norway must never blindly expect that its arguments will be taken at face value in Russia.

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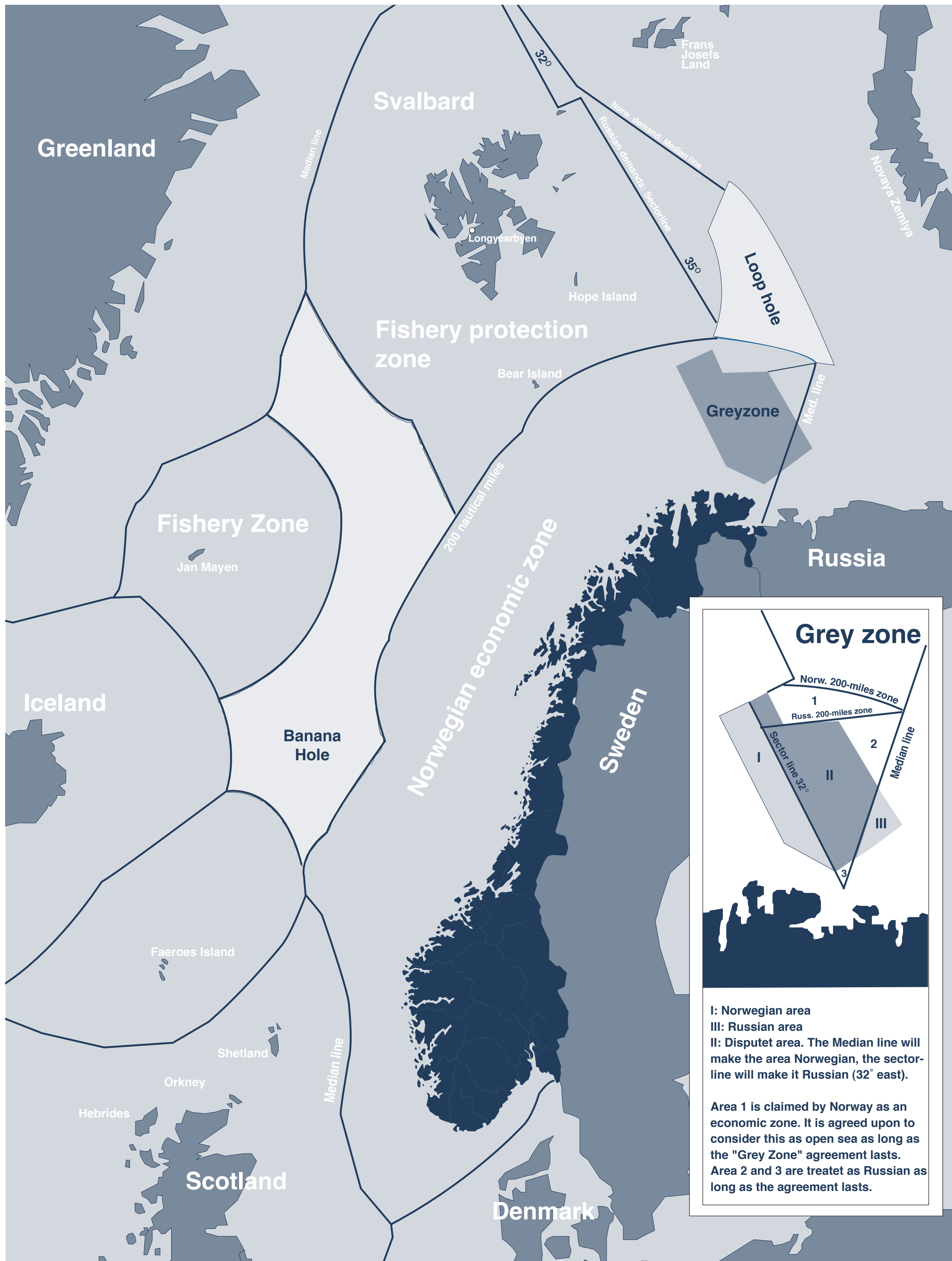

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