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Science diplomacy and sovereignty in Svalbard

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Brief Summary

Power politics and security dynamics in the Arctic increasingly manifest themselves in international research and science collaboration. Changes are visible also in the archipelago of Svalbard, where research is increasingly marked by strategic competition and framed in security policy terms. To a greater extent than before, research in the Arctic is defined by security measures and cautiousness. This Policy Brief discusses how Svalbard's status as both a geopolitical hotspot and a global laboratory for climate research makes for a difficult balancing act.

With rising geopolitical tensions come more security measures, reaching even the northernmost part of Norway and the archipelago of Svalbard. A highly developed infrastructure, together with the special conditions of the Svalbard Treaty, make it easily accessible for states with strategic interests in the Arctic. Many states are showing increased interest in Svalbard, including China and Russia, both of which are identified as national security concerns in Norwegian security authorities' most recent threat assessments. Uncertainty related to the US' position under the second Trump Administration, including its commitment to the defence of European member states, contributes to further complexity and adds a new layer of unpredictability to Norwegian High North policy. These challenges also influence Norway's Svalbard politics, where assertion of sovereignty and exercise of control, though nothing new, are increasingly important. The same is true for science politics, as science is among the main pillars of presence and activity on the archipelago. At the same time, science retains potential as a diplomatic buffer between rival powers.

Science in a securitized world

While science and research long were exempt from

security politics, recent years show clear signs of a securitization process, through threat assessments and pre-emptive policies. Securitization theory describes a process through which political actors present certain topics as security policy issues and thereby legitimize extraordinary measures. Within this theoretical framework security is not understood as an unconditional good: political issues may become locked in a crisis mode, sidelining alternative considerations and ordinary democratic processes. Securitization happens via discursive and institutional practices and control mechanisms. New guidelines and approval schemes can thus be read as expressions of a gradual institutionalization of the security logic.

A shift in Norwegian policy papers and institutional frameworks increasingly links research to sovereignty and questions of national security. In Svalbard, foreign policy and security politics influence all political and societal areas, including science. The latter is part of a broader development across Europe and the West, but Svalbard's size and unique conditions make the implications very visible. Climate-monitoring tools and communication systems also inherently carry dual-use potential, directly impacting Norwegian and European resilience.

Greater emphasis on national security affects the knowledge sector through measures taken to protect sensitive data critical to national security interests and prevent science from being used as a cover for strategic purposes: increased monitoring and threat assessments, stricter export controls and tougher advice on international cooperation. However, security-driven research management may in some cases prove counterproductive. Efforts meant to protect science and its normative values, such as research ethics and integrity, can paradoxically undermine them. Increased bureaucracy, security assessments, and caution might be unavoidable given the threats faced, but being on the 'safe side' may entail costs to academic freedom and researchers' autonomy. In many cases, it's hard to say when a topic, a technology or a research collaboration becomes sensitive. This demands caution: once securitization has been set in motion, it is difficult to reverse the process.

Power politics in the polar regions

In Svalbard, foreign actors are now largely present through research, as 'citizens', but also as nations with their own 'stations'. In addition to the international community of researchers employed at the University Centre of Svalbard (UNiS), about 1,000 researchers from 30 different nations visit Svalbard annually to conduct scientific research. Even if some of this activity seems to reflect strategic interests – a low-threshold way to acquire presence in the Arctic – the Ny-Ålesund Research Station facilitates international cooperation in a unique way.

Norway attempts to limit research in Svalbard to the natural sciences, established through government policy and administrative practices. Ny-Ålesund Research Station is tightly regulated, but shared laboratories and spaces, collaborative research projects and lunch talks bring together researchers from all over the world with common interests in the effects of melting sea ice, glaciers and permafrost. Svalbard hosts highly advanced, international satellite and research infrastructure. Its high latitude and proximity to the North Pole make the archipelago optimal for studying the aurora borealis, the ionosphere, the solar wind – and space. Coordination bodies such as Svalbard Integrated Earth Observing System (SIOS) works to reduce the environmental footprint and maximize research output.

In its neighbourly relations with Russia, Norway has traditionally balanced a policy of 'deterrence' with one of 'reassurance', with a stronger emphasis on the former approach after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. However, Russia is not only a neighbouring state to Norway; on Svalbard it also runs its own society 35 nautical miles away from the archipelago's main town, Longyearbyen. Contact between the two settlements has been significantly reduced since 2022.

Unlike Russia, China is not an Arctic state. Its best bet for a foothold in the Arctic is therefore via Russia which increasingly relies on China as a political and economic ally. In Svalbard, the extent of joint Russian-Chinese activity is not fully known. But while the West continues to uphold its sanctions regime, Chinese research representatives have visited the Russian settlement of Barentsburg. It is uncertain that either country would prioritize the alleged plans of building a research centre in the former mining town Pyramiden, but the states' Arctic cooperation is followed closely by Western actors, including Norway. This is due to the national security threat assessments and both these states' increasing strategic interests in the region. Among

potential threats are dual-use technology, foreign agents and strategic activity camouflaged as research.

Ny-Ålesund is characterized by a cooperative community, but interviewees note that the Chinese researchers tend to keep more to themselves. This is reflected in registered projects in the Research in Svalbard (RiS) database, where less than a tenth of China's registered projects shows international participation. European researchers are encouraged to coordinate their efforts or collaborate with Norway to use existing resources, whereas China seems committed to national autonomy. At UNiS, however, researchers report of good cooperation with Chinese colleagues. Despite this, and China's presence in Ny-Ålesund, Chinese students are not admitted to the educational courses the centre offers (along with anyone from states Norway has no security policy cooperation with).

Asserting sovereignty through increased monitoring

Norway's research policy in Svalbard has been characterized by international openness, academic freedom and low political control, but is now seeing a growing emphasis on Norwegian oversight and steering. While international openness remains the ideal, research is now subject to stricter regulations, with stronger requirements for registration, data availability and project specification; symbolic politics around terminology and institutional rights; and an explicit security awareness in the background. The ongoing shift indicates a preventive securitization, where national security and the status of liberal values, especially academic freedom, are increasingly being problematized in international knowledge collaboration through threat assessments and warnings from government agencies responsible for security, export control regulations and new, vague guidelines for international knowledge collaboration.

The Norwegian government has also taken steps to tighten its control over the archipelago's population in order to maintain Norwegian presence. Foreign residents who have not spent a minimum of three years residing on the mainland can no longer vote in local elections – a source of frustration for those who have lived half their life in Svalbard. Like the changes to research governance, it can be read as reflecting an underlying wish for tighter national control over who has a legitimate stake in Svalbard's future.

New regulations have direct implications for foreign researchers. Many states lease facilities at the Ny-Ålesund Research Station, maintained by the state-owned enterprise Kings Bay AS. These bases were earlier referred to as 'stations', also in their official names, a term now limited to the Norwegian research station, acting as a landlord. This makes it harder for other states to justify funding from home. The decision was also made without consulting the other members of Ny-Ålesund Science Managers' Committee (NySmac). Symbolic acts like this have led some actors to speculate whether it would be better to move their business to Greenland. New regulations have also made it more difficult to conduct research in Svalbard without (economic) support from a Norwegian organization.

While the 1920 Svalbard Treaty grants signatory states equal access to the archipelago, there are no explicit rules about scientific research. Norway argues that as sovereign it is responsible for regulating science in order to protect the archipelago's distinct and vulnerable nature and wildlife. For these reasons UNiS is to be the only educational institution, and research steered towards existing infrastructure and natural sciences. This approach has sparked criticism particularly from Beijing, claiming that equal access should include science with freedom to conduct research also on social sciences. Meanwhile, a recent Russian initiative, Beyond Borders Research, invites international artists and scientists to cross-disciplinary residencies in Barentsburg – its first held in august 2026. Its partners include organizations from China and South Korea, in addition to the Icelandic Arctic Portal. Although a small initiative it nonetheless shows, together with the above-mentioned criticism, that continued acceptance of Norwegian governance cannot be taken for granted.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 the seven other Arctic states paused their participation in Council meetings. They later announced a limited resumption and in 2024, all eight states agreed to gradually resume virtual Working Group meetings, and the Arctic Council still plays an important role as a forum for cooperation and dialogue. Svalbard remains largely outside the multilateral Arctic-conversation, despite the heightened attention to the Arctic – referred to in EU's new Arctic Strategy of October 2026 as its 'northern neighbourhood'. According to one interviewee this is explained partly by an attempt to avoid discussions about Norway's

sovereignty.

Conclusion: a diplomatic buffer?

Western states' breach with Russia after 2022 was politically, not academically motivated. Increased caution in research is driven by Russian conditions as much as Western sanctions. China and the US add further complexity. Responsibility for assessing risks associated with data sharing and collaboration with individual countries, or within individual areas, is left to researchers and research institutions – who often follow vague advice from authorities or research management bodies. This, together with export control regulations, can contribute to self-censorship and uncertainty, through a preventive logic of securitization.

The logic of securitization implies survival and prioritization – acting before it's too late. In Svalbard this logic is used primarily to justify stricter control measures and national governing of science. Even if the wish for improved control and oversight is partly explained by climate and nature conservation, these may be overshadowed by security concerns or used as official pretexts. Herein lies a paradox, as climate change and environmental issues can be seen as the biggest long-term security concerns of our time, where failure to act now will have irreversible consequences. These will affect many parts of the world directly through droughts, floods and extreme weather, and wide-reaching changes to the world's ecosystems. The effects will spill over into geopolitics as well.

Cooperation and knowledge sharing is vital for solving common challenges. In times of conflict, scientific knowledge can even provide a strategic advantage. Yet its production is dependent on transnational cooperation and thus vulnerable to geopolitical tension. The fact that academic freedom is under scrutiny in a number of countries, including in great powers like the US and Russia, only increases the importance of preserving it wherever possible. Polar researchers fear that a more nationalistically oriented US will curb open data access. There have already been halts in collection and publishing of long-term temperature measurements. American satellites remain the only global source for solar flare monitoring. Loss of data access outside the US can have crucial implications, all the more because the US government is denying climate change, cutting budgets and closing down research institutes specializing in climate. Europe and Norway should be more concerned with counteracting the development in the US than mirroring it. Accordingly, there is a need for strengthening scientific alliances with allied nations to compensate for the loss of access to Russian and American data and research contributions.

Given the geopolitical tensions, ongoing conflicts and climate change, there may be value in raising Svalbard's research and science diplomacy potential within the EU and the Arctic Council. Approached carefully, this could reinforce Norway's standing as a leading and responsible polar research nation – and support a more unified, proactive Arctic posture among allied countries.

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