



The politics of research presence revisited: A response to Molenaar and Ulfstein

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The politics of presence

«Presence equals influence in the Arctic», U.S. Coast Guard Commandant Karl Schultz summarised during an online event earlier this year.¹ The admiral championed for new U.S. icebreakers. For non-Arctic nations seeking political influence in this region, the most opportune route to presence has been through Norwegian hospitality.

In the archipelago of Svalbard, the Norwegian government has facilitated international researchers for years. Research institutions from around the world have been allowed to lease government-owned buildings in the research community Ny-Ålesund at 79° North and erect research infrastructure, ranging from small-sized sensor rigs to field camps, across the archipelago. Even as Norway has imposed strict conservation measures to preserve the Arctic wilderness and ecosystems, international researchers have been permitted to conduct fieldwork largely unaffected.²

My study «The Politics of Research Presence in Svalbard» calls out an unintended political fallout from the current facilitation of research.³ In recent years, some nations have added semi-governmental names and appearances to their research infrastructure, approximating them to enclave facilities hitherto found only in free-for-all Antarctica. Concurrently, capitals grow increasingly emboldened to capitalise on their presence-induced influence, pursuing a range of interests in Svalbard and the wider Arctic region.⁴ To the Norwegian government, the posturing in Svalbard represents a delicate challenge. First of all, these strategic footholds may undermine Norway's exclusive jurisdiction in Svalbard, which is nothing like Antarctica. Also, if international research infrastructure becomes telltale vehicles for pursuing political ambitions in Svalbard and/or the wider Arctic region, Norway is compelled to consider whether the objectives of foreign capitals are aligned with Norwegian interests. The said study suggests they are not necessarily so.

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¹Schultz, 'The Future of the Coast Guard.'

²For notification requirements, see The Governor of Svalbard, 'Guidelines for researchers in Svalbard.'

³Pedersen, 'The Politics of Research Presence in Svalbard.'

⁴Ibid.

Research and the Svalbard treaty

In a comment, Erik Molenaar implies that the question is somewhat irrelevant if Norway is under a treaty obligation to allow access to international researchers.⁵ He proposes that, although «an explicit right to engage in scientific research cannot be found in the Spitsbergen Treaty», Article 3 (which do not refer to science) are sufficient to provide liberal freedoms of scientific research to all state parties to the treaty.⁶ Further, he contests that the absence of conventions for scientific investigations in Svalbard, as called for by Article 5 (which does refer to science), renders the century-old provision outdated if not irrelevant. On the contrary, Molenaar seems to suggest that the lack of bilateral and/or multilateral agreements a legal shortcoming that potentially merits China's outrageous call for shared decision-making processes in Svalbard.⁷

Except, there is no legal shortcoming or legal vacuum in Svalbard. The fundamental fact is that Norway has the full and absolute sovereignty over Svalbard, only subject to some quite specific stipulations provided by the Svalbard Treaty. In his comment, Geir Ulfstein points out the obvious implication: In the absence of explicit conditions, Norway's full and absolute sovereignty prevails.⁸

Further, «The Politics of Research Presence in Svalbard» concerns the national presence advanced by research facilities in Svalbard, not so much foreign researchers making traceless visits that amount to «access and entry» to the archipelago. The Norwegian government remains largely unrestrained by the Svalbard Treaty as to how it chooses to regulate and facilitate for research, a perk that comes with sovereignty.

Moreover, international researchers adding government-like attributes to their facilities make matters more sensitive. Foreign government agencies and personnel enjoy no privileges in Svalbard, where, again, Norway's jurisdiction is exclusive. Ulfstein seems to concur, drawing a distinction between the treaty parties (sovereign states) and treaty beneficiaries (nationals). An exception would be government personnel eligible for immunities under the Vienna Conventions on diplomatic and consular relations as they have been implemented by Norway through rules, legislation and procedures.⁹ All foreign government-operated, non-commercial vessels and aircraft have been, and still are, required to obtain a diplomatic clearance before entering Svalbard.¹⁰

Facilitating research, not enclaves

«The Politics of Research Presence in Svalbard» is not a call for Norway to cease the facilitation of international research in Svalbard. It does, however, encourage the Norwegian government to facilitate well-regulated research that advances scientific knowledge rather than foreign strategic footholds.

⁵Molenaar, 'A Response to "The Politics of Research Presence in Svalbard".'

⁶Ibid.

⁷Chinese response to draft research strategy for Ny-Ålesund. The Research Council of Norway, email to author, 14 March 2019.

⁸Ulfstein, 'Comments to Molenaar and Pedersen.'

⁹The Norwegian Government, «Diplomat in Norway».

¹⁰*Forskrift om fremmede statsfartøyer*. Royal Decree, 1 June 1997.

Facilitating for posturing and opportunism in Svalbard would be reckless. International strives for enclave-like national presences in Svalbard not only undercut Norwegian sovereignty but add uncertainty and tension to a region already facing a deteriorating security outlook. Ulfstein's reference to a shared interest in avoiding «unregulated power struggle» and «securing a common peaceful order»¹¹ is not entirely reassuring. In international politics, it never has been.

With vast manoeuvring room inside the confines of the Svalbard Treaty, Oslo may wish to adopt a firm and proactive research policy to keep tensions low. Norway is under no obligation to facilitate for presence nor influence that could undermine its own jurisdiction in Svalbard or add instability to the wider Arctic region.

Disclosure statement

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¹¹Ulfstein, 'Comments to Molenaar and Pedersen.'