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The *High North* – an elastic concept in Norwegian Arctic policy

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The term, *High North* is a fairly recent addition to the vocabulary of systematic academic discourse. It was introduced as the English synonym for the Norwegian term *nordområdene* (i.e. the northern areas) in the mid 1980s, but not adopted as the official language of Norwegian authorities until the beginning of the 21st century. The usage of the term has since displayed a pattern of elasticity relative to shifting political circumstances. Hence, it is a political concept and not synonymous with the *Arctic*, which is a distinctly geographical concept that is defined according to a range of different factors (for example the Arctic circle, the tree line or the 10 degree July isotherm).

The use of the *High North* as the equivalent of *nordområdene* is a uniquely Norwegian phenomenon. The concept has no immediate corresponding counterpart in academic or political discourse outside of Norway, and it is not self-explanatory to foreigners. Accordingly, terminologically and conceptually, there is a distinct lack of shared understanding when Norwegians and non-Norwegians exchange views on policy issues related to areas which could be referred to as the Arctic/the Sub-Arctic/the European Arctic/the High North/the Far North or the Circumpolar Regions.

Invariably, this also creates problems of definition when attempts are made at analyzing the policies of other countries within a High North perspective. In Russia for example, one would find a terminology with nuances differing markedly from Norwegian perspectives, displaying various territorial perceptions and evoking different images and connotations.

Whereas the general usage of the term *High North* at the beginning of the 21st century had

been characterized by a certain vagueness, by 2007/2008 it had come to be linked to the policy challenges, options, priorities and substantive measures outlined in the *High North Strategy*, although the definition was still broad:

The High North is a broad concept both geographically and politically. In geographical terms, it covers the sea and land, including islands and archipelagos, stretching northwards from the southern boundary of Nordland county in Norway and eastwards from the Greenland Sea to the Barents Sea and the Pechora Sea. In political terms, it includes the administrative entities in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia that are part of the Barents Cooperation. Furthermore, Norway's High North policy overlaps with the Nordic cooperation, our relations with the US and Canada through the Arctic Council, and our relations with the EU through the Northern Dimension.

The end of the Cold War brought about a virtual evaporation of the previous threat-and-vulnerability mode of Norwegian High North policy. At the same time, new defining elements have entered the picture. Partly as a result of own choices (e.g. the great territorial expansion of offshore jurisdiction, the rejection of EU membership), partly as a result of unalterable geographical realities (above all, the location as next-door neighbour to Russia), Norway is conducting a rather solitary exercise in responding to the challenges that its exposed position entails. Thus, the associations that the term *High North* invokes today differ from those of the 1970s or 1980s.

However, in addition to the dynamism that characterizes the High North concept, there is also a degree of permanence and continuity. Norwegian High North policies encompass a range of different and even scarcely interrelated components, and the degree to which they are associated with “the North” in any sense of the word, is their main defining aspect. Another characteristic aspect is the extent to which they bear the mark of Norway’s interrelationship with Russia. No policies are developed or implemented in a political or social vacuum. Norwegian High North policy is largely shaped by the neighbourhood relationship with Russia. Other recurrent elements in Norwegian High North policy are fish, energy and plenty of seas and oceans.

The *High North* is not a geographical place-name, nor a defined territorial denotation, but

first and foremost a flexible political concept. Thus, acknowledging that the *High North* is uniquely and robustly linked to the long lines of politics and history, we should expect occasional and gradual shifts of emphasis in its contents and directions. In a book published in November 2008, Minister of foreign affairs, Mr. Jonas Gahr Støre, makes the following observation: “The Government’s High North Strategy (...) has a dynamic character, also when it comes to its geographical scope. Since I became foreign minister in 2005, I have been struck by the way our European High North perspective has merged with the broader Arctic perspective”.

This broadening in scope was evident in the follow-up report to the *High North Strategy, New building blocks in the north*, which candidly acknowledged that “we do not have any precise definition of the *High North* in the Norwegian public discourse”. Moreover, the government in the document stated that “with ever closer international interaction we have to take into account that the High North is becoming more and more synonymous with the Arctic”; and that Norway has to “expand our High North perspective if we want to take part in the development of good policies for this region in the future”. Thus, there is reason to expect that the use of the term *High North* will continue to be elastic and fluid.

Would such a development then also testify to the robustness or sustainability of the term as a policy concept? For cognitive and analytical purposes we may need a distinction between two aspects of the concept: On the one hand, the prospective viability of the concept of the *High North* as a meaningful arena for certain area-linked sorts of political endeavour – i.e. a brand-name with a substantive (albeit elastic) political content; and on the other hand, the prospective durability of the very term *High North* as a mere rhetorical buzz-word.

Thus, one may question the sustainability of the term if a predictable, constant and unchanging meaning combined with an enduring sense of relevance is seen to be the proof of sustainability. At the same time, however, the very dynamic character of the concept may well secure a sustained usefulness as a policy label also in years to come. Issues may live on even if they are re-branded, and brand-names may prevail even if the stuff itself is gone.

