

The "High North": An Elastic Concept in Norwegian Arctic Policy

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Summary:

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 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.

The Birth of a Concept

The author of this paper was raised in the county of Finnmark (i.e. the northernmost province of mainland Norway, and at the hub of what is nowadays understood as “the High North”) in the 1940s and 1950s. At that time, the expression “the High North” was unknown. In any case, it would hardly invoke any meaning in relation to people’s perception of geographical location. Our familiar local place-names were not linked – linguistically or conceptually – to some broader regional or trans-regional entity - at least not beyond the fact that we lived in Northern Norway, which for the past one thousand years or so had been an unquestionable part of the Kingdom of Norway. Thus, “the Arctic” was just somewhere else. Somewhere far away, like other exotic places like “the Barents Sea”. And the High North – or more specifically, its corresponding Norwegian term “nordområdene” – was yet to find its way into the language.¹

In fact, the very term “the High North” is a fairly recent addition to the vocabulary of systematic academic discourse. As such, it was introduced (although not necessarily coined) – as the most apt English synonym for the abovementioned Norwegian term - by the Norwegian diplomat Sverre Jervell in his book *The Military Buildup in the High North*, which was

¹ To illustrate, the term was still absent in my own magisterial thesis *Norwegian Polar Politics and Policies* from 1971 (published as a book by the publishing house Dreyers forlag, Oslo, in 1975, 302 p.).

published in 1986.² The term caught quickly on, within as well as outside academic circles. The Icelandic filmmaker Magnus Gudmundsson's 1989 documentary "Survival in the High North" – depicting the struggle of small coastal communities in Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands, dependent on the harvesting of the marine living resources for their livelihood and fighting for their right to do so – did much to popularize the term, and was a major inspiration behind the establishment in 1991 of "The High North Alliance" – a regional interest group (NGO) with a pro-whaling agenda and a strong and articulate presence in a number of international fora.

Thus, during these past two decades, the usage of the term has displayed a pattern which has reflected the given context as well as the level of precision which has been seen to be adequate in the shifting circumstances. It may be indicative that Mr. Jervell in his book offers no precise definition of the term, and that he has in subsequent years consistently declined any opportunity to do so.³

Whether by coincidence or by design, "The High North" is also the term that eventually (or gradually, and apparently reluctantly) was chosen by Norwegian authorities as the "official" translation into English of the Norwegian word "nordområdene". Whereas the latter term had been in extensive use in Norwegian political discourse since the 1970s, for most of this period it had no commonly agreed counterpart in Norwegian authorities' official English language. A literal translation would be "the northern areas", in plural. Apart from being somewhat awkward-sounding, this expression would probably be less than helpful for the purposes it has been meant to serve. This is because simply saying "the northern areas" would seem to require some additional context-defining element ("the northern areas" of what, where or in relation to what?), whereas the functional use of the term "nordområdene" has been context-defining in and by itself.

The origin of the current usage of the very term "nordområdene" (spelt with or without a capital 'N')⁴ is surrounded by some uncertainties. An early reference can be found in an

² Sverre Jervell, *The Military Buildup in the High North*, University Press of America, co-published with the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University, Sept. 1986, 174 p. (ISBN-10: 081915685X).

³ Confirmed in conversations with the author.

⁴ By some, the use of the capital 'N' is seen as a political statement, aimed at highlighting and emphasizing its political significance, whereas the spelling with the lower-case 'n' is perceived as more neutral in this respect, which is also why in this paper the lower-case is used. The use of capital letters ('The High Arctic') in the corresponding English version of the term may seem inconsistent. However, with regard to the use of capital letters in nouns, the established practices of the two languages differ in such a way as to make capitalization the preferred choice in this instance.

article in 1970 by a team of three research fellows at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), where the expression “de europeiske nordområdene” (literally “the European northern areas”) was used.⁵ Likewise, the term “det europeiske nordområdet” (“the European northern area”, i.e. in singular) was used by one of the three abovementioned NUPI fellows in an article the subsequent year.⁶ The term was quickly picked up and adopted by scholars and pundits in related fields of study, notably in articles by several research fellows at the Fridtjof Nansen Foundation.⁷ It is furthermore generally assumed that the term was introduced into the vernacular of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (or at least turned into a household expression in the Ministry) by Mr. Knut Frydenlund upon his taking office as minister in the autumn of 1973. However, the earliest reference which the author of this paper can cite, is from Mr. Frydenlund’s foreign policy report to the *Storting* (the Norwegian Parliament) 1 November 1974, where he stated that “We do not today know which concrete economic possibilities “våre nordområder” (literally “our northern areas”) may offer”.⁸ From the broader context, it transpired that the minister referred to a vaguely defined stretch of land (island) and sea territories in the Arctic and the sub-Arctic to the north of the Norwegian mainland. Apparently – although without him saying so – the term would primarily apply to territories under Norwegian jurisdiction (the Svalbard archipelago was mentioned repeatedly), but could also be understood to apply to adjacent high seas and continental shelves (bearing in mind, *inter alia*, that this was prior to the introduction of national Exclusive Economic Zones). It could even be argued that by including the word “our”, the minister was exploring the potentials of a broader regional and trans-national approach to the economic possibilities and the challenges that these possibilities would entail. The absence of a more precise language may also suggest an implicit or tacit understanding in the audience of what he was talking about, that “nordområdene” was a term with which the speaker and his audience were already familiar.

The term gradually gained semi-official status - at least in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). To illustrate, it may be noted that the MFA in 1977 established an internal working group in order to improve the coordination of questions concerning the northern areas.⁹

⁵ Johan J. Holst, John Kr. Skogan and Anders C. Sjaastad, ”Noen norske sikkerhetsproblemer i 70-årene”, in *Minervas Kvartalskrift*, No.3, 1970, p.238.

⁶ John Kr. Skogan, “Sikkerhetssituasjonen i Nord-Europa”, *Internasjonal Politikk*, No.2/3, 1971, p.239.

⁷ See for instance Knut Gabrielsen, “Hva skjer i nordområdene?”, *Internasjonal Politikk*, No.3B, 1973, pp.669-684.

⁸ Text published in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ information bulletin *UD-informasjon*, no.53, 8 November 1974, p.17.

⁹ MFA Circular no.61, 28 December 1977: “Behandling av spørsmål vedrørende nordområdene”.

Furthermore, following an internal re-organization in the summer of 1989, the Ministry during the subsequent 14-month-period included a tiny department named “Department for questions concerning northern areas and resources”.¹⁰ At the time, however, no corresponding denotation in English for “nordområdene” was decided upon.

This paper seeks to explore the usage of the term, including its political significance, in the dynamic perspective of developments that have taken place in the course of the past three and a half decades.

As has already been suggested, and which will become further evident, the term “nordområdene” is encumbered with peculiarities and connotations which make it well-nigh impossible to find an English synonym which gives an adequate grasp of its meaning(s). As noted above, the use of the term “The High North” for “nordområdene” in official language is a rather recent development. Strictly speaking, it took full effect only in 2003, when yet another internal re-organization in the MFA led to the establishment of a section which included “nordområdene” in its name – an event which necessitated an appropriate translation in English.¹¹ Under the circumstances, the Ministry (somewhat haphazardly?) settled for the term “The High North”, which had the important quality of being available, and also had the backing of influential figures such as Mr. Jervell himself. For this reason, and for lack of better solutions, in this paper the term “The High North” is used throughout - arbitrarily and as consistently as possible – as the English equivalent of the Norwegian term.

The High North vs. the Arctic

Obviously, the concept of The High North is not synonymous with “The Arctic” – in which case the former term would have been redundant. “The Arctic” is a geographical concept, defined in precise geographical terms. There are in fact several different definitions – depending on which scientific (geophysical) functions they are meant to serve as the case may be – but they are all precise. Thus, from an astronomical perspective, the Arctic comprises the part of the Earth lying to the north of 66° 33’ N. (i.e. the Arctic Circle). From a climatic perspective, the common definition includes lands and islands to the north of the northern

¹⁰ “Avdeling for nordområde- og ressursprosmål”

¹¹ The rapidly enhanced status of the High North in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was expressed in the next internal reorganization, subsequent to the change in government in the fall of 2005, which brought about a so-called “High North Project” and the creation of a new senior-level position as “High North Coordinator”.

limits of forests (the tree line) with continuous permafrost and ocean areas to the north of southern limits of maximum occurrence of sea ice. Another closely corresponding definition includes all areas to the north of a line on the map of the northern hemisphere indicating the July median temperature of +10° C. reduced to sea level (the +10 degree July isotherm) – a very uneven line which deviates considerably from the neat and evenly positioned Arctic Circle.

Explicit and strict geographical definitions of the Arctic are routinely dispensed with in other usage, such as in a socio-economic or political context, even though a geographical understanding of the term is usually implied. For example, membership in the Arctic Council is limited to those eight countries whose territories extend beyond the Arctic Circle, thus indicating a certain defined understanding of the term “Arctic”. Co-incidentally, however, those eight countries are also the only countries whose territories extend beyond the +10 degree July isotherm.

A hybrid definition – based mainly on the natural geographic parameters (the tree line, the +10 degree July isotherm) but combined with certain broader considerations (ecological as well as political and socio-economic) – is used by the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP); an intergovernmental think-tank with environment-related tasks, and a programme group of the Arctic Council.

To repeat, although “The Arctic” and “The High North” may, to some extent, be mutually overlapping, the former is a distinctly geographical concept. Depending on one’s functional perspective, “The Arctic” can be defined in different, but yet precise, geographical terms. The extent to which such characteristics may also apply to “The High North” is among the questions explored in this paper.

When discussing the concept of “The High North” as distinct from “The Arctic”, it may also be useful to keep in mind that the use of “The High North” as the equivalent of “nordområdene” – is a uniquely Norwegian phenomenon. We are actually dealing with a concept which has no immediately corresponding counterpart in either academic or political discourse outside of Norway, and which is neither self-evident nor self-explanatory to foreigners. Among the eight member states of the Arctic Council, none of the other seven has developed a “High North perspective” identical to what has evolved in Norway. Thus, terminologically and conceptually, there is a distinct lack of joint or 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 to describe or analyze the policies of other countries within a High North perspective. This is particularly true with regard to Russia. In Russia one would find a terminology with nuances differing markedly from Norwegian perspectives, displaying various territorial perceptions and evoking different images and connotations.¹²

The Norwegian Government's High North Strategy

As in other walks of life, trends and fashions play a noticeable role in politics, in political jargon and vernacular as well as with regard to topicalities of issues. Certain buzz-words become associated with more or less clearly spelled-out issues, with which politicians are supposed to display an active interest and – preferably – to take some spectacular initiatives. As will be demonstrated later on, the very word “North” has traditionally struck an evocative note in Norwegian national image-building.

For the past few years, the High North has been a focus of interest for politicians, government officials, academics, scholars, journalists, scientists, commercial entrepreneurs and political pundits of various stripes. Media, including TV/radio, newspapers, periodicals, books and weblogs have become saturated with articles highlighting the importance of the High North and all things related. The High North has become one of the hottest and sexiest themes in 21st century Norwegian political debate.

Thus, when the Government at a well-publicized meeting in Tromsø 1 December 2006 unveiled its *High North strategy*,¹³ this was an event which had been anticipated with great interest by the media. Minister of foreign affairs, Mr. Jonas G. Støre, emphasized the ostensibly epoch-making significance of the new developments in the High North by declaring that “In the course of one year, the High North has become a new dimension of Norwegian foreign policy. (...) During the last year the High North has been given a place on

¹² As a case in point, reference is made to the terminological discussion conducted by Kristian Åtland in his report “Russisk nordområdepolitikk etter Den kalde krigen”, Forsvarets Forskningsinstitutt, Kjeller, 2003 (FFI/RAPPORT-2003/00713), esp. pp.12-13.

¹³ *Regjeringens nordområdestrategi*, Utenriksdepartementet, Oslo/Tromsø 1 December 2006; <http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/kilde/ud/nyh/2006/0184/ddd/pdfv/302927-strategi06.pdf> ; text in English: *The Norwegian Government's High North Strategy*, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; <http://www.norway.org/misc/print.aspx?article={029ee42d-72b8-4bde-9e4c-bdd57f89343c}> .

the map of Europe. Foreign decision-makers have discovered that the High North has an importance that stretches far beyond Norway's borders".¹⁴

The High North strategy is a profusely illustrated publication of 61 pages, containing if not something for all tastes so at least quite a lot for fairly many. Most strikingly, it was announced that the Government's main political priorities in the High North strategy were as follows:

- to exercise its authority in the High North in a credible, consistent and predictable way;
- to be at the forefront of international efforts to develop knowledge in and about the High North;
- to be the best steward of the environment and natural resources in the High North;
- to provide a suitable framework for further development of petroleum activities in the Barents Sea, and to seek to ensure that these activities boost competence in Norway in general and in North Norway in particular, and to foster local and regional business development;
- to ensure that the High North policy plays a role in safeguarding the livelihoods, traditions and cultures of indigenous peoples in the High North;
- to further develop people-to-people cooperation in the High North; and
- to strengthen cooperation with Russia.

There were voices asking whether this was so epoch-making after all. Long-time students of Norwegian policies in the High North could rightfully note that each and every one of these items had a ring of *déjà-vu*. To this, it could probably be equally rightfully responded that the main objective with presenting a document with such a pretentious or even pompous label as "High North Strategy" was not to re-invent the wheel, but to put into words what the Government wishes to do and intends to achieve. In any case, *The High North strategy* was greeted with euphoria by broad swathes of the media and the political ambience, especially in Northern Norway.

The High North strategy is not the main subject of this paper. However, the effort the Government has put into making this such a high-profile endeavour, is in itself a striking illustration of the importance (real or perceived) of the High North for Norway. For that

¹⁴ Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pressemelding (Press Release) nr. 155/06, 01.12.06; <http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/ud/Pressesenter/pressemeldinger/2006/Utenriksmin...>

reason, and also because the strategy embodies a topical and fairly tangible manifestation of “the High North phenomenon”, it seems sensible to include it in our discussion.

“The High North” – A Political Concept

When talking about the importance of the High North, there would seem to be an underlying, implicit assumption among policy-makers that they, and their interlocutors, have a certain (and preferably shared) understanding of what is actually meant by the concept.

As noted in a previous section, “the High North” and “the Arctic” may to some extent be mutually overlapping, but whereas the latter is a distinct geographical concept which can be defined in precise geographical terms, it is not immediately apparent whether this also may be the case with regard to the High North. The suspicion that any claim to a precise geographical definition would be tenuous is reinforced by the fact that the Norwegian Government does not suggest such a definition in its *High North Strategy*. It does, however, make a brave attempt at suggesting a definition containing political as well as geographical elements and parameters:

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.

It should be noted that the above definition is a functional one, developed specifically to serve the purposes of the *High North Strategy*. It is also a highly selective one, for example omitting (for reasons of political expediency?) the Svalbard archipelago. It is not a definition which will necessarily take effect or which is obviously useful in just any kind of context outside the confines of the Government’s strategy. Thus, in their in-depth study of Norwegian High North policy, Geir Hønneland and Leif Christian Jensen pointedly explain that theirs is a definition considerably more narrow than the one used by the Government’s High North

strategy.¹⁵ An even more narrow understanding seems to have formed the context of the so-called High North dialogue between Norway and the USA, where the scope, according to a newly published research report, was by and large limited to energy issues linked to the Norwegian and Russian areas of the Barents Sea.¹⁶ Conversely, other commentators might find it more useful to include the Svalbard archipelago in their definition of the term. Such a broadened perspective could also apply to such sensitive localities as the disputed areas of the continental shelf (and the water column above it) in the Barents Sea.

The above-quoted text from the *High North strategy* is noteworthy insofar as it offers a definition. In the follow-up document to the strategy, which was presented in March 2009, the message had changed – here it was candidly acknowledged that “We do not have any precise definition of ‘The High North’ in the Norwegian public discourse”.¹⁷

In Norwegian official documents and public discourse alike, definitions are largely absent. The definition given in the December 2003 report from the special Governmental Expert Committee (“The Orheim Committee”) included “the whole of the circumpolar Arctic, including the Barents region and the Barents Sea area”, specifying that this definition was identical to the definition used by AMAP.¹⁸ In contrast, the Government white paper of April 2005 on the High North (*Possibilities and Challenges in the North*) contains no definition at all.¹⁹ The same applies to the *Soria Moria Declaration*, the joint political platform for the tripartite coalition government which took office in October 2005. *The Soria Moria Declaration* contained strong and ambitious language on the importance of the High North, identified as “Norway’s most important strategic target area in the years to come”.²⁰

Likewise, no definition can be found in the September 2006 report *Barents 2020 – A tool for*

¹⁵ Geir Hønneland & Leif Christian Jensen, *Den nye nordområdepolitikken*, Fagbokforlaget, Bergen, p.157-158.

¹⁶ Kristine Offerdal, “The European Arctic in US foreign energy policy: the case of the Norwegian high north”, *Polar Record*, No.45 (232), 2009, pp.59-71.

¹⁷ *Nye byggesteiner i nord – Neste trinn i Regjeringens nordområdestrategi*, (New building blocks in the north), Oslo/Tromsø, 12 March 2009, p.54;

http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/UD/Vedlegg/Nordområdene/byggesteiner_nord.pdf.

¹⁸ *Mot nord! Utdfordringer og muligheter i nordområdene*, p.21. The report was presented on 8 December 2003, and was subsequently printed in the series of government reports as NOU (Norges offentlige utredninger) 2003:32; <http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/ud/dok/NOU-er/2003/NOU-2003-32.html?id=149022> (text in Norwegian only).

¹⁹ *Muligheter og utfordringer i nord – Report No.30 to the Storting (2004-2005) (Opportunities and Challenges in the North)*; http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/ud/Documents/Propositions-and-reports/Reports-to-the-Storting/20042005/report_no_30_to_the_Storting_2004-2005.html?id=198406#.

²⁰ *The Soria Moria Declaration - Political platform for a majority government, issued by the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party*. Government report published 20.12.2005. English version <http://www.sv.no/partiet/english/dbaFile127882.pdf>.

forward-looking High North policy, which was a special study commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²¹

A recurring message seems to be “*Definitions? Why bother, we all know what we are talking about, anyway!*” This should not, perhaps, be too surprising, given the fleetingly complex genesis of the very term the High North, as described in the introductory section of this paper. However, by sorting out the various elements of the *High North strategy*, but also by analyzing the narratives contained in the usage (past and present) of the term, and furthermore, by analyzing the narratives contained in such issues as are nowadays addressed under the “High North umbrella”, one can discern a composite pattern of implicitly built-in parameters: Legal, historical, socio-economic, cultural and ecological. However, the main defining parameter, which permeates and transcends the aforementioned ones, is the political element. Whenever the term “the High North” is invoked – and in whatever context, it also happens in a political context.

Thus, the High North is not a geographical proper name – whether spelled with a capital letter or not. The High North is not a distinctly defined territorial concept. It is first and foremost a political concept. It is a concept which pertains to Norway’s northern land and islands territories, sea areas, adjacent areas and neighbouring areas, insofar as these territories or areas capture the focus of the public attention and are highlighted as political priority areas. For this very reason, it is also meaningful to speak about Norwegian High North policies, even though the concept has a varying and elastic content.

The Northern Dimension of the Norwegian Self-Image

In Norwegian politics and public discourse, national challenges in the North is a recurring topic. It was an old classic already in 1302, when King Haakon V Magnusson established the Vardøhus fortress as a marker of the national turf in the extreme north-eastern corner of his realm. It is relaunched from time to time in a new, contemporary wrapping, with the recurring message that the national challenges in the north are particularly acute just now - at this particular time and hence, that just now is the time to take pro-active measures to cope with these challenging developments.

²¹ Arve Johnsen, “Barents 2020 – A Tool for a Forward-looking High North Policy”, Report commissioned by and submitted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oslo, September 2006, 47 p.; <http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/ud/Documents/Reports-programmes-of-action-and-plans/Reports/2006/barents2020e.html?id=514015> .

Geography, history, national economy and all varieties of cultural expressions, even the movie industry²² and poetry²³, are useful keys to understanding the Norwegian national infatuation with the concept of “the North”. In the global context, Norway is an arctic outpost, the Ultima Thule of the inhabited world, a rocky outcrop of 3000 km length facing the Arctic Ocean, the final step stone on the way to the North Pole. Norway is “the land under the Northern Star, the Winterland, the Way Northward”, to use but a few of our unctuous clichés. The very point that Norway is north-facing is a national identity-marker, a part of the self-perception and self-image of the country’s inhabitants.²⁴ This is a mind-set that Norwegians are regularly exposed to from early childhood. Therefore, as a nation, Norwegians tend to display an almost compulsive sensitivity to the contents and meaning of the buzz-word “developments in the High North”, and to the challenges that such developments are believed to entail.

The Russian Dimension

Such challenges can be identified across a wide range of topics and subject matters, and include challenges of a permanent as well as temporary or shifting character. Besides, even though the High North is not an exact geographical concept, geography is one of the most permanent parameters in this respect. Also, inescapably, geography today – just as when Vardøhus fortress was built more than 700 years ago – means having Russia as one’s next-door neighbour. It is a neighbour-relationship which has passed through a number of phases – mostly peaceful, but occasionally troublesome, and in any case impossible to simply ignore. Politicians of our time frequently claim it is more important than ever before. To borrow a phrase from Norway’s minister of foreign affairs Mr. Jonas G. Støre, “cooperation with Russia is a key element in our High North efforts”.²⁵ Or, as he put it in his foreign-policy report to the Storting 12 February 2009: “The relationship with Russia constitutes a main axis

²² As a recent example meriting mention, at the Berlin film festival in February 2009, Norway was represented with the award-winning film simply named “Nord” (“North”); <http://www.nfi.no/nyenorske/nyheter/vis.html?id=3216>.

²³ Thus, it might seem almost inevitable that a reprint of Rolf Jacobsen’s poem “Nord” (“North”) ornaes the cover of the Norwegian version of *the High North strategy*.

²⁴ As a case in point, see the emphasis given to this aspect by Minister of foreign affairs Mr. Jonas G. Støre in his recently published book *Å gjøre en forskjell. Refleksjoner fra en norsk utenriksminister*, Cappelen Damm, Oslo, 2008; see also *Nye byggesteiner i nord*, op.cit., p.53.

²⁵ Jonas G. Støre, “Perspectives on current and future challenges in the High North”, in Rose Gottemoeller and Rolf Tamnes (eds.) *High North: High Stakes*, Fagbokforlaget, Bergen, 2008, p.13.

in our High North policy”.²⁶ In yet another one-liner, the minister describes the essence of this relationship while at the same time capturing the shared Northern identity of the two neighbours: “[W]e share much more than just a border. We share a Northern identity. We are Northernes, ‘Severyane’.”²⁷

This relationship has implications also for whatever falls into the ever more widely used category Norwegian High North policies (norsk nordområdepolitikk). This is a broad and umbrella-like omnibus term, encompassing a number of different and even scarcely interrelated components. The degree to which they are perceived to be associated with “the North” in one or any sense of that word, would presumably be the main and even defining aspect of these very diverse components. Another characteristic aspect of these components is the extent to which they bear the mark of Norway’s interrelationships with Russia,²⁸ or how the policies affect or are affected by Norwegian-Russian bilateral relations. No policies are formed, developed or implemented in a political or social vacuum. As far as Norwegian High North policies are concerned, the ambience is to an important extent shaped by the neighbour-relationships with Russia.

On Track of the Bygone Years

Through the media and the public debate, observers are continuously being exposed to such current and topical single issues of the day which are separate parts of the overall picture of Norwegian High North policies. To gain a better understanding and a clearer vision of this overall picture, it is necessary to take a look, retrospectively, at the long lines of politics and history. This is almost invariably a useful exercise in order to better understand and tackle the challenges of today and the future.

For our purpose, taking the situation around 1970 as the point of departure would suffice. At that time, Norway – like the rest of the world – found itself in one of the more chilly stages of the Cold War. Then, as now, Norway’s security-political mantra was stability and low tension

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http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/utenriksminister_jonas_gahr_store/taler_artikler/2009/redegj_stortinget0902.html?id=545344 .

²⁷ Jonas G. Støre, “The High North – Challenges and Opportunities. Perspectives on Norwegian-Russian Cooperation”, speech delivered at the Diplomat Academy, Moscow 24 March 2009;

http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/ud/dep/utenriksminister_jonas_gahr_store/taler_artikler/2009/high_north_challenges.html?id=550795 .

²⁸ To illustrate the depth as well as the breadth of the Russian dimension of Norwegian High North policies, see Lars Rowe and Geir Hønneland (eds.), *Russlandsbilder. Nye debattinnlegg om naboskap i nordområdene*, Fagbokforlaget, Bergen, 2007, 114 p.

in the North. The dominant threat perception included reports of Soviet nuclear arms build-up and, more specifically, the military build-up on the Kola Peninsula and of the Soviet Northern Fleet in particular, including the expanded pattern of Soviet naval exercises and deployments in the Norwegian Sea.²⁹ This threat perception caused fear and sparked a broad debate about the Soviet navy and Norway's security.³⁰

On 23 December 1969 oil had been struck at the Ekofisk in the North Sea, and during 1970 the Norwegian people gradually came to realize the formerly almost unthinkable - that Norway was about to become an oil nation – and that this would also bring consequences in the North. Already the same year, local politicians from North Norway requested (albeit without success) that the Barents Sea should be opened for oil exploration.³¹

At the same time, in September 1970, Norway and The Soviet Union conducted the first round of what should subsequently become a series of drawn-out negotiations on the delimitation of the continental shelf in the Barents Sea. The same year Norway also filed an application for accession negotiations with the European Communities, an initiative that was put to a halt when the Norwegian people voted against membership in the national referendum two years later.

Norwegian public debate on foreign policy in the early 1970s concerned itself, above all, with the issue of European Community membership, and with security issues. At the same time, it was a debate characterized by big visions about new opportunities opening up in the North. One example was the perceived prospects of an opening-up of the Northwest Passage, The Northern Sea Route, for commercial shipping between Europe and the Far East. This would reduce the sailing distance with several thousands nautical miles.³² Another vision concerned

²⁹ Dramatically illustrated and brought to the attention of a wider public by the "Special Naval Issue" of the publication *NATO Letter*, September 1970.

³⁰ A key contributor in this debate was the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). During the period August 1970 to December 1971, NUPI research fellows Johan J. Holst, Anders C. Sjaastad and John Kr. Skogan produced a series of articles on this topic (see NUPI papers N-4, N-6, N-9, N-12, N-15, N-16, N-21, N-21/2 and N-25). See also Odd Gunnar Skagestad, "Debatten om sovjetmarinen og Norges sikkerhet", *Dialog*, no.1, March 1972, pp.16-19.

³¹ Mentioned in an article in the Tromsø newspaper *Nordlys* 14 November 2003, as follows: "Today the chairmen of the Troms and Finnmark provincial councils are submitting a strong appeal to the oil minister Steensnæs to re-open the Barents Sea for oil and gas exploration – 33 years after the politicians of Northern Norway in 1970 for the first time made a request that the High North should be opened up for petroleum activities".

³² A research team at the Fridtjof Nansen Foundation at Polhøgda – later to be known as the Fridtjof Nansen Institute (FNI) – was at that time in the forefront of developing these perspectives. The perspectives were "re-discovered" and further refined in the broader INSROP programme, conducted by the FNI in collaboration with Russian and Japanese participants during the first half of the 1990's.

the potential for exploitation of Arctic oil and gas resources (which one assumed was enormous), on land and especially offshore. This was partly inspired by the great technological strides of the time. The following statement provides a critical comment to the prevalent thinking at the time:³³

The presence in the High North of huge petroleum resources does not necessarily mean that we are about to embark on a large-scale development with extensive exploitation of these resources. [...] But in this context we need to adopt a long-term perspective: Whereas today the High North are marginal areas as resource exploitation is concerned, this does not have to be the case in 10-15 years' time from now. This will to a large extent depend on external factors, above all the energy supplies situation in the industrialized part of the world. National governments as well as multi-national oil companies will have to make their dispositions on the background of such long-term assessments.

The above passage is a quotation from a lecture which the author of the present article gave in early 1975, and may, as such, be considered to be rather dust-covered. When witnessing today the slow progress in preparing for the eventual offshore exploitation of hydrocarbons in the Barents Sea, some might also be excused to think that not much change has taken place over these thirty-plus years. That would, however, be a gross mistake. There is plenty of evidence to show that the range as well as the contents of Norway's "national challenges in the High North" have undergone enormous changes since the first half of the 1970s. Changes have occurred that must, in the historic sense, be characterized as epoch-making, bringing about genuine paradigm shifts. Among the most dramatic are the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union two years later. These events had global consequences, but also regional side effects in the North. At the same time, looking back at the years that have passed since the early 1970s, a series of separate events and happenings define the context and preconditions for – and to some extent also the contents and character of – Norwegian High North policies and Norwegian-Russian relations.

Milestones in the Developments

Among such defining events, happenings and developments, the following deserve mention:

³³ From a lecture given by the undersigned at the "Leangkollen Seminar" organized by the Den Norske Atlanterhavskomiteé (DNAK) in March, 1975, subsequently published as the printed pamphlet *Olje og sikkerhet. Et polar-politisk perspektiv*, DNAK, May 1975 (19 p.); <http://www.skagestad.info/OljeOgSikkerhetDNAKmai75.pdf> .

- Throughout the whole period: Gradual strengthening of the legislative and administrative practices concerning the Svalbard archipelago, especially in the field of environmental protection.
- In 1975 the inauguration of a permanent airport in Longyearbyen, Svalbard.

During the period 1975-81 the great expansion of the arenas of Norwegian marine and maritime jurisdiction (“the big sea-grab”), with, *inter alia*, the following milestones:³⁴

- 1975: The establishment of a Norwegian Coast Guard.
- 1975 and 1976: The signing of bilateral framework agreements on fisheries with the Soviet Union, including the establishment of a Norwegian-Soviet Joint Commission on Fisheries.
- 1976: Enactment of the Law concerning the establishment of a Norwegian 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone.
- 1977: The establishment of the 200 nautical mile Fishery Protection Zone around Svalbard.
- 1978: The signing of the Agreement concerning an “Adjacent Area” in the Barents Sea (“The Grey Zone Agreement”) with the Soviet Union.
- 1980: The establishment of the 200 nautical mile Fishery Zone around the Jan Mayen island.
- 1981: The signing of a bilateral agreement with Iceland concerning the delimitation of the Jan Mayen Fishery Zone.

Norwegian-Russian cooperation on environment issues and confidence-building measures:

- 1988: Establishment of the Norwegian-Soviet Joint Commission on the Environment.
- 1990: The signing of the Norwegian-Soviet “Incidents-at-Sea” Agreement.

And, the establishment of new relations with Russia in the North, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union:

- 1992: Establishment of a Norwegian Consulate-General in Murmansk, and a Russian Consulate-General in Kirkenes.
- 1992-93: The establishment of the regional cooperation organization “Euro-Arctic Barents Region”.

³⁴ For a more thorough account, see Skagestad ”Hvordan gir havressursene Norge påvirkningsmulighet i internasjonale fora”, *Norsk Tidsskrift for Sjøvesen*, nr.5, oktober 2002, pp.28-35; <http://www.skagestad.info/UlvikforedragAug02.pdf> .

Simultaneously, the further development of the legal framework concerning the northern sea areas:

- 1982: The conclusion of the negotiations and the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.
- 1993: The verdict of the Hague International Court of Justice on the issue of the principles to be applied on the delimitation of the waters and seabed between Jan Mayen and Greenland.
- 1995: The signing of the Norwegian-Danish agreement on the delimitation between Jan Mayen and Greenland.
- 1995: The conclusion of the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement
- 1999: The signing of the tripartite agreement between Norway, Russia and Iceland on fisheries in the Barents Sea (“The Loop-hole agreement”).

Other concurrent developments and events of significance:

- 2003: The opening of the “Snøhvit” offshore gas production facility, signifying the definitive entrance in the High North of the Norwegian “Oil & Gas Age”.
- 2004: The expansion of Norway’s territorial waters from 4 to 12 n. miles.
- 2006: The Norwegian government presents its *Integrated Management Plan for the Barents Sea*.
- 2006: The Norwegian government launches its *High North Strategy*
- 2009: The follow-up to the *High North Strategy: New building blocks in the north*.

These events are partly interrelated, each of which may be seen to have occurred as response to the national challenges which Norway has been facing in the High North; and at the same time, they may be seen as factors which have contributed to shape how these challenges have been perceived. Broadly speaking, certain recurring elements can be discerned: The substantive issues include plenty of fish, plenty of seas and oceans, and Norway’s relations with Russia.

To sum up, developments over the past 35-plus years have brought about a new and different reality, justifying the use of such a pat expression as “paradigm shift”. But how different is, in fact, this new reality?

A New Reality?

The changes in the concept of the High North – and thereby the usage of that term – are obvious. At the same time, certain countervailing modalities should be taken into account: In a security sense, the dominant threat perception shows a picture considerably different from the situation which prevailed in the early 1970s. At that time, the main element was Norway's perceived vulnerability in the Cold War context. Today's situation is different in several respects. One element is the détente and the end of the Cold War, accompanying the collapse of the Soviet Union. The euphoria brought about by the termination of the Cold War seemed, during the 1990s, to entail a virtual evaporation of the previous threat-and-vulnerability mode. This has however, subsequently been somewhat tempered by developments giving rise to more sobering security-political assessments and warnings.

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 has to use considerable resources in conducting a rather solitary exercise in responding to the challenges that its exposed position entails. In the course of these thirty-odd years, Norway has become a major power in terms of marine resources, but it is a status which has also brought a measure of vulnerability, with corresponding limitations on its room to manoeuvre. Norway's marine regime is vast, but not all its elements are equally robust. For example, the Norwegian jurisdiction in the Fishery Protection Zone around Svalbard has in various ways been challenged by parties declining to recognize the legitimacy of this unique management regime.³⁵

As in the past, stability and low tension in the North remains Norway's security-political mantra. This necessitates a finely tuned balancing act, with cooperation as the primary tool. In order to safeguard its national interests, Norway has developed a network of cooperation structures in its relations with other regional actors, bilaterally above all with Russia, but also with the EU (especially in matters regarding fisheries). In addition, Norway has actively worked to develop wider regional structures of cooperation, such as the Euro-Arctic Barents Region and the Arctic Council. At the same time, while stressing the pre-eminence of cooperation, the Norwegian Government has considered it essential to maintain capabilities

³⁵ See Geir Hønneland and Leif Christian Jensen, *Den nye nordområdepolitikken*, Fagbokforlaget, Bergen 2008, pp.65-68.

and demonstrate the degree of physical power necessary to maintain the credibility of the Norwegian presence in the High North.

In a preceding section, mention was made of the negotiations which were initiated in 1970 between Norway and the Soviet Union concerning the delimitation of the continental shelf in the Barents Sea. Subsequent to the establishment of EEZ's in the late 1970s, the scope of the negotiations has come to include not only the continental shelf, but also the two parties' respective shares (i.e. jurisdiction) of the waters of the Barents Sea. Negotiations are still going on, so far with no indications that a solution may be just around the corner. The issue may serve as an illustration and a reminder of the necessity of not losing sight of the long lines of history and politics – even within a timespan otherwise characterized by such dramatic and epoch-making changes as may have been observed during these past 39 years.

The lack of progress in the negotiations is a core problem with ramifications for a range of issues in Norway's relations with Russia in the North: fisheries (including monitoring and catch control), petroleum extraction, cooperation on environment protection, nuclear safety issues etc. These are issues which form part of security politics in the broad sense of the term. As long as the delimitation issue has not been solved, as long as there is no clearly defined and agreed boundary between the two parties' respective sea territories and continental shelves in the Barents Sea, Norway will have to live with a measure of uncertainty with regard to its room to manoeuvre in its relations with Russia.

As the French would put it, “plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose”? Not quite, but it would seem that, in addition to acknowledging the dynamism characterizing the High North, one would be well advised to recognize the elements of permanence and continuity that govern the modalities and the scope for radical re-inventions of conceptual, strategic and political options.

The “New” High North policy

Albeit seemingly a detour from the main subject of this paper, the preceding section has been an attempt to depict the events and issues which have formed the backdrop for Norway's High North policy since 1970.

As the reader will have noticed, the concept “The High North” has undergone changes that testify to its elasticity as well as to the dynamics – real or perceived – of the issues to which

the term has been applied. Thus, the associations and connotations which the term invokes today, differ from those of the 1970s or 1980s. However, even within shorter spans of time, such as the seven-year period from 2002 to 2009, which may be termed “the New High North Policy”, certain nuances in usage can be detected.

As will be recalled from the introductory section, it was only as recently as in 2003 that the term “the High North” (as the English synonym for the Norwegian term “nordområdene”) was fully embraced in official usage by Norwegian authorities. This also coincided with an emerging renaissance of the concept of the High North as a main object of attention in Norwegian politics and public discourse. In particular, this would trigger off a scramble among the main contenders in Norwegian domestic politics for the ownership of the High North as a political concept. Thus, during the subsequent five or six years, there has been a surge of “High North-related” activities, especially on the rhetorical level, but also in the shape of the various more or less specific “High North-programmes” laid down in a series of political documents presented by the former as well as the present government (i.e. the Bondevik II and Stoltenberg II cabinets).

A seminal event was the presentation in early 2002 of the government White Paper no.12 (2001-2002) *Protecting the Riches of the Seas*,³⁶ which, *inter alia*, announced the plans for preparing an Integrated Management Plan for the Barents Sea. The project was subsequently taken over by the incoming government after the parliamentary elections in 2005 and resulted in the presentation in 2006 of White Paper no.8 (2005-2006) “Integrated management of the marine environment of the Barents Sea and the sea areas off the Lofoten Islands”.³⁷ This was an extensive and ambitious document aimed at facilitating long-term value-creation through sustainable use of the marine resources while at the same time maintaining the structure, function and productivity of the marine ecosystems.

In parallel with the preparation of the management plan, a government-appointed expert committee (“the Orheim committee”) in December 2003 submitted a weighty report with the evocative title *Mot nord!* (i.e. “Northwards!”) and the somewhat more prosaic subtitle

³⁶ Report No.12 to the Storting (2001-2002) ”Protecting the Riches of the Seas”; <http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/md/dok/regpubl/stmeld/20012002/Report-No-12-2001-2002-to-the-Storting.html?id=452041> .

³⁷ Report No.8 to the Storting (2005-2006) ”Integrated Management of the Marine Environment of the Barents Sea and the Sea Areas off the Lofoten Islands (management plan)”; http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/md/Selected-topics/Svalbard_og_polaromradene/integrated-management-of-the-barents-sea.html?id=87148# .

“Challenges and possibilities in the High North”.³⁸ The mandate and composition of the Orheim committee entailed the need for reconciling a number of rather divergent interests – representing not only divergent priorities but divergent understandings and interpretations concerning the very contents of the concept and the term “The High North”. Thus, the report *Mot nord!* brought forth bold and creative proposals for government initiatives within various fields under the High North label, but it could hardly be said to offer a specifically new or integrated perspective on the High North phenomenon, nor an operational definition which could form a functional basis for a new High North policy.

This report nevertheless formed a part of the groundwork for the subsequent presentation in March 2005 of the government White Paper no.30 (2004-2005) – a rather slimmer and less ambitious document titled “Possibilities and challenges in the North”.³⁹ Whereas the cover of the former report showed a map which generously included the whole Polar Basin with the surrounding circumpolar Arctic and sub-Arctic, the cover of White paper no.30 contained a map with a distinctly more modest perspective: At the centre, Norway depicted with adjacent waters and neighbouring territories, partly embraced by an egg-shaped halo – presumably a symbolism meant to vaguely suggest the geographic location of the otherwise undefined “High North”.⁴⁰

(By then, in tandem with the preparation of the White Paper No.30, the new emphasis on High North had already found expression on the foreign policy scene in the shape of the so-called High North dialogues, a series of bilateral talks initiated by the Norwegian Government in 2004 in order to create a better understanding of Norway’s High North policy and to promote Norway’s interests in the region among key allies. Such dialogue meetings have subsequently taken place with a select group of foreign countries on a semi-regular basis.⁴¹

³⁸ The Report *Mot nord!* was presented 8 December 2003, and was subsequently printed in the series of government reports as NOU 2003:32; <http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/ud/dok/NOU-er/2003/NOU-2003-32.html?id=149022> (text in Norwegian only).

³⁹ Report No.30 to the Storting (2004-2005) “Opportunities and Challenges in the High North”; http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/ud/Documents/Propositions-and-reports/Reports-to-the-Storting/20042005/report_no_30_to_the_Storting_2004-2005.html?id=198406#.

⁴⁰ To supplement – and possibly to complicate – the message conveyed by these maps, the Government’s High North Strategy offered yet another perspective: Its main map (although not on the cover, but modestly placed on p.10) depicts a section of the Globe, including Europe with some adjacent seas and lands, seen upside-down from a vantage point somewhere above the Northern tip of Greenland.

⁴¹ For a discussion of these dialogue meetings in the context of US foreign energy policy, see Kristine Offerdal, “The European Arctic in US foreign energy policy: the case of the Norwegian high north”, *Polar Record*, No.45 (232), 2009, pp.59-71.

Thus, the High North was placed squarely on the political agenda for the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2005. It became a high-profiled campaign issue for the opposition as well as for the government coalition to demonstrate their commitment to design, dispense and implement a strengthened and pro-active High North policy. Rather than being a fleeting fad, this development became further evident after the change of governments in October 2005, which brought the so-called red-green coalition into the corridors of power. The joint political platform of the three coalition partners, *The Soria Moria Declaration*, had explicitly designated the High North as Norway's most important policy priority in the years to come. The incoming minister of foreign affairs, Mr. Jonas G. Støre, in a programmatic and vision-presenting speech in Tromsø in November 2005, declared that:⁴²

[W]e will also need new tools, and an overarching, co-ordinated approach will be essential if Norway is to lead the way in the development of the north. The government has therefore decided to launch a long-term, cross-sectoral initiative for research and development in the High North. We have called this initiative Barents 2020. We will use this initiative to find new Russian and Western partners for Norwegian-led development projects in the High North. The purpose of Barents 2020 will be to initiate concrete Norwegian-led cooperation projects, which may involve both Russia and Western countries. It is intended to function as a link between international centres of expertise, academic institutions and business and industry in countries that are interested in the High North.

And furthermore:

Two areas will be of key importance in Barents 2020:

- *developing petroleum technology for areas where conditions are more difficult than those we are accustomed to in the North Sea*
- *increasing our knowledge of how to master the challenges involved in environmental and resource management in the north*

Projects in these areas can turn Barents 2020 into a tool for making Norway the chief custodian of knowledge and expertise in the High North. Our aim must be clear: It is to consolidate Norway's position as the leading knowledge nation in the north. We will be

⁴² Jonas G. Støre, "A sea of opportunities – A sound policy for the High North", speech delivered at Tromsø 10 November 2005;

http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/ud/dep/utenriksminister_jonas_gahr_store/taler_artikler/2005/A-sea-of-opportunities---A-sound-policy-for-the-High-North.html?id=420710 .

innovative. We want the world to look to Norway in order to understand the challenges and opportunities of the north.

In order to concretize the political ideas behind the buzz-word “Barents 2020” with regard to projects, financing, organization and progress plans, the government commissioned a report called “Barents 2020 – A Tool for a Forward-looking High North Policy”,⁴³ which was presented in September 2006. In the report, the Government suggested to establish a so-called “Pomor Zone” – an economic cooperation zone straddling both sides of the Norwegian-Russian border. However, the report was apparently mainly meant to be a basis for further discussions, and not a binding commitment for the government in its further handling of High North issues.

These initiatives were eventually followed up in the *High North Strategy*. With this strategy in place, the so-called “New High North Policy” seemed to have arrived at its port of destination: The conceptual analysis and understanding, the bold and self-assertive national approach, the more or less concrete or lofty plans, initiatives and promises, the politically correct priorities, rhetoric and buzz-words, - all the constitutive elements of the New High North Policy were now firmly anchored to a comprehensive, integrated and overarching strategy. Whereas the general usage of the term “The High North” at the beginning of the 21st century had been characterized by a certain vagueness or lack of fixed, cut-and-dried answers as far as possible policy implications were concerned, by 2007/2008 it had, noticeably, come to be linked to the policy challenges, options, priorities and substantive measures outlined in the *High North Strategy*.

The follow-up document to the *High North Strategy*, *New building blocks in the north* which was presented in March 2009, did not entail any new developments in this respect, but re-emphasized and confirmed the thrust and direction of the Government’s stated policy as well as further concretizing its substantive contents.

Back to the Present: A Sustainable Policy-Concept?

In their book *Den nye nordområdepolitikken (The New High North Policy)*, Geir Hønneland and Leif Christian Jensen conduct an in-depth and critical analysis of the elements which,

⁴³ Report issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: ”Barents 2020 – A Tool for a Forward-looking High North Policy”; <http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/ud/Documents/Reports-programmes-of-action-and-plans/Reports/2006/barents2020e.html?id=514015> .

especially since the turn of the century, have come to define – and to be encompassed under – the broad and catchy term “The New High North Policy”. This book is the first work that addresses this issue in a comprehensive and systematic way.

The book identifies a series of discourse analyses by drawing up analytical frameworks through the use of suggestive terms: “The Barents Enthusiasm”, “The Quiet Simmering of the 1990’s”, and “The Great High North Euphoria”. The authors then creatively divide these into the following sub-categories: “The Stick-your-finger-in-the-earth-discourse”, “The Protection discourse”, “The Misery discourse”, “The Sustainability discourse”, “The Alliance discourse” and “The Bandit discourse”. The book conveys a clear and useful comprehension of the basic point that “The High North” is not a geographical place-name, nor a defined territorial denotation, but first and foremost a flexible political concept.

This recognition, it should be noted, also entails a well-nigh inextricable problem of definition when it comes to the concept “High North Policy”. As a point of departure, the authors venture to define “Norwegian High North Policy” as “the Foreign Policy of the country (i.e. Norway) in the European High North”. The authors point out that this is a considerably more narrow approach than the definition used the Government’s *High North Strategy*, which also includes domestic and circumpolar elements. Nevertheless – and perhaps inevitably - the authors occasionally do display an elastic attitude toward their own definition.

Ruminating on the phenomenon of the accordion, Marve Fleksnes - the fictitious character in a popular Norwegian TV comedy series – made the following quasi-profound observation: “The accordion, well, yes – that is an elastic concept”. The same holds true with the concept “The High North”: Elastic, and capable of being drawn all-out as well as being squeezed tightly together. But even if concepts may change in content, value and direction, may this necessarily be the case with regard to the policy thus labelled?

A key question begging to be asked concerns the alleged “newness” of the “New High North Policy”. How “new” is it really, when shed of the hyped-up trendy rhetoric? Hønneland and Jensen offer the following answer:⁴⁴ “The real new High North Policy is first and foremost a series of government documents and some new activities that follow from these”. They proceed to ask, unbiased but guardedly: “Could it, conceivably, be that the High North policy

⁴⁴ Hønneland & Jensen, op.cit., p.159.

of the 2000's (...) will be remembered more for its domestic than for its foreign-political results?" In their concluding note, the authors put forward the following suggestion: "At the time of writing, the perhaps most interesting question is whether the High North euphoria has passed its peak".⁴⁵

Although more than a year and a half has passed since the abovementioned "time of writing" (late fall 2007), and although there are, as of yet, few obvious signs suggesting that "the High North euphoria" has in fact passed its peak, it is a rather safe bet that this will eventually occur. If past experience is anything to go by, any hyped-up political project will sooner or later run its course, and be superseded by something even more trendy.

As pointed out however, "The High North" – as a metaphor, as an expression of the northern dimension of the Norwegian self-image, and with regard to those material realities that provide its contents – is uniquely and robustly linked to the long lines of politics and history. What can be expected, then, is not the disappearance of the High North as a high-profiled topic in Norwegian public discourse and politics, but occasional and gradual shifts of emphasis in its contents and directions. Such shifts will necessarily evoke corresponding changes with regard to the usage of the term, depending on which particular issues might gain the focused attention of the general public and opinion-makers, and which will – consequently – be brought to the fore in the guise of the High North metaphor.

To some extent, this is already happening – not in the sense of anything resembling a paradigm shift, but in the perception of nuances in orientation and focus. Thus, in a book published in November 2008, Minister of foreign affairs, Mr. Jonas G. Støre, makes the following observation: "The Government's High North Strategy takes a comprehensive approach and a generational perspective. It 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".⁴⁶

Such an expanded perspective would indicate that "the accordion" of the High North concept is in the process of being stretched out a notch or two. This becomes even more noticeable in the follow-up report to the *High North Strategy, New building blocks in the north*:⁴⁷ "When

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.169.

⁴⁶ Jonas G. Støre, "Perspectives on current and future challenges in the High North", op.cit., p.20.

⁴⁷ "New building blocks in the north", op.cit., p.54.

the Government's High North Strategy was prepared in 2006, the term High North referred to the areas around the Barents Sea. This is strictly speaking a Norwegian perspective. With ever closer international interaction we have to take into account that the High North is becoming more and more synonymous with the Arctic. From the Norwegian side we have to lift our sight and expand our High North perspective if we want to take part in the development of good policies for this region in the future".

Thus, to the extent that politics can be likened to a musical exercise, it may be more apt to use the metaphor of a symphony orchestra about the High North, with its ever-changing interplay along the whole range of a sizeable number of instruments. There is reason to expect that the use of the term "The High North" will continue to be elastic, flexible, changeable and fluid.

But 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 conscious 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 the 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, elastic and adaptable character of the concept may well secure a sustained usefulness as a policy label also in future 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.