



Towards a common strategy for the Arctic: The Nordic countries can lead the way

By Per Augustsson

The changes taking place in the Arctic due to climate change are opening up a broad agenda of new strategic issues. These include management of oil, gas and fish resources, environmental protection, shipping, trade, economic development, legal issues, governance and security. Most of the issues are closely interlinked and a comprehensive approach to the Arctic will be needed in the coming years in order to tackle such challenges effectively. Since May 2011, all the member states of the Arctic Council have comprehensive Arctic strategies. The different strategies share many overall objectives. With closer Nordic cooperation on the Arctic, the Nordic countries could take the lead towards broader common international cooperative strategies for the Arctic. With a wider mandate and openness to new observers, the Arctic Council would be the natural place for such efforts.

New challenges, new opportunities

Climate change has a dramatic effect on the Arctic region. A great ocean is gradually opening up. Melting Arctic ice is not only producing new global and regional challenges, but also opportunities such as increased access to natural resources in the Arctic, and the possibility of new shipping routes and regional economic development. Some of these opportunities will not present themselves tomorrow, but rather decades into the future; nonetheless, strategic thinking about a range of issues in a changing Arctic is needed today. Some of the issues are:

- How can Arctic resources be managed in a sustainable way?
- How do we protect the Arctic environment?
- What should be done in support of Arctic research?

- How should the interests of local and indigenous populations be taken into account?
- What can be done to promote regional trade and economic development?
- Which investments are needed in new infrastructure and operational capabilities?
- Which safety measures are needed with regard to increased shipping to and through the region?
- How should legal issues and disputes regarding territory and economic rights of states be resolved?
- How can peace and stability be maintained in the region?
- What sort of international governance is needed in the Arctic?
- Who will provide international political leadership on Arctic developments?

Issues are interlinked

This is indeed a broad agenda that encompasses both national and international levels. Several of the issues have been the topic of various forms of international cooperation for years, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Experts and policymakers in the areas of sustainable development and the environment have for example been cooperating pragmatically and successfully in the Arctic Council and its working groups since 1996 (the Arctic Council is an international body exclusively focused on the Arctic, although with a limited substantial mandate). Search and rescue and the prevention and response to oil spills are concrete issues that have more recently made it onto the Arctic Council agenda. Meanwhile, other issues with “Arctic relevance” have

been or are being dealt with by bodies and forums such as the International Maritime Organization, various UN bodies, the Barents Euro-Atlantic Council, the Nordic Council, the EU's Northern Dimension policy and NATO. On some occasions, the five Arctic coastal states have met to discuss various topics. And as regards international law, the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea provides an overall framework (although not yet ratified by the United States).

All of these issues, dealt with by various bodies, are interconnected with each other in many ways. In the end, it is not really possible to separate discussions on the Arctic environment from resource extraction, shipping, research, or the situation for indigenous peoples. Energy resources, shipping and security are equally interlinked. Today, therefore, we need to focus not only on a range of different complex Arctic issues, but also on the interlinkages and "the big picture." If we do not, we risk fragmented Arctic policies.

Growing number of players

The group of Arctic stakeholders and interested parties is as complex as the range of Arctic agenda items. Eight countries with territory within the Arctic Circle (Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States) are members of the Arctic Council. They all have interests in the Arctic. At the same time they are as different as countries can be in terms of size, influence, history, Arctic capabilities, security political orientations and organizational memberships (for example, EU/NATO).

The level of engagement and relative degree of focus on the Arctic differs among the eight Arctic Council member states. In particular Russia, Canada, and Norway—all with great direct interests in the region—have been very active and view the Arctic as a priority issue. The United States—the power most often relied on for international political leadership—has kept a relatively low profile in the Arctic, although its engagement is now seemingly increasing. (It should be noted that both the US secretary of state and the US secretary of the interior participated in the last ministerial meeting of the Arctic Council in May 2011.)

Arctic indigenous organizations are participating on a permanent basis in the work of the Arctic Council, and a number of international and non-governmental organizations and non-Arctic states are participating as observers (including France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom). The private sector and the research community are important stakeholders in the Arctic. There is also growing interest from China—including investments in research capabilities—and other Asian

countries such as Japan and the Republic of Korea. In addition, the European Union is becoming more interested and is developing its own comprehensive Arctic policy. Several are on the waiting-list for permanent observer status in the Arctic Council (China, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea and the EU Commission). All of these different parties, whether inside or outside the Arctic Council, are now looking more closely at the Arctic as a region of growing importance to them.

A need for closer cooperation

The complex set of inter-related issues at stake in the Arctic, along with the complex and growing mix of interested states and other stakeholders, seem to suggest that cooperative management of the Arctic could benefit from three things:

- a comprehensive international agenda for the Arctic;
- one international forum, open to interested observers, where a comprehensive agenda may be discussed; and
- the formulation of common strategic priorities for the Arctic on a full range of issues.

In theory, one way to gather all issues and countries around common objectives would be to work out a comprehensive treaty on the Arctic (like there is for Antarctica), but there does not seem to be any great appetite among states for that, in particular since the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea already provides an excellent framework for many of the issues at stake in the Arctic. However, that should not prevent countries and other stakeholders from looking for new pragmatic ways to work closely together on the development of broader Arctic strategies.

On substance, there is a good starting point. Over the last five years, all of the eight member states of the Arctic Council (as well as the European Union) have presented comprehensive policy papers or national strategies on the Arctic; some have also been, or shortly will be, updated or further developed. Although the national strategies represent very different national perspectives, at the same time, they are similar when it comes to many of the overall policy objectives. In other words, even though the Arctic plays a different role in each country's national context and there are clear differences as regards geography, access to resources and security policies, the strategies display common general interest in sustainable development and management of resources, protection of the environment, international cooperation and regional security.

On process, there is also a good starting point. The Arctic Council is the only major forum exclusively focused on the Arctic. So far, its prime focus has been sustainable development and environmental protection. Recently, issues such as search and rescue and oil pollution preparedness and response have made it onto the council's agenda. If further strengthened, enlarged with new observers and given an agenda covering a broader range of strategic issues (while recognizing that some issues, i.e. territorial ones, must be left outside), the council could provide stakeholders with a forum capable of taking on more comprehensive strategic Arctic discussions. Needless to say, the Arctic Council could never replace other major international bodies mentioned above and should also not try to duplicate work done elsewhere. But new thinking on the council's role and mandate could broaden perspectives and promote better policies on this issue of increasing global interest and importance.

The Nordic countries can lead the way

Differences in history, geography, direct access to natural resources and NATO/EU memberships give the five Nordic countries partly diverging perspectives on the Arctic. Firstly, those differences have, at least historically, resulted in different degrees of relative priority for the Arctic as a general policy issue. Secondly, they naturally translate into different degrees of policy emphasis on issues such as oil and gas extraction, sovereignty assertion, the role of the armed forces in the Arctic, relations with Russia and the role of NATO and the EU in the Arctic. Although often referred to generally as "small" or "medium-sized" states, a couple of them—Norway and Denmark/Greenland—can indeed be considered superpowers in an Arctic context (for Norway, the Arctic—or "The High North"—is a top foreign and domestic policy priority).

At the same time, the Nordic countries—constituting five out of eight Arctic Council member states—share many similarities and interests, not the least of which is the broader interest of peace and stability in their neighborhood. They also share a number of more specific strategic objectives in the Arctic (see below). (The sense of shared Nordic interests in the Arctic may be even further strengthened in the future as global interest and the number of actors continue to increase.) With closer and deeper cooperation on the Arctic, manifested for instance by a common strategy, the Nordic countries could find new ways of working together to promote common policies. By doing this, they could also lead the way towards more common and comprehensive international strategies for the Arctic region.

The idea of closer Nordic cooperation on the Arctic is not new. In view of their successive chairmanships of the Arctic Council (2006-2012), Norway, Denmark and Sweden formulated common objectives on climate change, integrated resources management of resources, the International Polar Year, indigenous peoples/local living conditions and management issues (including a joint secretariat for the Arctic Council).¹ And in 2009, the Norwegian former foreign and defense minister, Thorvald Stoltenberg, argued for closer Nordic cooperation on Arctic matters in his report on Nordic cooperation on foreign and security policy.² In its introduction, Stoltenberg noted *inter alia* the following, after consultations with a variety of people in Nordic capitals:

- There is a wide-spread desire in all the Nordic countries to strengthen Nordic cooperation.
- There is a widely held perception that because of their geographical proximity, the Nordic countries have many foreign and security interests in common, despite their different forms of association with the EU and NATO.
- There is a widely held view that the Nordic region is becoming increasingly important in geopolitical and strategic terms. This is a result of the role of the Nordic seas as a production and transit area for gas for European markets and of the changes taking place in the Arctic.
- The EU and NATO are showing a growing interest in regional cooperation between member states and non-member states.

Stoltenberg put forward thirteen concrete proposals for closer Nordic cooperation, several of them with direct relevance in the Arctic context. Those included proposals concerning a Nordic civilian system for maritime monitoring and early warning; a Nordic maritime response force (search and rescue); a Nordic satellite system for surveillance and communications; a Nordic disaster response unit; a Nordic amphibious unit with Arctic expertise; and general Nordic cooperation on Arctic issues, with a practical focus on the environment, climate change, maritime safety and search-and-rescue services.

1 "Norwegian, Danish, Swedish common objectives for their Arctic Council Chairmanships 2006-2012," 27 November 2007

2 Thorvald Stoltenberg, "Nordic Cooperation on Foreign and Security Policy," Proposals presented to the extraordinary meeting of Nordic foreign ministers in Oslo on 9 February 2009

The national Arctic strategies of the five Nordic countries

As of May 2011, all five Nordic countries have developed national comprehensive strategies for the Arctic (a couple of them have also been, or are being, updated).³ The national strategies are different and similar at the same time. They are structured differently, place challenges in different orders and reflect different political perspectives. This is hardly surprising as they represent the views of five different countries. At the same time, however, the strategies reflect common thinking on many points. Provided there is an interest in working more closely together and using the national strategies as a starting point, common ground should be easy to find in the following areas:

Management of resources

All five of the strategies reflect a positive perspective on the opportunities for the use of resources, coupled with a strong emphasis on, and high ambitions for, sustainability and eco-friendly, science-based resource management. Common themes in the area of resources are the need for a strong link between management and research, the need for international cooperation on management and research, the opportunities for use of Nordic expertise and know-how, the link between resources and regional security policies and the importance of respect for international law, including its relationship to resource exploitation.

The environment

The strategies indicate strong consensus on the importance of environmental protection in the Arctic. The need to develop more knowledge on climate change and the environment is generally underscored, as is the need to cooperate internationally on research. Another common point is the need for global attention to the Arctic issues and the importance of sharing information about the Arctic at the global level. More specific references are made to the need for a coordinated marine environment monitoring system, the need for an international agreement on mercury, and the issue of nuclear safety in the region.

Research

Policies on research are closely linked to several other policy areas, including the environment and management of resources. The strategies point to high levels of national ambition on research, with emphasis on leading competencies (some examples from the different strategies are climate change, the environment, shipping, Arctic technologies and oil and gas development) and the need for further research support. The need for international cooperation on research

is emphasized, as is the importance of using research as the basis for policy decisions. Ideas and plans for research centers at different Nordic locations are mentioned in several of the strategies. The role of space and satellite technology is specifically mentioned in some of the strategies.

Economic development

The strategies all reflect a belief in the opportunities for economic development for the countries and for local communities in the region in view of ongoing changes. Emphasis is placed on opportunities for increased trade, exports, investments and tourism. The opportunity for Nordic expertise and know-how is highlighted, i.e. in environment and ship building technology. The role of business and the private sector is commonly highlighted. Another common theme is the importance of infrastructure development and cross-border cooperation on infrastructure policies. A couple of the strategies specifically emphasize new opportunities in port, transfer and service facilities in view of the expected increase in shipping activities.

Indigenous peoples

The importance of safeguarding and promoting the cultures and languages of indigenous peoples is generally emphasized. The strategies make various references to the need to support participation in decision-making processes, the roles of UN processes and the Arctic Council, the link between local competencies and business development, the need to fight negative health effects from climate change and environmental problems, and, more specifically, the issue of food security.

Shipping activities

All of the Nordic countries put great emphasis on the issue of increased shipping and maritime safety. The new agreement on Cooperation on Search and Rescue in the Arctic, negotiated under the auspices of the Arctic Council, is a very important step in this regard. Several of the Nordic strategies stress the need for better and joint monitoring and preparedness (including regarding oil pollution where the Arctic Council has decided to take further steps). The importance of supporting efforts at the International Maritime Organization, including on a Polar code, are mentioned in several strategies. Other issues include the possible need for new shipping lanes and the need for development of good practices regarding cruise ships.

³ "The Norwegian government's High North strategy," Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oslo/Tromsø, December 2006; "Nye byggesteiner i nord," Departementene, Oslo/Tromsø, March 2009; "Arktis i en brydningstid," Namminersornertullutik Oqartussat Udenrigsministeriet, May 2008; "Ísland á norðurslóðum," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 2009; "Finland's Strategy for the Arctic Region," Prime Minister's Office, July 2010; "Sveriges strategi foer den arktiska regionen," Regeringskansliet/UD, May 2011

Perspectives in the strategies differ in various degrees on the following:

Legal issues

Several unsettled disputes still exist between states in the Arctic regarding territory, delimitations at sea, economic zones and navigation rights, and different overlapping claims to continental shelves have been or will be made by Arctic coastal states. These issues go straight to the heart of national interests and will remain sensitive until resolved. On the other hand, once resolved, opportunities for wider cooperation should increase further. The Barents Sea delimitation agreement between Norway and Russia may serve as an example in this regard. The different Nordic strategies generally point to a strong consensus on the importance of respect for and use of international law (including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea) and established frameworks for the resolution of disputes and conflicts. There is naturally a shared interest in the orderly and peaceful resolution of all legal disputes in the Arctic.

Security

Differences in history, geography and organizational memberships (NATO/EU) give the Nordic countries partly different perspectives on Arctic security matters. The strategies reflect different degrees of emphasis on issues such as relations with Russia, the importance of firm assertion of sovereignty, the role of the armed forces, and the importance of cross-border and people-to-people cooperation. Relations with Russia constitute a particularly important part of Norway's strategy. In the 2006 document it was stated that "our relations with Russia form the central bilateral dimension of Norway's High North policy" and in the foreword to the strategy, the Norwegian prime minister Jens Stoltenberg noted as the first point among several the need to "continue to build on our good neighbourly relations with Russia." Cooperation with Russia was also one of the strategy's seven main political priorities (another one was people-to-people cooperation). Assertion of sovereignty as a policy priority was an important element of both the Norwegian and the Danish strategies. The first of seven priorities in the Norwegian strategy from 2006 was to exercise "authority in the High North in a credible, consistent and predictable way" and it continued to be one of seven priorities in the 2009 follow-up document. The other strategies put stronger emphasis on human security, non-military threats (for example environmental) and security-related issues linked to shipping or energy resources. The need for cooperation is generally underlined. There is a shared strong emphasis on the importance of international law and the overall objective of maintaining the Arctic as a low-tension region.

Governance

As regards international governance of the Arctic and the roles of different organizations and forums, the Nordic strategies on one hand display consensus on the general need for international cooperation on Arctic affairs. On the other hand, the Nordic countries have different perspectives (perhaps not surprisingly) on the Arctic roles of organizations such as NATO and the EU, where Norway has emphasized NATO's role and Finland, as well as Denmark and Sweden in different ways, the EU's. Denmark makes special mentioning in its strategy of the "A 5" - format of Arctic coastal states. And several of the Nordic strategies put strong emphasis on the central or primary role of the Arctic Council. The need to strengthen the Arctic Council is underlined in several strategies, including the need to broaden the Council's agenda as it pertains to new sectors and admitting new observers, including the EU. Finally, several strategies refer to the need for a stronger focus on Arctic issues in Nordic cooperation.

All in all, the five Nordic strategies for the Arctic region show that, although the countries have different Arctic perspectives, they also share many interests and policy objectives. Closer Nordic cooperation on the Arctic could serve both Nordic interests and a broader interest of working towards common international cooperative strategies on the Arctic. With a broadening agenda, the Arctic Council would be the natural forum for discussion about such strategies among the most interested stakeholders.

Conclusion

To summarize, common strategic thinking about the Arctic will be needed over the coming years and decades as the Arctic continues to change and the number of interested players continues to increase. The Nordic actors will need to ensure a continued cooperative spirit among all stakeholders, a comprehensive approach to the issues and the good use of a further strengthened Arctic Council as the main Arctic forum. They will also need to welcome new observers into that forum and adopt a more global perspective on Arctic developments.

Finally, the Nordic countries could take the chance to work more closely together on concrete policy priorities for the Arctic. That could further strengthen common "Nordic perspectives" in the broader future deliberations on the Arctic. It could also benefit closer cooperation on the Arctic for example between the Nordic countries and the US and a further strengthened transatlantic dialogue on this major emerging issue.

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