Informal Diplomacy in Norway’s Svalbard Policy: The Intersection of Local Community Development and Arctic International Relations

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The Arctic archipelago of Svalbard is under a limited form of Norwegian sovereignty and its settlements – among the northernmost in the world – are sites of activity by a range of states, most notably Russia. Norway’s Svalbard policy has historically focused on marginalising Russian influence. Through the use of informal diplomacy involving the creation of an economically diverse town (Longyearbyen, population around 2070) and the promotion of scientific research, Norway is consolidating its control over the archipelago. At the same time, however, it risks losing authority within Svalbard due to the strengthening of local democracy in Longyearbyen and the increasing opportunities in Svalbard for the involvement of non-traditional Arctic actors such as the Asian economic powers. This article considers the historical basis for the present situation in Svalbard as well as the complex results of Norway’s attempt to achieve its foreign policy through informal diplomacy.

Keywords: Arctic international relations; informal diplomacy; Svalbard; Norway; scientific diplomacy; community development

1: Introduction

Climate change and melting sea ice are altering the physical makeup of the Arctic, renewing interest in the region in terms of energy acquisition (oil, gas, and coal), fishing, and shipping. Considerable attention has been paid to the structures through which the region is governed. Debate is underway regarding the Arctic Council’s suitability as a governing body, the asserted primary importance of the Arctic coastal states, and the extent to which various non-Arctic states should play a part in developing Arctic policy. Meanwhile, various national governments and media have been apt to stress the potential for military conflict in the region despite there being very little evidence of desire among state actors to exert military force to secure advantages in the Arctic. However, little of this discussion has concerned – or even referenced – the one of the few land territories in the region that is subject to jurisdictional uncertainty. This is the Svalbard archipelago, which is under a uniquely limited form of Norwegian sovereignty.

This paper will consider how Svalbard has emerged as a key arena in the struggle for Arctic influence and how various states with a stake in the Arctic have sought to exploit the territory’s unusual jurisdiction. We will begin by reviewing the current governance arrangements for the Arctic, followed by an overview of Svalbard’s jurisdictional history. After this, we will show how the Norwegian government has historically focused its Svalbard policy on minimising Russian influence in the archipelago. We will then consider how Norway’s stance concerning Svalbard fits into its wider Arctic policy today and how Norwegian policy affects the opportunities of other states, including non-traditional Arctic players in Asia such as China, Japan, and South Korea.

By combining analysis of the literature on Arctic policy with the author’s experiences garnered while living and researching in Svalbard, this paper takes a deeply contextualised approach that recognises the socio-historical contingency of Norway’s informal diplomatic activity and takes into account conditions ‘on the ground’ that make such activity necessary and possible. This approach helps identify the international relations aspects underlying apparently apolitical activities.

This study is based on an understanding of jurisdictional capacity gleaned from the field of island studies. Jurisdictional capacity is the competence of a political entity “to pass laws, build effective administrative processes, facilitate inward capital flows, encourage education and support the development of a climate conducive to economic growth.” At the heart of this article, then, is an analysis of Norway’s attempts to increase its de facto and de jure jurisdiction over Svalbard. In order to do so, Norway has made use of both conventional and informal diplomacy, the latter being purposeful international interaction outside of conventional diplomatic channels. In the context of the present article, we will distinguish between ‘informal diplomacy’ and ‘public diplomacy’ inasmuch as the former seeks to fulfil high-level diplomatic functions through informal means whereas the latter – though similarly unconventional – is generally regarded as the practice of communicating with international publics.

It is necessary to qualify this article’s conclusions by noting that the policies in question do not represent official Norwegian government policy. It has furthermore been the author’s personal experience that official statements of policy and descriptions of the situation in Svalbard originating from the office of the Governor of Svalbard contrast sharply with popular opinion among residents of Svalbard’s Norwegian settlements.
2. Governance of the Arctic

As climate change decreases the quantity of sea ice, the Arctic Ocean is opening up to new forms of economic activity. Most dramatic among the developments in the region are the increasing accessibility of possible mineral deposits and the navigability of the Northern Sea Route and Northwest Passage, which represent potential shipping routes between Asia and North America/Western Europe.\textsuperscript{4} Arctic shipping is of the most direct interest to China, with its massive exports, but it also has a secondary impact on other states: The prospect of Arctic trade has, for instance, prompted South Korea and Singapore to invest in enhancing their shipbuilding industries.\textsuperscript{5}

In terms of international law, the Arctic – as a region – is not unique. It is not covered by any overarching legal arrangement analogous to the Antarctic Treaty System:\textsuperscript{6} Unlike Antarctica, which is a large landmass that had been subject to ambiguous ownership, no sizeable landmass in the Arctic is affected by jurisdictional ambiguity except for Svalbard. Prior to 1920, there were a number of disputed Arctic islands, but experiences relating to the treaty that so imperfectly settled the jurisdiction of Svalbard (discussed below) meant that these disputes were rather unambiguously decided in the next decade and a half: The Soviet Union gained sovereignty over Wrangel Island and Franz Josef Land, Norway received Jan Mayen, Canada received the Svedrup Islands, and Denmark received all of Greenland. Only the tiny Hans Island remains under dispute (between Denmark and Canada). With the exception of Greenland, none of these highly peripheral territories possessed indigenous populations when they were discovered by peoples of European descent, and none were subsequently permanently settled. It was the jurisdiction itself that the contesting states regarded as significant rather than any activities that could be undertaken on these islands.

The reason that Svalbard remains, unlike the aforementioned islands, a hub of international activity – indeed, international relations activity – is precisely because its jurisdiction was never satisfactorily determined. This makes Svalbard both an asset and a liability to Norway and allows it to present opportunities – thus far largely unexploited – for countries that missed out on the Arctic land grabs of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Nevertheless, the otherwise-settled nature of land jurisdiction in the Arctic means that the region is legally no different than any other coastal area. As is often noted, the most important piece of international law relating to the Arctic is the entirely general United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).\textsuperscript{7} The only high-level intergovernmental forum for the region as a whole is the Arctic Council, established in 1996. The Arctic Council’s member states are the eight states with territory in the Arctic (hereafter, ‘the Arctic states’: USA; Canada; Russia; Finland; Sweden; Norway; Iceland; and Denmark, including Greenland and Faroe). These are complemented by a number of permanent participants (consisting of indigenous peoples’ groups) and observer states. Although the Arctic Council is an important forum for discussing international Arctic issues, particularly regarding the environment, it is a relatively toothless body with no binding powers. The Arctic Council has, generally speaking, been a popular institution among the Arctic states but has traditionally been less popular among states that have asserted a stake in Arctic policy but lacked a voice at the negotiating table. Applications by a variety of other states and institutions to become observers had been consistently rebuffed, yet on 15 May 2013 the traditional observers (France, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and the UK) were at last joined by Italy, China, India, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea, heralding a new era of inclusiveness for the Arctic Council.
Upon the acceptance of the new observer states, Carl Bildt, foreign minister of Sweden, argued that “it demonstrates the broad international acceptance of the role of the Arctic Council, because by being observer, these organizations and states, they accept the principles and the sovereignty of the Arctic Council on Arctic issues”. Similarly, Norwegian foreign minister Barth Eide stated forthrightly, “To the new observers of the Arctic Council, there is no such thing as a free lunch.” These comments point to some of the paradoxes facing the non-Arctic states when it comes to playing a role in Arctic policymaking, for participation in the Arctic Council as an observer could, indeed, be interpreted as acquiescence that the real power lies with other states. It also, however, highlights the ambiguous strength of the Arctic Council as a body lacking jurisdiction.

Indeed, in recent years, some Arctic states have begun bypassing the Arctic Council in favour of more exclusive negotiating tables. For instance, the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration in which the USA, Russia, Canada, Denmark, and Norway – ‘the Arctic coastal states’ – claimed a “unique position” as stakeholders in the Arctic Ocean, suggesting that the Arctic Council is losing some of its authority even as it expands.

Various recommendations have been made for pre-empting future conflicts over use of the Arctic by strengthening and expanding the remit of the Arctic Council, increasing focus on UNCLOS, creating a new “coordinating body with teeth,” or establishing a comprehensive Arctic treaty. Whatever direction international cooperation in the Arctic takes, such cooperation will likely be complicated by the continued tendency for interested states to act in their own self-interest as well as to at times cast “the Arctic issue in terms of national identity,” which risks “reducing the political space for cooperative policy options.”

3. Norway’s jurisdiction over Svalbard

The Svalbard archipelago has a total landmass of 61,020 km² and is composed of various islands lying between mainland Norway and the North Pole. Only the largest of these islands, Spitsbergen, is permanently inhabited. Ice covers about 60% of Svalbard, and less than 10% supports vegetation. Svalbard has a total population of 2642, and although various economic activities are undertaken there, Svalbard is important to Norway and other states because of its jurisdictional status more than because of its direct economic value.

Svalbard was discovered in 1596 by the Dutch explorer Willem Barents. In 1613, an English whaling operation, the Muscovy Company, claimed exclusive rights to the islands, which clashed with the then-united kingdom of Denmark-Norway’s claims of sovereignty and with the Dutch principle of Mare Liberum, which held – much as UNCLOS would centuries later – that the seas belong to everyone. The Swedish-Norwegian Council of Ministers considered annexing Svalbard in 1870, but this option was forestalled by practical difficulties and Russian opposition.

Soon after gaining independence from Sweden in 1905, Norway sought to clarify Svalbard’s jurisdiction, and numerous countries claimed an interest. The Dutch asserted special rights due to Barents’ 1596 discovery and subsequent semi-permanent Dutch whaling stations. Russia argued that Pomor hunters had reached Svalbard prior to Barents. The United Kingdom pointed out that the Muscovy Company had claimed Spitsbergen for King James I in 1614. Meanwhile, Arctic whaling and seal hunting remained an important industry for a number of states. Further complicating matters, although most of Svalbard’s inhabitants were Norwegian, from 1906, the islands’ primary employer was the Boston-based Arctic Coal Company.
Joint-sovereignty solutions proposed by Norway, Sweden, and Russia were rejected, and it was only at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference that the Allied Supreme Council granted Norway sovereignty over Svalbard with provisions for international activity on the islands, resulting in the 1920 Treaty Concerning the Archipelago of Spitsbergen (hereafter, ‘the Spitsbergen Treaty’). This solution was linked to a number of factors, including declining American economic interest in Svalbard as well as the post-war disempowerment of Germany and unrecognized status of the Bolshevik government in Russia, both countries that had interests in Svalbard. The Spitsbergen Treaty had 14 original signatory states, with the Soviet Union and Germany signing in 1924 and 1925 respectively.

The Spitsbergen Treaty’s most significant provisions are:

- Article 1: Norway possesses “full and absolute sovereignty” over “all the islands between 10° and 35° longitude East of Greenwich and between 74° and 81° latitude North”.
- Articles 2-3: Nationals of all signatory states may undertake commercial activities “on a footing of absolute equality,” subject to Norwegian legislation.
- Article 6: States had a limited period in which they could claim land occupied prior to the treaty’s signing. Where valid, title to such land was granted to the claimant.
- Article 7: Nationals of all signatory states may acquire, enjoy, and exercise the right of ownership of property (including mineral rights) on terms of “complete equality”.
- Article 8: “Taxes, duties, and fees levied shall be devoted exclusively” to the administration of Svalbard.
- Article 9: Svalbard “may never be used for warlike purposes”.

The treaty does not specify how Norway should exercise its sovereignty. Norway does so primarily through the office of the centrally appointed Governor (Sysselmannen), who reports to the Norwegian Ministry of Justice. As Longyearbyen, Svalbard’s largest settlement, began a gradual process of liberalisation in the 1970s, the Governor began taking over tasks from Store Norske, the Norwegian mining company, and establishing “effective enforcement of Norwegian sovereignty, especially towards foreign agents on the archipelago.” As a result, the Governor is responsible for functions such as environmental protection, policing, tourism coordination, transport, and contact with Svalbard’s foreign settlements. However, the introduction of local democracy in Longyearbyen in 2002 reduced the Governor’s de facto jurisdiction in governing the town.

The Spitsbergen Treaty’s Article 8 means that all personal and corporate taxes levied in Svalbard go into a separate budget for the archipelago’s administration and that Norway’s central government receives no tax income. It is thus impossible for the Norwegian state to acquire direct economic advantage from the islands. Government functions are funded through tax revenues and annual grants from Norway. In 2010, government subsidies to Norwegian companies in Svalbard amounted to NOK 388 million (around US$65 million).

In the early-twentieth century, coal mining replaced seasonal hunting and whaling as Svalbard’s primary economic activity. The Spitsbergen Treaty led to the institutionalisation of scientific research in the archipelago, most significantly with the...
1928 founding of what later became the Norwegian Polar Institute.\(^2\) Today, Ny-Ålesund (the world’s northernmost permanently inhabited settlement, with a population of around 35 and managed by the public corporation Kings Bay AS) operates as a research centre. In addition, since 1978, Poland has maintained year-round scientific operations at the Polish Polar Station at Hornsundet, manned by around eight people.\(^2\)

Changes in ownership of Svalbard’s various coal mines meant that, within a few years of the Spitsbergen Treaty’s signing, only Norway and Russia were running mining operations on the islands. Thus, although all treaty signatory states theoretically possess equal mining rights, only Norway and Russia exercise these in practice.\(^2\) Nevertheless, the right to undertake economic activities on an equal footing means that all signatory states may use the seaways surrounding Svalbard.

Although still heavily dependent on coal mining, Longyearbyen (population around 2070) is no longer a true company town and hosts a variety of businesses dependent on tourism. The second-largest settlement, Barentsburg (population 439), is operated by the Russian state-owned Trust Arktikugol mining company.\(^2\)

### 4. Norwegian and Russian Svalbard policy

As we shall see, community life in Svalbard is structured by informal diplomatic activities undertaken by a variety of states, most notably by the desire of Norway and Russia to affirm their rights in the archipelago. Broader international relations concerns have always been at the core of both countries’ Svalbard policies, and for Norway’s part, its policy has focused on marginalising Russian influence.

It is a sign of the unusual nature of Svalbard society that both the Norwegian and Russian coal mining operations have historically been unprofitable and dependant on state subsidies. In reality, mining is undertaken due to the perceived political need to maintain settlements in Svalbard, to maintain de facto jurisdiction. With the active Norwegian mines running low on high-quality coal, a new mine is being developed. As the Store Norske mining company itself notes, “This is important not only for Store Norske [...] but also for the Norwegian presence at Svalbard and for the long-term stability of the community in Longyearbyen.”\(^2\) Similarly, there is the idea that “as long as Russia runs mining operations in Svalbard, Norway has to do so too.”\(^2\) Robert Hermansen, former Store Norske CEO, said much the same in 2000: “To keep control of Svalbard we have to have a community here. If we left the Russians would immediately claim it. I am under no illusions.”\(^2\)

The state-owned Store Norske is engaging in geopolitics, using the threat of Longyearbyen’s depopulation and consequent Russian dominance as an argument for greater state support. This strategy works because, as much as Norway argues that Svalbard’s jurisdiction has been fully resolved and is fully in Norwegian hands, the Spitsbergen Treaty is very much open to interpretation.

History shows that Norway has good reason to believe that its jurisdiction over Svalbard requires constant reaffirmation. For instance, the Spitsbergen Treaty’s Article 9 provisions on demilitarisation have, in practice, proved strongest in peacetime. Like the Baltic archipelago of Åland, the demilitarisation of which has invariably been put on hold in wartime, Svalbard was the scene of fighting during World War II. This followed the 1941 forced evacuation of Svalbard’s residents (2175 Russians and around 900 Norwegians) by Allied forces. To pre-empt German occupation of the islands, the Allied troops destroyed mines, buildings, oil and coal stocks, and machinery at all settlements.\(^2\) In 1944, the Soviet Union sought unsuccessfully to place Svalbard under joint Norwegian-Soviet military control, and Norway’s early entry into the North Atlantic
Treaty Organisation represented in part a defence of Svalbard against Soviet expansionism. Abiding concerns over the potential for Russian military activity are evident in the Norwegian Cold War thriller movie *Orion’s Belt* (1985), which presents a bleak vision of Svalbard as a plaything for Russian and American military interests. As recently as 2010, Russia protested against the military use of photos taken by the Norwegian-operated Svalbard Satellite Station.

Conflict has also arisen over Svalbard’s maritime borders, with the Norwegian government consistently prioritising the Spitsbergen Treaty over other international agreements. Norway regards the Spitsbergen Treaty as covering only land and territorial sea to a distance of 12 nautical miles (around 22 km), but some other states regard the treaty as applying to the continental shelf and fisheries zone. When Norway set up a 200-nautical mile (around 370 km) economic zone in 1977, the Soviet Union saw this as a contravention of the Spitsbergen Treaty. Conflicting interpretations as to the rights Norway derives from the Spitsbergen Treaty have led to the sporadic occurrence of international incidents, most dramatically in the ‘Elektron Incident’ of 2005. Although Russia implicitly compromised on its claims in its negotiation of a maritime border with Norway in 2010, disputes continue regarding fisheries rights, with the Norwegian Coast Guard seizing the Russian trawler *Sapphire II* on 28 September 2011.

Such dramatic issues, however, conceal day-to-day informal diplomatic activity taking place in the archipelago. The Government of Norway has argued for a strict reading of the Spitsbergen Treaty:

> Where other kinds of activities are concerned, the Treaty does not afford any special rights to nationals of the other contracting parties. This means that measures in areas that are not specifically listed in the Treaty and that favour Norwegian nationals or otherwise discriminate between nationals of contracting parties may be carried out without hindrance of the Svalbard Treaty.

Since Norway cannot deny Russia’s right to mining operations in Barentsburg, the Government of Norway has made do by insisting that all non-economic activity may only take place at its discretion and openly asserting jurisdiction over Barentsburg. Umbreit feels that, in the post-Soviet era, “Norway has made good use of the Russian weakness by gradually increasing its control over the Russians’ activities, introducing more and more regulations and enforcing them, at least partly, within Russian settlements.” Innocuous though regulations such as Norwegian-language road signs and fire standards may appear, impositions of domestic law “could lead to conflicts with the non-discrimination rule of the Spitsbergen Treaty as it is obviously more difficult for companies and employees from other countries to adapt to specific Norwegian standards.”

In the early 2000s, Russia began being more assertive of its rights, exemplified by its successful struggle to open a new mine at Colesbukta, which could conceivably replace the nearly spent mines in Barentsburg. The Governor opposed this development on the basis of domestic Norwegian law, specifically the 2001 Svalbard Environmental Protection Act, perceived by some Russian observers as “a disguised political instrument aimed at forcing Russia off the archipelago.” Russia’s renewed commitment to Svalbard has been illustrated in smaller but still telling ways, such as a recent dispute between the Governor and *Trust Arktikugol* over stewardship of eighteenth-century Russian artefacts. These artefacts had been stored in allegedly poor conditions at Barentsburg’s Pomor Museum. Because the Spitsbergen Treaty does not specify museum activities, the
Governor deployed the Svalbard Environmental Protection Act to demand the artefacts be handed over for preservation in Longyearbyen. In other words, the operations of the Russian museum were deemed to be under Norway’s jurisdiction. The need for caution in exercising Norwegian jurisdiction in Barentsburg is made clear though by the Governor’s subsequent climb-down following Russian protest.

Another recent dispute involved tourist helicopter flights that Trust Arktikugol ran from Longyearbyen to Barentsburg. Confronted with decreasing (or non-existent) mining income, Trust Arktikugol has sought to increase its tourism income, yet outside of the summer months, tourists can currently only reach Barentsburg by snowmobile. The Governor, however, contests that the Spitsbergen Treaty only protects flights directly related to Barentsburg’s mining operations. Trust Arktikugol argues that tourism represents commercial activity covered by the treaty and that Norway’s actions contravene the non-discrimination principle inasmuch as tourists have easy access to Longyearbyen (the location of Svalbard’s only commercial airport) but not to Barentsburg. Following hearings in the Norwegian courts, Trust Arktikugol was fined for illegal flights and banned from operating them in the future.

Russia could be justified in arguing that, by setting obstacles against both Barentsburg’s sustaining its mining operations and diversifying economically, Norway is attempting to starve the Russians off of Svalbard. Russia has historically consistently protested not only against being refused permission to undertake certain activities but also against being required to seek permission from the Governor prior to undertaking them.

The apparently mundane nature of conflicts over museum artefacts and helicopter flights is belied by the tenacity with which Norway and Russia pursue them. The helicopter flights, for example, are of no great economic significance to Russia – but are significant to its ability to prove economic activity in Barentsburg. Norway’s jurisdiction over Svalbard is absolute only to the extent that it goes unchallenged and that Norway does not exert authority over controversial matters.

Norway’s Svalbard policy as a whole can thus historically be seen through the lens of Norwegian-Russian political conflict. Investments in Longyearbyen’s businesses and infrastructure are informal diplomatic activities communicating to the international community a message of strong Norwegian jurisdiction, and Norwegian attempts to prevent Russia from exercising similar jurisdiction themselves represent informal diplomacy. It is important to note that Norway itself denies that it seeks to marginalise Russian activity on the islands.

5. The liberalisation of Longyearbyen

Although discussion of Svalbard from an international relations perspective usually concerns the broad sweep of Arctic geopolitical positioning, the weakness of the Spitsbergen Treaty means that the practice of such international relations has always been contingent upon events on the ground. Mining has long been central to this, but newer developments have significantly shifted Svalbard’s position in international relations over the past two decades.

Longyearbyen’s economic liberalisation began in the mid-1970s. Most of Longyearbyen’s residents were employed by Store Norske on shifts of a few years’ duration, and Store Norske was responsible for providing all community services. In 1989, these functions passed to the subsidiary Svalbard Samfunnsdrift AS, which became a fully public corporation in 1993. Store Norske also transferred functions to other new companies: Spitsbergen Travel AS (tourism operations), Svalbard Næringsutvikling AS
Differentiating these functions from the mining operations made diversified development possible. This was part of a Norwegian policy to encourage Longyearbyen’s tourism industry, which at the time lacked significant accommodation, dining, and shopping facilities. 1993 saw the establishment of UNIS, the University Centre in Svalbard, offering Arctic sciences education. These developments meant that Longyearbyen’s economy was no longer entirely dependent on Store Norske, and over the course of just a few years, the town’s service sector grew enormously, with the opening of numerous new shops, hotels, restaurants, and bars. Longyearbyen was transformed into Svalbard’s first – and so far, only – economically diverse settlement. The fall of the Soviet Union, the economic liberalisation of Longyearbyen, and the growth of tourism have increased opportunity and demand for Russian and Norwegian interaction, resulting in tourist boat and snowmobile trips between the settlements.

The decreased importance of the state-owned Store Norske has reduced Norway’s control over community development. As late as 2001, the Government of Norway asserted that Longyearbyen should ideally have a maximum of 1300 residents. As of 1 July 2012, Longyearbyen and Ny-Ålesund had 2195 residents combined. Of these, 1788 were Norwegian nationals, and 407 were nationals of states other than Norway, representing over 40 states in total. Because of the Spitsbergen Treaty’s Articles 2-3, Norwegian immigration law is not in force in Svalbard, meaning that one need not even be a citizen of a treaty signatory state in order to live and work in Svalbard.

The growing population and economic complexity of Longyearbyen meant that the Governor could no longer effectively run the settlement, and Norway introduced a degree of local democracy in 2002. On the one hand, this could be regarded as helpful to Norwegian efforts to reinforce Norway’s sovereignty over the islands inasmuch as Longyearbyen had become a true – albeit heavily subsidised – community. On the other hand, the corresponding decrease in the Governor’s power means that the Norwegian state has lost much of its control over life in Svalbard in practice as the local government in Longyearbyen is now seeking to chart its own, democratic course.

The Governor’s Office emphasises that Longyearbyen is but a small part of Svalbard and is under its jurisdiction, yet a degree of tension between the Governor’s Office and the local government is evident. Indeed, the local government is flexing its jurisdictional capacity in an attempt to gain greater powers in practice, undertaking informal diplomatic activities aimed at international Arctic actors. In the context of celebrating the Spitsbergen Treaty, Christin Kristoffersen, Mayor of Longyearbyen since 2011, writes:

This year, we are working to change the structure [of the local government] so that our organisation – both ‘municipally’ and politically – becomes even more accessible for our citizens and thereby increasing shared decision making and participation here in our beautiful north. We are a proud and democratic part of our nation. Svalbard is an international part of the Kingdom of Norway, with important Norwegian-Russian interaction, international citizens from over 44 countries, research, education, business, tourism, mining/industry, Arctic infrastructure […], cultural life is thriving, and people live well here up north! The local government’s priorities of promoting the community may not currently
be incompatible with the aims of the Norwegian government, but the fact that they are outside of central government control represents a substantive weakening of Norwegian authority in the islands.

6. Scientific research as informal diplomacy

In 2006, the Norwegian government identified the High North as “Norway’s most important strategic priority area in the years ahead.” Nor has this identification been an empty one, for Norway has invested significantly in Arctic diplomacy. Norway has hosted the Arctic Council’s secretariat in the city of Tromsø since 2006, and it hosts the International Barents Secretariat in the city of Kirkenes. Norway has nevertheless placed special emphasis on the Spitsbergen Treaty because it – as an international binding agreement – is something unique in the Arctic. Unlike the Arctic Council or other bodies with weak and diffuse powers, the Spitsbergen Treaty’s granting of “full and absolute sovereignty” has allowed Norwegian parliament to pass statutory legislation (like the 2001 Svalbard Environmental Protection Act) that fleshes out the details within this legal framework and to which foreign governments, by virtue of their participation in economic activity in the archipelago, accede.

Yet if Norway has long regarded Longyearbyen as an instrument of Norwegian sovereignty, one aimed at the Russians in particular, how has it coped with its gradual loss of de facto jurisdiction over this settlement? The answer represents a fascinating case of the exercise of informal diplomacy in international relations.

Norway’s response to Longyearbyen’s liberalisation has been to focus on scientific research. This focus developed somewhat accidentally. On 5 November 1962, an explosion killed 21 Norwegian miners at Ny-Ålesund. In mainland Norway, this disaster is remembered for its role in the toppling of Norway’s government, but the accident also made it politically impossible to continue mining at Ny-Ålesund. In the words of Thor B. Arlov:

> The closing of mining operations in Ny-Ålesund in 1963 [...] had an international relations aspect. Sovereignty did not inherently require a specific level of presence, but it was clearly desirable to have Norwegian settlement and economic activity multiple places in the archipelago. This in part involved balancing the Soviet presence and in part involved demonstrating Norwegian interests.

Fortuitously for Norway, a solution presented itself in 1964 when the European Space Research Organisation asked to establish a satellite ground station in Longyearbyen. The Norwegian government suggested it be built at Ny-Ålesund instead—and thus did Ny-Ålesund transform virtually overnight from a mining town to a scientific research town.

Over time, Ny-Ålesund developed into a diversified scientific community. In Svalbard, scientific research must be regarded at least in part as informal diplomatic activity engaged in by Norway (which makes such research possible) and by other states (which fund researchers). When Norway decided in the 1980s to regard research and education as key economic activities for Svalbard’s future, this was, as the Government of Norway itself states, aimed at “ensuring the continuation of Norwegian settlements.” Norway could have opened the UNIS university centre without redefining research and education as economic activity, but this redefinition allowed Norway to co-opt participating states into the maintenance of Norwegian sovereignty.
This Norwegian strategy has been successful in the sense that research drives Ny-Ålesund and is now a major plank in Longyearbyen’s economy.\textsuperscript{56} The Svalbard Global Seed Vault, which opened outside of Longyearbyen in 2008, is similarly more than just a worthwhile endeavour to preserve genetic diversity of food crops; it also involves countless other countries (as seed contributors) assenting to Norway’s sovereignty and to Norway’s framing of Svalbard as an exceptional territory when it comes to international relations. Without considerable awareness of the situation on the ground, such informal scientific diplomacy would be entirely opaque: This is international relations by stealth, a means of Norway strengthening its hand in a manner that dissuades protest— for what government could protest against scientific research and projects designed to safeguard the world’s natural heritage? 

Norway’s promotion of scientific research in Svalbard may have initially been intended as a means of weakening Russia’s claims to special rights by preventing Ny-Ålesund from falling into Russian hands and later by relatively disempowering Russia \textit{vis-à-vis} other states. The strategy has, however, become something more, offering non-Arctic states a gateway into the Arctic in a Norwegian state-sponsored setting that nonetheless possesses the trappings of an international zone. It is no coincidence that among the 12 countries now running research stations at Ny-Ålesund are Japan (opened 1991), South Korea (2002), China (2004), and India (2008). China’s Huanghe Research Station has been among the most active of such stations, located in a 500 m\textsuperscript{2} building and hosting a total of 36 project workers in 2010, with the capacity for 25 workers at any one time.\textsuperscript{57} It is in this context that Bailes muses whether the Spitsbergen Treaty has continued to accrue signatories precisely “because there is no other easy point of entry, as yet, for states who seek footholds – including a base for direct participation in research – within the High North region.”\textsuperscript{58} Although being a Spitsbergen Treaty signatory provides only very indirect influence on Arctic policymaking, in the absence of other options, Norway’s self-interested efforts to make Svalbard central to regional policy offers signatory states the opportunity to have some influence on the region’s future.

\textbf{7. Conclusion}

Through careful political positioning, informal diplomacy, and consistent privileging the Spitsbergen Treaty, Norway has maintained its control over Svalbard as a whole. At a micro-level, however, it could be argued that Svalbard is slipping out of the Norwegian government’s grasp. Norway’s assertion of its sovereignty \textit{vis-à-vis} Russia by creating a genuine community in Longyearbyen and by encouraging scientific research has relatively weakened Russia’s hand, but it has strengthened the hands of all other states. Norway no longer directly controls who lives in Longyearbyen and what work is carried out there. Not only is Longyearbyen now a multi-ethnic, multinational society, but its local government has been engaging in informal diplomacy of its own, seeking to build links across the Arctic region that are specifically in the interests of Longyearbyen— and thus not necessarily of Norway as a whole. Similarly, Norway cannot prevent new states from signing the Spitsbergen Treaty, and although it has the power to prevent the establishment of new research stations at Ny-Ålesund, it is treaty bound to keep Svalbard free from Norwegian immigration law, thereby allowing nationals of any state to enter and work in the archipelago.

All indications are that the situation in Svalbard – like that in the Arctic in general – will remain a complex one, subject to the competing needs and manoeuvrings of a host of state actors. Now that Norway and Russia have been joined in Svalbard by non-Arctic
states that nevertheless claim a stake in the Arctic, there is little reason to suspect a shift away from the opaque, informal diplomacy that has dominated life in the archipelago ever since the signing of the Spitsbergen Treaty. The case of Svalbard shows how small policy choices – for instance, state support for a coal company, a university centre, or a museum – can have big consequences in a territory in which no action is too minor to be of geopolitical significance.


Treaty signatories now include Afghanistan, Albania, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, India, Italy, Japan, Monaco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, the USA, and Venezuela.


30 Lüdecke, ‘Parallel Precedents’.

31 Numminen, ‘A History’.


43 Arlov, Den rette mann, 255-256.

44 Government of Norway, Report No. 9, §7.3.1.

45 Arlov, Den rette mann, 324-325.


52 Arlov, Den rette mann, 221-225.

53 Arlov, Den rette mann, 247 (translation my own); see also Lüdecke, ‘Parallel Precedents’, 256-259.

54 Arlov, Den rette mann, 247-249.

55 Government of Norway, Report No. 9, §3.3.

56 Government of Norway, Report No. 9, §3.3.
