While northern Norway for a long time was perceived as an area with high unemployment rates and a lack of opportunities for future generations, several significant events and developments in recent years, both nationally as well as internationally, have revitalized the region and increased attention to, and interest for, what is going on in the High North. Climate change and the melting of the polar ice cap in the Arctic can represent challenges in a number of areas, but they also offer opportunities to access new natural resource deposits and open new shipping routes. On September 15, 2010, Norway and Russia signed the Treaty concerning Maritime Delimitation and Cooperation in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean. The Treaty was a culmination of over 40 years of negotiations, and it has paved the way for a vast number of opportunities relating to business and industry development, research and education, trans-boundary cooperation in transport, fisheries and petroleum development.

In recent years, several Arctic states have developed comprehensive policy documents and strategies for advancing their respective national priorities in the region. These strategies vary in focus and scope. The Norwegian Government launched a white paper in November 2011 delineating policy proposals on a broad range of issues affecting the region in the coming decades. The Norwegian Parliament (Storting) submitted its final recommendations for the White Paper in April, and the debate took place in the plenary session held on April 17, 2013. The legislative process surrounding the white paper is the topic of this article.

From Cold War to Cooperation

For decades during the Cold War, the High North was an arena of rivalry between the super powers. Norway was at the crossroads of this rivalry, representing the border between the free world and communism. One of the first substantial, post-Cold war cooperative efforts in the Arctic was initiated by Norway in January 1993 with the signing of the Kirkenes Declaration, which established the Barents Euro-Arctic Region Cooperation. The cooperation was launched on two levels, the intergovernmental Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) and the interregional Barents Regional Council (BRC)\(^1\).

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\(^1\) The members of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council are Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the European Commission. The chair of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council rotates between Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden. Norway holds the chairmanship for the period 2011-2013.
The Barents Euro-Arctic Region is Europe’s largest area for interregional cooperation and includes 13 territories in northern Russia, Norway, Finland, and Sweden. Barents Cooperation has for 20 years provided cross border, people-to-people cooperation and peaceful resolution of common challenges in that area. The main focus of the Barents Cooperation framework has been on trade and industry, energy, resource development, health, education, culture as well as transport and logistics. Each chairmanship of the BEAC organizes a Barents Parliamentary Conference, and the last one was held in Harstad, northern Norway on April 22-24, 2013. One of the most important results from the Parliamentary Conference was an agreement on developing a comprehensive Barents transport plan, which includes transport on land, at sea and in the air, and the development of the Northern Sea Route. In 2011, the Barents region was assessed by the prestigious Monocle Magazine as being one of the 5 most promising regions in the world for business development and investments. The other areas were Chile, Haifa, Berlin and Istanbul.

The Arctic Council (AC) was established in 1996 as the only forum for circumpolar cooperation in the Arctic. The AC is an intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation, coordination, and interaction among all the eight Arctic states and its people. Underlining the increased importance of the Arctic, several non-Arctic countries have applied for observer status in the AC. The last Arctic Council Ministerial meeting took place in Kiruna, Sweden on May 15. At this meeting, China, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Singapore and Italy were granted status as new observer states in the council. The AC deals with a broad range of issues relating to interstate cooperation, energy development, maritime security, health, education, research and tourism, to name but a few.
Illustration 2: Map showing the Arctic region above 66 degrees north latitude (Source: World Atlas).

Norwegian Perspectives

The High North is Norway’s most strategically important policy priority, a statement unanimously supported by all seven parties represented in the Parliament. The High North has been a priority for several Norwegian governments. The current government launched its first High North Strategy in 2006, and then followed up with the report “New Building Blocks in the North” in 2009. The last government white paper on the High North, “Visions and Strategies,” was introduced on November 18, 2011 (see http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/ud/campaigns/the-high-north.html?id=450629). This white paper sets forth ambitious goals for Norway’s engagement in the north along a broad spectrum of policy areas. Since the main focus is on foreign policy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was tasked with coordinating the work. This was a significant task for two main reasons. Firstly, because the current government is a coalition government consisting of three different political parties, all efforts had to be agreed on jointly within the coalition. Secondly, because policy-making for the high north encompasses a number of different government departments all wanting a say in the process; therefore inter- and intra-departmental coordination was crucial.

After the white paper was launched, it was sent as a Report to the Parliament (Storting), and then passed on to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defense. The Standing Committee elected Mr. Morten Høglund from the Progress Party as parliamentary spokesperson, meaning that he would be responsible for drafting policy recommendations to be considered by the committee and finally put to a vote in the main assembly. Høglund is also the Chair of the Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region (SCPAR), which started its work in September 1994, supporting the establishment of the Arctic Council. Currently, the SCPAR consists of parliamentarians from all eight Arctic states as well as the European Parliament.
Throughout the winter of 2012, I traveled extensively in the three northernmost counties in Norway together with Mr. Høglund. The task was to meet with various international organizations, government bodies, regional and local authorities, non-governmental organizations, representatives of the business community as well as the petroleum industry. A hearing on the White Paper was held in the Parliament in the winter of 2012 with participants from a broad range of organizations and companies. Similarly, the White Paper was also widely distributed within the Progress Party, and each affected local or county board was able to submit remarks and recommendations to the spokesperson.

**Some Central Policy Areas in the north**

Norway’s High North policy encompasses a broad range of issues and policy areas. The scope of this paper does not allow for a comprehensive analysis of all of these areas. Therefore, transport and logistics, trade, energy and cooperation with Russia are highlighted as important policy issues.

Since the end of the Cold War, the number of people crossing the border between Norway and Russia has boomed. While around 8,000 people crossed the 196 kilometer border between the two countries in 1990, the total number of people has increased to over 300,000 in 2013. The increase in traffic across border poses both challenges and opportunities relating to infrastructure, visa requirements, business development and trade. In 2010, an agreement between Norway and Russia established a special border zone allowing for eased border crossing for 40,000 Russians and 9,000 Norwegian living within a 30 kilometer radius of the common border. The intention of the Norwegian Government is to further expand this agreement.

**Picture 1:** Widerøe flight from the city of Kirkenes to Tromsø. Air transport is crucial in rural areas in northern Norway.

**Picture 2:** Mr. Høglund meeting with representatives from the Harbor of Narvik, northern Norway. Narvik aims to become a transport hub in the high north.
Significant upgrades in the infrastructure network of the High North are needed in order to facilitate sustainable movement of people and goods in urban and rural areas. While Russia in recent years have upgraded the 240 kilometer road from Murmansk to the Norwegian border to European standards, the road on the Norwegian side of the border is in much worse condition. As reiterated at the Barents Region Parliamentary Conference in April 2013, there is a strong desire among the Barents countries to improve transport networks in the region and several potential transport corridors are discussed. Such projects will require joint cooperation, substantial investments as well as private sector involvement in all countries in the region.

Norway is an energy nation, a major oil exporter, the 6th largest hydropower producer and the third largest gas exporter in the world. While future US energy independence might have far reaching global implications for international energy markets, it is an important job for Norway to ensure there is a prominent role for our petroleum in the energy mix of countries around the world.

The agreement delineating the Barents Sea border between Norway and Russia explicitly states that joint cooperation is required when developing discoveries of petroleum which trespass the common border at sea. This opens up for a broad range of cooperative schemes between the two countries. At the same time, the low ice cover extent in the Arctic has allowed for the seasonal opening of the Northern Sea Route for commercial purposes and the first non-Russian vessel sailed from Kirkenes to China in 2010. Sustainable and secure utilization of the sea route in the future requires that due attention is paid to environmental concerns as well as safety standards.

The Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR) in the Arctic, which was signed on May 12, 2011, is the first binding agreement negotiated under the auspices of the Arctic Council. The SAR coordinates circumpolar maritime and aeronautical coverage and response among the Arctic States. According to the US Department of State, the agreement represents one of the most successful negotiations to date to address emerging issues in the Arctic.

**Norwegian Parliamentary Deliberations**

The final High North White Paper debate and recommendations passed in the main assembly revealed that there is consensus on most issues involving the north among the different political parties in Norway. Some of these areas relate to:

- The need for sustainable development of the region’s natural resources for the benefit of its population.

- “High north, low tension” - drawing attention to the fact that no party wants the Arctic to become an area of conflict. Further, the phrase “high attention, low tension” used by the Norwegian Minister of Fisheries and Coastal Affairs, implies that all parties agree on the strategic importance of the region.
- Norway is a small country, best served by an international legal order based on regional and international cooperation.

- That the Arctic Council is the primary, legitimate, circumpolar organization for dealing with Arctic issues in a joint manner.

At the same time, certain disagreement can be identified including:

- The need for strict priorities, concrete action and better coordination among the diverse government departments and institutions. The White paper listed over 100 different priorities, and the opposition parties requested a clearer strategy for implementation of policy recommendations (Opposition vs. Government).

- The need to distinguish between what can be termed a specific focus and priority of the north, and what are regular, budgetary requirements affecting the north (Opposition vs. Government).

- The misbalance between mandated missions and available resources for the Norwegian military in the north (Opposition vs. Government).

- The pace and scope of petroleum exploration and development in the north, including whether a moratorium should be declared for certain areas (Disagreements within both opposition and Government).

Conclusions

The experiences from Norway suggest strong political support among all political parties for the sustainable development of the resources of the Arctic. This has made Norway one of the lead actors in the region, thus being able to shape policy decision-making in a number of different areas. While not unique for the Arctic region, policy coordination among the many international, regional, national and local administrative bodies is the Achilles’ heel of Arctic cooperation.

If the Arctic region is to continue being an area of “high attention and low tension” it is crucial that the respective governments establish policy environments that are conducive to sustainable growth and development. Progressive policy environments have the potential of attracting a vast number of private and industry initiatives to what US Deputy Secretary of State Thomas R. Nides in 2012 termed “one of the last true frontiers of the United States.”