

9. Svalbard in national and international politics: problems of sovereignty and strategy

From 1814 to 1905 Norway and Sweden were unified under the Swedish king. Based on the initiative of A.E. Nordenskiöld, who sought the King's protection of his planned colony at Kapp Thordsen, the Swedish government in 1871 inquired European states whether they would object to an annexation of Spitsbergen to Norway. Russia protested, and the initiative was abandoned. During the 1890s public opinion in Norway leaned more towards an annexation, partly inspired by the polar expeditions of Nansen. When the union with Sweden was dissolved in 1905, this became a part of the foreign policy program of the young, independent Norwegian government. Conferences were called in Kristiania (Oslo) in 1910, 1912 and 1914 to discuss the "Spitsbergen issue", but no agreement was reached. During the First World War, Norwegian economic interests on Svalbard grew and the question of sovereignty was raised at the peace conference in Paris in 1919. On 9 February 1920 the Spitsbergen Treaty was signed, giving Norway "full and absolute sovereignty" over the archipelago, but granting excessive rights to citizens of the signatory states. Norway formally assumed sovereignty on 14 August 1925.

The economic crisis in the 1920s resulted in a contraction of coal mining, and from the 1930s only Soviet and Norwegian mines were in production. In this period Svalbard had virtually no strategic importance and very little economic significance. The settlements were evacuated in August-September 1941, and during the Second World War there were only a handful of German weather stations on Svalbard and a small Norwegian garrison. In September 1943 German warships attacked the main settlements and destroyed them. Svalbard was strategically important in the "weather war"; meteorological data were vital for both sides' war operations in the Northern Atlantic and the Barents Sea.

In November 1944 the Soviet foreign minister Molotov demanded an annulment of the Svalbard Treaty and expressed that the responsibility for the archipelago should be shared between Norway and the Soviet Union. The Norwegian government started a process to prepare a renegotiation of the treaty, but the Storting (parliament) called this off in 1947. In 1949 Norway joined NATO, and Svalbard was included in the NATO defence area in 1951.

Svalbard was in the periphery of the Cold War. The Arctic in general was strategically very important, particularly as an operation area for nuclear submarines of the Soviet North Fleet and for military intelligence. Svalbard, however, was largely spared by military activity. This was in the interest of both Norway/NATO and the Soviet Union. Norway kept a low profile – the so-called "low tension policy" was intended not to provoke negative reactions from the Soviets and was quite successful. There were only a handful of issues that represented a real strain on the relations: e.g., the airport matter (1960s), the petroleum exploration (1960s), the ESRO radars (1967–74) and the Hopen airplane accident (1978).

It could be argued that Svalbard's greatest significance for Norway since the 1970s is connected to the sovereignty over and management of natural resources in the sea. Due to developments in the Law of the Sea Norway has been able to expand its sea territory greatly, and in 1977 also declared a 200 NM fishery protection zone around Svalbard. Norway claims full sovereignty over sea and continental shelf in this area, but this is disputed by other states. Considering petroleum development and shipping in the Arctic in view of climate changes, this explains why the High North has become top priority of Norwegian policy.

Food for thought

- In what sense can Svalbard be said to be strategically important?
- How have relations to the Soviet Union/Russia influenced Norwegian Svalbard policy?