

How the New Cold War travelled North (Part II)

Interaction between Norway and Russia

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Summary

This policy brief examines changing Russian and Norwegian approaches to each other in the period 2012–2016, and discusses how the “New Cold War” spread to the North. This is an intriguing question, since both parties had initially stated that, despite the overall worsening of Russia–West relations following the crises in Ukraine, the North should be protected as a space for peaceful interaction. To address this question, watching and tracking the changing patterns of Russian exercises and military modernization is not enough; understanding the rise in tensions requires studying the effects of the interactions underway between the parties in this region.

Three interaction effects need to be taken into consideration in explaining why the tense relations following the conflict in Ukraine spread to the low-tension Northern theatre. In this, we stress the interactive dynamics that ensues when two parties start to view each other as threats, interpreting new moves by the other as expressions of hostile intent. Further, we explain the observed New Cold War “contamination” with reference to domestic policy agendas and practices of decision-making. On both the Norwegian and the Russian sides, the new military posturing in the North, now interpreted as part of a growing conflict, has emerged partly as a side-effect of implementing what actually were longstanding national goals.

Russia and Norway have moved from viewing and acting toward each other as key collaborating partners in the North to a far more conflictual and security-oriented relation. Although there were signs of growing mutual apprehension prior to the crises in Ukraine, relations have deteriorated markedly since 2014 (see the accompanying policy brief *How the New Cold War travelled North (Part I): Norwegian and Russian narratives*). In June 2018, Russia conducted yet another snap military exercise involving 36 of its warships

close to the Norwegian border. In October/November, Norway hosted the largest NATO military exercise since the 1980s, involving 50 000 troops, 150 aircraft, 65 ships and 10 000 on-land vehicles. At the same time, a US-led military exercise, “Northern Screen,” was held in Troms, in North Norway, involving the aircraft carrier Harry S Truman. It is fair to say that what some call “the New Cold War” has metastasized to the North.

How this has happened is an intriguing and important question. Both parties stated at the outset that, despite the overall worsening of Russia–West relations, the North should be protected as a space for peaceful interaction; also, neither state has offensive designs on the other. Apart from safeguarding its Bastion-P coastal defense, Russia’s core strategic interests lie in the former Soviet space. Recent cuts in military expenditures also demonstrate the Kremlin’s balancing of such expenditures with increasing domestic socioeconomic needs. Thus, beyond the context of an escalating military conflict, the likelihood that Russia would annex a piece of Norway is close to zero. Likewise, despite Russia’s sensitivity to what it calls “NATO encirclement,” the idea that NATO would attack Russia in the North is unreal. NATO’s primary objective is to secure the states that are already members of the alliance.

Explaining contamination

When political societies move into conflict, popular explanations are often skewed toward the actions and intentions of the other party. In most Russian accounts, reasons and blame for deteriorating relations are placed on the Western, US, NATO or even Norwegian side. In Norwegian accounts, they are most often said to be found on the Russian side. Such interpretations serve to legitimize and make reasonable a mutual and, as the parties see it, “defensive” strategic posturing or military build-up against the other side. This is a normal mechanism in conflict escalation. It is also a situation where analysis that focuses on laying out and

comparing the reasonings and developments on both sides becomes unpopular. Such an exercise of parallelism is often perceived as aimed at condoning the actions of the other party. We feel, however, that providing such comparative analysis in a situation of New Cold War contamination is both important and necessary.

Thus, while we can watch and track the changing pattern of Russian exercises and military modernization over time, it is impossible to understand how the New Cold War travelled northwards without also studying the interaction effects unfolding between the parties in this region. The character of relations is determined not solely by the foreign policy of one state, but by the combination of the foreign policies of several states. Drawing on our study of Russian and Norwegian official statements and policies toward each other in the years 2012–2016, we will outline three interaction effects that need to be taken into consideration in explaining why the tense relations following the conflict in Ukraine spread to the low-tension Northern theater.¹ We start with these observations of reciprocity and action-reaction dynamics because we believe that this aspect has been neglected in the current debate.

Further, we develop this argument by discussing how the pursuit of domestic policy agendas and practices of decision-making have contributed to increased tensions in the North. On both sides, the new military posturing in the North, now interpreted as part of a growing conflict, is in fact largely a side-effect of implementing longstanding national goals. For Norway, the drivers of escalation are also to be found far outside the bounds of this small state, in particular in the policies and relations of its closest ally, the USA. Although Russia, as a great power in itself, cannot be said to be in an equivalent relation of dependency on external powers, its aspirations to revive and defend its status ensure emulation of great-power posturing.

Contamination through interaction

If one takes the wording of Russian and Norwegian official statements at face value (see the aforementioned policy brief and article), the driver of deterioration stems from interpretations of what the other party is, does, and wants to achieve in the Arctic. Both parties then legitimize their own shift to a more security-oriented policy with reference to moves made by the other side. Already in 2012, Moscow indirectly identified Norway as part of “US militarization,” highlighting NATO’s increasing efforts to get involved in the Arctic; and from mid-2012, Oslo has re-emphasized Russia as a threat to liberal values. Norway’s longstanding and continuing efforts to bring NATO to the North implicitly acknowledge the idea of Russia as a potential threat. Given these brewing suspicions on both sides, even before 2014, it is not surprising that a negative pattern of interaction could ensue. Here we outline three broad points as to how interaction works and how the fault-lines over Ukraine were exported to the North.

First, in bilateral relations, policies pursued by one state are affected by the actions of the other party. Russian actions in Ukraine, in particular the annexation of Crimea, played into representations of Russia as a potential threat as seen from Norway, making the establishment of a stronger NATO footprint in the North appear a logical policy priority. In turn, such moves on the Norwegian side played into Russia’s already clearly articulated fears, spurring Moscow to step up what it has presented as defensive military activities in the Arctic. Pointing out this negative spiral effect may seem almost banal from an analytical perspective—but it is politically controversial in the current public Norwegian debate on Russia because it is mistaken as an attempt to apportion guilt among the parties. What we wish to highlight here is that it does matter how Western states relate to Russia, and vice versa. With the current official representations of each other as a potential threat in the Arctic, moves to strengthen the defense of one side will appear offensive from the other side, pushing the spiral upward and drawing attention to security issues at the expense of other issue-areas.

Second, when two parties view and represent each other as hostile and threatening in one theater (say, Ukraine), this representation will not be isolated from how they view each other and relate to each other in other theaters (say, the Arctic). Reviewing the changing patterns of Norwegian official discourse as a whole, we find Russia’s actions in Ukraine cited as the fundamental historical turning-point. Nearly every speech begins with a reference to these actions—and such framing cannot fail to affect how Norway views Russia in the North. Representations of Russia as an actor in Ukraine quickly found resonance in representations of Russia as an actor in the North. There has been a massive spillover from interpretations of Russian actions in Ukraine to Norwegian framings and policies on Russia in the North. A parallel on the Russian side is how Norway’s rapid and unconditional accession to the Western sanctions regime in response to the annexation of Crimea affected Russia’s framings of Norway in the North. There is also a highly practical link between the two theaters. The rapid movement of Russia’s armed forces in Ukraine immediately affected Norwegian military planning, as Norway decided it was essential to be capable of such rapid response in the North.

Third, when two parties increasingly view each other as threatening, new and sometimes unrelated events may get framed as springing from the general hostility of the other, as part of the same chain of hostile actions. Initially, Norway stated that Russia was not a direct threat; it also registered that there was no increase in Russian military activity in the North. But then a connection was made between heightened Russian military activity in the Baltic Sea and Russian military modernization in the Arctic—and then the latter no longer looked like “normalization.” In the Russian view, sanctions, large-scale military exercises in the North, and the rotational stationing of US Marines at Værnes in mid-Norway, are similarly interlinked. The exact size of the forces at Værnes is less important here—these events are seen as

1. For full references to the documents we refer to in the following discussion, see Julie Wilhelmsen and Kristian Lundby Gjerde (2018) “Norway and Russia in the Arctic: New Cold War Contamination?”, forthcoming in *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, vol. 9.

connected to a hostile US agenda directed against Russia, and include militarizing the Arctic. And each new step taken by the other is simply hitched on to the previous “offensive” step, increasing the perceived magnitude of the threat and necessitating further response. Tellingly, when Norway announced, on June 12, 2018, that it would increase the number of US marines in Norway from 330 to 700, stationing half of them further north in Indre Troms, this was followed the next day by the Russian announcement of yet another snap military exercise involving 36 of its warships close to the Norwegian border in the North—with both Norway and Russia likely to interpret their counterpart’s actions as further confirming the necessity of their own build-up and signaling of ability to defend. The announcement that Russia would be testing missiles in the Norwegian Sea in November 2018, simultaneously with the NATO Trident Juncture exercise and immediately following the arrival of the US aircraft carrier Harry S Truman in the same waters, is another illustration of such escalatory interaction.

Domestic politics as a source of contamination

The interaction dynamics outlined above go a long way in explaining how the New Cold War travelled northward. Still, before concluding, let us take one step back, and examine how the pursuit of longstanding national policy agendas as well the domestic organization of foreign policymaking may create additional, probably unintended, conditions for rising tensions.

After the 2008 war in Georgia, Russia seriously embarked on its longstanding but unrealized goal of modernizing its armed forces. Russia is the largest Arctic power; and securing sovereignty and economic interests in this area, also by building up military capabilities, was an ambition that finally could be realized from the early 2000s onward, with the beginning economic revival and rising oil-prices at the time. On the Norwegian side, the lack of proper territorial defense or prioritization of capabilities suitable for out-of-area operations had long been a concern, at least in some circles within the defense establishment. From 2008 onward, there had been explicit lobbying to get NATO’s attention turned to the North. Thus, for both sides, increasing their defense capabilities in the North had been part of a national “normalization” agenda which did not necessarily have much to do with the other side constituting a “threat.”

The re-emergence, with full weight, of the “Russian threat” (as seen in the West) and the “Western threat” (as seen in Russia) after the annexation of Crimea provided these agendas and their proponents with weighty arguments. In the domestic debates and tugs of war for resources, these “new threats” were used to push for realization of longstanding policy agendas—although these processes have taken different forms in Norway and in Russia, given their different political systems. In Norway, securing national defense gained prominence, and the ministry which deals with these questions became more vocal on Russia from 2014 onward.

Our analysis of texts shows that in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which manages a wide range of bilateral issue-areas as well as much of the longstanding close collaboration with Russia on such issues, security issues took center stage in the years immediately following the crises in Ukraine, (temporarily) overshadowing the importance of bilateral partnership issues.

In Russia, there has been a steady increase of the siloviki (security-oriented actors) at the top political level, as evidenced in 2011 when Finance Minister Aleksei Kudrin left office, partly in protest against rising military expenditures. In the immediate aftermath of the eruption of the crises in Ukraine, the arguments of the hawks in the Russian government did not become any less relevant: these actors could simply point to what they presented as an ensuing NATO build-up in Eastern Europe. In addition, the consensus in the Duma elected in 2016 has rested largely on the idea of the need to withstand “NATO/US aggression.”² The recent prominence of the hawks in the Russian government and of law enforcement agencies means that there have been fewer restraints on carrying out and prioritizing Moscow’s security agenda in the North.

In Russia, the tight state control of the major media and the instrumental use of these outlets to push the government agenda, as well as the fairly consistent hardliner communication through representatives of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, nurtures the “national unity” long sought by the Kremlin leadership. In Norway, the political system ensures institutionalized division of political power as well as an open media space where diverse opinions can be articulated. Nevertheless, the tradition of foreign policy consensus, and the stress on the importance of a consensus for such a small country, have at times served to limit the debate on Norway’s strategic choices. References to the “culture of consensus” are still frequent; indeed the necessity of consensus is emphasized even more today, given the growing perception of Russia as a threat, uncertainties about US commitment to NATO, and sharper political fault-lines in Europe.

Although pursuing longstanding national goals and ensuring domestic consensus and unity on security and foreign policy might seem rational from a national point of view, we hold that the combination of these two strategies has contributed to shifting the New Cold War further northward. Security-oriented actors on each side seem to be playing to the other’s agenda, fueling perceptions of mutual threat while marginalizing less security-oriented actors and agendas. Moreover, the principle of maintaining “one voice” on issues of foreign policy—particularly when this voice, as our study of texts reveals, calls for united strength to withstand the outer threat—leaves few openings for compromise and flexibility to the opposing party. This poses a real dilemma if the intention on both sides is actually to de-escalate.

2. Julie Wilhelmsen and Jakub Godzimirski (2017) “NATO and Russia: spiral of distrust,” in Karsten Friis (ed.) *NATO and Collective Defence in the 21st Century*, Routledge Focus.

Conclusions

The “New Cold War” travelled northward from Ukraine through the interactive dynamics that ensues when two parties increasingly view each other as threats, interpreting new moves by the other as part of a (potentially) offensive plan. In addition, both Norway and Russia are involved in implementing longstanding goals of building up their territorial defense in the North. These agendas seemed fairly unproblematic at a time when Norway and Russia viewed each other as primarily collaborative partners in this region. However, it was only to be expected that they would contribute to escalation when the primary view of the other became that of a threat.

Within official Russian and Norwegian representations in the period 2012–2016 our study has found a potential for a return to views that could make policies of collaboration, or at least tighter diplomatic contact, logical and reasonable once more. However, with the (re)turn of Russian images of Norway as NATO in the North, and Norwegian images of Russia as a power willing and able to use force, combined with a surging wave of practical defense measures that seem to confirm these mutual subjective understandings, this region now looks less like a collaborative space for the coming years.

Policy recommendations

- Policy planning should be based on a comprehensive analysis of events. To understand—and avoid—the types of interaction that drive escalation, such an analysis needs to include political statements and policies on both sides, across issue-areas and over a longer period.
- In policy planning, the need for a stronger territorial defense should be seen in connection with how such steps may be perceived by the other side. Official statements by the other party should be taken seriously. Although such statements can be understood as strategic communication, they usually say something about how the other party sees the situation and what kind of policies it intends to pursue.
- Given that mis-representation and mis-perception are at the core of escalation, direct contact and communication between the parties needs to be stepped up in periods of increasing tension. Direct contact in a closed format can be particularly valuable. If communication takes place only through public channels, the risk of mis-communication increases. Political statements aimed at the home audience or one’s allies can send the wrong signal to the other side, resulting in increased tensions.
- In Norway, the domestic debate on foreign and security policy must be opened up. The argument that Russia would misuse such a diverse debate should not be used to stifle debate—policies are sounder and unity stronger when they are based on open and informed discussions. Such a strategy would be in line with the values to which both Norway and NATO aspire—and would also send encouraging signals to those on the Russian side who seek de-escalation.

