

Introductory Words

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The Northern Research Forum (NRF) starts its 5th Open Assembly in the International Polar Day “People at the Poles” by discussing Northern issues with an emphasis on the interrelations between the circumpolar North and the rest of the globe as well as changes in the North due to new kinds of interrelations – “Seeking a balance in a Changing North”. Discussions in the plenary sessions as well as in the roundtable and project sessions of the 5th NRF are expected on one hand, to concentrate on key factors and dynamics indicating changes in the North and northern geopolitics and economics, and on the other hand, to highlight in particular the role of research and the social relevance of science, and the interplay between politics and science.

Geopolitical changes in the North

The transformation from the confrontation of the Cold War period into a wide international cooperation in the 1990s was the first significant change in circumpolar geopolitics and international relations. It meant on one hand, increased stability and decreased military tension, and, on the other a new institutional landscape based on an international, mostly multilateral, cooperation among new international actors from inside the region in and for the circumpolar North with regionalism and region-building, devolution of power and the intentional “mobilization” of non-state actors in policy formation. An important part of this is a growing international scientific and educational cooperation, one of its most interesting outcomes being the NRF.

The North of the early-21st century is not isolated but closely integrated into the current world of globalization and a part of the international system. Just recently, there has been a growing world wide, even global, economic and political interest toward the northernmost regions of the globe, particularly due to the estimated fossils in the shelves of the northern seas and visions of new trans-arctic sea routes. Consequently, a significant and rapid environmental, geo-economic and geopolitical change is occurring in the circumpolar North, and the strategic importance of the North is growing and moving higher on the agenda in geopolitics and economics in many northern states and major powers outside the region.

All this might have several consequences, such as northern areas becoming a target area for the growing economic, political and military interests of central governments of the arctic states as well as of major powers outside the region and trans-national companies. This raises a number of questions, e.g. whether the governments of the arctic states are ready for a thorough discussion on relevant issues in the context of institutionalized international cooperation, such as the Arctic Council and the United Nations. Or will there be more traditional responses and solutions, such as increased emphasis on national defence in Northern regions? Or, will further cooperation take place in a bilateral context, or in the context of different *ad-hoc* coalitions, such as the meeting of the five littoral states of the Arctic Ocean?

Here it is important to encourage the Arctic states and the EU “to work together on an agenda for issues of Arctic and northern interests, and to promote it on a global level in cooperation with international organizations and forums, which are taking a growing interest in Arctic issues of global importance”, as said in the Conference Statement of the 8th Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region in August 2008, in Fairbanks. One of the timely and critical issues is how to strengthen relations between regional organizations, particularly the Arctic Council, and global / world-wide organisations, particularly the United Nations.

The resource and technology models of geopolitics, two models of classical geopolitics, are still valid and relevant in the North in the early-21st century for a description and discussion concerning the strategic, political, economic and environmental situation of a geographical region, and the importance of natural (energy) resources. These models are not, however, sufficient as the geopolitical picture has become more complex and multi-functional, and therefore new theories, theoretical concepts and new approaches are needed.

In the manifold growth in its geo-strategic importance, which the circumpolar North has recently witnessed, first, we can find continuity of how “space” has been utilized and treated as “non-political” in classical geopolitics; second, new geopolitics emphasize indigenous peoples as (international) actors and the importance of identity/ies; and third, critical geopolitics have another approach of “politicization” of space, which can be seen for example in external and internal images of the Arctic.

Key indicators and factors

Followed from this, when trying to describe and analyse the current multi-functional geopolitical change in, and growing global interest toward the North one method is to find and define factors and dynamics that indicate change. Consequently, there are many precise factors and dynamics which can be interpreted to be indicative of changes in northern geopolitics, such as national security, utilization of natural resources, energy security, technology, education and science, and climate change.

Indeed, climate change is, in addition to its multi-functional impacts, either real physical and societal impacts or non-physical and more psychological ones, both one of the newest significant factors *per se* in changing northern geopolitics through bringing uncertainty into societies, politics and governance, and an influence on other key factors. Further, it deals with a “risk society”, which is largely based on faith in technology, and thus has a strong social relevance.

The North might act as a special kind of case study in geopolitics when analysing the influence(s) of climate change in the current geopolitics of the North. Instead of either the same type of determinism of classical geopolitics or the neglect of human influence, there is the interpretation that geopolitics is about space(s) and resources, technology, politics and power as well phenomena which deal with traditional power such as culture(s), identity(ies), knowledge and the fact that there are several actors in politics. Further, to implement the approach of “politicization” of space by geopolitics, knowledge and power are used when defining impacts of climate change to mean ‘uncertainty’ in the North. Therefore, it is imperative to find the interface between knowledge, science and politics when facing multi-functional challenges and societal problems.

Finally, as a result of these developments, there is a growing and obvious need for fundamental and policy-oriented discussions, negotiations on the issues and challenges, and consequently, an appropriate platform for such activity, one of the most important reasons for a forum such as the 5th NRF.

Aims of the NRF

Although a substance such as presented above is the primary focus here, the structure and the way in which the agenda has been set is important. We have put significant efforts into being innovative and launching a new kind of structural design and stage-building and into encouraging others to attend and develop these structures further. Consequently, the main mission of the NRF is “to provide a platform for an effective dialogue among members of the research community and a wide range of stakeholders to (a) facilitate research relevant to issues on the contemporary Northern agenda and (b) engage researchers, the policy community and other stakeholders to discuss, assess and report on research results and application.”

We have been successful when it comes to the main aim of the NRF, i.e. the interplay between politics and science. It has become a more interesting and relevant point of view, and been copied and applied by several actors in many forums; application is the key to innovation, and through synergy it is possible to benefit others' contributions, but copying without synergy and acknowledgement is merely theft. Additionally there are other goals which the NRF would like to strive for, such as the following:

First, “Dialogue-building”, i.e. to facilitate and promote open, free and democratic discussions on relevant (northern and global) issues, and “Stage-building”, i.e. to build new and wider platforms for the global age;

Second, dialogue as a method for “real-world problem-solving” and the cultivation of a good atmosphere for confidence-building, i.e. to promote everyday policy-making, foreign-policy and diplomacy;

Third, to cross sectoral and other borders of our modern cultural, political, legal and administrative system in one society and the whole (global) international community, i.e. to promote scientific discourse and political discussion on the local, regional, national, international and global level(s). Currently, societies need experts with strong social-relevance more than ever, they are in a better position to understand new inter-relations and produce knowledge;

Fourth, to understand that science is more than labs - it's the people, it's the environment, other environments (e.g. field-trips, meeting places such as cafés) and combinations and settings (e.g. meetings and festivals of thinkers, and the NRF Open Assembly). Consequently, to implement the social relevance of science is a crucial part of the agenda, and this is achieved by emphasizing the importance of the interplay between politics and science, and civil society and business, and by promoting the use of science and research findings in political decision-making. Underlying is the fact that science plays an important role in a society but is not utilized to its fullest potential - thus there is scope for socially relevant and motivated research;

Fifth, to bring together different knowledge(s) and expertise from different fields as well as researchers, both young and senior, from different disciplines, and thus become (or create) an epistemic community without meritocracy. To build and promote human capital for a new kind of leadership. However, even in an epistemic community a researcher has her/his own role whose journey towards expertise is different from that of others. Here the art lies in maintaining scientific legitimacy and a balance between science, politics and economics (in a society);

Sixth, to generalize, concretize, emphasize, underline and question relevant issues on one hand, through the Position Papers as substantial background to discussions. For the 5th NRF there are 20 such papers which hopefully have been read and studied, and will be commented on and applied by the participants. On the other hand, there are five NRF theme project groups with the aim of making policy- and issue-oriented substantial reports, analyses and syntheses.

The idea of creating ad hoc groups of experts to build and develop expertise on relevant northern fields and global themes such as legal issues, economics, energy, transportation and climate change originated from President Grimsson. The groups' initial tasks are the following: 1) to promote the preparation and feed discussions in the NRF open assemblies; 2) to recruit potential PP authors on the themes of, and potential panellists for, NRF Open Assemblies; and 3) to prepare policy-oriented reports on relevant and acute (Northern and/or global) issues.

Here the expertise consists of a combination of experts from academia, politics, administration, business and civil society; and hence, these groups can be interpreted as being an epistemic community in their field. Together with the NRF Network of Experts based on Young Researchers these groups may also be a foundation for a more comprehensive NRF network of experts on northern issues and research;

Finally, the aim is to serve as a multi-functional and interdisciplinary platform and workshop, without academic departments, for young researchers (and young policy-makers). To support them by providing a platform and assigning to them responsibilities and duties. This is no more a radical move than was the creation of the modern “Humboldtian” university where teaching and research is fused in new ways, but more a necessity as new and important issues cannot be addressed by traditional academic ways, or “by working within the confines of traditional academic departments”.

Followed from this, when evaluating the NRF Young Researchers - 22 of them here and about 90 altogether - it is taken into consideration that a) there is a valid scientific quality in the academic field(s) or discipline(s) of an applicant; b) the theme of an applicant fits well both with the main themes of the NRF Open Assembly; and c) that the social relevance of science, the near society and the global, will be applied in the presentation.

All this is to build and promote both human and social capital, and to cluster talented people (but not necessarily build a creative class), not in an actual built place (indicating physical space) but more as a creative distillation of ideas. As a result, the loose NRF Network of Experts based on YR is our most important human capital.

All in all, the NRF has already achieved several of these goals whereas some of them still remain as rhetorical aims or wishes. The critical issue here is that we are ambitious and capable enough to reach them. There is no historical necessity in anything, but there is, however, a chance to do something good!