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The Svalbard Archipelago as an Object of Geopolitical Competition in the Arctic. On the Treaty's Centenary

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Abstract. The study is devoted to analyzing the current geopolitical dynamics surrounding the Svalbard archipelago in the context of the centennial anniversary of the 1925 Svalbard Treaty. The paper examines the key trends in the transformation of the archipelago's legal, political, and strategic status amid the profound reshaping of the Arctic's international environment. Based on an analysis of official documents, expert assessments and practical steps taken by key participating states, the paper identifies growing contradictions between Norway, which seeks to consolidate national control and expand its sovereign powers, and Russia, which aims to maintain its historically established presence and safeguard its economic and scientific interests. Special attention is given to the processes of regional militarization under the framework of NATO expansion, the suspension of the Arctic Council's activities, and the intensifying competition among leading Arctic powers. Special emphasis is placed on the role of China as a new near-Arctic actor expanding its research footprint on Svalbard as part of a wider polar strategy. It is demonstrated that Svalbard is gradually losing its status as a zone of peaceful cooperation, transforming into an arena of strategic competition where the interests of Norway, Russia, China and the NATO alliance intersect. The paper further outlines Russia's adaptive measures aimed at preserving its influence through diversification of the Arcticugol enterprise, development of tourism projects, creation of an international research hub in Pyramiden, and cooperation with the BRICS+ countries. The conclusion emphasizes that there is a need for a comprehensive update of Russia's Arctic strategy, aimed at protecting national interests and strengthening its scientific, economic and humanitarian presence amid growing geopolitical pressure from Western states.

Keywords: *Svalbard, geopolitics, Arctic, Svalbard Treaty, Russian presence, militarization, NATO, international law, fisheries zone, continental shelf*

Introduction

August 2025 marked the centenary of the entry into force of the Svalbard Treaty¹, which formed the basis of the archipelago's current legal regime. The treaty was signed in Paris on February 9, 1920, by the United States, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Japan, Norway, the Netherlands,

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¹ Svalbard Treaty. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_contracts/international_contracts/multilateral_contract/51519/ (accessed 19 October 2025).

and Sweden, and entered into force on August 14, 1920, following its ratification by the Norwegian Parliament. The USSR acceded to the treaty on May 7, 1935.

Against the backdrop of a radically changed geopolitical situation in the Arctic region, this anniversary takes on particular significance, as it coincides with a period of acute international confrontation and a re-evaluation of established principles of Arctic cooperation. The Russian Federation, as one of the key Arctic powers and a party to the Treaty since 1935, faces serious challenges in maintaining its positions in the Svalbard archipelago.

The current situation is characterized by a qualitatively new level of geopolitical tension in the Arctic. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO in 2023–2024 has fundamentally altered the military-strategic balance in the northern latitudes. The suspension of the Arctic Council's activities in March 2022 brought to an end the era of "Arctic exceptionalism" (Bennett, Dodds, 2025) and peaceful cooperation in the region. In these circumstances, the Svalbard archipelago, located at a strategic point between Greenland, mainland Norway, and the Russian coast, has acquired critical importance for ensuring the national security of the leading Arctic powers.

Currently, Norway, which exercises sovereignty over the archipelago, is taking a number of active steps to strengthen national control and effectively revise the international nature of the 1920 Treaty. The new White Paper on Svalbard², presented by the Norwegian government in 2024, contains a number of measures aimed at limiting the activities of other states and strengthening Norway's presence³. At the same time, a gradual militarization of the archipelago is underway, despite the direct prohibitions of Article 9 of the Svalbard Treaty.

Russia, in turn, seeks to maintain and strengthen its presence on the archipelago through diversifying the activities of the state-owned company Arktikugol, developing tourism, and establishing an international scientific center in Pyramiden. Cooperation with BRICS+ countries and friendly states plays a special role in Russia's strategy, helping to offset the restrictions imposed by Western countries following the start of the special military operation.

China has also intensified its activities on Svalbard, expanding its research program and sending a record number of icebreakers to the Arctic region in 2024. Beijing views the archipelago as an important element of its Arctic strategy and a means of legitimizing its status as an Arctic state.

Main positions of Russian and foreign scientists on issues relating to the Svalbard archipelago

The academic discourse on Svalbard over the past five years has revealed significant differences in the approaches taken by Russian and foreign researchers to interpreting the archipelago's legal status and its role in Arctic security.

² Svalbard. Meld. St. 26 (2023–2024) Report to the Storting (white paper). Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security. 31.05.2024. URL: <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/f8407df1f6a641fbae2ca00f4509a64e/en-gb/pdfs/stm202320240026000engpdfs.pdf> (accessed 19 October 2025).

³ Middleton A., Sovereignty, Governance, and Infrastructure: Analysis of Svalbard's White Paper 2023-2024. URL: <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/sovereignty-governance-and-infrastructure-analysis-svalbards-white-paper-2023-2024> (accessed 19 October 2025).

Russian scientists V.P. Zhuravel and D.S. Timoshenko (Zhuravel, Timoshenko, 2022), A.A. Todorov (Todorov, 2020), and S.N. Grinyaev (Grinyaev, 2025) consistently defend the principle of equality enshrined in the 1920 Treaty. V.P. Zhuravel and D.S. Timoshenko argue that Russia's presence is motivated by strategic interests and the protection of historical rights. A.A. Todorov points to violations of the archipelago's demilitarized status through Norway's unilateral actions. S. N. Grinyaev takes a critical view of Norway's new Arctic strategy, emphasizing the increasing pressure on Russian positions and the strengthening of NATO's military presence.

Western researchers offer a different perspective. A. Østhagen (Østhagen, 2024), in his work "The Myths of Svalbard Geopolitics", criticizes common misconceptions, emphasizing the indisputability of Norwegian sovereignty. A. Moe and A.-K. Jørgensen (Moe, Jørgensen, 2025) conclude that Russia's policy of maintaining a presence is not strategic and is aimed at preserving a minimal presence within financial constraints. T. Henriksen (Henriksen, 2024) examines the 2023 Norwegian Supreme Court decision, which confirmed that the Treaty does not apply beyond the 12-mile zone.

S. Paukkunen and J. Black (Paukkunen, Black, 2024) analyze Russia's attempts to use the Arctic Council as a tool of pressure following its invasion of Ukraine. T. Branka (Branka, 2022) demonstrates the transformation of Arctic cooperation as a result of Russian aggression.

Thus, the academic literature reveals a deep division: Russian scientists insist on defending the principle of equal rights and criticize Norwegian policy, while Western researchers emphasize the legitimacy of Norwegian sovereignty.

Geopolitical and geostrategic situation in the Arctic region on the centenary of the entry into force of the Svalbard Treaty

The centenary of the Svalbard Treaty coincides with a period of fundamental transformation of the international legal foundations of Arctic cooperation. Signed on February 9, 1920, and entered into force on August 14, 1925, the Treaty created a unique legal framework granting Norway sovereignty over the archipelago while maintaining equal rights for all contracting parties to economic activity⁴. By 2025, 46 states had become parties to the Treaty, making it one of the most representative international agreements in the Arctic.

However, the modern interpretation of the Treaty's provisions differs significantly from the original intentions of its creators. The adoption of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea⁵ led to the emergence of new legal concepts, including 200-mile exclusive economic zones and expanded rights of coastal states over the continental shelf. These changes have created legal uncertainty regarding the applicability of the Treaty's principles to the maritime spaces around the archipelago.

⁴ About Svalbard and around it. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. URL: https://mid.ru/ru/about/social_organizations/association/1428089/ (accessed 19 October 2025).

⁵ United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1982. Montego Bay: UN. 1982.

Particularly acute disputes have arisen over the fisheries protection zone established by Norway in 1977⁶. Russia has consistently contested Norway's right to unilaterally establish jurisdiction in these waters, insisting that fisheries management should be carried out on a bilateral basis or through international organizations. Between 1998 and 2011, there were several serious incidents between Russian fishing vessels and the Norwegian Coast Guard, which could have escalated into diplomatic crises⁷.

The geostrategic significance of the Svalbard archipelago has increased dramatically with the changing military-political balance in the Arctic. The archipelago, situated approximately 990 km from the main base of Russia's Northern Fleet in Severomorsk, is an important facility for monitoring the transit routes of Russian submarines to the Atlantic. In case of a large-scale conflict between Russia and NATO, control of Svalbard could enable the Alliance to block the passage of Russian strategic submarines through the strait between the archipelago and the northern tip of Norway.

The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO in 2023–2024 has fundamentally changed the strategic context. Seven of the eight Arctic states are now members of the North Atlantic Alliance, creating a situation of virtually complete encirclement for Russia in the northern latitudes. The large-scale NATO exercises, including Nordic Response 2024⁸, involving 20,000 military personnel, demonstrate the Alliance's growing focus on the Arctic theatre of operations.

China also views Svalbard through the prism of its strategic interests in the Arctic. The deployment of three Chinese icebreakers to Arctic waters in 2024, including the flagship *Xue Long 2*⁹, testifies to Beijing's growing ambitions in the region. China's presence on the archipelago through the Huanghe research station in Ny-Ålesund and plans to expand scientific activities are causing concern for both Norway and its NATO allies.

Along with geopolitical and military-strategic factors, climate change in the Arctic is playing a significant role in the transformation of the situation around Svalbard, creating new economic opportunities while simultaneously intensifying geopolitical competition. The Svalbard archipelago, where average annual temperatures are rising several times faster than the global average, is becoming more accessible to various types of economic activity. This situation opens new prospects for mineral extraction, tourism, and shipping, creating the ground for international disputes over resource rights.

In 2024, Norway opened up sections of the continental shelf to industrial seabed mining (Grinyaev, 2025), approximately a third of which overlaps with the area around Svalbard. This decision was criticized by the EU and environmental organizations, and created new legal precedents

⁶ Groenning R. The Norwegian Svalbard Policy — Respected or Contested? 22.11.2017. URL: <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/norwegian-svalbard-policy-respected-contested/> (accessed 19 October 2025).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Nordic Response 2024. Norwegian Armed Forces. 20.12.2024. URL: <https://www.forsvaret.no/en/exercises-and-operations/exercises/nr24> (accessed 19 October 2025).

⁹ MV Xue Long 2. URL: https://alphapedia.ru/w/MV_Xue_Long_2 (accessed 19 October 2025).

that could influence the interpretation of the Svalbard Treaty¹⁰. Russia expressed concern that Norway's unilateral actions violate the principle of equal access enshrined in the Treaty.

The tourism industry is also becoming a subject of geopolitical competition (Zhuravel, Timoshenko, 2022). Russia, through the company Arktikugol, is developing tourist routes that include "nostalgic tourism" using Soviet symbols. However, the raising of Soviet flags in Barentsburg and Pyramiden in 2024 is not only a tourist attraction, but also a means of demonstrating Russia's presence.

The role of the Svalbard archipelago in the new geopolitical context

The Svalbard archipelago has historically been a symbol of successful international cooperation in the Arctic; however, in the new geopolitical context, it is becoming an arena of intense confrontation. The concept of "Arctic exceptionalism", under which the region remained relatively isolated from global conflicts, was finally shattered following the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine (Paukkunen, Black, 2024; Branka, 2022).

The suspension of the Arctic Council's activities in March 2022 marked a turning point in the history of Arctic cooperation (Gricius, Fitz, 2022). The seven Western Arctic states decided to temporarily suspend Russia's participation in the organization's work, which affected 128 scientific and environmental cooperation projects. Although an attempt was made in June 2022 to partially resume activities without Russia's participation, the Council's full functioning remains in question.

In these circumstances, Svalbard takes on particular significance as one of the few remaining formats for Russian-Western cooperation in the Arctic. The 1920 Treaty obliges Norway to ensure equal rights for all contracting parties, creating a legal basis for maintaining Russia's presence even under the pressure of sanctions. However, in practice, Norway is taking an increasing number of measures to restrict Russian activities under the pretext of environmental requirements and security concerns¹¹.

Thus, despite the explicit prohibition of military fortifications and bases in Article 9 of the Svalbard Treaty, the archipelago is gradually being drawn into the process of the militarization of the Arctic. Norway officially denies accusations of militarization¹², but the regular presence of coast guard and naval vessels on the archipelago raises legitimate questions about compliance with international obligations.

¹⁰ Leading Scientists Urge Moratorium on Deep-Sea Mining: Explore Recycling and Terrestrial Resources First. EASAC. 08.06.2023. URL: <https://easac.eu/news/details/deep-sea-mining-press-release> (accessed 19 October 2025).

¹¹ Lokeren F.V. What a militarized Svalbard would mean for Russia. *Naval News*. 17.04.2025. URL: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/04/what-a-militarized-svalbard-would-mean-for-russia/> (accessed 19 October 2025).

¹² Norway denies Russian accusation of militarising Svalbard Arctic islands. *Reuters*. 14.03.2025. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-accuses-norway-militarising-svalbard-arctic-islands-2025-03-14/> (accessed 19 October 2025).

Russia has repeatedly protested against Norway's use of the KSAT satellite station on Platåberget near Longyearbyen for purposes that may have military applications¹³. Russia claims that the data collected by the station could be used by NATO for reconnaissance purposes, which contradicts the archipelago's demilitarized status. Norway denies that the station is used for military purposes, but refuses to provide detailed information on the nature of the data collected.

Particular concern is caused by the possibility of NATO air and missile defense systems being deployed on the archipelago. Svalbard's strategic location makes it an attractive site for radar stations and missile systems that could monitor vast areas of the Barents Sea and the routes of Russian strategic submarines.

Given the limited opportunities for official diplomatic interaction, scientific cooperation on Svalbard is particularly important as a tool of "soft power". Russia is actively developing the concept of an International Arctic Research Center in Pyramiden, which is intended to become an alternative to the Western-oriented scientific community in Ny-Ålesund¹⁴.

The planned scientific center in Pyramiden is focused on cooperation with BRICS+ countries and friendly states, including China, Brazil, India, Turkey, and Thailand. This will enable Russia to establish a parallel system of scientific cooperation in the Arctic, independent of Western institutions. The signing of an agreement between MGIMO (Moscow State Institute of International Relations) and Arktikugol in 2024 demonstrates the seriousness of Russia's plans to develop its scientific presence on the archipelago¹⁵.

China regards its scientific presence on Svalbard as a means of legitimizing its status in the Arctic. The Huanghe station in Ny-Ålesund has been operating since 2004, but in 2024, Chinese representatives visited Russia's Barentsburg for the first time to discuss possible cooperation. This signals Beijing's willingness to diversify its Arctic partnerships amid growing pressure from Western countries.

Steps taken by key players to review the status of the archipelago

In recent years, Norway has significantly intensified its efforts to strengthen its sovereignty over the Svalbard archipelago, seeking to revise the international nature of the 1920 Treaty. The new White Paper on Svalbard, presented in 2024, contains a set of measures aimed at strengthening "national control" over the archipelago. The introduction of controls on personal data and the movement of goods in 2022 was the first practical step in this direction¹⁶.

¹³ Jonassen T. Russia Accuses Norway of Increased Military Presence on Svalbard. HNN. 07.10.2022. URL: <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russia-accuses-norway-increased-military-presence-svalbard> (accessed 19 October 2025).

¹⁴ "Pyramiden is the Pearl of Svalbard" Ildar Neverov, CEO of Arktikugol, on international cooperation and tourism development in the Arctic. URL: <https://iz.ru/1529650/video/neverov-o-mezhdunarodnom-sotrudnichestve-i-razvitiiturizma-v-arktike> (accessed 19 October 2025).

¹⁵ MGIMO and Arktikugol begin cooperation. URL: <https://mgimo.ru/about/news/main/arcticugol/> (accessed 19 October 2025).

¹⁶ Norwegian Customs in Svalbard. *Tolletaten*. 25.11.2024. URL: <https://www.toll.no/en/corporate/import/norwegian-customs-in-svalbard> (accessed 19 October 2025).

The decision to introduce a tourist tax for visitors to Longyearbyen, which will be used to develop infrastructure and public services, is particularly significant¹⁷. This sets a precedent for a discriminatory approach towards citizens of different countries, which contradicts the principle of equal rights enshrined in the Treaty. Russia has expressed concern that such measures are aimed at creating financial barriers for Russian citizens.

Norway is also reviewing ownership issues relating to the archipelago's critical infrastructure. The decision to transfer responsibility for Longyearbyen's energy supply from the municipal council to the state-owned company "Store Norske" demonstrates the central government's desire to strengthen control over strategic facilities¹⁸. The allocation of 175 million Norwegian kroner for the energy transition and 42 million Norwegian kroner for strengthening infrastructure demonstrates a willingness to make significant financial investments to achieve this goal¹⁹.

Restrictions on the number of passengers on cruise ships and plans to introduce limits on the total number of vessels in the archipelago's territorial waters also serve to strengthen Norwegian control²⁰. Although these measures are officially justified by environmental concerns, they provide additional tools for selectively regulating various countries' access to the archipelago.

The accession of Finland (April 4, 2023) and Sweden (March 7, 2024) to NATO has fundamentally changed the military-strategic situation in the Arctic. All Scandinavian countries are now members of the alliance, creating a unified military-political bloc in the northern latitudes. This undoubtedly increases pressure on Russia and enhances the strategic importance of Svalbard as a potential location for a NATO military presence.

Conducting large-scale NATO military exercises in the Arctic region has become a regular practice (Todorov, 2020). In particular, the Nordic Response 2024 exercise, involving military personnel from Norway, Sweden, and Finland, demonstrated the Alliance's increased military capabilities in the northern latitudes. Although these exercises did not formally involve Svalbard, their proximity to the archipelago sends a clear sign of NATO's intentions.

The signing of a supplementary agreement on defense cooperation between the US and Norway²¹ expands the US armed forces' access to Norwegian military infrastructure. Although the Svalbard archipelago is not specifically mentioned in the agreement, the growing US military pres-

¹⁷ Norway's tourist tax: New source of revenue for municipalities. *Nordic Marketing*. 29.11.2024. URL: <https://www.nordicmarketing.de/en/blog/norways-tourist-tax-new-source-of-revenue-for-municipalities> (accessed 19 October 2025).

¹⁸ Jonassen T., Norway Wants Greater State Ownership of the Energy Supply on Svalbard. *HNN*. 10.05.2024. URL: <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/norway-wants-greater-state-ownership-energy-supply-svalbard> (accessed 19 October 2025).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Hager J. New Svalbard report: Stronger national control by Norway and fewer ships. *Polar Journal*. 06.06.2024. URL: <https://polarjournal.net/new-svalbard-report-stronger-national-control-by-norway-and-fewer-ships/> (accessed 19 October 2025).

²¹ U.S.-Norway Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement (SDCA). The U.S. Department of State. 20.01.2025. URL: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-norway-supplementary-defense-cooperation-agreement-sdca/> (accessed 19 October 2025).

ence in northern Norway creates the preconditions for a potential expansion of the use of the archipelago's resources for military purposes.

The development of space surveillance and communication systems on the archipelago also raises concerns about compliance with the demilitarized status. The modernization of the KSAT satellite station and plans to develop communications infrastructure could serve both civilian and military purposes (Grinyaev, 2024). The lack of transparency regarding the use of the collected data creates grounds for Russian suspicions of a violation of Article 9 of the Svalbard Treaty.

The new aerial monitoring station in the Ny-Ålesund area of Svalbard, which began operating on October 1, 2025, under the management of the Norwegian Radiation and Nuclear Safety Authority, is a technically advanced instrument for detecting artificial isotopes. Such unilateral actions to strengthen monitoring should undoubtedly be interpreted as a violation of the principle of equal rights enshrined in the Svalbard Treaty, given that the monitoring data is being used for NATO's military and strategic purposes²².

The positions of other Arctic states on the status of Svalbard are largely determined by their relations with Russia and the degree of their integration into Western security institutions. Thus, Iceland, despite its NATO membership, has traditionally pursued a more balanced Arctic policy, seeking to maintain dialogue with all Arctic states. Reykjavík continues to support the concept of peaceful cooperation in the Arctic through the Arctic Circle, a forum serving as an alternative to the suspended Arctic Council.

Denmark, which exercises sovereignty over Greenland, is under increasing pressure from the United States to expand its military presence in the Arctic regions. President Trump's statements regarding the US's intentions to gain control over Greenland are creating further tension in Arctic relations and may influence approaches to the interpretation of international law in the region, including the Svalbard Treaty.

Canada, which has traditionally supported the principles of multilateral cooperation in the Arctic, is now forced to balance its alliance obligations to the United States with its desire to maintain its role as a significant player in the region's geopolitical processes.

Norway's actions to limit international presence on the archipelago

Norway systematically uses administrative and legal mechanisms to restrict the activities of other states on the Svalbard archipelago. The introduction of stricter environmental regulations has become the main means of exerting pressure on Russian enterprises. Arktikugol has repeatedly faced new regulatory requirements that significantly increase the costs of conducting business.

The introduction of controls on personal data and the movement of goods in 2022 created additional barriers for Russian citizens and enterprises. Although these measures are officially justified by national security concerns, in practice they create selective barriers for certain categories

²² Norway opens world's northernmost permanent radiation monitoring. *Arctic Today*. 27.09.2025. URL: <https://www.arctictoday.com/norway-opens-worlds-northernmost-permanent-radiation-monitoring/> (accessed 19 October 2025).

of visitors. Russia regards these actions as an attempt by Norway to circumvent its obligations under international law to ensure equal access to the archipelago.

The refusal to grant permission for direct charter flights for Russian tourists from Moscow or Murmansk demonstrates the use of transport restrictions as a means of exerting pressure. The Norwegian authorities have permitted only one business flight for Arktikugol employees, rejecting plans to develop tourist transportation²³. This decision contradicts the principle of free access enshrined in the Svalbard Treaty.

The introduction of a tourist tax for visitors to Longyearbyen sets a precedent of financial discrimination, which could be used to selectively regulate tourist flows. The revenue from these taxes is planned to be used for infrastructure development, meaning that foreign visitors will finance the strengthening of Norwegian control over the archipelago.

Furthermore, Norway actively uses environmental arguments to justify restrictions on the activities of other states in the archipelago. The creation of new protected natural areas and the tightening of rules regarding visits to these zones disproportionately affect Russian interests, as the main sites of the Russian presence — Barentsburg and Pyramiden — are located in areas of increased environmental sensitivity.

Restrictions on the use of helicopters are particularly pressing for Russian operations. The company Arktikugol has traditionally used helicopters to transport personnel and cargo between Russian settlements, but new environmental requirements prohibit such flights outside narrowly defined zones. This creates serious logistical problems and increases operating costs for Russian companies.

The prohibition on the use of heavy fuel oil by vessels in Svalbard's territorial waters, although dictated by objective environmental considerations, imposes additional costs on Russian logistics. The need to use more expensive diesel fuel increases the cost of delivering cargo to Russian settlements.

Restrictions on the number of passengers on cruise ships and plans to limit the total number of vessels in territorial waters also affect Russian interests in the tourism sector. As Russian tour operators are just beginning to develop maritime routes to Svalbard, such restrictions could block promising development opportunities.

It is also worth noting that Norway is conducting an active information campaign aimed at creating a negative image of Russia's presence on the archipelago. Norwegian media regularly publish reports about the "Russian threat" and "violations" of the Svalbard Treaty, shaping public opinion to strengthen restrictive measures. Particular attention is paid to criticism of Russian symbolic actions, such as raising Soviet flags or holding a Victory Day parade in Barentsburg.

²³ Wiersen S.Å. Får fly fra Russland til Norge. *Dagbladet*. 12.09.2023. URL: <https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/far-fly-fra-russland-til-norge/80187785> (accessed 19 October 2025).

The emphasis on the “Putinization” of the Russian presence and the intensification of “authoritarian tendencies” in Russian settlements serves as a justification for further strengthening Norwegian control over the archipelago.

Criticism of Russia’s plans to establish an international research center in Pyramiden is also systemic. Norwegian officials and experts question the scientific nature of this project, claiming that it may serve geopolitical aims^{24,25}. This creates a pretext for imposing additional restrictions on Russian research activities.

Russia’s actions to strengthen its position on Svalbard

The Russian Federation is pursuing a policy of diversifying its presence on the Svalbard archipelago, seeking to reduce its dependence on coal mining and create a sustainable basis for a long-term presence. In 2024, the state-owned company Arktikugol completed a large-scale modernization of port infrastructure in Barentsburg²⁶, increasing the berth depth to 13 meters and creating the capacity to service several vessels simultaneously.

The development of the tourism sector is becoming one of the key areas of diversification. The Russian side is actively promoting the concept of “nostalgic tourism”, based on the archipelago’s Soviet heritage (Valkova, Shumkov, 2022). The restorations of Soviet symbols, including the slogan “Peace to the World!” over Barentsburg and Pyramiden, as well as the raising of Soviet flags, serve not only as a tourist attraction, but also as a way to demonstrate Russia’s historical rights to a presence on the archipelago.

Particular attention is being paid to developing cruise tourism with direct routes from Russian ports. Although Norwegian authorities have rejected applications for regular tourist cruises from Russia, Arktikugol continues to work on creating alternative routes. The first direct voyage of the vessel “Professor Molchanov” from Murmansk to Barentsburg in 2025 was a symbolic breakthrough in overcoming transport restrictions²⁷.

The modernization of the coal-fired power plant in Barentsburg²⁸ to improve its environmental performance demonstrates Russia’s willingness to meet contemporary environmental requirements. The purchase of the first electric vehicle for use in Barentsburg and plans to expand the use of environmentally friendly transport show an adaptation to Norwegian environmental standards.

²⁴ Solberg K. Vil etablere forskningssenter i «spøkelsesby». *Dagbladet*. 05.02.2024. URL: <https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/vil-etablere-forskningssenter-i-spokelsesby/81335828> (accessed 19 October 2025).

²⁵ Pyramiden — et viktig russisk fotfeste i norsk Arktis. *Dagsavisen*. 02.10.2022. URL: <https://www.dagsavisen.no/nyheter/pyramiden-et-viktig-russisk-fotfeste-i-norsk-arktis/5702348> (accessed 19 October 2025).

²⁶ Arktikugol modernized port infrastructure on Svalbard. URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/19462519> (accessed 19 October 2025).

²⁷ The first visa-free flight carrying tourists departed from Murmansk to Svalbard. Ministry of Information Policy of the Murmansk Oblast. URL: <https://mininform.gov-murman.ru/info/news/547782/> (accessed 19 October 2025).

²⁸ Arktikugol modernized port infrastructure on Svalbard. URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/19462519> (accessed 19 October 2025).

The establishment of the International Arctic Research Center in Pyramiden is an ambitious project aimed at strengthening Russia's position in Arctic research. The project has received the support of Alexey Chekunkov²⁹, Minister of the Russian Federation for the Development of the Far East and Arctic, which demonstrates the government's prioritization of this initiative. The center is expected to attract researchers from BRICS+ countries, including China, Brazil, India, Turkey, and Thailand.

The agreement between MGIMO and Arktikugol will attract leading scientists to work on the archipelago and create sustainable educational programs at several Russian educational institutions (Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov, Murmansk Arctic University, and others). The thematic focus of the center covers a wide range of research areas, including climatology, biology, geology, geophysics, space research, meteorology, ecology and historical and cultural studies. This interdisciplinary approach will maximize the Arctic region's unique potential for scientific research. As part of the Agreement of Mutual Understanding and Cooperation signed between MGIMO and the Arktikugol trust, a public lecture was given by the trust's General Director, I.A. Neverov, entitled "The Svalbard Archipelago: Contemporary Challenges", in March 2024. To address practical and organizational issues, the Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute of Roshydromet has established a special unit — the Russian Scientific Arctic Expedition to the Svalbard Archipelago.

Cooperation with Chinese research institutes is particularly important given the limited contacts with Western scientific centers. The visit of a Chinese delegation to Barentsburg in 2024³⁰ and the agreements reached on joint Arctic projects create an alternative system of scientific cooperation. Planned consultations between Russian and Chinese scientific organizations were scheduled to begin in the autumn of 2025.

Russia actively uses symbolic politics to demonstrate its historical rights and cultural ties to the archipelago. The Victory Day parade in Barentsburg on May 9, 2023³¹, featuring 50 vehicles, snowmobiles, and a low-flying helicopter, was a striking demonstration of Russia's presence. Although the Governor of Svalbard was invited to the event, his refusal to participate highlighted political disagreements.

The restoration and renewal of Soviet symbols in Russian settlements serves several purposes. The restoration of the slogan "Peace to the World!" in large white letters in Pyramiden and in red letters in Barentsburg creates visual markers of Russia's presence, visible from a great dis-

²⁹ Shchetinina A. Svalbard is no longer a coal miner, but a future center of tourism, film production, ship repair, and scientific cooperation. URL: <https://goarctic.ru> (accessed 19 October 2025).

³⁰ A delegation of scientists from China will visit the Russian Scientific Center on Svalbard. URL: <https://www.aari.ru/press-center/news/novosti-aari/delegatsiya-uchenykh-iz-kitaya-posetit-rossiyskiy-nauchnyy-tsentr-na-shpitsbergene> (accessed 19 October 2025).

³¹ The world's northernmost Victory Day parade took place in Svalbard. URL: <https://ria.ru/20230509/parad-1870638708.html> (accessed 19 October 2025).

tance. The raising of Soviet flags on a coal crane in Barentsburg and at the top of Pyramiden in 2024 was a symbolic act of affirmation of Russia's position³².

The installation of a large Orthodox cross in Pyramiden demonstrated Russia's willingness to defend its cultural and religious rights. Although the cross was subsequently moved following the governor's intervention³³, the fact of its installation sent a clear signal about Russia's intentions.

The development of a Russian-language cultural space in Russian settlements includes support for the Russian school in Barentsburg, organization of cultural events, and preservation of the Russian language as the primary means of communication. This creates a stable cultural foundation for Russia's presence and attracts Russian-speaking tourists.

Russia is actively using diplomatic channels to defend its rights over the archipelago and to oppose Norway's restrictive measures. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has repeatedly protested Norway's actions, which are considered violations of the Svalbard Treaty. Accusations against Norway of militarizing the archipelago and violating its demilitarized status have become a regular element of Russia's diplomatic strategy³⁴.

Moscow's proposals to hold consultations on the interpretation of the provisions of the Svalbard Treaty with the participation of all contracting parties are aimed at creating a multilateral dispute resolution mechanism. Russia insists on the need to take into account current international legal realities while maintaining the fundamental principles of equal access and non-discrimination.

The work of the Russian Consulate General in Barentsburg is particularly important given the limited diplomatic contacts with Norway. Today, the Russian consul in Barentsburg not only performs traditional consular functions, but also plays an important role in coordinating Russian policy on the archipelago.

Conclusion

On the centenary of the entry into force of the Svalbard Treaty, the archipelago has transformed from a symbol of peaceful international cooperation into an arena of intense geopolitical confrontation. Fundamental changes in the international system, associated with the end of the era of "Arctic exceptionalism" and the beginning of a new period of great-power rivalry in the Arctic, require a re-evaluation of the archipelago's role and status in contemporary international relations.

³² Vene riigifirma heiskas Teravmägedele Nõukogude Liidu lipu. *Ppostimees*. 02.07.2024. URL: <https://maailm.postimees.ee/8051686/vene-riigifirma-heiskas-teravmagedele-noukogude-liidu-lipu> (accessed 19 October 2025).

³³ Arktikugol announced negotiations to move the cross on Svalbard. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/65321ee79a7947ffddb9f043> (accessed 19 October 2025).

³⁴ The Russian Foreign Ministry expressed concern about the growing militarization of Svalbard. URL: <https://ria.ru/20250314/mid-2004989177.html> (accessed 19 October 2025).

An analysis of the actions of key players reveals a qualitatively new level of geopolitical competition on Svalbard. Norway is pursuing a consistent policy of strengthening national control, using administrative, legal, environmental, and information tools to limit international presence. NATO's expansion through the accession of Finland and Sweden has created new opportunities for the potential militarization of the archipelago, despite the formal prohibitions of the Svalbard Treaty.

The Russian Federation is adapting its strategy to the changed conditions, emphasizing the diversification of its presence and the development of alternative formats for international cooperation. The establishment of an international scientific center in Pyramiden and cooperation with BRICS+ countries demonstrates Russia's ability to find new partners in the face of Western restrictions. Symbolic politics and cultural diplomacy now serve as tools for asserting Russia's historical rights and maintaining a visible presence.

In these circumstances, China is becoming an important player in Arctic geopolitics, using its scientific presence on Svalbard to advance its strategic interests in the region. The intensification of Sino-Russian cooperation in Arctic research is creating an alternative system of international relations, independent of Western institutions.

Meanwhile, legal disputes surrounding the interpretation of the Svalbard Treaty, particularly regarding the application of its provisions to maritime space, remain unresolved and may become more acute with the start of industrial seabed mining. The lack of an international dispute resolution mechanism creates the preconditions for further escalation of these contradictions.

For the Russian Federation, maintaining its position on the Svalbard archipelago is critical in terms of national security and protecting its interests in the Arctic region. The archipelago's strategic location makes it an important element in the system of controlling Arctic maritime routes and ensuring the Northern Fleet's freedom of action. Against a backdrop of increasing pressure from NATO, Russia's presence on Svalbard takes on an additional military-strategic dimension.

The need to respond appropriately to the challenges associated with the revision of the archipelago's status requires Russia to develop a comprehensive long-term strategy. This strategy should include strengthening its legal position through international mechanisms, developing its economic presence by diversifying its activities, expanding scientific cooperation with friendly countries, and maintaining a symbolic presence to demonstrate its historical rights.

The prospects for resolving the disputes surrounding Svalbard depend largely on the overall state of Russian-Western relations and the willingness of the parties to return to the principles of international law and peaceful cooperation. In the context of ongoing geopolitical confrontation, the archipelago is likely to remain an arena of competition, requiring Russia to be prepared for a prolonged period of tension and the need to defend its legitimate interests by all available means.

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