



International Relations and Defence Committee

Corrected oral evidence: The Arctic

Wednesday 24 May 2023

10.30 am

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Members present: Lord Ashton of Hyde (The Chair); Lord Anderson of Swansea; Lord Boateng; Lord Campbell of Pittenweem; Baroness Coussins; Baroness Morris of Bolton; Lord Robertson of Port Ellen; Lord Stirrup; Baroness Sugg; Lord Teverson; Lord Wood of Anfield.

Evidence Session No. 5

Heard in Public

Questions 62 - 71

Witnesses

I: Dr Elana Wilson Rowe, Research Professor, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs; Dr Áslaug Ásgeirsdóttir, Professor of Politics at Bates College, Maine; and NSF-Arctic Scholar at the University of Iceland.

Examination of witnesses

Dr Elana Wilson Rowe and Dr Áslaug Ásgeirsdóttir.

Q62 **The Chair:** Good morning. This is our fifth evidence session and I would like to welcome our two witnesses from Iceland and Norway to help us in our inquiry into the Arctic. Thank you very much for coming. Today, we are focusing on the interests and concerns specifically of Iceland and Norway with regard to the Arctic.

This is a public session. It is streamed live on the Parliament website and a transcript will be taken. We will send you a copy of the transcript to make sure you are happy with what you said when it goes into the official record. Can I also remind members that they should disclose any interests pertinent to the inquiry when they speak? Can I ask the witnesses, in your first answer, to briefly introduce yourselves? That would be very helpful.

I will start with a brief background and then we will follow up with some more detailed questions. We would like to know briefly what Norway and Iceland's key concerns and objectives are regarding the Arctic. In particular, what does it mean to the Governments and people of your two countries to be Arctic states and what is their place in the world? That would be very interesting.

Dr Elana Wilson Rowe: Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to provide evidence on this important work. I am a research professor at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs in Oslo and an associate professor at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. My background is in political geography and international relations, and I have a long-standing research interest in Arctic multilateralism and governance. You will probably find my answers on that to be my longest, but I also look forward to sharing insight from the work of others on security issues.

That is a wonderful first question to open with. The question of what being an Arctic state means and the political significance invested in it is one of the outputs we have had from three decades of post-Cold War region building. First, I will just do a few baseline facts on Norway's key concerns and objectives regarding the Arctic.

Norway is a country with a comprehensive set of long-standing interests and policies relating to the region. This is no surprise. Northern Norway makes up 35% of Norway's mainland territory and 9% of Norway's population live north of the Arctic circle. Arctic policy-making is important and garners a lot of attention, also because of its connection to ocean governance more generally.

As you probably well know, this is a topic of great importance to Norway. The marine areas Norway manages are five times as large as Norway's land territory. Ocean-based sectors, oil and gas, shipping, fish and seafood, stand for almost 70% of Norway's export income. Norway also has the highest number of ocean researchers relative to national population size, meaning you are more likely to bump into an ocean

researcher in Norway than elsewhere. This represents a decades-long investment in ocean-related social and natural sciences.

What are the main policy lines? Like all the Arctic states, Norway has a fairly clearly articulated Arctic policy. A revised Arctic White Paper was presented to Parliament in 2020. There are three key areas of emphasis. It is about maintaining security and stability; promoting diplomacy and governance; and fostering innovation and sustainable livelihoods in northern Norway.

I would like to note for you that this strategy in 2020 already had many important changes from the paper that it replaced from 2011. In the 2011 paper, you would see comprehensive attention to what Norway and Russia could achieve together in many of these sectors of interest in the Arctic. By 2020, even before this period of extreme geopolitical unrest and uncertainty that we are now in, that had already very much changed, with Russia in a much smaller role in Norway's ambitions for what it was going to achieve in the region.

Since we have the opportunity to discuss multilateralism and security as this conversation progresses, I wanted to flag that the emphasis on the domestic elements in the strategy is very real and garners a lot of attention. For example, there is an emphasis on the concern for demographic decline. Regional urbanisation and net population decline are both concerns for Norway's north. There is a lot of interest in making smart development choices and finding opportunities for education and growth to make the north an attractive place to live, as well as managing the green transition.

Finally, I would also like to note that Norway's north is also, while not matching its exact borders, co-extensive with Sápmi, the homeland of the Saami people, extending across borders in the European north. Respecting Saami sovereignty, peoplehood and cultural integrity remains a priority and, as for all Arctic states, an area of improvement in practice for how to do this well.

The Chair: That is very helpful.

Dr Áslaug Ásgeirsdóttir: Thank you so much for having me as part of this inquiry. It is an honour to be here. I am a professor of politics at Bates College in Maine. I am a political scientist by training and my research has focused on ocean governance, especially in the north Atlantic. This past year, I have been in Iceland as an NSF Arctic scholar, focusing on understanding Iceland's Arctic policy creation.

In terms of answering your questions, as we all know, I think, Iceland was a founding member of the Arctic Council, but it was not until the mid to late aughts that Iceland started serious work in crafting its own Arctic policy. This work has been led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It has resulted in two parliamentary resolutions, the first one in 2011 and the second in 2021. In both cases, the Parliament has approved these

resolutions unanimously, so there is a great deal of support in government circles for Iceland's Arctic ambitions or Arctic co-operation.

In focusing on the new parliamentary resolution, which is sort of Iceland's Arctic policy, it is important to understand Iceland's role as a small state. It is crucial for Iceland to collaborate with others in order to achieve its goals. Iceland's goals in the Arctic are no different from that. Co-operation lies at the centre of the Arctic policy, as well as the search for economic opportunities in sustainable ways.

For Iceland, being an Arctic state means being considered as a legitimate member of the Arctic by the other Arctic nations and the world at large. Iceland positions itself, through an expansive definition of the Arctic, as being the only country fully within the Arctic and having the only capital in the Arctic.

The current policy reaffirms Iceland's need to co-operate with other states. Being part of the Arctic Council is key to that strategy, as is reliance on the law of the sea as a policy tool in the Arctic. There is also emphasis on enhancing economic co-operation, especially with the countries closest to Iceland, having a healthy marine ecosystem and collaboration around education and science.

In matters of security, as a country without an army, Iceland has always advocated for demilitarisation in the Arctic. Sustainable utilisation of resources is necessary for survival in the Arctic, but also for responding to climate change and advocating environmental protection when possible. There is interest in building Iceland's role in search and rescue in the area. Finally, there is an emphasis on being a supporter of indigenous rights, especially emphasising the maintenance of culture and language in those cases. In the past few years, there has been an increased emphasis on building better collaborative relationships with Greenland.

The Chair: That is very helpful and very good background.

Q63 Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: Thanks for coming to give evidence. I am obliged to say at the beginning that I am an adviser to BP, which used to have interests in Russian oil and gas. I was the Secretary-General of NATO and had a lot of connections with both Norway and Iceland at that time.

Both of the policy papers that we have been studying, from Iceland and Norway, were written before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Therefore the geopolitical situation has dramatically changed. The Arctic Council has decided not to co-operate with Russia. I wondered whether you would like to say how that has impacted on the operations of the Arctic Council and how it has affected the foreign policy of Norway and Iceland.

Dr Elana Wilson Rowe: It certainly is an important question that is occupying the policy and expert community extensively. In the pause that you mentioned, with the change in working in the Arctic Council, there was certainly a departure from a previous toolbox of attempting to

keep the Arctic a bit out of geopolitical tensions, even though all parties were aware of the geopolitical insecurity overlays in the region. Co-operation simply became untenable in light of Russia's violations of Ukraine's sovereignty. Practically also, a lot of the more broad-based Arctic co-operation is rooted in political good will and information sharing on lower levels. On a pragmatic level, it is easy to see how this co-operation certainly was, and it going to remain, problematic when it comes to Russia.

Thinking about the impacts, it is first worth considering a bit what the Arctic Council does. It does many things and I am going to pull out a few. It is important to keep in mind that the Arctic Council is somewhat unique in an Arctic context as a 'knowledge-policy' interface. It is also diplomatically unique, in that it brings representatives of the indigenous peoples of the region to sit alongside states and discuss core issues of the day, excluding security issues, but including a wide range of others, both natural, science and environment-related issues and social issues.

At the core of the Arctic Council are these working groups that often do assessments, for example, of the state of knowledge on a particular topic and lead to knowledge-based recommendations. These assessments have been important, also outside the institution. They have set the agenda in global institutions more broadly. For example, the Arctic climate impact assessment, now almost two decades ago, raised the policy awareness of the ongoing impact of climate change in the Arctic. It set climate change adaptation and mitigation for the Arctic on the agenda.

The Arctic marine shipping assessment fed into, for example, the Polar Code of the International Maritime Organization. Likewise, work within another working group on emergency preparedness set the stage for the first regional binding agreement on search and rescue.

Finally, what does the Arctic Council do? I would argue that it also has a broader foreign policy signalling effect. It has been a location in which non-Arctic states can engage in a systematised way and flag their interest in what they can do in the Arctic. It has been a signal of cultural co-operation in the region, and has served to manifest Arctic states' capacity and intentions to govern the region well and peacefully.

With these being some of the core outputs, I will focus on what the impacts look like. The pause has had an impact on progress in truly circumpolar projects and planned work of the Arctic Council—for example, on what might have been the next broad-based eight-country political solution. We will not see that. Reopening at the project level helped mitigate some of these issues on progress on core Arctic issues. By reopening at the project level—I know that you have heard this in previous sessions—I mean in projects where Russia was not involved. It was giving the green light for other forms of working among Arctic Council actors.

As I said earlier, we will not know what would have happened because of the absence of political co-operation, which I believe was necessary, and

of an atmosphere of good will and trust. For example, the work that was anticipated included some regional agreements or focus on radiation as an environmental issue, or firefighting practices in the Arctic. Those sorts of things may be on hold for a while.

One last impact I would like to pull out is actually not a loss or an impairment. We are in a period of rapidly transforming geopolitical trends and outcomes. It also results in some awareness of strengths. There are two forms of strength. The co-ordination among Arctic states, non-Arctic states and allied countries in sorting out what to do about the Arctic Council and putting it on pause showed a capacity among these states to come up with pragmatic solutions in difficult times, and likewise the reopening at the project level.

Finally, we have seen how the Arctic networks that support work in the Arctic Council have enabled co-operation. There is a big, unwieldy network of experts, indigenous peoples organisations—very importantly—states, NGOs and so on, which are all engaged on some level, not necessarily right in the Arctic Council but in promoting good governance and the research and knowledge that support that in the Arctic region. The fact that the Arctic Council is an organisation but also somewhat of a broad tent, and had some redundancies in it that might have previously been seen as unwieldy, gave strength to the Arctic governance network in finding other ways to work and carry forward.

It should be noted that informality also had its initial weaknesses. Early on, there was an intensified call to make sure that all discussions of the Arctic Council, the pause and how to proceed would be inclusive of indigenous peoples organisations that are so essential to Arctic Council work. That was an early course correction that was made.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: In terms of Iceland, the resolution of the Parliament was very clear about co-operative work with Russia. Clearly, a lot of that has now been put on hold. Has Iceland's foreign policy changed dramatically as a result of that?

Dr Áslaug Ásgeirsdóttir: Iceland's foreign policy is in the process of changing and shifting. There have, of course, always been close relationships with Russia through trade especially. In thinking about how this is changing going forward, Elana gave an excellent summary of the Arctic Council's role and expected outputs.

Iceland's policy is in the process of changing to thinking about what it means to be secure as a small island in the north Atlantic without an army. There is more focus on security affairs now than there has been in the past, trying to figure out what that means for Iceland going forward if there is increased tension in the area.

I would like to add one thing to what Elana was saying. Norway just assumed the chairship of the Arctic Council. Looking at the next two years, that is going to set the stage for what is possible within the Arctic Council due to the current war in Ukraine. Norway has an important role

in trying to navigate a tricky and sensitive situation going forward. It would be very interesting in two years to see how that has happened and to what extent collaboration in the Arctic has continued around key areas that are important to all of us who live there.

Q64 Baroness Coussins: Both of you have mentioned the importance of the rights of indigenous peoples in the region. I wonder whether you have any observations, given the suspension of co-operation with Russia since the invasion of Ukraine and given that the majority, as I understand it, of the indigenous peoples in the region live within Russian territory.

What impact has that had on the profile of indigenous peoples within the governance structure of the Arctic Council and its various working groups? Is there any continuation of dialogue with the indigenous peoples within the Russian territory? How effective has their participation been in the Arctic Council to date anyway? Is it regarded as mainstream, or does it risk being tokenistic?

Dr Áslaug Ásgeirsdóttir: I do not think that I have a good answer to this. I do not really know how the Russian groups have been engaging with the Arctic Council so far and how that has changed since the invasion. I do not know whether Elana can add anything to that.

Dr Elana Wilson Rowe: It is an important question. I hope that, through the process of written testimony and other forms of evidence gathering, you receive some additional input on this question. To your point, the engagement of indigenous peoples organisations in the Arctic Council has been extremely decisive for the direction of the outputs, the form of dialogue and the spirit of the Arctic Council.

The fact that several of the indigenous peoples organisations represented in the Arctic Council have parts of their people within Russia, crossing international borders, has made their way forward more problematic. RAIPON, the official organisation representing the indigenous peoples of the north in Moscow and in the regions, has been under quite a bit of government pressure, not only recently but over the past decade.

As to the quality, during Russia's chairship of the Arctic Council, which continued within the country itself with its own website while the secretariat was not working, you could see that consultation in Russia on topics relevant to some indigenous peoples' priority areas or some RAIPON priority areas continued. Of course, as we know, there are broader challenges around human rights and minority rights within Russia. For example some key indigenous politicians' status as asylum seekers abroad gives us an indication of the state of play.

It is a very complex issue and almost a topic on which you could have an additional hearing with experts called in for more pointed and informed testimony than I can offer. It is a very important topic.

Q65 Lord Anderson of Swansea: Building on Lord Robertson's question on the governance of the Arctic Council, particularly following this suspension of Russia, I note that last month the Norwegian Foreign

Minister said, "We will do everything we can to ensure that the Arctic Council maintains its role as a forum for addressing the most pressing, cross-border challenges we are facing in the Arctic". Without Russia, which has the largest territory, how can this be done on a multilateral basis?

Norway, for example, I believe co-operates with Russia on search and rescue. Is that done with other countries? What is the level of co-operation now with Russia and how do you see this evolving? Do you see a continuing co-operation in more technical matters and search and rescue, which seems to make sense? Is there a continuing ban that is likely to stretch into the future so long as Russia maintains its policy on Ukraine?

Dr Elana Wilson Rowe: This is a specific question and I will turn to the specifics, but it is also a general question on the future of Arctic governance. Going back two questions, Norway's policy had already changed quite dramatically in the intervening years since the annexation of Crimea, with those big differences between the 2011 and 2020 White Papers on Arctic politics. Policy thinking has continued to evolve in both governance and security issues.

Until the reinvasion of Ukraine in February 2022, I think that most Arctic states were content to continue co-operating as before. The structure around Arctic governance in the region, including the Arctic Council but also many other levels that I will perhaps talk about later, was seen as very robust. To the question of what sort of co-operation with Russia in the Arctic Council is politically or practically feasible in today's climate of distrust, we largely have to wait and see.

Norway's Foreign Minister has flagged heavily its support and eagerness to lead the Arctic Council well through this very difficult period. There were statements that Norway would like to see some level of co-operation among all Arctic states in the lead-up to the end of the Russian chairship and the start of the Norwegian chairship. Very little has been specified but sometimes it is mentioned. It may be some form of data sharing or virtual participation. Also, you will see it publicly acknowledged by high-ranking Norwegian civil servants at the ambassador level that exactly how the Arctic Council will function for the next period remains an open question.

As to how this is interpreted and understood in Russia: policy within Russia, along with its approach to multilateralism and to the Arctic in general, continues to change. You saw some press conferences and seminars after the transfer of the chairship to Norway. The Russia senior Arctic official, for example, would say, "We will wait and see. Norway has indicated that there might be some opportunity to work together."

While Russia largely, and unfairly, places the blame on western states for pausing the co-operation and emphasises that it is not proposing an alternative structure to the Arctic Council, it certainly has relevant bilateral relations with non-Arctic countries. Sometimes you see China

and India mentioned in the same area of discussion. That can be an important part of how Russia realises its national aims. I know that we will also discuss that later.

It is important to note that, while opinions vary among Arctic states about the level, type and form, if any, of co-operation in the Arctic Council that other Arctic states may wish to have, there is certainly a lot of support for Norway in sussing out the options for working within the Arctic Council. As per my second point, a positive outcome of this is that, wherever this conversation ends up, the other Arctic states, excluding Russia, will end up there together. It is a form of dialogue that is very robust. I have a few comments on the bilateral level that I can maybe come back to.

Dr Áslaug Ásgeirsdóttir: There is going to be continued conversation at a lower level, echoing what Elana is saying about collaboration going forward among the other Arctic seven. What shape it is going to take remains to be seen. I would think that most of the collaboration is going to be at the administrative level and among senior Arctic officials in trying to figure out a path forward under Norway's leadership in the next two years.

There is commitment among the seven to continue talking, because that has been a useful forum. It is a useful forum going forward in continuing to think about the Arctic as an area of peace rather than an area of war. Whether Russia ever re-joins those conversations remains to be seen. There is value in continued conversation among the Arctic seven, but I do not think that it is going to necessarily be at the ministerial level going forward, at least not any time soon.

Q66 Lord Stirrup: Could I turn your attention now to security issues, and the scale and nature of the security threat posed by Russia in the Arctic? In the days of the Cold War, we viewed the north of Norway as a potentially vulnerable flank. I was on an RAF squadron that deployed frequently to Norway and flew in NATO exercises in places such as Bodø, Andøya and Bardufoss. Also, we worried a great deal about the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap.

Today, with the impact of global warming and the increased exploitation of the Arctic, the size of that flank seems to have become much larger. It stretches much further north. Also, it has now become a region within which one could envision conflict starting, rather than just being exploited as part of a conflict that starts elsewhere.

The threat posed by Russia, which is effectively, given its size and scale of its coastline and the economic exploitation that is taking place, the Arctic superpower, leads to all sorts of potential vulnerabilities—for example, GPS jamming or disruption of underwater infrastructure—all of which could provide a spark for conflict. I wonder what view Norway and Iceland take of that security threat and their responses to it.

Dr Elana Wilson Rowe: It is great to hear you mention Bodø, a place where I have spent much of my career and gained a lot of teaching

experience. You will notice it, I hope, in 2024, not only for its strategic significance but as European city of culture.

Security issues certainly are a strong part of all Norwegian policy, strategy and thinking about the Arctic. Policymakers and analysts alike have had to recalibrate some long-held assumptions about how to interpret Russia regarding, after the reinvasion of Ukraine, how useful our more rational balancing considerations about Russian possible decision-making in foreign and security politics are. Also, there is a pessimism or concern about the future prospects of trust-based or rules-based co-operation with Russia.

Nonetheless, on the whole, the Norwegian expert and official analyses tend to note that there are no new indications that Russia is seeking to provoke instability or create military conflict in the Arctic as per today, even though that certainly remains an important part of thinking about preparations and preparedness. Here I draw upon the work of some other good colleagues at NUI, my home institute.¹ For Norway, a key challenge has been a desire to signal an effective capacity, with NATO partners, to deter Russia in the region, without signalling aggression.

Interestingly, with Finland and Sweden joining NATO, the playbook for how this is going to look will require some rethinking, also just due to the changed geography of NATO's areas. Positively, with long-standing Nordic security co-operation, there is certainly a strong baseline and culture for having these important conversations.

One area for concern—I heard it also in the excellent session you had a few weeks ago, which was more focused on these security issues—is how accidents, misunderstandings and tactical-level provocations could escalate in a wider political atmosphere that is extremely tense. One thing you hear mentioned as an important measure is the maintenance of the existing channels of open and reliable lines of communication.

There is one thing I frequently reflect on. One of the first things I remember from when I first moved to Norway from the US in 2004 was that, in 2005, a Russian trawler was going to be arrested by the Norwegian coastguard for illegal fishing. The trawler itself, the "Elektron", took off with two Norwegian fisheries inspectors on board and left the area. It was depoliticised on both sides and resolved at the high political level. Thinking about how those sorts of incidents may play out today, it certainly underlines for us the risks involved in a busier and more geopolitically tense Arctic area.

In terms of hybrid threats, this has certainly been a long-standing issue of concern within Norway. Interestingly, Russia's reinvasion of Ukraine and the prosecution of this brutal war of aggression has certainly created

¹ Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and Wilson Center, *Navigating Breakup: Security realities of freezing politics and thawing landscapes in the Arctic*, 2023: <https://www.nupi.no/en/publications/cristin-pub/navigating-breakup-security-realities-of-freezing-politics-and-thawing-landscapes-in-the-arctic> [accessed 9 June 2023]

a broader societal awareness of the nature of these hybrid threats. That awareness, in itself, also brings some strengthened capacity to address them.

To round off, a last up-to-date moment I would like to bring to this committee is that—it may be good reading for you once the English translation is completed—the fourth Norwegian defence commission, which is a commission convened three times previously and established at times of fundamental geopolitical change, was reconvened in December 2021 and has just delivered its report. Its task is to provide advice on national security with a 10 to 20-year perspective and what consequences this has for Norway's armed forces.

The report called for a national conversation around security apropos these hybrid threats and how to make society more robust, but also a vast increase in defence spending.² In the maritime domain there is also a key emphasis on strengthening military capacity, co-operation with the civilian or private sector and co-operation with allies. These issues are receiving a very high and focused level of attention within Norway.

Dr Áslaug Ásgeirsdóttir: Iceland, as a country without a military, fully depends on others for its defence. Until 2006, when the US naval airbase closed in Keflavík, that was Iceland's first line of defence in general. Since then, Iceland has been trying to build more robust relationships with others around its defence. Iceland's pillars of security remain the defence agreement with the US that was signed in 1959 and its belonging to NATO since 1949.

In addition, over the past decade or so, Iceland has increased collaboration with other Nordic states through the Nordic defence pact. Iceland is actively trying to figure out how to be a safe country in this area.

In thinking about security, in the past 15 years or so Iceland has had to build up more expertise within the Government around security issues. That has been done slowly and over time. Iceland now has a security policy and an active national security council. Those are all relatively new additions to the Icelandic bureaucracy. With the war in Ukraine and the conflict in Europe, it becomes more salient in Iceland to think about these issues on a more systematic level and to be part of the NATO collaboration, not only with personnel but in trying to find areas of expertise where Iceland can send experts who are helpful.

Lord Stirrup: I am not trying to put words in your mouth; this is just a question. Would it be fair to say that the effects of climate change and the increasing exploitation of the Arctic make Iceland feel more vulnerable in a security sense than it did in past years? Would that be a true assumption?

² Post-meeting note: an English summary of the report is expected to be published here: <https://forsvarskommisjonen.no/2023/05/04/norwegian-defence-commission-proposes-new-level-of-ambition/>

Dr Áslaug Ásgeirsdóttir: I have not seen any evidence that climate change is making Iceland feel more vulnerable necessarily. The invasion of Ukraine is what is resulting in more attention being given to security matters. Iceland was slow in recognising how climate change could impact especially the waters around Iceland. That is now much more in the conversation and in current policy documents. I do not see it as being more vulnerable necessarily. It complicates collaborations with neighbouring states around key resources in the area.

Q67 **Lord Teverson:** One of our pre-inquiry briefers, Professor Klaus Dodds, suggested that the island of Svalbard could be a potential flashpoint in the future. It is supposed to be demilitarised. I think that there is some military presence of Norway on its own territory there. The island is used by Russia economically. It has mining activities and others. Is that something? It did not seem particularly real to me. Is Svalbard a potential area of conflict in the future or where the screws could be tightened, if you like, if diplomacy gets difficult?

Dr Elana Wilson Rowe: The Svalbard treaty provides a framework for settlements and activities, including the level of security or military presence that is allowed. I am not an expert on Svalbard, but I would be happy to find a follow-up report and share it with you. I think that what you would hear from Norwegian policymakers is an indication of a very well-resourced civil servant-level contact around Svalbard that works out the majority of small issues.

I will take one example. It is of course part of the Norwegian territory, so the sanctions regime also applies there. When Russia was seeking to resupply Barentsburg, there was some concern about how these transit points would be made and how this would work. Norway and Russia still found a solution for conforming with the Norwegian sanctions regime, living up to the Svalbard Treaty and ensuring the supply of Barentsburg.

That is not to say that there are not, in our bigger scenarios or scenario thinking, different [potential] forms of conflict or issues. On the whole, Norway is used to managing and sorting out any issues that it might have due to the unique features of the Svalbard treaty. The broader challenges or issues for Norway as a whole, relating for example to the things we were speaking about regarding hybrid threats, provocations or risk of miscalculations, are equally true in and around any parts of the Norwegian territory or marine areas, including Svalbard of course.

The Chair: On Svalbard itself, on the day of the victory parade in Moscow, there was a paramilitary parade of Russians in uniform who marched through the streets. It clearly was not completely spontaneous because it was organised, they were in uniform and they carried weapons and things. There is some degree of provocation there, I think.

Q68 **Lord Teverson:** This is moving on to the economic side of issues. One area where there is big focus is on the opening up of the Arctic, due to climate change, for shipping, fisheries and other economic activity. That raises the possibility of new maritime disputes and disputes over

governance of the Arctic Ocean. Is the current international legal framework adequate to manage this?

I recall that there was an agreement not so long ago between Russia and Norway to sort out the EEZ issues, which has actually been successful. I do not know whether there are any lessons from that or whether it is all downhill from here.

Dr Áslaug Ásgeirsdóttir: With the opening up of the Arctic, it is important to keep in mind that, even though the Arctic might have less ice, it will still have a lot of icebergs and it will still be dark half the year. It will always be a difficult and costly area to operate in. That will probably determine to what extent people will be willing to go there for resources in the future.

The Ilulissat declaration of 2008 put the governance of the Arctic Ocean in the hands of the Arctic five, kind of. That may be overestimating it a little. There was a decision to not fish there for the foreseeable future. I think where we will see conflict more is in the fact that climate change and the resulting ocean warming will shift a lot of valuable resources northward.

If you look at how that is already happening in the oceans around us, this is leading to really difficult conflicts among countries that actually collaborate on other issues pretty well on a regular basis. I am thinking about the pelagic complex in the north Atlantic, capelin and cod, these straddling fish stocks that are shared among a lot of states. When they change their distribution, existing agreements on management tend to collapse. It is difficult to add new actors into existing fisheries. It is difficult to figure out who should get what in these negotiations.

I see most of the conflicts around the Arctic being about resources. The maritime boundaries are pretty much all settled, except between Canada, the US and then that small island between Denmark and Canada. The conflicts that we are going to see are primarily about resources, changing resources and changing distribution of valuable stocks. Probably also, as Elana mentioned earlier, there could be accidents that might escalate into conflicts if we are not careful. Primarily, we should focus on resources and resource collaboration.

Dr Elana Wilson Rowe: That was a great discussion of the potential changing economic picture in the Arctic and some of the challenges that that could bring, even among states that are used to co-operating with one another. I would note that the Arctic governance complex is multilevel. You of course have the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and relevant global outputs such as the Polar Code.

Regionally, we saw the Arctic states and peoples of the region, to use a non-Arctic pun, make hay while the sun was shining in concluding a lot of really good anticipatory agreements. They were in expectation of a busier, more open region with all those challenges that Áslaug mentioned, taking a kind of precautionary approach. For example, the

agreement about how to take a precautionary and proactive approach to managing a potential commercial fishery in the central Arctic Ocean was concluded and recently had its first conference of the parties in Korea. That was largely reported to be a successful and collegiate meeting. This includes the Arctic states plus some key fishing nations, so non-Arctic states as well.

Bilaterally, there are some good sources of managing bilateral issues. On the security side, there are several agreements functioning called the INCSEAs—incidents at sea agreements—which establish codes of conduct and mechanisms for communication between military vessels. Several countries had frozen their agreements with Russia after Crimea. Norway kept its and updated it last year also to include unmanned aerial vehicles, navigation systems and the use of lasers. Those are still in place.

Going back to the earlier question about technical co-operation and bilateral co-operation, the Norwegian-Russian treaty and international law-based fisheries co-operation continues in a largely routine interaction so far, maybe pared down from its more maximal version in better geopolitical times. Similarly, traffic management in the Bering Strait between Russia and the USA continues as before, if in a reduced, back-to-basics format.

While I certainly see, and would not want to underplay, that there will be novel, unexpected or unanticipated challenges in the Arctic, when it comes to governance structures we have a lot to gain from better and more full use of what we already have. That is through implementation of agreements and recommendations, and identifying new directions for policy or legal discussions within existing bodies.

What I appreciate about the UK Arctic strategy that we are meeting around today is that there is an emphasis on what can be achieved in the Arctic, through regional, subregional, trilateral or bilateral co-operation, and what can be achieved for the Arctic in global settings. This tallies well as a response to Russia's reinvasion of Ukraine. Western countries would like to show that the rules-based order not only works but can work well. The same applies to the Arctic. Using the bodies we have in more well-resourced, effective and ambitious ways is an important way forward.

Lord Teverson: Can I come back quickly on economic development? Is it inevitable that, as there are these opportunities for economic development in the high north, national economic interests will absolutely trump the interests of indigenous peoples?

Dr Elana Wilson Rowe: That is a good question. There are certainly always tensions involved in terms of economic development. One thing that I found very interesting and important coming out of the Saami Council, for example, relates to the much-desired green transition for Norway and most other Arctic countries as a response to climate change. At the same time, the Saami Council, in several very compelling arguments, has pointed out that there should not be a new wave of green colonialism, where the rapid pursuit of green energy solutions, for

example, is carried out on Saami land in ways that hamper other forms of culturally or economically significant activity.

However, specifically when it comes to Norway, the High North in Norway is already very much an integrated part of the Norwegian national economy. A lot of these issues are certainly real. There is this discussion of trade-offs, rights and one form of development precluding another, for example fish or oil, as per a previous discussion. I think that we will indeed continue to see this as a policy topic and an important domestic issue.

Dr Áslaug Ásgeirsdóttir: Indigenous groups now have a seat at the table, for example being a permanent participant in the Arctic Council. Also, domestically, indigenous groups have got more of their own voice. With modern technology and communication, it is going to be harder for national interests to always trump indigenous interests going forward. There are ways to mitigate that clash.

Q69 Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: I have been trying to get my head around the long-term consequences of what we are discussing. I hope that it does not sound too pessimistic, but I put this analysis to both of you. There was the Arctic Council. There was Russia in the chair. There was an acceptance of international legal principles and a respect for the positions of all those with an interest in the Arctic.

Three things have happened. First, there was the invasion of Ukraine and a demonstration by Russia that, when it comes to international law, it is quite happy to put a horse and cart through it. Secondly, there is the environmental change, which has given rise to ambition for exploitation of resources. Thirdly, there is the interest of other countries, which, up until now, would not have been regarded as Arctic countries in any sense whatsoever.

It seems to me that, if that analysis is correct, there is no going back. Even standing still is not going to be possible. It seems to me that, if I am right in my pessimism, the future is going to be studded with occasions when the interests of both your countries will be at risk because of the ambitions and the failure to accept what was previously the way of behaving, as evidenced in the important work of the Arctic Council. Am I being over-pessimistic? Are there more reasons to be optimistic than I put to you?

Dr Áslaug Ásgeirsdóttir: I tend to be an optimist in international affairs and to hope that there is usually a reward for collaboration over the alternative. The Arctic has been challenged by environmental change for a very long time now. The interest of other countries in having a say and having access to the conversations that happen around the Arctic has been there for the last 20 years, since the creation of the Arctic Council.

I personally think that having more voices present, even if they are not in the decision-making part of the Arctic Council, is usually a benefit going forward. I do not see that necessarily changing. The biggest challenge now is, with the war in Ukraine going on and Russia not being part of the

Arctic Council conversations right now, how we move forward within that forum and advocate for policies that help the Arctic going forward.

I am not quite as pessimistic as the question implied. I am hoping that cooler heads will prevail in the future. If there is ever an active conflict in the Arctic, it is going to be incredibly expensive and difficult because of weather and conditions in the Arctic. I do not think that that is desirable for anybody.

Dr Elana Wilson Rowe: That was an excellent answer and an important question. The prospect of environmental change has been holding steady for a long time.

We often think about Arctic politics as if there was this really incredible period of Arctic exceptionalism where nothing was going to get in the way of co-operation and then we have today where everything has fallen apart. Both of them end up being overdrawn. This period that we sometimes refer to as Arctic exceptionalism was much more difficult diplomatically and in the security sense than that word would imply. Lots of things were difficult to carry out or were not carried out because of geopolitical rivalry dynamics and so on, particularly so since the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Of course, this is a new chapter and I absolutely agree that the future we are going to have in 10 years is being forged in these events, so it is extremely important to take into consideration what remains stable and what is changing. As Áslaug pointed out, the interconnections, for example, that triggered a form of Arctic co-operation in the first place remain, across ecosystems, with indigenous peoples crossing borders and so on.

If I can pick up on the interest of other countries, it is interesting to have a brief thought about the role of China or other big, major powers in the international system and their interest in the Arctic. We see that China has had this interest in the Arctic governance.

The Chair: Can I stop you there because I think Lord Boateng wants to ask something aligned to that?

Q70 **Lord Boateng:** Thank you, both professors, for your evidence. I wonder whether you would help the committee with your views on Norway and Iceland's response to the interests of other non-Arctic powers in the region. I listened with interest to the optimism that came in response to an earlier question, but I wonder whether that optimism is not in fact rather challenged by the reality.

As long ago as 2014, President Xi made a speech on his ambitions for China in the Arctic, which was commented upon by the State Oceanic Administration as making it clear that China urgently needs to enter into the ranks of the world's great polar powers. That is the language that was used.

The Chinese ambassador to Norway has talked about the military

significance of the Arctic. Another military figure has referred to there being a right, by virtue of China's population, to a fifth of the interest in the Arctic and the Antarctic, as part of the common heritage of mankind. In light of that, should we not hope for the best and be optimistic but prepare for the worst?

Dr Elana Wilson Rowe: That is an excellent summary of some of the key issues at play when it comes to China and the Arctic interests and, as you rightly framed it, the spaces of global significance or what could be considered global commons more generally. Generally, the idea that the Arctic is primarily an area that is already managed under international ocean law frameworks as well as national sovereignty really plays in against that more global commons framing. But it absolutely is a framing and representation of the region that China has promoted at times to a greater or lesser degree.

Very importantly, to sound a small note of optimism, there is some opportunity to call on China, in light of its proclaimed interest in Arctic governance issues, to double down and work harder and more effectively on international climate action, for example. China frames some of its interest in the Arctic as being due to the Arctic's broader role within the global climate system. There is also some opportunity to focus on reducing black carbon and international climate mitigation, which are key aspects of Norway's Arctic Council chairship document.

However, one of the areas that I, as an analyst, and some Arctic states, Norway in particular, are watching closely is this declared no-limits partnership between Russian and China. Historically, Russia tended to, in some ways, act as a bit of a gatekeeper for Chinese interests in the Arctic: "We have the functioning Arctic Council. That's where we take those discussions". Being an observer there is an appropriate channel for non-Arctic states such as China. The Arctic is hugely economically significant for the Russian state and it will seek to continue to develop the region, despite the exiting of western capital and technology.

If China-Russia co-operation were deepened in the Arctic and, for example, pushed from the economic realm into the security realm, this would certainly be a cause for concern and a game-changing moment. We do have this very small accumulation of datapoints. For example, in September 2022, the US Coast Guard reported that it had encountered Russian and Chinese naval vessels engaged in some sort of co-ordinated exercise in the Bering Sea. We have the recent coastguard agreement between Russia and China, which you discussed at a previous session, and of course the substance of that will tell us a lot about the direction of this relationship. I absolutely agree that this is an important dynamic to watch.

This is now my own opinion as an analyst, not a reflection of a stated policy of any Arctic state. It is important to keep in mind that the desire to see what could work within the Arctic Council and get that format functioning again is not only about the very specific outputs that the Arctic Council can produce for global governance, but also about a

geopolitical signal that the Arctic states are able to work together. The prospect of Russia-China convergence figures into the thinking of what to do more broadly around Arctic co-operation or certainly is a driving factor.

What the other Arctic states choose to make of this during the chairship remains to be seen, but the geopolitical framework is also shaping responses and interest - not necessarily only what the Arctic Council can achieve in and of itself.

Dr Áslaug Ásgeirsdóttir: I would build on what Elana was saying and the excellent points she made about China and its goals. Iceland, within the Arctic Council, has always supported observer status for countries that respect the Arctic Council as the governing organisation in the area and the law of the sea as one of the key legal instruments for ocean governance there. That is part of Iceland's stated strategy at this point.

Iceland has been trying to figure out what China is trying to do. China has approached Iceland, as with other countries, promising to buy and build things, but that has not been accepted. There has been no decision made on, for example, Iceland's role in the belt and road initiative or anything like that. To echo Elana's point, if Russia and China start collaborating more and more in the Arctic and that becomes an access point into the Arctic more directly for China, that will probably give everybody here pause. I also think, economically, they will continue to collaborate. Maybe I am missing something but a security collaboration between Russia and China is unlikely given different interests in the world in general.

Lord Boateng: Is there not concern on the part of Iceland about dual-use capabilities and strategic motivations? As I understand it, a former Chinese propaganda official sought to purchase 300 square kilometres of Iceland to build a golf course and an airfield in a part of the world where golf cannot be played. Does that not cause people to worry?

Dr Áslaug Ásgeirsdóttir: There was of course concern and that purchase was prevented. There have been other interactions between Iceland and China that have worked to a certain extent. There is a small research station in the north of Iceland that is co-managed by China. It is hard to figure out exactly what is going on in there. It is a northern lights centre, essentially. There has been concern about direct purchases of land in Iceland because that was Iceland's largest singly owned piece of land. Within the Arctic Council, Iceland has been supportive of having other states being observers there as a general rule.

Q71 **Baroness Morris of Bolton:** Thank you to both of you for your interesting and informative evidence to the committee. How welcome, from the perspective of Norway and Iceland, would increased UK involvement in the Arctic be? In the hope that your answers are going to be positive, what form do you think that might take?

Dr Áslaug Ásgeirsdóttir: It depends on what form the UK engagement takes. Iceland would welcome economic collaborations, scientific collaborations and things like that, and the UK continuing to accept the Arctic Council and the law of the sea as being the key instruments of governance in the area.

Dr Elana Wilson Rowe: The UK strategy document places emphasis on several thematic areas that are highly relevant and, from my perspective, I believe would be welcomed by Norway. There is a lot of overlap. For example, the emphasis on working globally on climate change action of significance, or strengthening governance and management of marine litter, makes a lot of sense alongside Norwegian Arctic priorities and the priorities for this upcoming period of Norwegian leadership in the Arctic Council. There are also these long-standing research and science ties between the UK and Norway on science and research that have been and could be further enhanced.

From my own perspective, given the pressing security issues in the region, it was wonderful to see our research councils open up for more social science collaboration that would fill a gap in this Arctic network, where Arctic political and security studies remain more nationally focused when really there could be an important, broader conversation. Then, in the security field, as you know, particularly from previous sessions, Norway and the UK have a long-standing co-operation bilaterally and within NATO, which remains very important.

To round off and make a more general conclusion about where we could be seeing more political will and emphasis in a lot of countries, despite the cessation of co-operation with Russia and uncertainty in the broader political environment, it is important to continue to address governance challenges in the Arctic and to take concrete steps to mitigate and manage Arctic risk. At the same time, while it is important to keep in mind that there is an intensified geopolitical situation, do we need radically different new measures or approaches? I would say possibly not.

Rather, the emphasis is best put on something that is a bit quieter, more productive. There needs to be nimble, attentive, pragmatic and, importantly, well-resourced diplomacy, as well as support for knowledge networks, which help in continuing to identify important Arctic challenges and how they can be addressed in both Arctic regional constellations and a global setting, so working for the Arctic also globally.

I welcomed the opportunity to speak to you on this topic and there certainly are a number of very important areas already outlined in the strategy that would be welcomed by actors in the region.

The Chair: Thank you both very much for giving us an hour and a half of your busy lives. We are very grateful. Thank you for your optimism as well, counteracting the pessimistic views some of us have. It was very kind of you and we are very grateful. Can I just remind you that we will send a transcript to you so you can check what you said? With that, and further thanks, I declare the public session closed.