

Bulletin no. 16

THE ARCTIC THE TIGHTENING OF NORWAY'S RESEARCH POLICY IN SVALBARD

SEPTEMBER 2026

POLAR WATCH

Polar Regions Monitoring and Forecasting



www.lecerclepolaire.com

POLAR WATCH

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Laurent Mayet

EDITORIAL BOARD: Neil Hamilton (Australia), Marie-Noëlle Houssais.

EXPERT COMMITTEE: Paul Berkman (USA), Marc Éléaume (France), Patrick Hébrard (France), Alan Hemmings (Australia), Timo Koivurova (Finland), Volker Rachold (Germany), David Renault (France), Ricardo Roura (Netherlands), Yan Ropert-Coudert (France), Serge Segura (France).

REVISED BY: Lesley Jessop (USA).

GRAPHIC DESIGN AND LAYOUT: Stéphane Hergueta, Pacha Cartographie.

PUBLISHED BY: le Cercle Polaire – September 2026

PUBLICATION MANAGER: Stéphane Hergueta

COVER CREDIT: Anders Skoglund, Norwegian Polar Institute.

PRINTER: Abon'copies

Headings, captions, boxes and footnotes are the responsibility of the Editor.

All rights reserved

ISSN 2981-2739

With the patronage of H.S.H. Prince Albert II

Institutional Partners



Operational Partners



Svalbard, an increasingly strategic international research space

Faced with growing interest in using Svalbard for research purposes, the Norwegian government decided to strengthen the degree of national control over international research activities in the archipelago.

In May 2026, two solid stone lions (Figure 1) were removed from Ny-Ålesund Research Station at 79 degrees north on the Svalbard Arctic Archipelago. For more than 20 years, they had guarded the premises hosting the Polar Research Institute of China and its affiliated projects, known to many as *Yellow River Station (Huánghé Zhàn)*. According to some, however, the lions represented a geopolitical statement rather than a scientific one. As one Norwegian government official explained to me in a research interview: “It is a sign that China is in the Arctic. They probably weigh 500 kilos each, and there were 500 million Chinese TV viewers at the opening, I’ve been told. It was a very important matter for China. It is very symbolic and expresses geopolitics more than research.”



Figure 1 –The building hosting the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC) before the removal of the stone lions, in Ny-Ålesund Research Station, Norway. On the PRIC website, this building is described as “China’s first Arctic scientific research station established on July, 28, 2004”. Credit: T. Vold Hansen

‘Permits to establish new research stations outside the land use planning areas should not be expected’

Svalbard White Paper, 2023-2024

The statues gained much attention in Norwegian media in July 2024, when nearly 200 Chinese tourists gathered around them, taking photographs, waving Chinese flags, and displaying a large celebratory banner. Among the visitors was a woman wearing a uniform reportedly associated with the Chinese military. The incident prompted diplomatic reactions, and ultimately contributed to the decision to remove the lions, according to the local newspaper *Svalbardposten*. Kings Bay, the state-owned company responsible for operations and development in Ny-Ålesund, denied in media interviews that the removal of the lions had anything to do with China or foreign policy. Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Espen Barth Eide, likewise stressed that Chinese researchers remain welcome in Ny-Ålesund. He did however, emphasize to *Svalbardposten*, the importance of making clear that Ny-Ålesund is a Norwegian research station: “There is no Chinese station, nor for that matter a British or German station. There is one, Norwegian station, but we facilitate for foreign researchers to work there. Kings Bay and the Norwegian government have wanted Ny-Ålesund to have a more unified appearance. Those lion statues made it look a bit too Chinese, but the point is to make it clear that they are guests at our station “. The Chinese stone lions and their recent removal raise a broader question about Norway’s research policy in Svalbard: Is the Norwegian government tightening its approach to research on the archipelago, and if so, why? The answer is of obvious and immediate relevance to those involved or otherwise interested in research and its management in Svalbard, with the potential to help navigate the increasingly complex landscape of Svalbard research policies. More broadly, Norway’s research policy in Svalbard also provides an interesting case study of the relationship between science and geopolitics in the polar regions.

Scholars in critical geopolitics have long argued that scientific activity in the polar regions is deeply entangled in strategic and geopolitical interests. In Antarctica, for example, research from the late 1950s onwards has been interpreted not merely as knowledge production, but also as a form of geopolitics in its own right, in which research activities and cooperation helped establish control on the continent. Similar dynamics can be observed in the Arctic, where scientific activity has been closely linked to questions of sovereignty and strategic positioning. A prominent example is Russia’s oceanographic expedition *Arktika 2007* to the Geographic North Pole seabed, which arguably combined scientific research with clear geopolitical significance, namely the territorial claim over the seabed at the North Pole. More broadly, Arctic research has been described as essential for advancing sovereignty claims, particularly for states outside the main centers of global power. This includes Norway in relation to Svalbard, where it has been argued that its research presence contributes to reinforcing and maintaining its

sovereignty claims over the archipelago. At the same time, Arctic research is not limited to territorial signaling by Norway alone. It can also enable other states to assert presence and geopolitical interests in the region, and, arguably, position themselves in anticipation of new resource opportunities linked to declining sea ice. Although much of the scholarly literature on Svalbard tends to focus on state interests and rivalry, the archipelago's significance should not be reduced to geopolitics alone. The location also offers substantial scientific advantages, including exceptional conditions for natural science research, reliable year-round air connections and well-developed infrastructure.

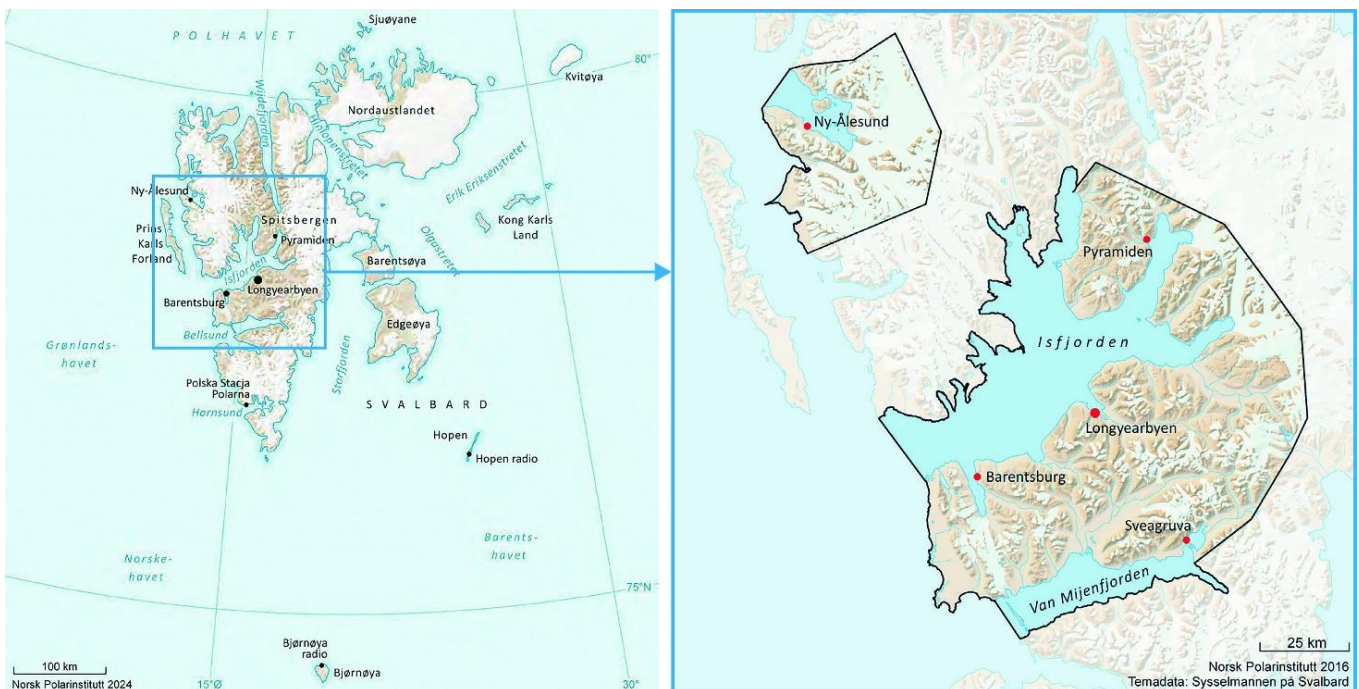


Figure 2 - Svalbard archipelago (left) and International Scientific Research in Svalbard (right). Research activities are mainly concentrated in four year-round stations (Ny-Ålesund, Longyearbyen, Hornsund, and Barentsburg). *Source: Anders Skoglund, Norwegian Polar Institute.*

In particular, Ny-Ålesund, the world's northernmost year-round research station, is regarded as a premier site for Arctic science, being described by politicians and researchers to me in research interviews alike as an “unbelievably exciting location for research” where “world-class research takes place”, or, simply, as “a magical place”. On their website, the research station presents itself as a “unique platform for studies of climate change,” and emphasizes its role in facilitating international collaboration in polar research. As of June 2026, more than 20 institutions run long-term projects and programs in Ny-Ålesund, of which ten (Box 1) have long-term rental agreements hosting projects from their respective countries (Norway, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom). As reported in the “Research in Svalbard” (RiS) database, there are currently 675 reported active projects in Svalbard overall, of which 159 are new in 2026, involving researchers from 40 countries. Svalbard's

role in facilitating much-needed international cooperation on environmental, climate and polar research is similarly highlighted in Norwegian policies.

Norway's research policy in Svalbard has long been characterized by the tension between two competing priorities: fostering high-quality international polar research and ensuring the consistent and firm exercise of Norwegian sovereignty. Research and exploration of, and on, Svalbard date back to 1596, when the archipelago was first documented by Willem Barentsz. During the nineteenth century, scientific activities became more prominent alongside growing economic interest in the archipelago's newly discovered mineral resources. Russian coal-mining activities contributed to the establishment of a permanent Russian presence in the archipelago. By the early twentieth century, competing national interests had prompted negotiations over Svalbard's legal status, culminating in the so-called "Svalbard Treaty" in 1920. Norway's position as a neutral ally during the First World War, together with the absence of Russia - the victors of the Great war did not recognize Lenin's revolutionary regime in Moscow - and Germany - as a defeated nation - from the negotiations, helped secure Norwegian sovereignty over the archipelago. At the same time, the Treaty granted citizens of all signatory states equal rights to engage in key economic activities, provided they complied with Norwegian laws and regulations¹. These activities explicitly included mining, hunting and fishing, but not scientific research². The Treaty states that conventions shall be concluded to establish the conditions for conducting scientific research, but no such convention has yet been adopted. The Norwegian government therefore maintains that, in the absence of such an agreement, it falls to Norway as the sovereign authority to regulate scientific research. However, some treaty parties and legal scholars have challenged this interpretation, arguing that foreign nationals and institutions should have an equal right to conduct scientific research alongside Norwegian actors in line with the non-discrimination principle.

¹ The treaty concerning the Archipelago of Spitsbergen signed on 9 February 1920 ("Svalbard Treaty" in short) establishes the legal framework governing the Archipelago. Article 1 recognises Norway's "full and absolute sovereignty over the Archipelago". Articles 2 and 3 impose obligations of "equal liberty of access" (Art. 3) and non-discrimination for "nationals of all the High Contracting Parties [including Norway] without exemption, privilege, or favour" (Art. 2) in specified economic activities: "all maritime, industrial, mining and commercial operations" (Art. 3). (Editor's note)

² Some Spitsbergen Treaty's signatory states, notably the People's Republic of China (China's Arctic Policy, 2018), argue that even though "the exercise and practice of scientific research" are not explicitly mentioned in Articles 2 and 3 of the Spitsbergen Treaty, as a 'peaceful utilisation' of the Archipelago (Preamble), scientific research falls within the Treaty's "equal-treatment requirement". On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Spitsbergen Treaty, August, 13, 2025, the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Norway issued a statement announcing that: "We have major plans to build up scientific and research activities, develop tourism, transport accessibility, improve and upgrade Russian settlements' infrastructure. The 1920 Treaty provides all necessary legal grounds to this end." (Editor's note).

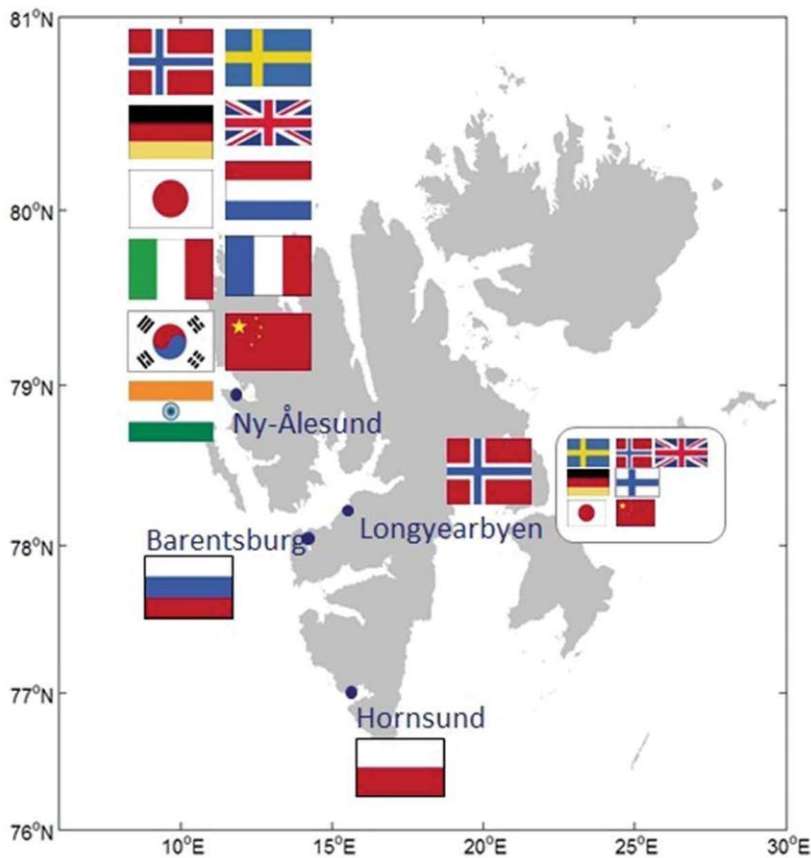
Over the years, Norway has facilitated and welcomed international research in Svalbard, while stressing that all research activities must be in line with the Norwegian regulatory framework. However, although the Norwegian government has consistently upheld this principle, specific rules governing research were largely absent until relatively recently. This is particularly evident in the case of Ny-Ålesund. Once a mining settlement, Ny-Ålesund was effectively turned into a research village with the establishment of the European Space Research Organization (ESRO) telemetry station in 1967. A year-round Norwegian research station was established the following year. The 1985 Svalbard White Paper did not set out any explicit policy on foreign researchers in Svalbard, but it signaled Norway's support for international research and allowed foreign researchers to participate in projects based at the Norwegian station in Ny-Ålesund.

International research in Ny-Ålesund first gained momentum in the 1990s, coinciding with the end of the Cold War and increased attention to cooperation on climate and environmental issues. Starting with the Alfred Wegener Institute in 1990, several foreign research institutions established a permanent presence in the research village in the following decades. In practice, these operated as separate research stations, all affiliated with different nations. This is also how they were referred to in official Norwegian documents, notably the Chinese research station (Svalbard White Paper, 2009). Although still supportive of international research, the 1993 Svalbard White Paper also emphasized that Norway, as the sovereign, should assume a host role for research in Svalbard. This reflects a certain tension in policy between openness to foreign research and the assertion of national authority. The Svalbard White Paper from 1999 similarly highlighted Norwegian research activities and bases as key instruments in enforcing Norwegian sovereignty, while also welcoming international research. Ny-Ålesund Science Managers Committee (NySMAC) established in 1991 and the Svalbard Science forum (SSF) created in 1999 were aimed at improving coordination of research activities. Foreign research institutions in Ny-Ålesund were nevertheless allowed a high level of independence.

The 2009 Svalbard White Paper announced the development of a joint research plan for institutions active in Ny-Ålesund, signaling stronger Norwegian leadership and coordination of research activities. In line with this, the 2016 Svalbard White Paper proposed a gradual shift away from separate, nationally affiliated research stations toward thematically organized centers aligned with priority areas and designed for shared use, in effect moving away from nationally defined research stations. This way of organizing the research activities was further developed in the 2019 Research strategy

for Ny-Ålesund. The strategy specified that research was limited to natural sciences and introduced the name, “Ny-Ålesund Research Station”, with “Norway” added to the logo.

Box 1: Nations with various education and research activities in the settlements in Svalbard



Eleven institutions have established Arctic field stations in Ny-Ålesund. The research activities in Ny-Ålesund are coordinated by the Ny-Ålesund Science Managers Committee. In the summer season, there are scientists at all the stations. The Norwegian Polar Institute's Sverdrup Station, the Zeppelin Observatory, the Norwegian Mapping Authority's station and the joint French–German Arctic Research Base have small permanent staffs to enable observations and measurements also in winter. Russian research in Barentsburg dates back to the 1960s. For several decades research has been conducted at the Stanislaw Siedlecki Polish Polar station in Hornsund. At Hopen and Bjørnøya there are manned stations operated by the Meteorological Institute of Norway with four to six staff members working on six-month contracts. *Source: Misund, O. A., 2017.*

According to the 2016 Svalbard White Paper, the official reasoning behind the changes were “to achieve higher quality, more cooperation, transparency and sharing, and better utilization of resources across institutional and national boundaries”. My research interviews with researchers and managers in Ny-Ålesund confirmed that they had previously experienced challenges related to overlapping measurements, increased use of the site and its infrastructure, and greater environmental disturbance, all of which may potentially affect research quality. Stronger coordination policies could therefore help safeguard and enhance the quality of research.

As several research interviewees acknowledged, however, “polar research is big politics and Ny-Ålesund is part of that.” Beyond generating scientific knowledge, research activities in Ny-Ålesund can also be understood as a means of demonstrating presence on Svalbard. As mentioned by Norwegian government officials, this is an important consideration for Norway: “Research activity has become an important part of Norway's Svalbard policy, also as a means of maintaining a presence. We were concerned with strengthening the research presence.” This emphasis reflects the longstanding view that

“Norwegian research activities and Norwegian research stations are important instruments (...) for safeguarding national interests and exercising sovereignty” (Svalbard White Paper, 1999). At the same time, research activities can serve as a strategic means for foreign states to assert their presence in the Arctic and strengthen their role as “players in the Arctic” in order to “develop and influence Arctic policy,” as expressed by a Norwegian research manager. From this perspective, the research policy changes introduced in the 2016 Svalbard White Paper and the subsequent 2019 Research Strategy were not only intending to strengthen research quality and cooperation, but also to reinforce Norwegian sovereignty in the face of increased international research presence. This presence was also expressed symbolically through the national markers displayed at the premises hosting foreign research institutions, of which the Chinese stone lions as mentioned above, were the most conspicuous example. For the Norwegian government, it was important to downplay the national affiliations of research institutions while emphasizing the “Norwegianness” (In Norwegian, *norskhet*) of the community and station. Some observers questioned the extent to which the amendments represented a real change. As one on-site manager noted regarding the new station setup and name: “It is the same researchers, the same institutions, and they conduct research on the same things as before.”

With the 2023-2024 Svalbard White Paper and the subsequent 2026 Strategy for Research and Higher Education in Svalbard, however, new measures were introduced. These included the establishment of a Svalbard Research Office, grounded in the need for additional measures to ensure “clear and strong Norwegian research leadership.” Although officially opened in March 2026, it is not intended to exceed the existing budget framework, relying instead on resources from the Norwegian Polar Institute and the Research Council of Norway. Without substantial financial backing, it remains to be seen what concrete changes the research office will bring about. A potentially more substantial change compared to previous Svalbard White Papers, however, is the stronger emphasis on the role of research and education in producing Norwegian presence, including the explicit statement that a strong Norwegian presence is important to ensure an effective and credible exercise of authority. In line with this, the 2023-2024 Svalbard White Paper proposed measures aimed at increasing the proportion of Norwegian researchers and students at the University Centre in Svalbard (UNIS), as well as Norwegian researchers in the Ny-Ålesund Research Station. While the precise content of these measures remains to be specified, it is worth noting that UNIS no longer accepts Chinese students or employees, following changes in the security policy landscape. The 2023-2024 Svalbard White Paper also states that UNIS shall continue to be the sole

provider of higher education in Svalbard, and that research in Svalbard should be conducted from established local communities and research stations. While not explicitly framed as such, this may also be understood in light of Russia's announced plans to develop a research station with an educational component in cooperation with Brazil, India, China, and South Africa.

Norway has maintained a consistent position on research activity in Svalbard and its relationship to the Svalbard Treaty, emphasizing that while foreign researchers as nationals of the signatory countries, have no formal right to conduct research in Svalbard, Norwegian authorities have chosen to actively facilitate international polar research there, including through the development of Ny-Ålesund research platform. As the sovereign state, Norway regulates research activities, which must be carried out in accordance with Norwegian laws and regulations. All circumstances considered, there have been no abrupt changes in the underlying principles of Norwegian research policy in Svalbard, but these principles have been given a more concrete form³. In this regard, it is worth recalling that the balancing act between openness to foreign research and the assertion of national authority has been carefully crafted over time⁴. From this perspective, it is perhaps not surprising that the Chinese stone lions were allowed to remain in Ny-Ålesund for some 20 years.

Tiril Vold HANSEN⁵ for POLAR WATCH⁶

³ Hansen, T. V., Geopolitics, diplomacy, or idealistic research? Framing the research community in Ny-Ålesund, 2024; Hansen, T. V. & Moe, Norway's research policy for Svalbard: Intentions and perceptions, 2024.

⁴ In response to the 2016 Svalbard White Paper, the director of the French Polar Institute, Yves Frenot, had expressed his concern about freedom of research in Svalbard: "The Norwegian government plans to develop a comprehensive strategy for research in Svalbard. The question arises as to whether France (and its German partner) will be able to develop its own scientific research strategy in the coming years" (Y. Frenot, "La liberté de recherche en question", Pôles Nord & Sud, n°5, 2020) (Editor's note)

⁵ PhD, Senior Researcher at Nordland Research Institute, Norway.

⁶ The opinions expressed in this article are the responsibility of the author.

**REGISTER FOR
THE MONTHLY BULLETIN
POLAR WATCH**

*Developments and trends in Polar Regions
decrypted by experts.*

**GO TO OUR WEBSITE:
WWW.LECERCLEPOLAIRE.COM**



Bulletin no. 16
THE ARCTIC
THE TIGHTENING OF NORWAY'S
RESEARCH POLICY IN SVALBARD



www.lecerclepolaire.com

POLAR WATCH

Polar Regions Monitoring and Forecasting

All rights reserved

ISSN 2981-2739