

Sweden's Strategy for the Arctic Region - Geopolitics on Thin Ice

Katina Yoneva¹

Abstract: With more than 150 years of Swedish expeditions to the High North, the Arctic-related scientific researches have their long history in the Sweden. In 2011 the country adopted its own strategy for the Arctic region. Under the pressure to define the objectives of its chairmanship, Sweden understood the need of developing a more explicit document. The renewed interests in the Arctic preceded the development of the Northeast Passage or the Northern Sea Route (NSR). In this regard, the paper describes the characteristics of this alternative maritime route connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. It shows the potential of Arctic routes as an alternative to the Suez Canal. Shipping through the forbidden sea of ice can be time-saving but also comes with too many uncertainties. The study looks also at the challenges in front of this route such as: harsh weather conditions, lack of modern deepwater ports, ice breakers and ice strengthened ships, SAR (search and rescue) infrastructure and low population density in the region. Sweden is also interested in the Transpolar Sea Route (TSR) - a variable non-coastal sea-lane across the Arctic Ocean, including a route closer to the NSR but outside of the Russian Exclusive Economic Zone. With the growing economic relationship with China, Sweden may become the most important shipping hub for Europe.

Index Terms: Arctic Region, Northeast Passage, Transpolar Sea Route, Sweden, Arctic Council

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Today, we are living in an era of science and technology achievements, endless information, social media development, economic prosperity, globalization and democracy, freedom of transportation and unlimited trade opportunities, but this is also the age of a major climate change. And while we are all acquainted with the negative effects of the human interaction with the environment, there's often less clarity about the reverse of that equation. Global warming leads us inevitably to the peak of our civilization, leaving the humanity with numerous difficult choices. Under the conditions of this rapid climate change, the world's attention is directed once again to the Arctic region, not for safeguarding and protection, but for the possibilities it presents. Among them are the increased access to exploitation of oil, gas and minerals, new shipping routes and trade destinations. And while for the majority of people, the global warming in the Arctic exist only on the internet pages, for many cultures it is a present reality, in which they need to survive. The arctic nations have a deep spiritual connection to the land that is also their main source of sustenance. The northern states share the burden of responsibility and advocate against its denigration by oil and gas development.

Established by the Ottawa Declaration in 1996, the Arctic Council is the high-level intergovernmental forum for promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic states. Formed by the five countries with Arctic Ocean coasts (USA, Canada, Norway, Denmark and Russia) and the three other states within the Arctic Circle (Sweden, Finland, and Iceland), the AC includes today 13 more non-Arctic observer states. "Sveriges strategi för den arktiska regionen" was adopted in May 2011, when the country accepted the torch from Denmark of the Arctic Council chairmanship (Mouritzen, 2010: 180). In fact, Sweden was the last country of the eight Arctic states to approve its own strategy. Before that time, the government had not formulated any official Arctic foreign policy documents. Under the pressure to define the objectives of its chairmanship, Sweden understood the need of developing a more explicit strategy. At the same time, as an important EU member, Brussels is depending on Sweden to promote the EU interests in the region. Building upon their involvement in the Arctic, the European countries fear a Russian and even Canadian interruption.

For many years the Arctic Council has been criticized for not discussing issues of traditional security and distancing itself from the main geopolitical events. Sweden has also been judged for its loose leadership, unclear goals and lack of accomplishments in the Council. In fact, under pressure from the Nordic countries, the Arctic Council has focused on issues of soft security, such as environmental protection and sustainable development (Exner, 2016). In 2011, during the Swedish chairmanship was signed the important Search and Rescue (SAR) Agreement, severely threatened by Crimean crisis.

In April 2011, the first conference on the emerging challenges in the Arctic took place in Sweden, organized by the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). The state is also substantial contributor to the Polar research. All projects are coordinated by the Swedish Polar Research Secretariat. With more than 150 years of Swedish expeditions to the High North, the Arctic-related scientific researches have their long history in the country. Following the footsteps of his teacher Olof Rudbeck, the Sweden's great botanist Carolus Linnaeus ventured in 1732 on a journey to Lapland. The Swedish baron and geologist Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld was the first explorer to conquer the Northeast Passage during the Vega expedition. The unique Abisko Scientific Research Station (ANS), situated about 200 km north of the Arctic Circle, dates back to 1903 and holds meteorological datasets for the last hundred years. However, there are not that many political

1. Katina Yoneva is from Institute for Historical Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria



statements or speeches by Swedish politicians on the Arctic issues.

Even the country's coastline lies on the land-locked Baltic Sea and has no actual border with the Arctic Ocean; the Scandinavian country has its strong ties - both geographically and demographically with the region. Sweden's nomadic reindeer herders - the Sámi are the country's only indigenous people. That is why, the introduction of the Sweden's Strategy for the Arctic Region, which emphasizes its arctic cultural and historical heritage, comes to legitimize Sweden as a rightful member of the Arctic society. Even though the Swedes have always seen the nationalism as a weak ideology, their national identity-building was invariably based on the Viking archetype, provided by the Norse mythology, which diverges from the general Sámi identity.

Another issue that must be taken under consideration is the long list of forums and organizations, mentioned in the strategy. The document promotes the multilateral cooperation not only within the Arctic council, but also Nordic cooperation (i.e. the Nordic Council of Ministers), Barents Region cooperation, cooperation with the European Union, United Nations and cross-national Sámi cooperation (particularly the Sámi Parliamentary Council). Seeking understanding from other international forums, the Nordic countries are still struggling to withhold the main actors in the region (Russia, Canada and the USA). On the other hand the involvement of more non-Arctic countries as observer-states undermining their own claims. As always, Sweden is torn between external influences and the call of its own moral duty. The country is not among the five littoral states of the Arctic Ocean, which excludes it from the Arctic Five summits. As one of the Arctic countries, however, Sweden has an obligation to accepted the chairmanship of the Arctic Council and formulate its priorities, goals and objectives. Even though the meetings of the Arctic Council have produced binding international agreements, all decisions have always been made by consensus (Kuersten, 2016: 389). The pre-discussed positions of the Arctic Five, however, can influence the votes and limit the Council's engagement in Arctic affairs. With the end of the Nordic "soft security" chairmanship in 2013, the Canadians, showing less hesitation than the Swedes, focused the new agenda on economic development over the environment and climate change. Over the past 20 years, the Arctic Council has proved to be "Canadian foreign policy at its best", declares the former minister of foreign affairs Lloyd Axworthy (Skura, 2016). There are also concern about Russia's increased military presence in the region and the Russia-Canada political tension. The Canadian chairmanship is focused on less climate-change struggles and more material outcomes as building new Arctic patrol vessels and patrol aircraft, as well as a new deep water port.

Unlike the other Arctic states, Sweden has emphasized only three main priorities: "climate and the environment", "economic development" and "the human dimension". As sub-priorities from the first area of interest are mentioned "climate", "environmental protection", "biodiversity" and

"climate and environmental research". The third priority - the human dimension focuses on "the survival of Sámi languages" and culture. Of these three priorities, the "economic development" is the most important for the Swedish foreign affairs and the only one that promotes its commercial interests in the Arctic. The area includes "mining, petroleum and forestry", "land transport and infrastructure", "maritime security and the environmental impact of shipping", "sea and air rescue", "ice-breaking", "energy", "tourism" and "reindeer husbandry".

According to the "Sweden's Strategy for the Arctic Region", behind the wildly promoted ambition to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to invest in becoming a leading nation in scientific research on climate, the economic development seems therefore to be a top priority of its's Arctic policy. In the context of the extreme development of Sweden's economic relations with China during the past decade, the Arctic region is able to offer new strategic lanes. In this regard, there is a renewed interest in the Northeast Passage or the Northern Sea Route (NSR). Today the Nordic countries are looking at the arctic passages as trade routes with large potential and importance. However, transit shipping through the Arctic is still not attractive for the international shipping industry. For many centuries the routes were nearly impassable, but the modern ship technology advanced to the point where the vessels can break up the ice pack as they sail. Global warming is another major contributor to the development of the Arctic. The reduction in perennial Arctic sea ice opens new itineraries and destinations.

Nowadays one of the most important waterways in the world trade is "*Qanāt al-Suways*" or the Suez Canal. It is the only passage that allows water transportation directly between Europe (the Mediterranean) and Asia (the Red Sea). With the building of the Suez Canal and its continuous widening, the Cape of Good Hope has lost its strategic importance. The Cape route remained only an important transshipment hub for the rapidly growing trade relations between Asia and Latin America (Rodrigue, 2015: 34). This man-made shortcut reduces the distance for shipping between Northeast Asia and Europe around The Cape of Good Hope by 23 to 43%. In addition, the route provides access to multiple markets and opportunities to stop at any port along the way for maintenance and support. However, there are also many disadvantages. Because of its wide, ships must sail in convoys. The permitted speed of 8 knots (15 km/h) allows three convoys per day to transit the canal (two from the north and one from the south) (Bodden, 2007: 24). Every year over 15 000 ships sail through the canal. Their journey takes between 11 and 16 hours. Over the last decade, the increasing threat of Somali pirates has forced many shipping companies to avoid the Gulf of Aden.

Although the strategic value of the Suez Canal is unquestionably immense, the demand for secondary alternative routes is already present. With more ships opting to sail around the Cape of Good Hope and to avoid the Gulf of Aden, the Northeast Passage (NEP) has the potential to become one of the great breakthroughs in the

modern international trade. This waterway can shrink the distance compared to the traditional Suez Canal route by 24% (according to ships' origin and destination). The NEP is most attractive for trade between Northern Europe and Northeast Asia (Japan, Korea and China), but not so appealing for shipping cargo from South Asia to the Mediterranean ports, where both routes became equidistant.

For the Scandinavian countries, the NEP can become the long desirable shortcut to China. For most of the Swedish brands the PRC is the biggest market in the world. More and more firms move to China not only to exploit the economic advantages but to gain access to the international supplier network. Finally, the companies are keen to conduct sourcing in China because their customers are also there. On the other hand, the Swedish market has also become more important for Chinese companies. Sweden is seen as an attractive market not only due to advanced technology, stable political and economic conditions but also because it provides access to a large amount of customers in the rest of Europe. With the growing economic relationship with Sweden, ships may bypass Singapore, which is at present the most important shipping hub for China.

Regardless of NEP's economic potential, the route suffers significant environmental and infrastructural challenges. The first problem is the shallow bathymetry of the coastline. With a drafts of 13 and 6.7 m in the main Russian straits, the waterway is limiting cargo size to approximately 50,000 deadweight tons. (*DWT or TDW is a measure of how much cargo and fuel a ship can safely carry, but it doesn't include the weight of the ship itself.*) The biggest vessels have to choose alternative paths or sail through deeper Arctic waters, where they risk becoming ice-bound. Nevertheless, the modern ULCS (ultra large container ships) and 20% of the oil tankers still prefer the stormy waters around the Cape Peninsula. They exceed the capacity of the Suez Canal and can't be supported by any icebreaker escort. Sailing the TSR (Transpolar Sea Route) has been a long-lasting dream for many nations and it may come true in the future. The Arctic multiyear ice pack is decreasing rapidly, making the deep waterway more accessible. However, the wish of conquering the TSR is not just an adventures idea but a pursuit of navigational freedom in the Arctic. During the Soviet era the Russian North was strongly subsidized by the government. The dissolution of the USSR led to the NEP's political opening and ratification of the UNCLOS (the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) in 1997 (Efferink, 2015). Despite that, there are still many un-resolved issues such as territorial claims, economic exploitation, technical shipping requirements, environmental protection and SAR responsibilities. With the new right of "innocent passage" and freedom of transit through exclusive economic zones, only internal waters remain under the unrestricted sovereignty of the state (Humpert, 2012: 189). In 2013, the new legislative changes eradicated many requirements such as prior inspection in a Russian port and mandatory icebreaker assistance. However, based on its self-granted authority, the Federation controls all navigation permits

and transit fees. In 2007, Russia even planted its flag on the seafloor at the North Pole, proclaiming the area as Russian territory.

Battling the planet's coldest environment demands a full ship's independence. While the sea ice is melting even faster than predicted, the NSR still restricts all typical vessels. The arctic waterway is navigable only for ships, built with special materials and designed for smashing ice. The implementation of rotating azimuth thruster increased the position agility of the northern vessels, allowing them to maneuver in ice-covered waters. The new double acting ships are able to sail not only forward but also backwards, breaking ice in either direction (Adolf, 2016: 38). The efficient equipment winterization is just another requirement for sailing the Arctic. The vessel has to be maintained operable with proper heating system and materials resistant to extreme temperatures. In addition, the life support boats should contain all necessary equipment and engine-independent power generators. These expensive technologies aren't the only barriers for development of Arctic shipping. The lack of support services like SAR, traffic control, communications, emergency response services and weather forecasts, keeps thousands of trade companies away. Among the all 18 Russian ports in the region, only 4 are operating normally and have rail connections. Even though the most Russian ports are neglected, in 2016 Murmansk had a more than 40% increase with 33.4 million tons of goods in transit (Staalesen, 2016).

Another problem that requires a huge amount of investments is the voice and data transfer capability. Sailing the Southern seas is much safer, especially with the available communication and GPS systems. Under development is also the new e-Navigation application. The information is always accessible through Internet connection, supported by geostationary satellites, but they do not cover the area of the Arctic. The available Iridium satellite constellation is able to supply communication services in the region, but there are recorded cases of interruptions. Many icebound ships even have difficulties sending their distress signals. The Canadian Space Agency is working on the new Polar Communications and Weather satellite (PCW) and Russia is developing the Arktika satellites. The energy company Gazprom is also providing data for the ships due to its Polar Star satellites. Crossing the Arctic region demands extremely accurate weather forecasts and ice charts. Many observers like NCAR (*National Center for Atmospheric Research*), NASA, NOAA (*National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration*), University of Washington and the Northern California Indian Development Council, offer maps describing the Arctic sea ice extent. However, the provided information and predictions are not always accurate. Unfortunately, the satellites are able to observe the Arctic ice cover, but the ice thickness can be estimated only by upward-looking sonars (Fissel, 2008: 16).

The increasing traffic density on the NEP demands more sustainable human presence in the region. Prevention of oil spills should remain the primary objective of any energy



company. The Arctic states need to support each other in the ensuing oil spill containment and recovery operations. With the new Sky-Sails system, ships can not only lower their fuel costs, but significantly reduce emission levels as well. “Sky-Sails” can be installed on both new and existing vessels. It has 3 main components: a towing kite with rope, a launch and recovery system, and a control system for automated operation (Siegel, 2007). It brings the high-altitude wind power (HAWP) back to ship propulsion. The transmitted power is comparable to that of an ocean-going tug. Beluga Shipping is the first company that equipped its ships with the Sky-Sails system, and the first that sanded heavy-lift ships along the NSR without any icebreaker support.

Understanding the Swedish policy in the Arctic means understanding the Nordic culture and social system based on democracy and individualism. The love for nature is another factor that characterizes the Scandinavians and determines their policy preferences. The Swedes tend to isolate themselves from the surrounding. The old “Law of

Jante”, also called “Jantelagen” dates back to the Vikings era and can be summarised as: “You are not to think you're anyone special or that you're better than us”. (Dadfar, 2010:12-13) Today it is preserved through the concept of equality – an important ideal in the Scandinavian society. The long-term adherence to the Nordic identity was the cornerstone of the Swedish statesmanship. Today, as an important EU member, the country plays a crucial role in promoting the EU strategic interests. Arctic’s development opens up new opportunities as well as presents certain challenges for the largest Scandinavian country. However, Sweden is still not ready to accept its Arctic heritage and became an active member of the High North society and important actor in the region. The development of the NEP is a step forward to recognize its own trade interest and to increase its participation and involvement in the Arctic.

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