Repositioning Finland as an Arctic country

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Abstract: The political and economic situation and orientation of Finland as a state has varied over time, and recently a renaissance of its northern position has become evident. This paper examines the various definitions from natural science to politics over Finland's northern and Arctic character. According to definitions in physical geography and biological indicators, the area of Finland can be seen as belonging to the sub-Arctic and Boreal zones. The recent geopolitical changes, including increasing economic interest in the exploitation of natural resources and transportation corridors in the North, and strategic value of northern areas, have increased the importance of the circumpolar Arctic. In line with this larger trend, governmental and business actors in Finland have sought to politically re-orientate the country's position and, according to the latest governmental strategy paper on Arctic issues, Finland is explicitly defined as an Arctic country.

Keywords: Northernness, Nordicity, Arctic, sub-Arctic, Finland

Introduction

It has been common in public and political discourse to place Finland in terms of its location between the East and the West (Antonsich 2005). It has also been rather common to position Finland as a northern country. Recently, there clearly has been an increase in political and commercial aims to promote Finland's Arctic position (Suomen arktinen strategia 2013). But what does the Arctic actually mean in political and commercial contexts? In this paper, we seek to clarify this issue by analysing definitions of the Arctic and sub-Arctic. We examine how Finland is currently being repositioned in relation to the debates on the Arctic, and especially its natural resources and geopolitical importance. The drivers for such debates have emerged over the years in scientific and political discourses. We investigate both discourses, point out differences in definitions of northern and Arctic areas, and illustrate how the political economy is driving the developments in these definitions.

Definitions according to the natural sciences

According to the categorisations within physical geography, Finland is not an Arctic country but sub-Arctic at best. This point has often been substantiated with the argument that agriculture can be practiced in most of the country, with the exception of the northernmost parts of Finland. For

example the Finnish geographer Uuno Varjo considered Finland as a northerly country, and never mentions there to be Arctic or sub-Arctic conditions (Varjo & Tietze 1987). However, Finland has many characteristics of a cold Boreal, often sub-Arctic area. The country regularly experiences long cold winters with an annual freezing of soil to the depth of 0.5 to 1.5 meters, and sporadic permafrost is seen on high mountain tops and in *palsa* mires (palsa is a Finnish -Sámi name for a peat mount with a core of permanent ice, Figure 1), in the northern fell areas. Finnish winter is characterized by cold temperatures and a continuous snow cover (0.5–1 m) lasting for 145 to 225 days in most of the country, except for the coastal South-West area (FMI 2014). Also rivers and lakes as well as the Gulf of Bothnia and most of the coastal waters are covered with thick ice for most of the winter period, making the use of ice-breakers a necessity for winter-time ship traffic from the country's ports. The summer is characterized by a relatively short growing season, which effectively limits the profitability of agriculture. A substantial part of the country lies north of the Arctic Circle (N 66°33'), creating specific Arctic light conditions with 24 hour daylight during the summer and no sunlight during part of the winter. Biologically the southernmost limits of many Arctic and sub-Arctic species (both plants and animals) are found in Finland. One third of Finland is in use by free grazing semi-domesticated reindeer, a sub-species of the Caribou and wild reindeer species found only in the circumpolar sub-Arctic areas (Colpaert, Kumpula & Nieminen 1995; Kumpula & Colpaert 2007; Colpaert, Kumpula & Nieminen 2003).

The orientation towards the North of many Finnish academics can be seen in

Figure 1. Palsa mire and thermokarst pond, Peera, Enontekiö, Finland. Photo: Alfred Colpaert 2014.

the fact that the Sodankylä geophysical observatory was founded already in 1913 by the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters. At the time the most northern weather station in Finland, the Sodankylä weather station stated to be recording continuous weather data already in 1908. Finnish researchers were also very active in the first *International Polar Year* of 1882–83. The research stations of Utsjoki Kevo (1954) and Kilpisjärvi (1964) have become internationally renowned centers for Arctic and sub-Arctic research. Fell mountain climate and environment as well as tree and forest line demarcation have been studied extensively in northern Finland and the results clearly show the Arctic and sub-Arctic character of these areas (Autio & Colpaert 2005, 15–36).

Overall, debates on the Arctic are complicated by differing definitions in the natural sciences. The Arctic can be just as well defined as the area north of the Arctic Circle (referring to light conditions) or as the area where the July isotherm remains below ten degrees Celsius (referring to temperature, Figure 2), or it can be stated that the Arctic consist of the area north of the northernmost tree line, while at the same time maintaining that the Arctic forests comprise 8.2% of the world's total forest area (Jumppanen 2013).

Political definitions

Finland's sense of Northernness and belonging to the Nordic has fluctuated over time, partly because of changes in national borders since independence (1917). According to historian Maria Lähteenmäki the main political and scientific orientation of Finnish scholars during the 19th century was eastward (Imperial Russia), but the orientation changed dramatically towards the West during the Russification periods in the turn of 20th century. However, some scholars like statesman and professor of history Väinö Voionmaa (1869–1947) had a clear view of Finland as a northern state. He was one of the main architects of the Petsamo (Russ. Pechenga) corridor connecting Finland with the Barents Sea (Lähteenmäki 2012; Lähteenmäki 2014). Finland ceded the Petsamo area in 1944 to the Soviet Union, thereby losing its connection to the Arctic Ocean and consequently ending the economic development of "Arctic" Finland. A period of more southern orientation began. This change also put Finland outside the community of shoreline states around the Arctic Ocean (Canada, Denmark with Greenland, Iceland, Russia, and the USA) and became "land locked" with regard to the Barents Sea.

For a long time the Arctic was considered a wilderness area too remote and inaccessible to be of use or of economic value. For this reason it was largely unexplored and its huge mineral reserves remained untouched. Advances in transportation and mining technology, exhaustion of more accessible resources and a growing demand, led to the present interest in the Arctic. From a void wilderness it became a resource area for minerals gas and oil. Also tourism started to utilize these last wild areas of Europe.

An early expression of the new interests in Arctic cooperation was the establishment of Barents region Euro-Arctic Council (Barents Euro-Arctic Council 2014). The

Figure 2. Map of the Arctic region, 10°C. July isotherm shown in red. Source: National Snow and Ice Data Center, USA 2014.

Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) was established in 1993 by Finland, Norway, Sweden and Russia, with representatives of Denmark and the European Commission included, as an intergovernmental regional cooperation forum. Its origins were in the Nordic cooperation and North Calotte initiatives from the 1950's. In Finland, the regions of North Ostrobothnia, Kainuu and Lapland are represented in the council, with North Karelia having an observer status.

Further political aims at increasing the weight of the northern part of Europe were manifested in the so called Northern Dimension during the 1990s. At the time, it was the characteristics of the North rather than the Arctic that were emphasised in political discourse. Like the Arctic, the emphasis on the North had a strong cross-border cooperation character. Finland's Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen (1998) promoted a European *Northern Dimension*, partly as a way to interconnect Europe's energy markets with Russia's Siberian gas supplies. He stated that the whole of Finland is part of the Northern Dimension, which was supposed to cover the region from Iceland to North-West Russia, and the coasts of the Baltic and Barents Seas. Therefore, it stretched more south than any of the current definitions of the Arctic. The rationale, however, for taking it on the agenda, is essentially the same. It was, and is, the natural resources of the northern regions that are the impetus for their further colonization, and the resulting economic benefits for the nations located there. Agriculture and the problems of the sparsely populated areas were explicitly left out of the Northern Dimension initiative, much in the same way as they are not included in the recent hype about the Arctic.

Contrary to the current international political situation that has emerged since the 2000s, with the Russian Federation first not wishing to be included in the EU's *New Neighbourhood Policy* and thereby to become subject to its extraterritorial aspirations, and with the cooling of the political climate with the crisis in Ukraine, the Russian Federation or at least its neighbouring regions to the EU, were keen on positioning themselves in relation to the new economic and natural resource policy by the EU. Valery Shlyamin, later to become the Trade Representative of the Russian Federation in Finland, particularly prepared a report on *Russia in the Northern Dimension* (Shlyamin 2002). Interestingly, the book contains statements such as "Russia on its part can also give a lot to the European Union. Based on its huge potential in science, culture, human resources and natural resources, Russia can make a valuable contribution into the future development of the EU" (Shlyamin 2002, 81). The Northern Dimension, therefore, seemed to come with a promise of bridging the Russian Federation to the European Union politically and economically.

As it turned out, the Northern Dimension seemed to vanish without having much effect. At the same time with the promotion of the EU's Northern Dimension, other developments were underway that were politically and territorially much more far-ranging. The Arctic Council was established in 1996 as an intergovernmental forum for promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, with the involvement of the Arctic indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants,

in particular on issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic (Arctic Council 2014). There are eight member states forming the Arctic Council: Canada, Denmark with Greenland and the Faroe Islands, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russian Federation, Sweden, and the United States.

The idea of being or not being Arctic is thoroughly mingled with political and economic aspirations. One perspective is provided by the debates over agriculture. Often, these debates culminate in the issues over state subsidies supporting agricultural production. During the negotiations about the membership of Finland in the European Union, the country that mostly lies below an elevation of 300 metres, was partly classified as mountainous area. Agriculture has been discussed earlier as well, as Varjo (1987) argued that as an agricultural country, Finland should not been seen as Arctic. Later on, there was also debate over the EU's rural policy and whether Finland could be seen as a wine-producing country. It was at risk of becoming the only EU member state without wine production, which was resisted by interest groups.

Pulling the debate towards the other extreme, the government of Finland recently prepared an Arctic strategy as a response to the geopolitical situation in which northern countries seek to find ways to benefit from the thrust to exploit northern resources and need to provide infrastructure in the region (Smith 2011). To this end, the arctic strategy makes the politically-laden statement that "Finland is an Arctic country" and "the people of Finland as a whole are Arctic" (Suomen arktinen strategia 2013, 15). It is also argued that climate, nature, geography, history and experiences have moulded the identity of the Finns, the political argumentation therefore resorting to environmental determinism. It is also stated that it is the increase in the weight of the Arctic region and the strengthened vision concerning Finland as an Arctic country that is the reason for revising the Arctic strategy (ibid., 7). Therefore, it seems much like being Arctic is a task for soul-searching.

Economic push factors and criticism

Of course, in making these claims on what the Arctic or Northernness is, potential economic benefits play a key role. This is exemplified by the quote: "Finland has built some 60% of the world's icebreakers and a number of different types of ice-going vessels to be used both in Arctic and Antarctic waters. Other Finnish actors have decades of experience in Arctic technology development in different construction, mining, forest and mechanical industry sectors" (Jumppanen 2013). The key to understanding the thrust towards the Arctic is the anticipated exploitation of natural resources and the economic multiplier impacts brought along. The ideas about the Arctic and also Northernness have transformed from being primarily related to identity or nature, to issues that are seen to bring about economic benefits. In effect, the Arctic and Northernness have been reduced to economic categories. Even when it comes to claims dealing with identity, such as in the governmental arctic strategy, it is the economy that is brought

to the foreground. Hereby lies also the heart of criticism from the part of some non-governmental organisations towards the arctic as a strategy or policy, as it is seen that an overemphasis on natural resources with economic value has been gaining supremacy over other argumentation, such as environmental or that related to indigenous communities (WWF 2014; Greenpeace 2014).

Conclusion

From some perspectives, Finland can clearly be called an Arctic country, even though the southern parts have a more moderate climate, as most of the country has sub-Arctic traits, harsh climate, limited biodiversity and sparse population. The occurrence of Arctic and sub-Arctic species, like reindeer and livelihoods based upon these species (reindeer herding, hunting and fishing), limited agricultural productivity with the use of much of the area for forestry, all clearly show that Finland is definitely not a country of the moderate latitudes, but clearly Boreal and sub-Arctic in nature. Also the Finnish North is rich in mineral resources, as gold, nickel, copper and other metals are found in many locations, and the economic value of these has increased making their exploitation economically viable. The possibility for improving transportation infrastructure to the Barents Sea, for example the building of a railroad connection to northern Norway can one day change the political and economic status of northern Finland in the not so distant future.

It has been maintained that natural resources that are envisioned to provide economic benefits have fundamental significance for human conquest of the Arctic. The same has applied to Northernness in recent decades. These are also the targets for criticism towards Arctic strategies with the environment and human communities argued to be at risk. As the last wilderness areas of Europe are being consumed ever faster, the need for international and national Arctic strategies is more than evident.

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