



# Deterrence and (Re)assurance in the High North

Finland and Norway Compared

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## Brief Summary

- Finland and Norway are both frontline states to Russia with a similar deterrence and defense strategy.
- Finland's geopolitical position as a frontline state is mainly defined by the long land border to Russia. Norway is predominantly a maritime frontline state.
- Norway is both a frontline state and a rear area for staging support to military operations in the Nordic Region.
- Geography is a factor influencing the different approaches in Finland and Norway to foreign military activity near Russia. Also, proximity to nuclear forces and test areas.

While the Nordic states pursue broadly similar security policies and strategies there are some differences. A key similarity is the dual approach to international integration. For all five countries, the main element is NATO-membership and participation

in the alliance's comprehensive system of collective deterrence and defense. Another similarity is a supplementary regime of bi- and multilateral security and defense cooperation and agreements with the U.S., Canada, and key European allies. Differences and nuances between the Nordic states are their foreign base policies, restrictions on foreign military activity, and geostrategic considerations.

After Finland and Sweden announced their intention to join NATO in 2022, commentators have discussed whether these new members states will align with the Norwegian security model of deterrence with reassurance of Russia. Finland's approach is of particular of interest due to the country's long border with Russia and proximity to the St. Petersburg and the Kola military base complexes. Finland has chosen a somewhat different approach, informed by the country's geostrategic environment and how their historical experiences influence security policies and strategies. This policy brief will mainly focus on similarities and differences between the frontline states Finland and Norway.

## Deterrence and reinforcement concepts

NATO's concept for deterrence has always relied on a mix between the nuclear weapons and conventional forces. For NATO's frontline states, deterrence and conventional defense requires that their national forces may be reinforced by Allies, either in peacetime or shortly after the onset of hostilities. Peacetime foreign military presence usually consists of infrastructure and materiel to support invitational exercises and rapid reinforcement in a crisis, in several countries also permanently based or rotationally deployed Allied forces. The underlying consideration is that an absence of preparations in peacetime for allied reinforcements in crisis and war can increase the strategic risk for a frontline state and reduce an adversary's threshold for aggression.

## Reassurance versus assurance

After joining NATO in 1949, Norway gradually adopted a dual security policy combining deterrence and reassurance of Russia. The intention behind this balancing was to maintain a firm defensive military stance, but not adopt a posture that could be viewed as threatening. The self-imposed limitations were also intended to dampen domestic skepticism towards USA and the alliance itself. Reassurance has been, and still is, maintained through the allied base policy, nuclear weapon policy, and geographical restrictions on allied activities near the Russian border. These are unilateral Norwegian declarations and measures, never covered by binding agreements with the Soviet Union or Russia, who have never reciprocated with similar measures of reassurance. This is a unilateral policy defined, adjusted and updated, and interpreted independently by Norway alone.

Within NATO it is more common to use the dual term deterrence and assurance in relation to the alliance policies of NATO's frontline members. USA, Canada, and European alliance members have since 2014 deployed forces to the Baltic region and later to other Eastern European states and the Black Sea region. The intent of NATO's forward presence model is to deter Russia and to assure governments and inhabitants that they are covered by the collective defense system. These deployments are thus conducted on an invitational basis to alleviate concerns among the NATO-member states. Assurance is particularly important to the NATO members who were Soviet Republics or Warsaw Pact members neighboring the Soviet Union during the Cold War. These countries share

a geopolitical situation and historical experiences differing significantly from their Western European allies. Finland also had a quite turbulent and strained relationship with the Soviet Union.

## Foreign Base Policies

All Nordic countries have bilateral defense agreements with several states. These agreements directly or indirectly enable military reinforcement in crisis and conflict, and include aspects such as information sharing, provisions for training/exercises, infrastructure, and pre-positioning of equipment. Some of these agreements also provide legal frameworks for foreign military forces when they deploy in peacetime for training, exercises, or other activities. The difference between the Nordic states is related to permanent stationing of foreign forces. Iceland and Denmark (Greenland) had/have permanently stationed U.S. military units. None of the other Nordic states have that option available for anyone.

Thus, Norway does not allow permanent bases with foreign combat units, but the "no foreign bases in peacetime in Norway" is a nuanced policy. Norway has since the 1950s approved the establishment of numerous facilities for NATO organizations and allied forces on its territory, including permanent NATO headquarters and centers. Furthermore, NATO's AWACS aircraft have a forward operating location with tailored facilities at Ørland Air Base. Supported by NATO's infrastructure funds and bilateral investments, many facilities have been established to support Allied air, ground, and naval operations. Prepositioning of materiel and other preparations for allied reinforcements have since the 1970s been a part of Norway's concept of deterrence and defense.

Norway has since the Cold War period formed its policy to allow prolonged deployments of allied forces conducting in-theater familiarization, seasonal training and participating in exercises. For instance, British and Dutch military forces have since the 1970s conducted their annual cold weather courses and training programs in Norway, currently using designated facilities in Northern Norway. Furthermore, U.S. and other European allied forces carry out training and exercises in Norway on a regular basis with an access to local military infrastructure.

## Foreign Military Activity in Norway

The regime for allowing foreign military activity in Norway has undergone several changes, primarily by removing or relaxing restrictions. In the early

1950s, allied naval vessels or military aircraft could not operate in Norway beyond 68° north (just south of Narvik). Pressure on this regime quickly arose primarily because allies could not train with Norwegian forces in the Ofoten and Troms areas. Over time, the demarcation line for foreign naval vessels and military aircraft was moved to 24° east, near Hammerfest, providing a buffer of about 250 km to the border. However, Allied ground forces had an even stricter regime and were not allowed to conduct any activities in Finnmark county.

In 1995, the Norwegian system underwent a major revision to facilitate allied training and exercises. The Ministry of Defense moved away from calling the regime "self-imposed restrictions", and instead created more "general guidelines" for a broader range of foreign military activity include forces from allied nations, partner nations as Finland, Sweden and Switzerland, and even Russia at the time.

For example, allied land forces units were allowed to participate in military exercises in Finnmark, but only with small units. Foreign military aircraft were also allowed beyond 24° east given specific authorization. The new provisions allow foreign military transport and passenger aircraft as well as helicopters to fly throughout almost all of Finnmark. However, a new buffer zone has been established at 28° east, serving as an absolute limit for flights with foreign fighter aircraft. Back in 2014 and 2015, French fighter aircraft were allowed to use Banak Air Station and the nearby Halkavarre weapons range, operating at least up to 26° east, as made possible by the revised provisions. Finnish F-18 aircraft have also flown into Finnmark from their own air bases in connection with Cross Border Training activities among Nordic air forces.

Allied surveillance and intelligence collection aircraft monitoring the Russian Northern Fleet and the Kola Peninsula base complex previously had to remain outside Norwegian airspace for the entire transit to and from the Barents Sea. In recent times, Norway has allowed American aircraft operating out of the UK to transit over mainland Norway up to the western part of Finnmark. From there, the aircraft must turn northward into international airspace before heading east into the Barents Sea.

A key consideration in Norwegian policy is the sensitivity due to proximity to the Russian strategic submarines with nuclear weapons on patrol in the Barents Sea and their support structure in the Kola Peninsula. Also, proximity to Russian test areas for new systems and weapons in the White Sea, Kola Peninsula and Barents Sea areas. These aspects are

important considerations and explains the Norwegian conservative approach to allied presence in Eastern Finnmark and the adjacent maritime areas.

## Foreign Military Activity in Finland

Finland and Sweden formed a strong bilateral bond right after the Cold War, and they both immediately became more extrovert. They have for instance participated in the U.S. Navy-led exercise BALTOPS in the Baltic Sea region since the early 1990s. U.S. and European military forces have been training and exercising in Finland long before the country considered applying for NATO membership. From 2013, military aircraft from other countries have used Finnish air bases to participate in the biannual Arctic Challenge Exercise, which takes place in the airspace of the northern parts of Finland, Sweden, and Norway. In addition, U.S. Air Force tankers have regularly flown over Finland twice a year to train Finnish fighter pilots. On the ground, units from the U.S. Marine Corps have, on several occasions, withdrawn equipment from their mountain storage facilities in Mid-Norway, crossed the border to neighboring countries, and participated in exercises with units from both the Finnish and Swedish Armed Forces. Parts of the NATO exercise Trident Juncture 2018, hosted by Norway, took place in Finland and Sweden, and in exercise Nordic Response 2024, the common exercise area covers large areas in all three states.

In 2022 and 2023, foreign units exercised more frequently in Finland to follow up on agreements for increased presence and assurance during the NATO application process, to follow up on security guarantees from the U.S. and other Allies. Ground forces, naval ships, marine corps units, and aircraft from the UK and the USA became frequent visitors in Finland. For instance, U.S. F-16s have been stationed at Rovaniemi Air Base, 150 km from the Russian border, to exercise with Finnish F-18s. At the end of 2023, Finland organized a major naval exercise in the Baltic Sea with about 20 ships from several NATO countries.

## Overflights by foreign military aircraft in Finland

In one area, the Finns have been notably more restrictive than their Nordic neighbors. In 2018, the U.S. Air Force established the called Bomber Task Force (BTF) operation as part of the Dynamic Force Employment program. Bomber aircraft have sporadically deployed from the United States to other parts of the world and flown alongside regional allied air forces. Both B-1B, B-2, and B-52 bomber aircraft have flown in the Nordic region to interact

with Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish military aircraft. In some cases, U.S. bomber aircraft have operated out of Ørland in Norway or Keflavik in Iceland in connection with BTF deployments to Europe. In Norway, BTF missions have occurred as far north as Troms, but not in Finnmark. So far, none of the missions have taken place over Finland, and Finnish fighter aircraft have therefore only practiced with U.S. bomber aircraft elsewhere in the Nordic region. The sole exception is a single flyover by two B-1Bs at a Finnish air show. The U.S. strategic bombers have never deployed to Finland. However, BTF missions over Finland may be allowed in the future.

In another category of military overflight, the Finns are far less restrictive than Norway. Since 2023, Finland has allowed U.S. RC-135 Rivet Joint surveillance and intelligence aircraft operating from RAF Mildenhall in the UK to fly along the entire Finnish border with Russia from the Gulf of Finland up to Lake Inari in the north next to the Russian base complex on the Kola Peninsula. These U.S. aircraft apparently receive a diplomatic clearance flexible enough to fly less than 50 km from the Russian border at certain locations. Signals reconnaissance aircraft (Korpen) from the Swedish Air Force are also allowed to fly missions in Finland close to the border to Russia.

## Finland and Norway compared

Geography is a factor influencing the various approaches in Finland and Norway regarding foreign military activity near Russia. Norway has only a 198 km land border with Russia in the eastern part of

one county state. Therefore, a limit at 24° east has little significance for the possibilities of allied training and exercises in Norway at large. If Finland were to establish a similarly 250 km buffer zone against the Russian border, large parts of Finland and almost all of Northern Finland would be inaccessible for allied training and exercises. Finland has a 1340 km long border with Russia from the Gulf of Finland in the south to the tripoint border marker in Pasvik, and the country is only 100-500 km wide. Thus, Finland must have a smaller buffer than Norway to facilitate allied military activity, a strategic precondition for credible deterrence. Limited options dictated by geography can also explain why the northernmost U.S. Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) facilities in Norway are approximately 450 km away from Russia, and Finland has two DCA sites only 50 km from the border.

Finland's geopolitical position as a frontline state is mainly defined by the long land border to Russia. Norway has only a small land border to Russia in the north. However, Norway a principal frontline state by considering both the land border and the maritime border areas as the Barents Sea and Svalbard with adjacent waters. Also, the prospects of Russian naval and air operations even in the Norwegian Sea and North Atlantic areas are all major considerations in Norwegian security and defense policies and strategies. Norway has also a vast geostrategic rear area and depth compared to Finland. Thus, Norway is both a frontline state and a transit area for reinforcements and logistics to support military operations throughout the northern part of the Nordic Region.

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