



Trump II: A new trajectory in Russia relations for NATO Nordic states

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Summary

- The incoming Trump administration will replace the policy of “stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes” with “making a deal with Russia”. This might entail de-escalation with Russia as well as economic and security burden-sharing with Europe. Norway and its now NATO neighbours Sweden and Finland have a window of opportunity to develop new policy for the second Trump term.
- An adjusted approach to relations with Russia in the North can be devised that draws on Norwegian traditions in its relations with Russia. This approach will differ from the UK, Poland and the Baltic States but can represent a fruitful model of NATO membership for the Nordic states.
- Despite a significant decline in military tension in the North since 2022, the risk of a future security competition with Russia and Nordic NATO members should not be downplayed. Presuming Russia is a status quo power in the North, NATO should have a clear and predictable posture in the North that combines deterrence and reassurance.
- Russia should not be treated as a monolithic entity; there are moderates that would welcome diplomacy with Nordic NATO neighbours. Backchannel contacts between Russia and the Nordic NATO states can develop the outlines of an adjusted security posture for the North that could be received favourably by the new Trump Administration as it attempts to open negotiations to end the war in Ukraine.

Introduction

The past few years have transformed Norway's situation on its Northern border with the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has seriously worsened relations with NATO countries while paradoxically causing a de-escalation of military tension in the North since 2022 (Åtland et al 2024). The US stance on the North, already shifting in Biden's 2022 [National Strategy for the Arctic Region](#) (NSAR), will again be altered by the incoming Trump administration, which, notwithstanding recent talk about annexing Greenland, is expected to seek a deal with Russia in Ukraine to free up resources for other priorities. In the process, more of the security burden will be moved to European NATO members.

The situation is in flux, but this may be an appropriate juncture for Norway to reassess how it will work with Sweden and Finland to calibrate its posture to Russia in the North. Although Norway's [official statements](#) have often been consistent with the government policy of balancing deterrence and reassurance towards Russia, in practice Oslo has followed the common NATO trend of emphasising the deterrence and containment of Russia since February 2022. On the face of it, the NATO Nordic states adopt the forward-leaning deterrence strategy of the UK, Poland and the Baltic States. The leaders of Norway, Sweden and Finland have all supported upping military support to Ukraine and were among the first to advocate a green light for deep strikes into Russian territory. Yet, if we shift our gaze away from Ukraine and to the North, things are developing rather differently. Here it can be argued a stronger alignment to Norway's historical policy line to Russia relations – reworked with new NATO members Finland and Sweden – could produce a more effective approach in these turbulent and changing times. Recalibrating the balance of deterrence and reassurance can generate a new sense of autonomy and manoeuvre within the NATO alliance that is appropriate to the coming changes to US and – possibly – Russian foreign policy. Trump's statements on Greenland may herald a new confrontation with Russia in the Arctic – or lead to a new deal. Nordic NATO states should prepare for both eventualities.

The new situation in the North: worsened relations combined with military de-escalation

Norway, Finland, Sweden are finally together as

NATO members at a historical moment when Russia-NATO relations have never been worse. On the Russian side, the belief that NATO is using Ukraine as a proxy to inflict a strategic defeat, regime change and state collapse on Russia has become even more [mainstream](#). The Kremlin claims resisting NATO in Ukraine is an existential struggle for Russia as a state. This is widely accepted in Russian society; the Russian leadership has repeatedly signalled its willingness to go all the way and use nuclear weapons if Western “escalation” continues. Meanwhile, in the West the most negative view of Russia as an aggressive, expansionist, and terrorist state has become mainstream. It has been repeatedly stated that Russia seeks the downfall of the “rule-based order”, to completely conquer Ukraine before setting its sights on new expansion Westward. NATO discourse is now emphasising the global nature of the threat, pointing to the help China, Iran and North Korea have given Russia and demanding significant new defence spending for global confrontations in multiple theatres.

In this tense standoff, Norway is no longer seen by Moscow as the “in-between state” of the last Cold War, inside NATO but moderate to Russia and balancing deterrence and reassurance. Instead, together with Finland and Sweden, Norway is now part of a trio of frontline NATO states facing a radicalised Russia and low level [hybrid threats](#) in the North. This leads some to argue the NATO Nordic states should mirror the hardline deterrence of Poland and the Baltic States, who are also on the frontline with Russia.

It is important to note, however, that since 2022 there has been a noticeable [reduction](#) in Russian military deployments and exercises close to NATO waters compared to the previous phase of tit-for-tat “[coercive signalling](#)”. Fully committed with its war on Ukraine, Russia has avoided provocative military actions in the North, although low intensity hybrid warfare continues. NATO, although stretched in supporting Ukraine's war effort, has made some [progress](#) with ambitious plans for the military integration of Norway, Finland and Sweden. On the other hand, US defence spending is at a historic [low](#) as a % of GDP; European NATO forces are way below Cold War levels and perhaps less than is needed for basic deterrence.

Meanwhile, in spite of radical militarisation in recent years, Russia still operates as a [status quo power](#) in the North not inclined to act as it

has in East-Southern Europe and the Caucasus. Russia has crucial military-strategic assets on the Kola Peninsula that are central to its nuclear deterrence strategy. As climate change and reduced sea ice make the Arctic more accessible for military activity, Russia will be increasingly anxious that its [control](#) of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF) may be threatened. Any NATO military deployments perceived as threatening Russia's "Bastion defence" – and therefore the viability of the Northern Fleet and Russia's Second-Strike capabilities – are likely to elicit an aggressive response from Moscow, including nuclear brinkmanship (Åtland et al 2024).

The above highlights the danger of a future security competition in the North. It is worth underlining that we are still at the initial stages of NATO integration in the North. Norway has [granted](#) the US military exclusive rights to access 12 Norwegian bases. Sweden and Finland have made similar bilateral agreements with Washington. It has been [argued](#) that a large expansion of US and NATO military presence in the North enhances security, increases deterrence and stretches Russia's resources. However, there is little reason to believe the formula of "more weapons equals more peace"; new military systems deployed defensively may be perceived as containing an offensive capacity that is destabilizing. Security competition and the lack of a stable and agreed upon set of operating principles are more likely to spark a spiralling security dilemma pregnant with the [risk of dangerous miscalculations](#).

Pre-empting Trump: reducing tensions and sharing the burden

Even before the 2024 Presidential elections there were signals that the US wanted to reduce tensions with Russia in the North. The US [2024 DoD Arctic Strategy](#) and the 2022 NSAR advocated a "monitor and respond" approach to defence while prioritising on the rising challenge of China. Although the exact policies are unknown, the incoming Trump administration has signalled it will go even further in this direction, ending the Biden administration stance of non-engagement with Russia and full support for Ukraine. Furthermore, in the process of negotiating an end to the war in Ukraine, it is likely Trump will demand that European NATO allies take more responsibility for the security burden in relation to Russia. All of this creates a clear demand in Washington for proposals from NATO allies to reduce tensions and create

more stable regional security settlements with Russia.

This demand is also present within Russia. A close reading of Kremlin discourse over 2024 shows a repeated claim of willingness to enter negotiations on a security deal with NATO. Its terms for a peace in Ukraine are harsh but are not set as preconditions to opening talks. Although several prominent officials such as Maria Zakharova, Dmitri Medvedev and Nikolay Patrushev produce hawkish rhetoric on Nordic NATO states, which is then amplified in state media, this is only part of the picture. There are a number of more pragmatic voices in Russian [expert circles](#) that argue against provocative first moves in the North and advocate [resuming cooperation](#) with the Nordic states at the first opportunity. Furthermore, although public opinion is behind President Putin in Russia, there is also a strong [desire for peace](#) in Ukraine among his supporters. Putin's [reduced attention](#) to the war in his major addresses across 2024 is likely to be a response to inhouse polling and focus group data showing war fatigue in the country. The Kremlin is apparently [preparing](#) regional heads and United Russia leaders to appeal to the "calm majority" and distance themselves from the radical "party of war" in 2025.

New trajectories in relations between Nordic NATO states and Russia

The Nordic NATO states are under the protection of article 5 and a nuclear umbrella; Russia is relatively secure in its defensive posture around its "Bastion". There is a common interest in avoiding escalations. Yet, even before 2022 experts criticised the lack of a [recognised security architecture](#) for the region. Discussions on the benefits of restraint and reinforced diplomacy in the North, would help prepare the public for the new era sparked by Trump's election victory. Nordic NATO-Russia back channels could lead to a different range of diplomatic solutions to tensions in the region that would fit with and even pre-empt the post-Biden NATO future. A range of objectives could be targeted in these discussions:

- Clarifying deterrence by creating a recognised ["military code of conduct"](#) for the North: discussions on the scale and location of deployments; guidelines and timetables for military exercises; demarking defensive ["choke points"](#) and limiting forward deployments.

- Generating points of reassurance: transparency on NATO deployment and integration plans in the North and clarification of their non-offensive nature. Open rejection of “strategic ambiguity” from both sides, emphasising the mutual benefits of restraint; establishing limits on economic warfare.
- The use of carrots to encourage diplomacy, such as resuming pre-2022 cooperation on non-security matters such as the environment and transport. Limited resumption of scientific and technological ties is also an option. Although Arctic Council cooperation has been paused on state-to-state level, its Working Group meetings were [resumed](#) in 2024 under Norway’s [chairship](#).
- Consolidation of the [existing](#) hot lines and similar communication channels between Oslo, Helsinki, Stockholm and Moscow to minimise misunderstandings and risks in the event of sudden crisis.

We do not assume it will be easy to create such an adjusted common position among the three Nordic neighbours. Ending strategic ambiguity, for example, is a marginal view in Finland but a more accepted one in Norway. Yet, if progress is made in the above areas, the governments of the Nordic NATO states will have important gains in the realm of security. Such initiatives stop short of some radical new *Ostpolitik* to Russia; Nordic NATO countries would continue close

collaboration with other NATO partners. What it would give, however, is a distinct Nordic model of NATO membership in relation to Russia that more adequately reflects both the projected shift in US foreign policy and the security interests of the Nordic states. Even if the new NATO-Russia Cold War continues for many decades, the resultant security stabilisation of such an approach is likely to have knock on gains in other areas further down the road. A new trajectory in the North may form the nucleus of a more stable order – regardless of what happens next in the current unpredictable international environment.

References

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