NORPOLFACTOR WP 3

Poland and Norway in their regional strategic contexts

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1 The regional context of policymaking: how to understand it?

There are several reasons why regional security cooperation should be developed. First, it is often so that various types of security challenges countries encounter have a regional dimension. For instance, countries in the southern part of Europe have over the past decades faced security challenges, risks and threats related to uncontrolled movement of people seeking a better life in Europe. Further north and east, countries bordering an increasingly aggressive Russia must deal with a different set of security challenges, risks and threats, and strengthened regional cooperation can help them address this type of issues in the most efficient manner.

Another good reason for developing regional cooperation in Europe is that most European countries are members of organisations that address problems from various parts of the security spectrum, and decisions on common actions in both the EU and NATO are based on consensus. This can be problematic in organisations with 27 and 32 members respectively who must often deal with different types of security challenges. Regional cooperation on common regional challenges can therefore be a part of the solution to this institutional 'consensus seeking dilemma'.

Finally, only a few EU and NATO members have the strategic deterrence potential to deter adversaries from launching various types of covert and overt operations against them. Regional cooperation can therefore not only help the countries in question to be better prepared for different types of security risks, challenges or threats, but such arrangements also send a strong deterrence message to potential aggressors.

The previous NORPOLFACTOR reports emphasized that Poland's and Norway's strategic calculations were heavily influenced by their self-perceptions and the significant asymmetry in strategic potentials between them and Russia. By strengthening regional cooperation with other countries facing the Russia challenge, both Norway and Poland can improve their strategic positions vis-à-vis Russia, as demonstrated in Table 1. The table demonstrates how strategic regional cooperation can contribute to changing the strategic calculus and increase the deterrence potential vis-à-vis Russia. In this table we have summed up IISS data available in the 2024 edition of the IISS Military Balance, comparing how various regional cooperation formats can change the parameters of the strategic balance sheet in relations between Russia and countries that have developed, or are about to develop, various forms of regional cooperation. In this table we look at how strategic asymmetries between Russia and countries embarking on various forms of regional cooperation vary depending on which partners are involved. The table presents a set of basic data on Russia and compare how regional cooperation among countries that face the Russian challenge can change these strategic parameters. Here we look at the key parameters of the Visegrad cooperation involving Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary; the Weimar 3 cooperation involving Poland, Germany and France; the countries that have joined the 3 Seas Initiative; countries cooperating withing the Bucharest 9 framework; the Nordic strategic cooperation; and finally, the strategic balance sheet between what we define as Baltic NATO (four Nordic countries, the three Baltic states, Poland, Germany) and Russia.

Regional cooperation frameworks: changing parameters of strategic asymmetry vis-à-vis Russia[1]

	Russia	Poland	Norway	Visegrad	Weimar Triangle	B9	Nordics	Baltic NATO
Area (in sq.km)	17 098 246	2%	2%	3%	7%	6%	7%	12%
Population (in million, 2022)	144	26%	4%	45%	133%	66%	19%	109%
GDP (in $bn, 2024)	1 900	46%	30%	85%	455%	118%	100%	400%
Defence budget (in $bn, 2023)	143	22%	6%	32%	122%	43%	23%	103%
Armed forces (2023)	1 100 000	9%	2%	16%	44%	29%	7%	36%
MBT Tanks	1 750	27%	2%	34%	57%	61%	22%	68%
AIFV	4 050	31%	2%	45%	64%	58%	17%	69%
APC	4 700	9%	8%	19%	81%	46%	60%	96%
ARTY	4 397	15%	4%	20%	26%	59%	44%	74%
Navy, submarines	50	2%	12%	2%	32%	2%	20%	34%
Navy, principal surface combatants	33	6%	12%	6%	106%	24%	27%	67%
Aircraft (combat capable)	1 415	6%	3%	10%	44%	15%	20%	42%
Helicopters, ASW/ATC	415	5%	3%	14%	44%	16%	5%	28%
Air defence SAM	2 656	6%	0%	8%	9%	12%	2%	9%

2 Regional dimension of Polish foreign and security policy

Poland's approach to regional security cooperation in addressing challenges arising from Russia's war of aggression is deeply embedded in its broader national security strategy. The country's defence policy is guided by a comprehensive framework of military preparedness, alliance-building, and regional engagement, as outlined in Poland's National Security Strategy (2020).[2] Poland views regional cooperation as a key pillar of its national defence, complementing its commitment to NATO and broader transatlantic security arrangements.

As a frontline state in NATO's eastern flank, Poland has consistently pursued a strategy of strengthening its national defence capabilities through multilateral and bilateral security cooperation. Poland's membership in NATO remains the cornerstone of its defence policy, ensuring deterrence and collective defence under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Alongside NATO, Poland places significant importance on its strategic partnership with the United States, which is reflected in the stationing of U.S. troops on Polish territory, joint military exercises, and defence procurement agreements aimed at modernizing the Polish Armed Forces. This bilateral cooperation with the U.S. includes initiatives such as the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) and Poland's participation in NATO's defence and deterrence posture.[3]

Regional security cooperation plays a crucial role in Poland's defence planning, particularly in response to the evolving security environment following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Poland has prioritized strengthening security collaboration within regional formats such as the Bucharest Nine (B9), the Visegrad Group (V4), the Weimar Triangle, and the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). These platforms allow Poland to coordinate security policies with neighboring states that share common geopolitical concerns, particularly regarding Russian aggression and hybrid threats.[4]

The Bucharest Nine, a coalition of NATO's eastern flank countries, has become an essential forum for aligning regional security policies and advocating for a robust NATO presence in Central and Eastern Europe. Through this platform, Poland has actively pushed for increased NATO deployments, enhanced air and missile defence systems, and greater intelligence-sharing mechanisms. The group's role in shaping NATO's strategic approach to deterring Russia has been reinforced by growing defence commitments from allied states.

The Visegrad Group remains an important element of Poland's regional security engagement, despite political divergences among its members, particularly regarding their stance on Russia. Poland continues to work within this format to address common security concerns, especially in the fields of defence modernization, border security, and countering hybrid threats. While the V4's effectiveness in coordinating a unified response to Russia's aggression has been

limited, Poland sees value in maintaining security cooperation within this group, particularly in non-military areas such as cyber defence and defence-industrial collaboration.[5]

The Weimar Triangle – comprising Poland, France, and Germany – has gained renewed significance in Poland's security strategy, particularly in the context of European defence policy. Poland has been advocating for a more cohesive European security approach, emphasizing the need for a strong NATO-EU partnership. Given the deteriorating security situation in Europe, Poland has sought to leverage this format to enhance defence-industrial cooperation, intelligence sharing, and strategic coordination with key European partners.

Poland has also expanded its security cooperation within the Three Seas Initiative, a regional economic and infrastructure-focused platform that indirectly supports security resilience by improving military mobility and energy security. The initiative, which brings together twelve Central and Eastern European states, is seen as a crucial mechanism for strengthening regional cohesion and reducing dependence on Russian energy sources.

Bilateral security cooperation remains a key aspect of Poland's defence strategy. In addition to its strategic partnership with the United States, Poland has deepened military and security ties with the United Kingdom, Germany, France, South Korea and the Nordic and Baltic states. Cooperation with the Baltic states, in particular, has intensified due to shared concerns over Russia's military activities in the region. Poland's defence concept is based on a multi-layered approach that integrates national military capabilities, allied reinforcement strategies, and regional security cooperation. The Total Defence Concept, which involves the mobilization of civilian resources in support of military operations, has been increasingly emphasized in Poland's security planning. Civil-military cooperation, cybersecurity preparedness, and the strengthening of critical infrastructure resilience are seen as essential components of national and regional security.

The most recent assessments from Polish defence and foreign policy institutions highlight the need to further adapt Poland's security strategy to the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. The enlargement of NATO, particularly with Finland and Sweden joining the alliance, presents new opportunities for Poland to deepen military cooperation in the Nordic-Baltic region. Additionally, the evolving security dynamics in the European Union, including debates over European strategic autonomy and defence spending, have led Poland to advocate for a NATO-first approach while simultaneously engaging with EU-led security initiatives.

In light of the ongoing war in Ukraine, Poland has significantly increased its defence spending, modernized its military capabilities, and expanded its defence-industrial base. The procurement of advanced weapons systems, such as the HIMARS rocket artillery, F-35 fighter jets, and the South Korean K2 tanks, underscores Poland's commitment to strengthening its deterrence and defence posture. These efforts are closely linked to Poland's broader strategy of ensuring that regional security cooperation complements and reinforces NATO's collective defence mechanisms.

Poland's bilateral security cooperation

Poland's bilateral security cooperation has evolved significantly, shaped by historical alliances and shifting geopolitical realities. France has long been a strategic partner, with ties dating back to the Valois dynasty and the Napoleonic era. While France was Poland's key security guarantor during the interwar period, post-Cold War relations lacked the same intensity as Paris focused on Africa and Southern Europe, while Warsaw prioritized NATO integration and strengthened ties with the United States. Relations deteriorated further in the early 2000s due to Poland's support for the Iraq War and the cancellation of an Airbus helicopter deal. However, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has prompted a reassessment. French President Emmanuel Macron, alarmed by Russia's actions and its growing influence in Africa, has pushed for greater engagement in Eastern Europe. Poland's pro-European government under Donald Tusk has provided a new opportunity to revitalize the relationship. France has expanded its military presence in Eastern Europe, particularly through NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in Estonia and Romania, and is also strengthening defence ties with Moldova. Shared interests in sustaining military aid to Ukraine, expanding EU defence production, and increasing joint procurement make Poland an attractive security partner. Deeper ties with France could also elevate Poland's standing within the EU, particularly in the Weimar Triangle, while offering France a counterweight to tensions with Germany in defence policy.

Poland's security cooperation with the United Kingdom is anchored in a long history of mutual defence commitments, dating back to the 1939 Anglo-Polish military alliance. In the post-Cold War era, the UK remained a close defence partner, granting equal rights to Polish workers upon Poland's EU accession in 2004, fostering strong social ties. Recent years have seen a deepening of military collaboration. The 2017 Treaty on Defence and Security Cooperation formalized joint efforts in military training, intelligence sharing, and defence procurement. The UK has also been a key contributor to NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Poland. The signing of the '2030 Partnership' in 2023 further solidified bilateral ties, while the 2022 Poland-UK-Ukraine trilateral pact highlighted a shared commitment to regional security. In early 2025, Poland and the UK initiated negotiations on a Defence and Security Treaty, signaling a further strengthening of their strategic partnership amid growing concerns over European security.

Germany remains Poland's largest economic partner in Europe, yet security and defence cooperation has often been strained by differing strategic priorities. Poland viewed Germany's pre-2022 defence posture as overly cautious, particularly in its approach to Russia, which was shaped by diplomatic engagement and economic dependencies such as the Nord Stream pipelines. However, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine triggered a major shift in Berlin's security policy. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's 'Zeitenwende' (turning point) policy promised increased defence spending and a more active role in European security, opening new avenues for cooperation. Germany's decision to supply Leopard 2 tanks and air defence systems to Ukraine, despite initial reluctance, demonstrated this shift. Poland and Germany already collaborate through NATO's EFP in Lithuania and participate in joint defence industry projects, including the modernization of Poland's Leopard tanks. However, tensions remain over Germany's perceived hesitancy in military aid to Ukraine and the slow pace of its military transformation. Despite these challenges, Germany's increased investment in European defence, particularly in boosting EU defence production, presents opportunities for Poland to shape the future of European security frameworks. Energy security is another area of evolving cooperation, as Germany's pivot away from Russian gas increases its reliance on alternative energy supplies, including Poland's LNG infrastructure.

Poland's defence cooperation with South Korea has expanded rapidly since 2022, making Seoul one of Warsaw's most significant non-NATO security partners. Faced with the urgent need to modernize and expand its armed forces following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine,

Poland turned to South Korea's defence industry for large-scale acquisitions. In a landmark deal, Poland ordered K2 Black Panther main battle tanks, K9 Thunder self-propelled howitzers, FA-50 light combat aircraft, and K239 Chunmoo multiple rocket launchers. This partnership is not only enhancing Poland's military capabilities but also establishing long-term industrial and technological cooperation, as part of the weapons will be produced and maintained in Poland. South Korea's ability to provide advanced military hardware on short timelines has made it an attractive partner, and Poland's large-scale purchases have positioned it as Seoul's key European defence customer. The deepening cooperation with South Korea reflects Poland's strategy of diversifying its defence suppliers beyond traditional NATO partners, strengthening its deterrence capabilities, and securing access to cutting-edge military technology.

Norway is a crucial partner for Poland in energy security, maritime defence, and regional cooperation. Poland's decision to cut off Russian gas imports in 2022 made Norway one of its primary energy suppliers, facilitated by the Baltic Pipe, which became operational in October 2022. Defence cooperation is embedded within NATO, with both countries emphasizing maritime security in response to increasing Russian naval activity. Norway has supplied Poland with Naval Strike Missiles (NSM), enhancing Poland's coastal defence and acquired Polish Piorun MANPADS to strengthen its air-defence capabilities.

The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO in 2023–2024 has fundamentally reshaped the security landscape of Northern and Eastern Europe. Poland and Finland share similar threat perceptions regarding Russia, given their historical experiences and geographic positioning. Finland's extensive territorial defence model and Poland's rapid military expansion create opportunities for joint training and interoperability within NATO. Poland's acquisition of K9 Thunder howitzers aligns with Finland's artillery modernization, offering opportunities for shared logistics and maintenance strategies. Sweden's NATO membership has further strengthened naval security ties with Poland, particularly in the Baltic Sea. Both countries have long collaborated on Baltic security, and their joint leadership in the Eastern Partnership Initiative reflects a shared commitment to supporting Ukraine and other post-Soviet states. The Polish and Swedish navies are increasingly engaged in joint maritime exercises, responding to Russian hybrid threats targeting undersea infrastructure.

Poland's security relationship with the Baltic States – Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – is one of the most strategically interdependent in the region. Poland plays a critical role in defending the Suwałki Gap, the narrow land corridor between Belarus and Kaliningrad that serves as NATO's only direct connection to the Baltic States. In the event of a conflict, this corridor would be a primary route for NATO reinforcements, making Poland's military presence essential to Baltic security. Poland leads NATO's EFP battalion in Lithuania and regularly conducts joint exercises such as BALTOPS and Saber Strike. In addition to conventional military cooperation, Poland and the Baltic States are intensifying efforts to counter hybrid threats, including cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns originating from Russia. The growing integration of Poland and the Baltic States into a broader Nordic-Baltic security framework, especially following Finland and Sweden's NATO accession, ensures a more cohesive regional deterrence posture.[6]

Poland in the existing multilateral regional networks

Weimar Triangle

Poland France Germany

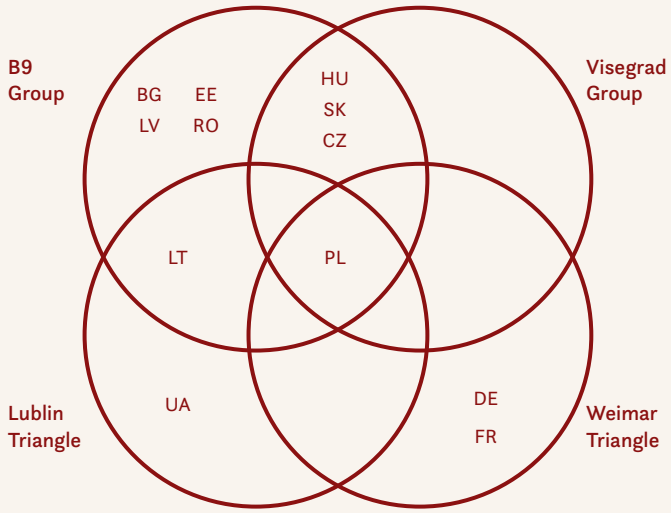
The Weimar Triangle, formed in 1991 by the foreign ministers of Poland, Germany, and France, aimed to support Central and Eastern Europe's transition to Western institutions. It played a crucial role in Poland's path to EU and NATO membership, fostering political and economic reforms while promoting regional integration. In its early years, the format was instrumental in advancing Poland's European aspirations and reassuring sceptical voices, particularly in France, about the benefits of Eastern enlargement. Following Poland's EU accession in 2004, the Weimar Triangle's relevance declined, with engagement shifting to bilateral and broader EU-focused initiatives. Despite efforts to revive it, sporadic meetings were held until a renewed push in 2011, driven by economic and security challenges across Europe. However, the format struggled to establish long-term initiatives. The 2014 annexation of Crimea reignited diplomatic cooperation within the Weimar Triangle, with joint efforts to support Ukraine's European aspirations and coordinate sanctions against Russia. Despite increased engagement, Poland was not directly involved in the Minsk agreements, which limited the Triangle's effectiveness in conflict resolution. By 2017, political shifts and divergent national priorities led to a period of diminished activity. However, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 prompted a resurgence of interest, with a series of high-level meetings focusing on military aid, European security, and NATO's Eastern flank.

The change of government in Poland in late 2023 further bolstered the importance of the Weimar Triangle, with policymakers and experts increasingly viewing it as a potential driving force within the EU. However, rather than serving as a new engine of European integration, the Weimar Triangle should be seen as a platform for generating pan-European initiatives. Security concerns have historically fueled its activity, yet the strategic outlooks of Poland, Germany, and France often diverge significantly. Poland, as a frontline state on NATO's Eastern Flank, Germany, as the EU's economic powerhouse, and France, as the Union's leading military force, each bring distinct perspectives to the table. Despite these differences, consensus among the three countries carries substantial weight, often influencing broader EU decision-making, as smaller member states tend to align with one of these key players.

The functional Berlin-Paris axis has traditionally been critical in shaping the EU's direction. The authority of these two major players has consistently propelled the Union's agenda forward. The inclusion of Poland in their discussions through the Weimar Triangle format allows Warsaw to provide a much-needed Eastern perspective at a time when regional security is under increasing strain. Historically, the Weimar Triangle's activity has fluctuated in response to security crises, thriving in times of tension and receding during periods of stability. Its coordination of strategic efforts has added value to European security, yet maintaining consistent momentum has proven challenging.

The current momentum behind the Weimar Triangle is likely to persist, as the format holds significant political value, particularly given Poland's role as an impartial facilitator of dialogue between France and Germany. At a time when Paris and Berlin face challenges in advancing the EU agenda bilaterally, Poland can act as a bridge, elevating difficult negotiations from a bilateral to a trilateral level. However, substantial groundwork remains. Franco-German cooperation is anchored in the Aachen Treaty of 2019, which mandates regular consultations and even joint parliamentary sessions. In contrast, Poland lacks comparable agreements with either France or Germany. While Warsaw is expected

Diagram of alliances and allied organisations in the Central Eastern Europe



to formalize a treaty with Paris this year, Germany's leading candidate for the chancellorship has signaled interest in a similar pact with Poland[7]. If all three agreements are concluded bilaterally, they could lay the foundation for a comprehensive trilateral treaty, further institutionalizing the Weimar Triangle framework.

Thus far, cooperation within the Weimar Triangle has been largely confined to isolated initiatives. However, two key milestones illustrate how this format can generate tangible added value in the defence sphere. At last year's Weimar Triangle defence ministers' summit in Warsaw, the three nations announced a joint military exercise set to take place in Poland in 2025, alongside a commitment to enhancing military mobility[8]. Additionally, on the sidelines of the NATO Washington Summit in 2024, Poland, France, and Germany – alongside Italy – signed a memorandum of understanding to co-develop ground-launched cruise missiles with a range exceeding 500 kilometres[9]. This underscores the Weimar Triangle's potential to transcend its core membership, fostering broader coalitions and reinforcing its inclusive rather than exclusive nature. Crucially, the Weimar Triangle remains an EU-centred initiative and should be interpreted within this framework. Poland actively advocates for expanding cooperation by integrating other key European actors – such as Spain and Italy, forming the so-called *EU Big Five* – and engaging the United Kingdom in ministerial consultations and strategic partnerships.

Poland's engagement in the Weimar Triangle is particularly significant from a security perspective, as it seeks to bolster the EU's strategic autonomy amid growing uncertainty over the United States' long-term commitment to Europe and NATO. Warsaw regards the format as a crucial mechanism for enhancing EU defence capabilities and solidifying the Union's position as a credible security actor. Moreover, Poland aspires to play a more decisive role in shaping Europe's future security architecture, ensuring that its strategic interests are adequately represented.[10] Warsaw is keen to avoid a repeat of past exclusions, such as during the Minsk agreements, which were negotiated within the Normandy Format without Polish participation – despite Poland's persistent concerns and objections regarding the process.[11]

One of the major areas of divergence within the Weimar Triangle concerns the defence industry. France has criticized Poland's extensive procurement of non-European military equipment, arguing that it undermines EU defence capabilities. However, Poland, facing immediate security threats, has prioritized acquiring arms from the United States and South Korea to rapidly strengthen its defence posture. Despite record-high military spending, Poland's domestic defence industry remains underdeveloped, still burdened by its post-Soviet legacy. From Poland's perspective, EU military funding should not be directed solely towards established defence giants such as France and Germany but should also support the modernization of emerging defence industries across the EU.

With Poland, Germany, and France representing the EU's three largest military spenders, the Weimar Triangle is uniquely positioned to shape the Union's future defence investment strategies. Poland argues that increased EU defence spending, if properly structured, could serve as a catalyst for broader economic growth – something the EU urgently needs. However, the benefits of these investments must be equitably distributed across member states to ensure greater involvement and commitment to collective security initiatives. A fairer distribution of defence-related economic opportunities could encourage more member states to participate actively in EU security initiatives, fostering greater unity and resilience within the bloc.[12]

The Bucharest Nine

Bulgaria
Czechia
Estonia
Hungary
Latvia
Lithuania
Poland
Romania
Slovakia

The Bucharest Nine (B9) was formally established on 4 November 2015, as a joint initiative by Polish President Andrzej Duda and Romanian President Klaus Iohannis. Bringing together NATO's Eastern Flank countries – Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia – the B9 was conceived in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Its primary aim has been to provide a forum for aligning the security policies of member states with NATO's broader strategic objectives, particularly in the areas of collective defence and regional stability and presenting them as a common front to the rest of the allies.[13]

The creation of the B9 was preceded by a series of consultations initiated by Poland and Romania in 2014, as the security environment in Eastern Europe deteriorated following Russia's aggression in Ukraine. The inaugural summit in Bucharest in 2015 marked the beginning of a platform designed to give the Eastern Flank countries a unified voice in NATO. From its inception, the B9 has emphasized strengthening NATO's deterrence posture, particularly through the deployment of allied forces and infrastructure along the Eastern Flank.[14]

In its formative years, the B9 played a critical role in advocating for NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP). At the June 2018 summit, Polish President Andrzej Duda underscored the importance of NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia, reflecting the B9's commitment to supporting nations vulnerable to Russian aggression.[15] Similarly, during the 10 May 2021 summit, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis called for a stronger NATO military presence on the Eastern Flank in response to Russian troop build ups near Ukraine's borders, a call that resonated across the B9 members.[16]

The B9's relevance was dramatically heightened by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.[17] An extraordinary summit, convened in Warsaw on 25 February 2022 at the initiative of President Duda, brought together

The B9 summit in Warsaw in February 2023 joined by the president of the USA – Joe Biden and NATO Secretary General – Jens Stoltenberg.

B9 leaders alongside President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen. During this meeting, the B9 pledged comprehensive support for Ukraine, including military, economic, and humanitarian aid. Following this, the 10 June 2022 virtual summit joined by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg reiterated calls for increasing NATO's presence in the Eastern flank and coordinating positions ahead of the 2022 Madrid summit.

The 22 February 2023 summit, held in Warsaw was diplomatically significant as joint by the U.S. President Joe Biden and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. It further solidified the B9's importance. The joint declaration from the summit in one year after the Russia full scale invasion against Ukraine condemned the aggression and continued to call for an enhanced and permanent NATO military presence in the region. Biden's participation underscored the United States' commitment to the security of NATO's Eastern Flank and reinforced transatlantic solidarity and solidified the commitment to defend every inch of NATO's territory.[18]

The 11 June 2024 summit in Riga, the first hosted outside Poland, Romania, or Slovakia, marked a turning point for the B9. For the first time, Finnish President Alexander Stubb and Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson attended, signalling the potential expansion of the platform to include NATO's newest members and the potential of expanding the format to include the Baltic dimension.[19] The summit's communiqué identified Russia as NATO's primary threat while also highlighting the emerging strategic alliance between Russia and China. Additionally, the B9 leaders pledged to deepen cooperation with non-NATO countries such as Georgia, Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, recognizing the shared risks posed by Russian destabilization efforts.[20]

Poland has consistently positioned itself as a leader within the B9, using the platform to advocate for an enhanced NATO presence on the Eastern Flank. Warsaw has emphasized the importance of permanent military infrastructure, increased forward deployments, and improved military mobility to ensure the rapid reinforcement of NATO forces in the region. Poland's proposals, including the establishment of brigade-level formations under NATO's EFP initiative, reflect its proactive approach to strengthening collective defence.

Energy security has also been a key focus within the B9, with Poland leading efforts to reduce regional dependence on Russian energy supplies. Infrastructure projects such as the Baltic Pipe and the development of LNG terminals in Poland have bolstered regional energy resilience. Poland continues to advocate for integrating energy security into the B9's broader defence strategy, recognizing the strategic vulnerabilities posed by reliance on adversarial energy sources.

The B9 has increasingly focused on hybrid threats, including cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, which undermine public trust and exploit divisions within NATO. Poland has been a leading advocate for strengthening cybersecurity infrastructure and intelligence-sharing mechanisms across the B9 countries. Joint efforts to counter disinformation and enhance national resilience are essential components of the B9's strategy, aligning with NATO's broader initiatives to address unconventional threats.

Despite its successes, such as putting Eastern Europe on the map of NATO, the Bucharest Nine faces considerable challenges, particularly divergent threat perceptions among its members. Poland and the Baltic states regard Russia as the primary security threat and advocate for strong defensive measures. In contrast, countries such as Hungary have adopted a more cautious stance toward Russia, complicating efforts to forge a unified policy. Hungary's opposition to additional military support for Ukraine, as demonstrated during the Riga summit, underscores these internal divisions. The limited participation of Hungary and Slovakia – represented only at the ambassadorial level – further reflected their estrangement from the broader B9 consensus.

Adding to these concerns, recent political instability surrounding Romania's presidential elections – an event affecting one of the B9's key pillars alongside Poland – raises questions about the format's cohesion. Moreover, the B9 remains primarily a consultative and advocacy-driven mechanism aimed at coordinating positions for Western partners rather than a platform generating intrinsic strategic value.[21] It lacks institutionalized structures and concrete defence projects, limiting its ability to enhance military capabilities on the ground. Without further institutionalization and operational initiatives, its impact will remain constrained.

Visegrad Four

Czechia Hungary Poland Slovakia

The Visegrád Group (V4), established in 1991 by Poland, Hungary, and the then-Czechoslovakia, was initially conceived as a platform for coordinating the Central European transition from communist rule to democracy and market economies, with a strong emphasis on integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. Following the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, Czechia and Slovakia continued their participation, ensuring that the V4 remained a key regional initiative. The group played a pivotal role in the European and NATO accession processes of its members, enabling coordinated diplomatic efforts and shared strategies to meet Western institutional criteria. After achieving these objectives to join NATO (Poland, Czechia and Hungary entered NATO in 1999, while Slovakia in 2004) and the EU (all in 2004), the V4 adjusted its focus to broader regional cooperation, security, economic development, and policy alignment within the EU.[22]

Defence cooperation within the V4 has historically been characterized by both ambitious initiatives and structural limitations. While all four countries are NATO members and share common security concerns, particularly regarding Russia's revisionist policies, their defence policies have not always been fully aligned. The most concrete military initiative has been the Visegrád Battlegroup (V4 EU BG), established to contribute to the EU's rapid response capabilities.[23] The Battlegroup was on standby in 2016 and 2019, with plans for renewed activation in 2023. However, despite these efforts, operational deployment has remained limited due to differing national priorities and the broader inefficiencies of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. The V4 has also worked on joint military training, airspace surveillance cooperation, and common procurement initiatives, but these projects have often struggled to materialize due to financial constraints and divergent national defence strategies. Poland, with its strong security focus on NATO and close military ties with the United States, has often taken a more ambitious approach to defence spending and modernization than some of its V4 partners.[24]

The International Visegrád Fund (IVF), established in 2000, remains the only institutionalized mechanism within the V4 framework. It supports regional cooperation through funding educational, cultural, and research projects, alongside fostering civil society engagement. For Poland, the IVF has been an important tool for extending its regional influence and promoting European integration among its eastern neighbors, particularly Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkans. By financing academic exchanges, think tank collaborations, and civil society initiatives, the fund aligns with Poland's broader foreign policy goal of strengthening regional stability and democratization. However, while the IVF has successfully cultivated people-to-people ties and soft diplomacy, it lacks the political weight to influence hard security or economic policies significantly.

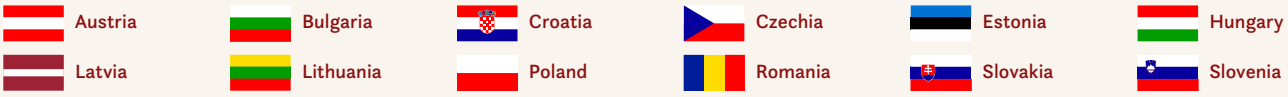
In recent years, the V4 has encountered growing internal challenges, with divergences emerging on key issues such as relations with Russia, the rule of law, and the future of the European Union. Poland and the Czech Republic have taken strong stances against Russian aggression, pushing for increased NATO presence on the Eastern Flank and substantial military aid to Ukraine. Hungary, however, has maintained a more conciliatory approach toward Moscow, opposing EU sanctions and military assistance, which has created significant tensions within the group. Slovakia, with its changing political landscape, has oscillated between alignment with Poland and the Czech Republic and a more restrained stance similar to Hungary's. These divisions were evident in the group's fractured response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, weakening the V4's credibility as a unified security actor and these divisions can further grow after the parliamentary elections in October 2025.

Beyond security, governance issues and democratic backsliding have also strained intra-V4 relations. Poland and Hungary, frequently criticized by the European Commission for rule-of-law concerns, have at times used the V4 as a counterweight to Brussels. However, this stance

has not been uniformly shared, as Prague and Bratislava have sought to maintain stronger alignment with mainstream EU policies. These ideological and strategic fractures have hindered V4 cooperation within the EU, making it less effective as a cohesive block in European decision-making.[25] Economic cooperation within the V4 has been another area of mixed results. While trade and infrastructure projects have been promoted, including cross-border transport corridors and energy diversification efforts, deeper economic integration remains limited.

Despite current political differences and divergent approaches to key issues such as support for Ukraine and relations with the European Union, none of the V4 countries are considering abandoning the format entirely.[26] Cooperation within the Visegrád Group continues, albeit often in a more selective manner and primarily at the ministerial level. Regular meetings, particularly in areas such as economy, transportation, and energy security, demonstrate that the format remains useful, even if it no longer plays as dynamic a role as it once did. Additionally, the International Visegrád Fund continues to function at the civic level, financing cultural, educational, and research initiatives that foster regional ties and mutual understanding. This grassroots engagement ensures that the format retains relevance and resilience, even during politically turbulent times. There is also a need for a long-term revitalization plan that could allow the V4 to regain a more significant role in Europe despite ongoing political differences among its members.

Three Seas Initiative



The Three Seas Initiative (3SI), established in 2015 by Poland and Croatia, is a regional cooperation platform comprising 13 Central and Eastern European countries situated between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas. Its primary objective is to enhance infrastructure connectivity in the energy, transport, and digital sectors along the North-South axis, thereby fostering economic growth, security, and a more cohesive Europe.[27] It was developed within the European Union framework to enhance regional cooperation and infrastructure among Central and Eastern European countries. While its primary aim is to strengthen EU cohesion, it is sometimes perceived in Western Europe as a move that could potentially undermine European unity.[28] This perception stems from historical contexts, as many 3SI member countries were part of the former Eastern Bloc, and their efforts to assert regional ambitions can be viewed with skepticism by Western counterparts.

Historically, the infrastructure in this region has been oriented along East-West lines, linking Central and Eastern Europe to Western Europe. The 3SI seeks to address this imbalance by developing North-South connections, facilitating more robust regional integration.[29] Key projects under this initiative include the highways and railways, as well as grid connections and digital infrastructure. These projects are designed to improve both civilian and military mobility, thereby strengthening regional security and economic resilience. The Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund (3SIIF) was established to finance these critical infrastructure projects. The fund operates on commercial principles, attracting private investments to supplement public funding.[30]

In recent developments, non-EU countries such as Moldova and Ukraine have expressed interest in joining the 3SI to enhance connectivity and regional integration. Both nations were granted associate status during the Three Seas Summit in Bucharest in September 2023, reflecting their aspirations for closer ties with EU member states and participation in regional projects aimed at bolstering infrastructure and economic development.[31]

The United States has shown significant interest in the 3SI, viewing it as a means to bolster the economic development and energy

independence of Central and Eastern Europe. During the first Trump administration, this interest was particularly pronounced, culminating in President Donald Trump's attendance at the 3SI Summit in Warsaw in 2017.[32] His participation underscored the U.S. commitment to the initiative and highlighted the strategic importance of the region in transatlantic relations. In addition to transatlantic partners, the 3SI has attracted interest from countries such as Japan, which have been invited to participate in its activities. This inclusion reflects the initiative's openness and its potential to serve as a bridge between Central and Eastern Europe and other global partners, fostering broader economic and strategic cooperation.[33] As of early 2025, there is renewed potential for the 3SI, with discussions underway regarding a possible visit by the newly re-elected President Trump to Warsaw in April. Such a visit could reinvigorate the initiative, attracting increased attention and investment to its projects.[34]

While the 3SI is primarily focused on economic and infrastructure development, it also has significant implications for regional security. The development of dual-use infrastructure – facilities that serve both civilian and military purposes – enhances military mobility across the region, a critical factor for NATO's strategic planning. Improved transport corridors facilitate the rapid deployment of military forces, thereby strengthening deterrence and defence capabilities on NATO's Eastern Flank.

Other formats

Throughout the years, Poland has also participated in other regional formats, but their overall impact remains rather limited. The Lublin Triangle, established in 2020 by Poland and Lithuania to promote Ukraine's European and transatlantic aspirations, has been particularly vocal on this matter. Indeed, the two EU countries often advocate for Ukrainian interests within Western institutions. However, the format remains small and serves more as a consultation tool rather than a crucial platform for regional decision-making. Prior to the establishment of the format, there were punctual trilateral defence cooperation efforts, such as the Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Brigade (LITPOLUKRBRIG). This joint military brigade, based in Lublin, was created to enhance military interoperability between the three nations and support Ukraine's alignment with NATO standards. While operational cooperation has been limited, the brigade remains an important symbol of regional security collaboration and continues regular exercises, such as Brave Band.[35]

Another format, the Chinese-led 16+1 initiative, remains largely frozen and nearly non-existent in its current form. Following the departure of several Baltic states and the inclusion of Greece, the number of participating countries has become difficult to track. The Chinese approach of grouping all Central and Eastern European countries together – regardless of their EU membership status – proved to be too divisive and overly complex.[36] In the end, only a few countries, such as Hungary and Serbia, managed to secure closer cooperation with China, while the format effectively transitioned into a series of bilateral relations rather than a regional mechanism. Poland, for its part, has adopted a cautious policy toward China. Warsaw is acutely aware of Beijing's role as a key ally of Russia but recognizes that it would be challenging to afford having hostile diplomatic relations with both simultaneously. As a result, Poland has focused its strategic efforts on deterring Russia while maintaining pragmatic but limited ties with China, avoiding outright confrontation while addressing its security concerns within NATO and the EU.

The Eastern Partnership (EaP), launched in 2009 as an initiative of the European Union (led by Poland and Sweden), aimed to strengthen ties between the EU and six post-Soviet states: Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. While it initially provided a common framework for engagement, its internal contradictions have increasingly limited its effectiveness. The diverging trajectories of the member states – Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia actively pursuing EU and NATO integration, while Belarus remains under Russian influence – have made a unified approach untenable. Additionally, the long-standing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan further undermines the partnership's coherence, as the EU struggles to balance its engagement trying not to take sides. With Belarus aligning more closely with Russia, and Ukraine and Moldova granted EU candidate status, the EaP's original format appears increasingly outdated. A revision of the framework is necessary to reflect the fundamentally

different geopolitical realities of its members rather than artificially grouping together countries with irreconcilable strategic paths.[37] Also recent developments in Georgia undermine the viability of this format even further.

Poland's engagement in regional security formats has been cyclical in nature, with varying levels of activity. These initiatives should be viewed as instruments tailored to specific geopolitical contexts and timing, rather than as a singular, long-term strategic solution serving Poland's national interest. However, a notable gap in Poland's approach is the absence of structured, permanent cooperation mechanisms that go beyond consultations and move toward operational execution. This is particularly evident in the lack of dedicated military formats, joint training programs, and exercises aligned with the evolving security threats posed by Russia. Historically, Poland has refrained from participating in certain multinational defence initiatives, such as the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), largely due to its southern-focused strategic priorities and emphasis on land-based security challenges. However, as geopolitical dynamics increasingly shift northward, Poland may reconsider its stance and consider participation in intervention frameworks that align with its security interests.

3 Regional dimension of Norwegian foreign and security policy

This analysis of Norway's approach to regional cooperation in addressing security challenges stemming from Russia's war of aggression is based on a comprehensive review of key official Norwegian policy documents and statements from recent years. Cooperation with allied countries, both bi- and multilaterally, is intended to contribute to increasing national defence capabilities in Norway. Such cooperation provides access to capabilities and materials, training, exercises, operations and further development of both integration and interoperability. Bilateral cooperation undergirding reinforcement from close allies is an important part of the allied dimension in Norwegian defence planning. To facilitate the reception of allied reinforcements, it is crucial to further develop and strengthen operational cooperation with close allies in Norway, and in neighbouring areas, including in peacetime. This regional cooperation strengthens and supports NATO and contributes to increased defence capability in an Allied framework. Due to the sharply deteriorating security situation in Europe, the Norwegian government seeks to strengthen this cooperation with close allies. Increased joint training and joint concept development between Norwegian and allied forces helps to strengthen the Armed Forces' operational capability and national defence capability and is therefore a significant contribution to Norwegian security.[38]

The current long-term plan for defence[39] states that Norwegian security and defence policy aims to safeguard Norwegian sovereignty, territorial integrity, democratic system of government and freedom of action against political, military and other pressures by contributing to:

- Protect Norway's population, territory, key societal functions and infrastructure against threats and attacks from both state and non-state actors
- Prevent armed conflict and the emergence of threats to Norwegian and allied security
- Promote peace, stability and the further development of the international legal order
- Defend Norway and its allies against threats and attacks in an allied framework

In broad terms, it is argued that Norway's inability to defend itself alone against aggression has led to a longstanding tradition of basing its national security on alliance-building and cooperation with other countries. Norwegian strategic thinking is therefore shaped by the principle of enhancing various forms of security cooperation, combined with the development of a strong national defence rooted in Norway's total defence concept.

The Defence Concept describes the overarching idea for the defence of Norway, centered around the Defence Forces. The concept consists of three interdependent elements: Norwegian national capability, the collective capability within the framework of NATO defence plans, and the capability through bilateral support and reinforcement plans. The three main lines shall be supported by a modern and prepared total defence that also strengthens the nation's

FIGURE 1 The Norwegian Defence Concept[124]

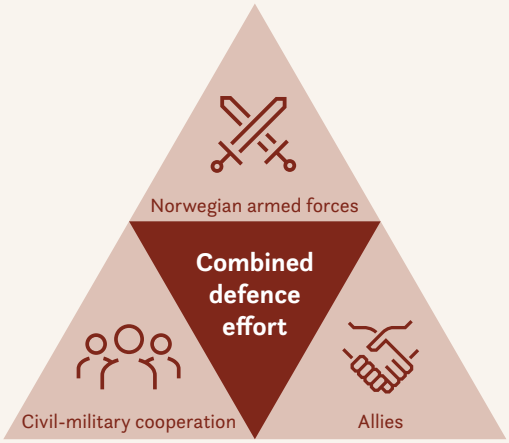
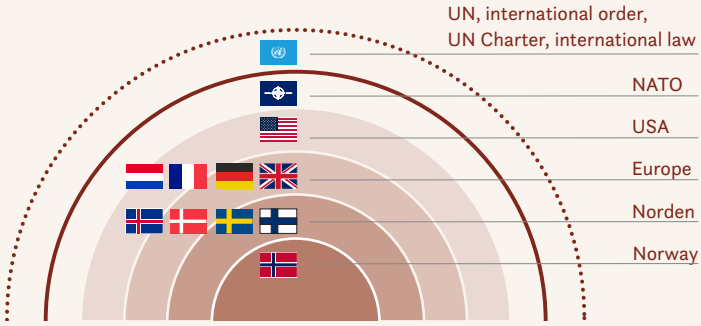


FIGURE 2 Layers of Norwegian security cooperation[125]



resilience and endurance. These elements together constitute the defence capability.[40]

The Norwegian Defence Concept represents a comprehensive approach to the defence of the country. Security is to be achieved by combining the Armed Forces' own capabilities, the defence capabilities generated through allied and regional cooperation, collective deterrence and defence capabilities within the framework of NATO, and the support that can be mustered from civil society, also within the framework of total defence. A wide range of civilian total defence actors and mechanisms support both national and allied military forces operating in Norway and Norway's neighbouring areas.

According to the most recent assessment of the situation presented by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the process of preparing the budget for 2025, regional cooperation to safeguard peace and security is being strengthened. Norway's membership in NATO, but also the country's connection to the EU, are of particular importance. Finnish and Swedish membership in NATO strengthens the opportunities for closer military and civilian cooperation, not least in the northern parts of the Nordic region.[41]

Norway is involved in several layers of regional security cooperation. Being a relatively small country with limited resources, Norway supports the international order based on international law and the UN Charter. Norwegian membership in NATO is the most important regional and institutional framework for security provision. Yet Norway has also strengthened bilateral security cooperation and relations with the USA, which is important because Norway and the USA share a number of overlapping security interests in the region. Although Norway is not a member of the European Union, it has a strong security partnership with the union and Norway has indeed defined several EU/European countries as strategic partners. In recent years, government documents have used the term 'close allies' systematically about the USA, the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Sweden and, increasingly, the Baltic states, France and Poland. Finally, cooperation on addressing various types of security challenges and issues with the Nordic countries is another regional form of cooperation prioritized by Norway, mainly under the NORDEFCO cooperation format, but now also inside of NATO structures following Finland and Sweden's accession to the Alliance.

In this study on Norway's myriad of regional security cooperation we will focus on these forms of cooperation that have the most bearing on the situation in Norway's close strategic environment. Norway's cooperation in NATO and bilateral security cooperation with the USA are going to be dealt with in a separate NORPOL-FACTOR study dealing with the impact of the Trump factor on the Norwegian perceptions of security. This is why this study focuses on how those 'under NATO' forms of regional security cooperation have been developed in response to the worsening security situation in Europe after the Russian aggression against Ukraine starting in 2014, and escalating dramatically in February 2022.

Norway's bilateral security cooperation

In addition to developing various forms of regional cooperation, Norwegian policy also aims at strengthening bilateral cooperation with several allies in Europe and in other parts of the world.

The UK

The United Kingdom is treated as Norway's most important European ally. The relationship with the United Kingdom is based on historical ties, a high degree of trust and shared values, and a focus on the High North. The country is a leading nation in European security policy, which has been clearly illustrated in the role it has played in Ukraine. The United Kingdom has always been an early supporter, as well as playing an important role in coordinating support on behalf of other countries. This has been important for Norway's support to Ukraine, for example. The United Kingdom is the leading provider of conventional deterrence in the North Atlantic, which plays a major role in Norway's security. In recent years, defence cooperation with the United Kingdom has developed further. The United Kingdom has paid more attention to the High North and the North Atlantic, both in security policy and through concrete reorientation of activity towards the North. The UK is not an Arctic state, but in illustration of its interest in the High North, its Arctic Policy Framework labels it as 'the nearest neighbour' to the Arctic region.[42] For this reason, the UK is, alongside the US, the ally most present in Norway and in its immediate vicinity. This has laid the foundation for strengthened defence cooperation and partnership.

UK troops deploy annually to Norway for winter training, including increased air force cooperation due to Norway and the UK operating the same weapon systems, such as the F-35. . Since 2023, the UK has operated a winter training base in Northern Norway – Camp Viking – for its Royal Marines.

Maritime cooperation has traditionally been a cornerstone of the bilateral relationship.. This includes regular joint operations in the North Atlantic, including with British aircraft carriers, as well as increased cooperation on maritime surveillance. Cooperation with the UK includes plans for reinforcement in a potential conflict,, making the the country a particularly close and important ally in a European context.

The UK and Norway have a particularly close trilateral security cooperation with the United States due to the strategic importance of keeping track of the Russian activity in the Nigh North... Examples include special forces (SOF), intelligence gathering, joint surveillance patrols, joint maritime operations, and the introduction and use of fifth-generation platforms such as the F-35. This trilateral cooperation is especially important for Norway as it provides security in concert with two crucial allies.

Finally, the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) has become an increasingly important framework for enhancing cooperation since its establishment in 2014. In addition to the UK and Norway, the Nordic states, the Baltic states, and the Netherlands are part of JEF. Recently, potential membership in JEF for Germany and Poland has been discussed.[43]

France

France has shown an increased interest for the northern regions. French forces, particularly the naval forces, are more present in Norway and in surrounding areas than before. The French Navy now regularly sails in the North Sea and the North Atlantic, providing opportunities for increased cooperation with the Norwegian Navy. Furthermore, French forces are heavily present during exercises in Norway, such as Nordic Response 2024. Also increasing cooperation with France on counter-terrorism and stabilization operations outside the Euro-Atlantic area has been an important element of cooperation.

Germany

Norway's most recent Germany strategy states that Germany is the country's most important partner in Europe.[44] After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Germany promised to ramp up its security policy for the new security situation in Europe, and despite struggles in Germany to implement the so-called 'Zeitenwende' to its full potential, both Norway and Germany have used the momentum to increase their bilateral security cooperation. In 2023, the two countries signed an agreement to further strengthen their security and defence cooperation.[45]

The relationship with Germany is based on important defence industrial cooperation, as well as capability development. The German-Norwegian submarine cooperation is the core example of this. Thyssen-Krupp in Kiel is currently building TKMS212CD submarines, and the number of vessels to be procured has increased to potentially 12 – 6 for each country.[46] In recent years the shared interest in protecting critical sub-sea infrastructure has manifested itself in the German-Norwegian partnership through increasing security risks in this domain, as well as German dependency on Norwegian gas and electricity supply following the near total cut-off from Russian energy in Europe.[47]

Furthermore, the Norwegian Army has close and long-standing cooperation with the German Army. Norway is part of the German-Dutch Corps and has personnel at the headquarters in Germany. Furthermore, the contribution to NATO's enhanced forward presence in Lithuania (Enhanced Forward Presence – EFP) is part of the German-led multinational battalion battle group there. Germany is also a major participating nation during exercises in Norway, such as Nordic Response 2024. And on the industrial side, Norway's acquisition of 54 Leopard A8NOR battle tanks further illustrates the cooperation in the land domain.

The Netherlands

The close ties with the Netherlands are based on common interests and perspectives, including in NATO and in the further development of the alliance. Together with the USA and the UK, the Dutch Marine Corps participate in yearly winter training in Norway. The degree of binding cooperation with the Army and other parts of Norway's land forces is unique and important for Norwegian security.

Poland

Poland is investing heavily in its defence. Modernization and development of defence capabilities are taking place on a broad front, with a particular focus on land power. When these investments are gradually realized, Poland will become one of, if not the largest, land powers in Europe. The security policy role of Poland in Europe and in NATO is changing, where the country is in the process of gaining a greater leadership role. This has been clear in the handling of the Ukraine war in which Poland as a border country has played a major part. Norway has also developed close defence cooperation with Poland, including within material cooperation. Security and defence policy cooperation with Poland will be a priority for Norway in the years to come.

Poland will become an increasingly central actor in European security in the coming years. The country is in the process of developing one of Europe's largest military forces and is making significant purchases of military equipment. Poland plans a defence budget of at least 3 percent and perhaps up to 5 percent of GDP. A defence force with up to 1,500 tanks, 1,000 combat vehicles, 500 rocket artillery units and 300,000 soldiers means that Poland will also become a central player in the defence of Central Europe, the Baltic Sea and the Baltics. The United States is investing heavily in further developing defence cooperation with Poland and considers the country to be crucial in the defence of the European continent. Poland has also distinguished itself as a more important defence industrial player, including with the sale of handheld air defence systems to Norway in 2022.

In addition, Norway's cooperation with Poland on security matters will also be strongly influenced in 2025 by the fact that Poland will have the presidency of the EU in the first half of 2025 and that security-related issues will be the top priority of the Polish presidency.[48]

Finland and Sweden

The most important direct consequence of the Russian aggression against Ukraine is that Norway has gained two new European allies in its near neighbourhood. With Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO, a new chapter was opened in Nordic security cooperation, not only for the benefit of the countries in question, but also for the benefit of NATO and other European allies. Especially concerning Finland, Norway was a key partner as Helsinki decided to apply for NATO membership and throughout the accession process.[49] Their entry into NATO opens new avenues for bilateral, trilateral and regional Nordic cooperation.

Norway in the existing multilateral regional security networks

In addition to regional bilateral cooperation also multilateral frameworks were established involving Norway because several major allies were taking initiatives for multinational and regional defence cooperation in Europe. These initiatives were flexibly designed to be able to react quickly, and are used in both the EU, NATO and UN contexts. Germany was early in establishing its own framework for multinational cooperation with an emphasis on capacity development, the Framework Nations Concept (FNC). This was followed by a British-led force for multinational operations, the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). France also decided to establish a capacity (European Intervention Initiative) to react quickly in crises and operate together in EU, NATO, UN or coalition operations. A detailed overview over these multilateral frameworks operating in the Northern Europe and involving Norway is provided in a recently published study on their place in the new European security architecture.[50]

A quick search on the official website of the Norwegian government[51] reveals the growing but uneven interest in these various forms of regional cooperation.

Figure 4 shows how many references to each of the examined cooperation frameworks are returned when the content of this official government website is analysed.

FIGURE 3 Regional frameworks for military cooperation in Northern Europe[126]

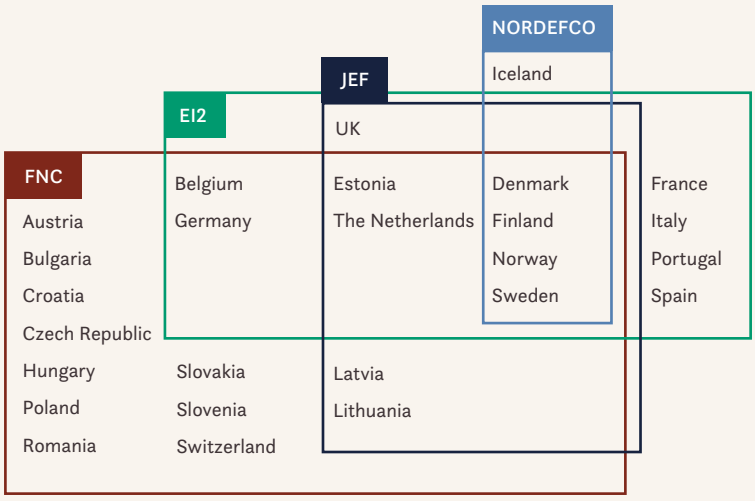
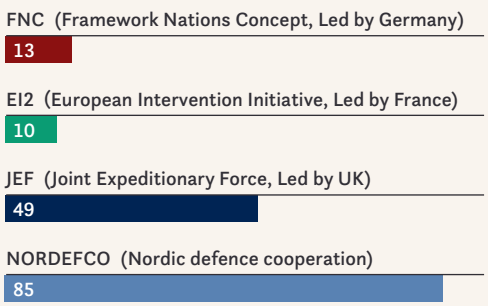


FIGURE 4 Number of references to each of the regional frameworks on www.regjeringen.no



NORDEFCO

Denmark Finland Iceland Norway Sweden

Evidently, the most exclusive of formats for regional security cooperation is NORDEFCO, involving Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Iceland. The aim of NORDEFCO that was formally launched in 2009 was to strengthen the participants' national defence, explore common synergies and facilitate efficient common solutions.[52] The initiative emerged as an attempt to better structure Nordic security cooperation in response to unsuccessful experiences in Nordic cooperation, such as the failed Swedish-Norwegian attempt to jointly develop the Archer artillery system, and the near-catastrophic joint acquisition of NH90 helicopters by Finland, Norway and Sweden. Recently, these three countries started rolling out new uniforms that are based on a joint venture under the NORDEFCO cooperation format. These uniforms are produced in Norway and considered one of the successes of NORDEFCO.

At the political level, the Nordic defence ministers meet regularly to exchange information about the regional security situation and engage in scenario-based discussions. At the military level, the various Nordic armed forces have been increasingly focusing on operational cooperation in crisis situations. Once Finland and Sweden joined NATO it is expected NORDEFCO cooperation will be boosted and become the key element in building a stronger regional NATO presence.

A united Nordic region in NATO is historic. Finnish and Swedish NATO membership strengthens security. A new military geography is being established in the region. Norway and its neighbouring areas are more directly linked to the Baltic Sea region. Norway's role as a recipient country of allied reinforcements is becoming more important in helping to defend the NATO countries Sweden and Finland. The Norwegian Government's objective is for the Nordic Region to be the most integrated region in Europe in the field of defence. NORDEFCO will continue to be the foremost platform for Nordic defence cooperation, and a vision is therefore being developed for strengthening cooperation towards 2030. The cooperation will be aligned with NATO's plans and doctrines. The recently held exercise Nordic Response was an important test of the ability to defend the entire Nordic region within the framework of NATO's collective defence. The Government will further develop Nordic defence cooperation on operational planning in an allied framework and draw lessons from the recent exercise.[53]

With Sweden and Finland in NATO the Nordic countries' strategic complementarities will strengthen the region's security. Collectively, the Nordic countries have the world's eleventh largest economy, 27 million inhabitants and, among other things, more than 250 modern combat aircraft. The expanding joint air operations is perhaps the foremost example of the combined potential of increased coordination and collaboration among the Nordic countries. The proposed establishment of a new NATO Combined Air Operations Centre in Norway will contribute to the further integration of the Nordic air forces.[54]

Norway's proximity to the Russian Northern Fleet and the shipping lanes for the Northern Fleet is well known. Finland has always had its attention towards the border with Russia and is located close to the supply lines to the Kola Peninsula. Sweden has largely focused its defence on the Baltic Sea and the defence of Gotland. Denmark's strategic location makes it possible to monitor the entry and exit of the Baltic Sea. The Faroe Islands and Greenland are located in an important position for maritime operations in the Norwegian Sea and towards the Arctic. Denmark also manages important strategic interests through its control of Greenland's large area, minerals and location. Despite the lack of its own defence, Iceland's location has long been important for maintaining control of the exit to the Atlantic Ocean both on, above, and below water. The Nordic region is becoming a coherent security policy region. The increased potential that lies in deepening and strengthening Nordic defence cooperation must be exploited. By effectively integrating systems, platforms, logistics,

education and policy, the Nordic countries can not only exploit the economies of scale inherent in effective defence cooperation but also create a security and defence policy force with strength and great influence in NATO. These opportunities will not translate into concrete policies and strengthened defence capabilities on their own. Norwegian and other Nordic political and military authorities must demonstrate a willingness to innovate and the ability to work systematically – and with a long-term perspective.

In the Hurdal Platform, the current Norwegian government's steering document, Norway has set itself the goal of expanding and deepening Nordic cooperation in defence and security policy. Little was known when that document was drafted that a new chapter in Nordic defence cooperation with Finland and Sweden would be opened after their decision to join NATO. Existing Nordic cooperation has been particularly successful in the air domain, but this must be developed to cover new areas crucial for enabling defence and deterrence of the alliance's territory. This is why in April 2024 the Nordic defence ministers signed a new NORDEFCO vision that takes this development into account. It states that a united Nordic region in NATO provides completely new opportunities for closer integration in the short term and across a wide range of areas. This was tested during the Nordic Response 24 exercise and this exercise provided useful experience related to Nordic total defence cooperation.

Another important aspect that needs to be factored in the work on NORDEFCO is the strategic overlap between the High North and the Baltic Sea region that is becoming more important. This means that the security of the Nordic and Baltic regions is even stronger tied together which is also reflected in the higher level of cooperation between the informal N5 (Nordic 5) and NB8 (Nordic/Baltic 8) frameworks.[55]

Responding to the changing international situation and the emergence of a new institutional framework for NORDEFCO cooperation caused by Finland and Sweden joining NATO defence ministers of the Nordic countries who gathered in April 2024 at the Faroe Islands presented new vision for NORDEFCO cooperation.[56]

There is a broad agreement in the Norwegian policymaking circles that Finnish and Swedish NATO membership fundamentally changes Norwegian security policy, including its regional dimension. The entire Nordic region becomes a border between East and West, and an attack on one Nordic country will be considered an attack on all. NATO expects the Nordic countries to take greater responsibility for their own territory and contribute to the collective defence of Europe. Although Sweden and Finland are already closely integrated with NATO, it will take time to realize the full potential of this recent NATO expansion.

Sweden and Finland's NATO membership presents significant opportunities but also challenges. The new NATO border with Russia along Finland's border requires careful political and military approaches to avoid escalation. Finland's NATO accession added 1340 km to the NATO-Russia border. From the traditional role as the "northern flank" in NATO, Norwegian soil will now function as strategic depth for the other Nordic countries. Norway will be responsible for facilitating allied reinforcements in the Nordic region and for protection of the logistics tail of the defence of the Nordic region. While the added depth to the defence of Norway is a strategic relief, the new role as one among many northern flank states will also require Norwegian forces to be ready and capable to defend Swedish and Finnish territories in a potential conflict. This responsibility requires that Norway and the other Nordic countries take greater responsibility for their own security and contribute to regional stability by deepening their cooperation and coordination as NATOs conventional deterrent in the North.

Security cooperation in the Nordic region has arguably become even more important as Russia's strategic centre of gravity on the Kola Peninsula has become even more vital in the wake of the war in Ukraine. The war has weakened Russia's conventional military power, underlining the regime's reliance on the second-strike capabilities based in the North. At the same time Russia has demonstrated the willingness to use military instruments of power in the pursuit of what its current power elite defines as the country's strategic interests. In the case of escalation of the conflict, the ambition to be able to ensure free access to the Atlantic Ocean with strategic submarines and long-range bombers will most likely remain an important element of the Russian strategy. Norway is well placed to take

greater responsibility in the region, but this will only be possible with increased self-sufficiency combined with close cooperation with allies and partners who have similar regional interests. Norway has always had a maritime orientation towards the west and the Arctic, which aligns with American and British strategic priorities. Norway's role in NATO will be strengthened with the expansion in the Nordic region, as it is expected that the need for maritime operations will increase.

Nordic cooperation is also a further development in line with the Alliance's Framework Nations Concept: a major ally takes a leadership role regionally to develop the total capabilities of the respective allies. The Nordic countries stand stronger together and provide added value in cooperation with other allies through the Nordic-Baltic format, the Northern Group and the British-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). All countries in these multinational constellations now consist of allies. Strengthened cooperation will contribute to strengthening NATO. This is particularly the case for the relationship with the UK and the JEF cooperation, where there is now a better opportunity to carry out a seamless transition from a JEF to a NATO operation.

FIGURE 5 Norway's changing role in the region – from being a final station to becoming a transit country for NATO reinforcements[127]

Joint Expeditionary Force

United Kingdom
Denmark
Estonia
Finland
Iceland
Latvia
Lithuania
Netherlands
Norway
Sweden

All High North countries take part in the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)[57] initiative established in 2014, which is a military partnership between a smaller group of countries in Northern and Western Europe. Cooperation in the JEF is developing positively, although there are also some critical voices.[58] JEF constitutes a framework for close cooperation between like-minded Nordic and Northern European countries and plays an important role both as a political consultation forum and as an operational framework. JEF is primarily a regional resource in peacetime that can also respond quickly to emerging crises at an early stage, which makes a seamless transition from a coalition operation to an allied operation possible.[59]

JEF was officially launched with the Letter of Intent as a NATO initiative at the September 2014 Wales Summit, subsumed under the new "Framework Nations Concept" rubric. The main aim of this initiative is to develop a UK-led high-readiness intervention force with contributions from partners and the aim is to deter Russia. JEF cooperation focuses on crisis management in the early stages, before a NATO-led operation is established, and thus complements the alliance. As its main area of geographical 'responsibility' is Northern Europe, and its task is to engage early in a crisis situation and act as a bridging force until other allied forces are able to join, it can play a major part in early crisis management efforts in the region. To improve its chance to play this role the countries engaged, which in addition to the four High North countries include UK, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and the Netherlands, conduct joint training and exercises, work on improving interoperability, as well as issues related to rapid decision-making.

The Norwegian Prime Minister and Minister of Defence have participated in several JEF meetings after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine – in the UK on 22 February 2022,[60] in Oslo on 15 June 2022,[61] in Edinburgh on 10 November 2022,[62] in Riga on 19 December 2022,[63] in Amsterdam on 13 June 2023,[64] in Visby on 13 October 2023,[65] and in Tallinn on 19 December 2024.[66]

On 22 February 2022, JEF issued a statement on the situation in Ukraine where they condemned Russia's recognition of the Ukrainian oblasts Luhansk and Donetsk as so-called 'peoples republics'. They also called on Russia to de-escalate and encouraged Russia to engage in transparent dialogue, including through the OSCE and the NATO-Russia Council, in order to reduce tensions.[67]

On 15 March 2022, JEF issued a statement in which Russian aggression against Ukraine was strongly condemned.[68]

On 15 June 2022, Defence Ministers of JEF met in Oslo to discuss security challenges, including the implications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and considered the future development of the JEF to ensure it continues to make an effective contribution to security and stability in its core region of the High North, North Atlantic and Baltic Sea. In addition, they also strongly welcomed Finland's and Sweden's applications for NATO membership.[69]

On 10 November 2022 JEF leaders who met in Edinburgh issued statement in which they reiterated their support for Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression that they again strongly condemned. They underlined that the JEF was at the forefront of providing diplomatic, financial, humanitarian and military support to Ukraine, nationally and in various international frameworks.[70]

On 19 December 2022 JEF leaders met in Riga and issued a short statement in which they reiterated support for Ukraine and its people. They also committed to provide further political, military, humanitarian and economic support to Ukraine for as long as it takes and condemned Russian attacks on critical national infrastructure and other abhorrent actions. They also

welcomed President Zelenskyy's readiness for a just peace. In addition, they also informed about strengthening the ability to operate together in a crisis, also through exercises in response to the challenges they were confronted by. [71]

On 13 June 2023 JEF organized a meeting in Amsterdam and issued Joint statement in which the current situation in Ukraine was discussed as well as measures to be taken by JEF to further mitigate the security threats to JEF nations, including hybrid threats. They also promised to ensure coordination, complementarity and alignment with NATO on its ongoing work on the protection of critical undersea infrastructure.[72]

During its meeting in Visby (Gotland) in October 2023 the JEF reiterated its strong condemnation of the Russian aggression and signalled unwavering support to Ukraine's fight against this Russian aggression. To increase interoperability and enhance the capability of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, they agreed that the JEF shall invite Ukraine to observe JEF exercises during 2024 and 2025. They also agreed and published a ten-year vision for the JEF: The JEF – Working Together as One in which the founding principles for the JEF were reiterated and ambition for its further development were outlined. JEF was also to accelerate cooperation in tackling hybrid threats and deterring and defending against threats to critical national infrastructure, including shared communications and energy infrastructure. The damage caused by external activity in the undersea infrastructure between Finland and Estonia was also discussed at this meeting because threats to critical undersea infrastructure are real and there is therefore need to maintain resilience both at a national level and as a collective endeavour.[73]

Finally, on 17 December 2024 JEF held a summit in Tallinn and a joint statement signed by all JEF leaders was published. It was agreed to work closer together to disrupt and deter the Russian shadow fleet of crude oil tankers that circumvent international sanctions, directly fund the Russian war effort in Ukraine. The JEF nations also agreed to strengthen their defence industries to increase capacity to produce munitions and weapons, to collectively aggregate demand, improve interoperability and standardisation. Trying to address some of the concerns caused by the re-election of Donald Trump as the US president, the JEF leaders also sent a strong message concerning their commitment to solidarity, burden-sharing, and ensuring NATO remains the cornerstone of Allied deterrence and defence.[74]

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine has had huge consequences for the activity and the future of JEF. As a recent RUSI study argued support for Ukraine has become a major political output of the JEF and the 10 JEF members have committed $11.1 billion more aid to Ukraine than the 18 remaining European NATO members. For instance, the JEF's activity in the 18 months following the Russian invasion increased eightfold compared with the preceding eight years and included deploying its headquarters to Iceland and the Baltic states, dispersing multinational liaison officers throughout Europe, increasing exercises, and deploying military forces to strengthen critical underwater infrastructure (CUI) protection after JEF defence ministers activated Joint Response Option (JRO) 3.2 for the first time.[75] Arnold expressed opinion that the JEF is ideally placed to accept the increased burden-sharing that Europe is set to encounter in the coming years, especially following the war in Ukraine and Trump's re-election.[76]

What then is the future of JEF? In a recently published study on JEF, the authors argued that if the incoming US administration should make Donald Trump's threats to reduce the US' commitment to European defence a reality, and if NATO were thereby weakened, the JEF could conceivably become involved in full-scale conflict in its own right. However, the study argued that fighting such wars, would require far more resources than the JEF currently has and that the JEF is well-suited to filling the gap between peace and open conflict – the gray zone in which NATO may struggle to agree on how to react to unfolding events[77].

European Intervention Initiative

Since 2019, Norway participates in the French-led European Intervention Initiative (EI2) established in 2018, which is a security and defence policy arena outside the EU framework that helps to complement other cooperation initiatives.[78] This is a non-binding forum of European countries that have the ability and willingness to participate in military operations within the framework of the EU, NATO, the UN, or coalitions of the willing. Europe has a common interest in being able to respond faster and in a more coordinated manner. Norway sees EI2 as an arena that can complement other existing formats and initiatives within the field of defence and security policy. The Northern European countries have a common security and military interest that supports broader cooperation within NATO. Participation in multinational cooperation forums within the alliance is therefore important. Cooperation with other allies and NATO partner countries is prioritized where it is in Norway's interest.[79]

EI2 aims at facilitating the emergence of a European strategic culture and at creating the pre-conditions to conduct coordinated and jointly prepared future operations, on the whole spectrum of possible crises. EI2 is built around a limited number of European countries that have political will and military capability to shoulder engagements in operations for the sake of the European security. Although initially, in 2018, only Denmark joined this format together with France, Spain, the UK, Portugal, Estonia, the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium, by 2021 also Finland, Norway and Sweden joined. Its core purpose is to bolster Europe's military credibility, reinforce Europe strategic autonomy and contribute to a fairer burden sharing.

The goal of EI2 is for participating countries to achieve greater mutual knowledge of systems, thinking, and approaches in each country. This will strengthen common strategic culture and the operational ability to participate in, and conduct, operations.[80] EI2 also aims to make participating countries better able to predict and manage crises and conflicts in the lower and middle parts of the crisis spectrum, and a goal of the initiative was to enable European countries to respond more quickly to crises and cooperate better on military efforts.

The December 2022 annual ministerial meeting for the 13 countries in the European Intervention Initiative (EI2) took place in Oslo and resulted in a joint statement presenting its aims and understanding of the situation in Europe. According to this statement the main objective of this cooperation is to create a common strategic culture allowing able, willing and close partners to act together. With war returning to Europe, those goals were described as more relevant than ever, as the new security challenges in Europe made it necessary to enhance efforts and update strategic approaches. During the meeting in Oslo, participants exchanged views on current security and defence challenges, debated EI2's future and conducted a scenario-based discussion. They also presented views on the ongoing war in Ukraine and agreed on the necessity to support Ukraine on a long-term basis. Furthermore, questions related to Finland's and Sweden's membership in NATO were discussed in this context. The participants were briefed by France on the security situation in Western Africa and exchanged views on European strategy in the region to fight against terrorism. They affirmed EI2 as a useful forum to discuss competitors' presence in the area.[81]

For the time being it seems that the EI2 is what some experts described as a 'paper tiger' because there are not many signs of concrete activity, and even in the Norwegian context there is no mention of this initiative in the most recent budgetary documents.[82] Compared to the range of developments happening in JEF under UK leadership, it is evident that EI2 has not had the impact that France initially sought.

Framework Nations Concept

The German Framework Nations Concept (FNC) was developed and presented to NATO in 2013 and accepted at the 2014 NATO summit in Wales. After the Russian annexation of Crimea and the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014, the goal was expanded to include the formation of larger military units. In June 2016 it was agreed to also offer non-NATO states the opportunity to integrate. FNC is an area of cooperation within capability development and larger force formations, and Norway actively participates in several capability activities. The FNC cooperation tie allies closer to Norway within the framework of the alliance[83] and strengthens the ability to cooperate between the member countries of the alliance, as well as selected partner countries.

FNC is the most inclusive of all regional arrangements with Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and 17 other NATO and non-NATO partners. The aim of this network is to enhance NATO's deterrence and defence by linking forces up to brigade-level, to the German force structure. Although not all NATO members responded positively to this initiative it is clear that any decisions on the use of the available capabilities will be subject to ordinary force generation procedures in NATO or the EU. The main task of this format is to facilitate common training and exercises, improve interoperability and modernisation of equipment. As all Nordic countries take part in this framework it could be expected that this participation will translate into a better coordination of their efforts also in the regional context. The focus of Germany's FNC encompasses the participation of 15 Allies, and "a dual focus on capability development and the delivery of usable forces".[84] Following the Wales Summit, the Germany-led grouping's focus was expanded to also encompass building up larger multinational formations. The intention of this scheme was to further a more structured and collaborative force planning. Moreover, it highlighted that following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, deterrence and defence had to be "underpinned by a new, tangible capacity for high-end, combined-arms manoeuvre".[85]

Other regional cooperation formats

The Northern Group is an informal cooperation that includes Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Poland, in addition to the Nordic and Baltic countries. This gives several close allies ownership of key issues affecting the Northern European area.[86]

Another interesting regional initiative focusing on protection of subsea critical infrastructure is the cooperation involving North Sea countries that met together in April 2024 and established a regional framework involving six North Sea countries: Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Norway, the UK, and Denmark. The main objective of this cooperation is to protect infrastructure in the North Sea through joining forces, taking appropriate measures and exchanging information and best practices. This initiative focuses on resilience and prevention and is therefore complementary to NATO's endeavors, which all participants involved are part of.[87] It is expected that this experience can also be highly relevant in other regional context, especially in the Baltic Sea region where questions related to protection of critical infrastructure have over the past months received more attention due to several incidents involving Chinese and Russian vessels suspected of inflicting damage to elements of national and international critical infrastructure in the region.

Conclusions on Norwegian regional security cooperation

After the Russian full-fledged aggression against Ukraine the perception of Russia in Norway changed dramatically. Russia is now perceived as a source of strategic threat but at the same time there are some growing concerns about the reliability of the USA as a security guarantor. In this situation the Norwegian Defence Commission has recommended a hedging strategy to counter this risk. One of the elements of this hedging strategy is the development of closer ties with the other actors sharing interests and concerns with Norway. Norway has been following a dual track in this context by developing closer bilateral cooperation with key European traditional and emerging powers, but also by strengthening regional cooperation with the Nordic countries, all of which are now NATO members. In addition, the Nordic 5 has been strengthening cooperation with the three Baltic countries that share interests and concerns with other countries in the Baltic Sea region, including Poland that has over the past months increased the level of its cooperation with both the Nordic 5 and the Baltic 3.

Norway has limited economic, military and institutional resources and should therefore prioritize and strengthen the cooperative efforts within JEF, also by involving Poland, the key emerging regional power. This is likely to contribute to a more credible conventional deterrence of Northern Europe and contribute to strengthening the most active of the existing regional frameworks for security cooperation. Additional efforts must be made to marshal all competitive advantages to ensure that the limited resources are combined to create a predictable and credible conventional deterrent. This will also strengthen the solidarity and unity among the NATO members most affected by the increased Russian efforts to disrupt European societal security and sow division among allies.

The Norwegian Defence Commission believes that Norway needs an overarching national defence strategy. The pillars of such a strategy will be recognizable: The US is, and is likely to remain, Norway's most important ally although there are growing concerns about the impact of the new Trump administration on the form and the content of the trans-Atlantic cooperation. In the worst case scenario this could also have a negative impact on cooperation within NATO that is still considered to be the most important framework for the defence of Norway in a 10 to 20-year perspective. Having this uncertainty in mind, it is obvious that Norway should develop a more efficient hedging strategy based on the idea of closer cooperation with allies who share similar regional concerns and interests.

In a more dangerous and uncertain world, there is a need for deepened relationships with other allies. As a consequence, Norway should prioritise and accelerate the efforts to strengthen regional cooperation on security. In the coming years, it will be therefore particularly important to build a more credible regional capability to defend Northern Europe and the Nordic region together with the UK, Germany, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands and Poland.[88] This can be done by using a range of established cooperative frameworks.

Regional cooperation on security should also help Norway establish closer cooperation on security and defence with the EU because multinational cooperation arrangements in Europe in which close EU and NATO countries participate, including the German-led Framework Nation Concept (FNC), the British-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), the French-led European Intervention Initiative (EI2), as well as the Northern Group and NORDEFCO can facilitate closer cooperation with the Union on these matters. The Norwegian government will therefore continue to prioritize participation in these European-based multinational and regional cooperation arrangements.[89] And in 2024, Norway entered into Security and Defence Partnership with EU that is to deepen cooperation in most areas pertaining to European security.[90]

Cooperation with the EU should be further developed not least because there is a risk that several of Norway's allies, including the US, can turn

inward or towards other and greater challenges, losing interest in or capacity to help Norway in a crisis situation. It is therefore important to ensure that Norway has more legs to stand on to take care of its security and strengthened regional security cooperation is one of the important strategic measures to be implemented.

Norway should therefore develop a hedging strategy with what could be seen as a series of mutually reinforcing cooperation arenas that support Norway's strategic interests and national security. In such a hedging strategy, there are constellations of supporting players with different capacities and interests that form a mutually reinforcing security network around Norway. The United States, which remains a superpower with direct global influence is indeed the most important of the country's partners as the only NATO country that has the capacity to handle any security challenge that Norway and the West may be exposed to. Norway's most important European allies in Northern Europe, with the UK in a special position, form the second arena. There is also potential in cooperation with Germany, Poland, and great potential in close security cooperation with Nordic neighbours. Strengthened cooperation with the EU in specific areas such as complex threats, economic security, sanctions policy and the defence industry in Europe will also be in Norway's interest. Finally, Norway must strengthen its own capabilities by investing more in its own Armed Forces, and by developing its total defence concept and by strengthening its societal and national resilience.

As mentioned earlier, Poland has over the past years been increasingly viewed as an important security actor. The fact that Poland is about to spend up to 5 percent of its GDP on defence makes Poland an even more attractive partner. It is therefore important to have a good understanding of how the bilateral Norwegian-Polish cooperation, as well as Poland's stronger involvement in various regional security cooperation frameworks could help address grave security concerns both countries, as well their regional partners, must deal with in the current situation.

4 Joint regional formats of Poland and Norway

The chapter aims to analyse the engagement of the Republic of Poland and the Kingdom of Norway with the regional organisations to which the two analysed countries belong. Three structures were analysed: The Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the European Political Community (EPC) and the Organization for Security Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Poland and Norway also cooperate within NATO, but such a structure will be the subject of a separate – fourth – study within the NORPOLFACTOR project.

Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS)

Denmark Estonia Finland Germany Iceland Latvia Lithuania Norway Poland Sweden

The Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) was established in March 1992. The CBSS brought together ten states (Iceland joined in 1996) from both sides of the former Iron Curtain plus the European Union to ensure a regional forum for political dialogues and the development of peaceful relations in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). Therefore, the CBSS became the first sub-regional cooperative institution, connecting states from both sides of the former East-West dividing line and non-aligned Finland and Sweden.[91]

Shortly after the establishment and during the 1990s, cooperation in the framework of CBSS was conceptualised primarily in terms of promoting the transition and transformation of Poland and the Baltic States in line with 'European values': liberal democracy, rule of law, and ability to transnationally cooperate on common "soft" challenges to international security (economic, social, and environmental). Member states have revised the CBSS's list of priorities several times. The current three long-term goals – (1) Regional Identity, (2) Sustainable and Prosperous Region, and (3) Safe and Secure Region – have been in place since 2014, when they were adopted through silent procedure.[92]

Due to the dynamics in the global environment, the CBSS gradually widened its scope of action. The last reform of the CBSS was conducted in 2020, which allowed Member States to adopt a new document – the "Vilnius II Declaration – a Vision for the Baltic Sea Region by 2030", accepted by the CBSS Foreign Ministers and high-level representatives on 1 June 2021. The number of benchmarks was reduced to ten, including

upholding the rule of law, democracy, and respect for human rights; the presence of a strong, well-functioning, and multi-level governance structure for political dialogue, practical cooperation, and people-to-people contacts; youth involvement; improvement of the ecological health of the Baltic Sea; further development of green transition towards climate neutrality; full recovery from the COVID pandemic; a high level of digitalisation that brings profit to society and protects it from cyber threats and disinformation; more intensified regional cooperation in crises management, including civil protection, fighting organised crime, and protection of children at risk; closer cooperation in education, science, and research; and finally, well-functioning bottom-up cultural networks.[93]

In the Vilnius II Declaration, the CBSS Member States declared their political will to use the organisation's strengths to transform the BSR into "one of the most sustainable, prosperous, innovative, and competitive regions in the world". Having completed its reform, the organisation was about to embark on the next stage of its activities, based on the continuation of regional political dialogue, project implementation and structural cooperation with other institutions in Northern Europe. These were the main tasks of Norway, which took over the chairmanship of the CBSS in July 2021 at a significant time for this regional organisation.[94] During the first half of its presidency, three key goals were important. First, it aimed to accelerate cooperation on the green transition, emphasising innovation and promoting best practices in industry, sustainable transport, and clean energy production. The significance of the circular economy and shifts in consumer behaviour were also highlighted. Second, the Norwegian presidency prioritised increasing youth engagement and participation in activities across the BSR and involving civil society organisations in shaping policy foundations and implementing projects aligned with them. Third, Norway focused on strengthening the mandates of recently renewed working groups responsible for regional cooperation on civil protection – particularly concerning children at risk – and anti-trafficking policies, emphasising organised crime and cybercrime.[95]

However, in February 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine created a new situation for the CBSS, often described as another turning point/critical juncture, similar to the end of the Cold War or the EU enlargements of 1995 and 2004.[96] On 3 March 2022, following swift discussions among the foreign ministries of the CBSS's ten member states and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Norway's Foreign Minister announced the suspension of Russia and Belarus from CBSS activities.[97] This decision, justified by Russia's military aggression, reinforced that Moscow should not benefit from regional cooperation. The suspension signified a shift in the already fragile stability of the Baltic Sea Region since 2014, making future collaboration with Russia unlikely.[98] Russia's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, condemned the move as hostile, while Norway's Foreign Minister, Anniken Huitfeldt, maintained that cooperation could only resume if Russia adhered to international law. All CBSS members agreed that Russia's actions violated fundamental international norms, including the UN Charter and key OSCE documents such as the Helsinki Final Act (1975) and the Charter of Paris (1990). As a result, the suspension remained unchanged. In response, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov announced Russia's withdrawal from the CBSS on 17 May 2022.[99] Nevertheless, the organisation continued its work, holding its first ministerial session in nine years in Kristiansand in May 2022.

In recent years, the CBSS has increasingly emphasised strengthening societal resilience and pursuing long-term priorities. Finland's presidency (July 2023 – June 2024) has been accompanied by the promotion of comprehensive security concepts and enhanced emergency preparedness.[100] Their importance in cross-border cooperation in the BSR was highlighted in the Porvoo Declaration, adopted at the 21st Ministerial Session of the BSR in June 2024. States in the region have advocated strengthening resilience and crisis preparedness, emphasising the need to strengthen ties between democratic and like-minded states.[101]

Estonia is pursuing this, which seeks to further enhance resilience in areas of so-called 'soft security'. During its presidency (July 2024 – June 2025), Estonia intends to use CBSS structures to increase situational awareness and preparedness for unexpected situations. Under the ongoing Presidency, it plans to emphasise issues related to the protection of critical infrastructure in the Baltic Sea basin, the challenges of mass

evacuation and sheltering, and the instrumentalisation of migration at the eastern borders of the countries in the region.[102] All topics are of crucial importance due to the deterioration of the BSR's overall security situation following Russia's aggression against Ukraine and after taking into account the impact of significant incidents in the region (destruction of parts of three of the four Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines, damage to the Balticconector pipeline).[103]

European Political Community (EPC)

EU Member States + Albania Andorra Armenia Azerbaijan Bosnia and Herzegovina Georgia Iceland Kosovo Liechtenstein Moldova Monaco Montenegro North Macedonia Norway San Marino Serbia Switzerland Turkey Ukraine United Kingdom

The European Political Community (EPC) comprises more than forty European countries. This format links the 27 members of the EU and its institutions with 17 other countries, except Russia and Belarus. These include EU associate and candidate countries, as well as countries outside this process, such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Norway, Switzerland or Iceland, as well as the UK and Turkey.

This format was launched in May 2022 by French President Emmanuel Macron. Initially, its creation was linked, on the one hand, to the need for a geopolitical reconstruction of the EU after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and, on the other, as a response to the applications for EU membership by Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. The EWP's main idea is to maintain a dialogue of the 'European political family' for peace and stability on the continent despite existing political differences.[104]

Compared to other institutions, the lack of an institutional structure distinguishes the EPC, and the objectives of the meetings are defined on an ongoing basis by current objectives. EPC conversations are informal, consultative, and do not end in official agreements or declarations. However, it is customary for the summit to close with a press conference to summarise the talks and present the main conclusions.

The first Community Summit took place on 6 October 2022 in Prague. It aimed to extend the political dialogue on issues fundamental to European security beyond the Member States of the European Union. For this reason, the meeting was dominated by two themes – military threats to peace and security in Europe and the energy crisis.[105] The primary focus of the one-day meeting was security guarantees for Ukraine. President Macron set the tone of the discussion, stating in a speech in Bratislava on the eve of the summit that the West must provide Ukraine with "concrete and credible" security assurances. Observers noted that his speech in Bratislava notably appreciated Central and Eastern European countries' history and security perspectives. This was widely interpreted as an attempt to reset and improve France's relations with the region. From Poland's perspective, the EPC delivers a crucial strategic message to Russia and offers an opportunity to rebuild ties with the United Kingdom. However, it should not become another ENP-style holding area for countries aspiring to join the EU.[106] Both issues were also addressed by the Norwegian Prime Minister, who stressed, in particular, the importance of maintaining natural gas production at the highest possible level to maintain the ability of the gas transport system to supply European markets.[107]

The second EPC summit took place in Chisinau on 1 June 2023. It reinforced the format's role in the international system and highlighted the growing influence of Central and Eastern European countries.[108] However, discussions revealed differences among European leaders regarding security guarantees for Ukraine. For Moldova, hosting the summit was a diplomatic success, emphasizing its pro-Western orientation. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Moldovan President Maia Sandu reaffirmed their commitment to European integration. Security guarantees for Ukraine dominated discussions. French President E. Macron proposed a framework between Israeli-style assurances and full NATO membership, signalling a shift in

his stance. V. Zelenskyy called for a clear NATO invitation and interim guarantees. However, leaders like Germany's Olaf Scholz remained cautious, citing NATO's criteria. The summit also addressed ongoing military aid, including plans for an international coalition to supply Patriot missile systems and F-16 jets to Ukraine.[109] The EPC summits also touched on the EU enlargement, with the admission of Eastern European and Western Balkan countries presented as a strategic necessity during the third EPC summit in Granada (October 5, 2023).[110]

From the perspective of Norway and Poland, the discussions at the fourth EPC meeting, hosted by the United Kingdom at Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire (18 July 2024), were particularly relevant.[111] In addition to ongoing topics such as continued support for Ukraine and broader debates on energy and connectivity, security and democracy, and migration, EPC representatives addressed the operations of the so-called Russian 'shadow fleet'. They unanimously agreed that these activities seriously threaten maritime safety, the environment, and international trade due to their illegal nature, lack of insurance, and regulatory non-compliance.[112] The emphasis on stricter enforcement and enhanced cooperation signals a commitment to closer collaboration and intelligence sharing on vessels being part of this fleet, marking the beginning of coordinated efforts against these risks. It also focuses on the awareness of risks related to sabotaging a critical undersea infrastructure in the Baltic Sea and North Sea, which was continued in subsequent months during JEF meetings or by a multilateral experts group.[113]

Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is the largest regional international organization in the Euro-Atlantic region, comprising 57 members, including all European states, post-Soviet countries, the United States, Canada, and Mongolia. The organization originated during the Cold War as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), with its foundational document, the Helsinki Final Act, signed on August 1, 1975. The CSCE aimed to enhance so-called cooperative and comprehensive international security through dialogue and collaboration beyond ideological divisions. After the end of the Cold War, the structure changed its name and became known in 1995 as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.[114] By the end of the 1990s, a pan-European security structure had emerged, headquartered in Vienna, and encompassing political, human rights, economic, ecological, and military aspects, as well as crisis management and compliance monitoring mechanisms. The most important OSCE institutions are the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights – ODIHR (based in Warsaw), the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities – HCNM (based in The Hague) and the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.[115] Copenhagen is the seat of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, whose Chairperson is currently Pia Kauma (Finland).

Following NATO's decision to enlarge and invite new members from Central Europe, interest in the OSCE declined among Central and Western European nations. Although discussions within it continued for some time, initiatives like the *Charter for European Security*, adopted at the 1999 OSCE summit in Istanbul, had little impact.[116] Following the Istanbul summit in 1999, while the OSCE institutions remained operational, the OSCE became increasingly marginalized, mainly because of a deteriorating security environment after Russia suspended the CFE Treaty in December 2007, the 2008 war with Georgia, and its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In recent years, the interests of OSCE member states in security and foreign policy have diversified to a point where they hinder the effective functioning of the organization, particularly in the politico-military and human dimensions. Since 2014, Russia has obstructed the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM), blocking decisions on extending its mandate and restricting observer mobility in Donbas. As of late March 2022, the mission ceased operations

with little chance of reactivation.[117] The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has caused a serious crisis as the war involves two of its member states. The OSCE lacks the ability to impose sanctions on members like Russia for breaching its security principles, endangering essential functions such as budget adoption and field operation mandates. Observers express doubts about the organization's survival under these pressures. Given its formal criteria – such as membership, age, and bureaucratic strength – the OSCE appears fragile. Necessary reforms for resilience seem unlikely due to divergent state interests, suggesting a decline characterized by a diminished role focused on forum functions while operational capacities shrink.[118]

This reduction likely amplifies existing tensions among member states. This trend was observed even before the war of aggression; for example, in 2019, during Sweden's chairmanship, the annual OSCE human rights conference (HDIM) was not held for the second consecutive year, imposing overlaps with attempts at the times to find a solution to the crisis 'in and around Ukraine'. In the following years, Russia attempted to exploit the OSCE for its own purposes, abusing the principle of unanimity and waging a full-scale war against Ukraine. This was a violation of the fundamental principles of the Organization and the commitments of participating states, which were very often criticized by Western and Central European states, including Poland and Norway.[119] Poland's leadership firmly opposed efforts to impose the aggressor's narrative internationally. As the OSCE chair in 2022, Poland focused the OSCE's agenda on aggression against Ukraine, implementing the principle of "no business as usual" during the war, which has been upheld by the subsequent chairmanships of North Macedonia, Malta, and Finland.[120]

Nonetheless, the OSCE remains one of the few institutional forums for Western communication with Russia and Belarus; thus, significant changes in its functioning are not expected. Among the OSCE's most important challenges in recent years, both Poland and Norway include Russia's prolonged violations of the principles set out in the founding document of the CSCE 50 years ago and international conflicts that threaten the foundations of common security. Finding a consensus is not made any easier by the ongoing geopolitical rivalry among the US, Russia, and China, which exacerbates unresolved regional conflicts.[121]

Secondly, the war in Ukraine persists after Russia's aggression, with a number of OSCE's activities unimplemented, including the Minsk agreements and the OSCE, and the termination of the OSCE's SMM. There is also little effect from activating further mechanisms to investigate Russia's human rights violations: the Moscow (February 2024) and Vienna (March 2024) mechanisms.[122]

Thirdly, widespread human rights violations continue in Belarus, particularly against the opposition and peaceful protesters after the 2020 elections. An OSCE mechanism confirmed electoral fraud, yet Belarus rejected mediation proposals regarding the conflict with President Alexander Lukashenko. The Informal Group of Friends of Democratic Belarus continues its efforts to exert political pressure on the Lukashenko regime through the OSCE, courting political prisoners in Belarus and demanding their immediate release, as well as supporting the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people.[123]

Endnotes

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