

US-Norway Bilateral Defense Agreements: a partnership that strengthens NATO

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The defense partnership between the United States and Norway plays a crucial role for both American and Norwegian national defense. Less understood is the important and positive role that these US-Norwegian bilateral defense agreements (BLDAs) have for NATO. In the words of the Norwegian government, “NATO is the foundation of Norwegian security, and the USA is Norway’s most important ally.”¹ In practical terms, US-Norwegian BLDAs are the glue that binds the US, Norway, and NATO together. This policy brief elaborates this point by offering a short exploration of the following: 1) NATO’s connection to the bilateral US-Norwegian defense relationship; 2) an overview of how and why BLDAs are used in the US-Norwegian defense relationship, 3) a review of different BLDA types, and 4) an overview of key bilateral US-Norwegian defense agreements.

NATO’s connection to US-Norwegian BLDAs

Article 5 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty clearly states that assisting and defending allies is both an individual and a collective obligation. Rather than diluting NATO, nation to nation defence cooperation between allies should be viewed as a natural and necessary outgrowth of the treaty imperative to mutual defence. Seen in this context, BLDAs between NATO signatory states have served to strengthen the alliance and contribute to upholding and bolstering existing NATO defense frameworks.

NATO has relied on BLDAs between its members as a critical building block of the alliance from its very inception. Within the first years after signing the NATO North Atlantic Treaty, the United States entered BLDAs with most of its European allies. It supplemented its rights and obligations under the NATO status of forces agreement (SOFA) with bilateral SOFAs with several of its European allies. This list included Denmark, Germany, Greece, Iceland, the Netherlands, Turkey, and Norway—and these bilateral SOFAs would serve as the foundation for subsequent bilateral defense agreements between the US and NATO allies over the decades to come. In this fashion, BLDAs have also served as a cornerstone of the United States’ participation in European security and as the

legal basis upon which host nation consent has been granted for the deployment of U.S. forces in Europe.

This is especially relevant in a Norwegian context. The US-Norway SOFA of 1954 specifically mentions that it enhanced US defense commitments to Norway under NATO and in this way was an “agreement supplementing or in addition to the NATO SOFA.”² Not only was the US-Norway SOFA of 1954 seen as a supplement to the NATO treaty, but practically every BLDA between the US and Norway since then has been interpreted as an elaboration or implementation of defense obligations enshrined under the canopy of the NATO treaty.³

US-Norwegian BLDAs: strategic, ad hoc, and personal

Political and strategic considerations provide the foundation of US-Norwegian defense cooperation, and their shared common set of values and security interests have driven cooperation across all their military branches for decades. From the US perspective, Norway’s valuable geographic position is complimented by a high level of trust in Norway as a reliable and proactive security partner willing to fulfil US requests for military contributions. In turn, the Norwegian Ministry of Defense views the United States as the most important ally for Norway, and its BLDAs with the US as “the broadest, longest, and deepest.”⁴ Norway has also experienced a large degree of support from the Pentagon in taking Norwegian proposals and concerns into account when negotiating BLDA policy matters, largely because it has proven to be a reliable partner with well-prepared initiatives.

If political and strategic considerations provide the rationale for US-Norwegian BLDAs, in practice, these agreements are often driven by bottom-up policy entrepreneurship and interpersonal relationships. In Norway, rather than being result of government initiatives, new ideas have often been championed by individual actors within the defense establishment who have identified a need—and the right timing—to push initiative or a proposal.⁵ The Norwegian-American bilateral study group (discussed below) known

in Norwegian as ‘den norsk-amerikanske bilaterale studiegruppen’ is likely the most famous example of this bottom-up BLDA policy entrepreneurship, but it is not the only example. For instance, the Minnesotan National Guard and the Norwegian Home Guard initiated a troop exchange (literally with a handshake) in 1974 in one of the longest running BLDAs of its kind worldwide.⁶ This still-running program continued for decades on just a handshake before being legally formalized in 1990.

Such long-lasting relations built on trust and mutual recognition and shared interests have helped Norway secure top-level access to important actors and offices in the US, and thereby an opportunity to voice Norwegian concerns at the highest levels. For example, these ties were vital when the US signaled that they wanted to cancel the COB agreement in 1995, and again when the US questioned the continued relevance of NALMEB in 2005 (COB and NALMEB discussed below). In each case, Norwegian defense diplomacy managed to convince the Americans of the importance of these arrangements and secured continued US military engagement with Norwegian bases and storage facilities. These long-lasting ties have led to very close relationships between Norwegian military personnel and defense officials with their American counterparts in the US Marine Corps, Air Force, Navy, Special Operations community, and US Intelligence agencies (in particular the Office of Naval Intelligence)—relationships that endure to this day.⁷

The Hierarchical Typology of US-Norwegian BLDAs

The policy-oriented nature of US-Norwegian BLDAs means that they can (and have historically) come in a wide variety of formats and degrees of formality—from simple handshakes to formal treaty status. Over time, and especially since the end of the Cold War, these defense agreements have become more formalized, and the terminology more standardized and precise. In the process, the Norwegian MoD has modified its language to match the needs of its US partner, developing a standard set of agreement vehicles it uses in US-Norwegian BLDAs.

Tveiten lists them in a hierarchy of descending levels of importance:

- Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) providing the general guidelines for forces operating in host nation’s territory that guides the agreement
- Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) providing strategic level agreement outlining each nation’s understanding of key aspects and duties mentioned in the SOFA
- Technical Agreements (TAs) providing operational level agreements, typically between the host nation and the relevant international commanders or commands.
- Joint Implementation Agreement providing tactical level, detailed agreements about the nuts and bolts of host nation units and the deployed forces.⁸

The Norwegian MoD also includes Joint Statements of Intent, Joint Letters of Intent, and even Joint Press Releases and formal bilateral agreements to update point-of-contact email address lists as examples at the bottom of this BLDA typology.⁹

Today, typically, the overarching BLDAs are formalized through MoUs with several TAs underneath, regulating details in the working relationships between the branches of the Armed Forces. However, it is important to note that practically every BLDA between the US and Norway since the 1950s has been interpreted as an elaboration or implementation of defense obligations enshrined under the canopy of the NATO treaty and NATO SOFA—which sits at the top of the above list (above the US-Norwegian SOFA). In Norway, there are both domestic political as well as pragmatic military reasons for this, since any bilateral defense agreement interpreted as a practical extension of the NATO treaty can be implemented without prior political approval. However, to allow for public debate and avoid the potential for political criticism, BLDAs regarded as politically sensitive are increasingly subject to Norwegian parliamentary discussion and approval. Compared to the Cold War period, the day to day management of the various MoUs and their underlying arrangements and agreements is to a much larger degree formalized and bureaucratized. These formalized processes are also subject to more systematic political review, with some amendments or additions that in the past could be dealt with swiftly and informally now having to pass through more formalized processes.¹⁰

Key US-Norway BLDAs, Past and Present

Comprehensive surveys of US-Norwegian BLDAs are limited by the fact that records of such agreements do not exist (as one recent US study suggests)¹¹ or are not made public (in the case of the Norwegian MoD).¹² Rather than providing such a survey, this section provides examples of several of the most important BLDAs between the US and Norway across the Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps branches of the armed services, respectively. It also provides an example of NATO reliance on BLDAs by discussing the original defense agreement used to implement US military assistance to Norway—MDAP—under the auspices of NATO.

Mutual Defence Assistance Program (MDAP)

The Mutual Defence Assistance Program (MDAP) was used to create the legal machinery needed to implement US military and financial assistance to its new European allies created by the newly ratified North Atlantic Treaty (NAT) of 1949. Norway’s request for military assistance from the US under MDAP was signed bilaterally with the US in January 1950. Originally, Norway viewed membership in NAT as adequate reassurance of allied commitment to the defence of Norway, and its domestic political climate was marked by skepticism towards allowing allied bases and forces on Norwegian soil. However, Soviet willingness to use force during the Korean War altered this Norwegian defense calculus, and it was acknowledged that it was unrealistic to expect allied military assistance in defense of Norway without creating the necessary logistics and basing frameworks to facilitate troop and material transfers in times of crisis. MDAP—in combination with vast allocations from NATO’s infrastructure fund—led to the construction of numerous bases, airfields and installations to serve the rapidly growing Norwegian Armed Forces and to facilitate the transfer of allied forces in a potential conflict.¹³

Collocated Operational Bases (COB) Program

The Collocated Operational Bases (COB) program was a secret BLDA designed in the 1970s to provide US Air Force support to Norway and other European allies in alignment with NATO's contingency defense planning. COBs facilitated the prepositioning of large numbers of US Air Force aircraft within NATO countries (including Norway, Denmark, and France) that during the 1950s and 60s were politically opposed to permanent (or even rotational) stationing of US strike forces within their territory.¹⁴ Militarily, the COB allowed the strategic dispersal of US fighters to bases across Norway (and other NATO allies) in wartime to avoid clustering them in bases in the UK and Germany. Politically, in a Norwegian context and elsewhere, it served a wider purpose. By keeping this 1974 US-Norwegian COB agreement secret (classified) until later declassification in the 1980s, the Norwegian government was able to provide permanent facilities at as many as nine bases for the rapid deployment of US fighters without having to publicly admit how this BLDA potentially contradicted the Norwegian principle of *basepolitikken* that disallowed such permanent or rotational forward deployment arrangements.¹⁵

INVICTUS

The 'INVICTUS Arrangement' is another originally classified BLDA that was first signed in 1960 (and updated in the 70s and 80s) to allow the US Navy to pre-position fuel and mobile naval field hospitals, as well as emergency-land its fighters and surveillance aircraft at designated Norwegian bases.¹⁶ The program was described in a Norwegian MoD document from 1998 thusly:

The Invictus agreement entails several prepositioned supply facilities that will support and re-supply the Atlantic Fleet, included Carrier Fleets. The Agreement includes a very large fuel storage facility in Trøndelag, as well as logistical support for maritime aviation at Værnes, Ørlandet, Bodø and Andøya. In addition, there are two mobile hospitals each with a capacity of 500 patients, stored in Trøndelag and in Ofoten. The hospitals have special equipment and can therefore not be manned by Norwegian personnel.¹⁷

NALMEB

The Norway Air-Landed Marine Expeditionary Brigade (NALMEB) was a BLDA established in 1981 to allow the US Marine Corps to pre-position military equipment in Norway in order to defend and quickly reinforce NATO's northern flank, and thereby Norway. The agreement sprung out of an initiative voiced by the Norwegian-American bilateral study group (known as "den norsk-amerikanske bilaterale studiegruppen") that had been formally, but secretly, set up in 1976. The ability for the Norwegian Defense Ministry to work bilaterally and in secret with the Pentagon without going through NATO or diplomatic channels created, according to JJ Holst, an "efficient way of doing business."¹⁸ However, knowledge of the working group went public in 1980, when political sensitivities over where to place US storage facilities, and what to store, became subject to public debate. Eventually the US storage facilities were placed in Trøndelag (outside Trondheim), as opposed to further north, due to political considerations because this was seen as less aggressive towards the Soviets. Due to the same considerations, the Norwegians would not let the US

Marines preposition A-6 fighter/bombers because they were considered offensive weapons, despite these being core components of the US Marine Corps brigade NALMEB was created to support.¹⁹

MCPP-N

During the early 2000's, the Pentagon put the NALMEB under scrutiny, questioning whether the arrangement was beneficial or cost-efficient for the US. The Norwegian MoD scrambled to convince the Americans that the prepositioning was both necessary and desirable from a Norwegian point of view. In the following discussions, Norway's offer to pay 50 % of the operating costs of the program and agreement to allow greater flexibility in the use of the facilities and the equipment stored there was important for the continued cooperation regarding the US Marine Corps prepositioning program.

Following these discussions, in 2005 and 2006 NALMEB was renamed the Marine Corps Prepositioning Program-Norway (MCPP-N) and was recalibrated to serve a different geostrategic environment. This BLDA continued to store weapons, ammunition, vehicles and other equipment, but greater emphasis was placed on MCPP-N being suitable for a wider range of tasks both within the framework of NATO and outside Norway (peace operations, humanitarian assistance, disaster assistance, impact management in the wake of terrorist attacks and evacuation operations). From a Norwegian perspective, the continued use of these storage facilities also helped ensure US participation in joint exercises and training in Norway, including activities stemming from operations at NATO's Joint Warfare Center in Stavanger. To further underline that the trans-Atlantic link remained strong, in 2012 the then commander of the USMC visited Norway to express US interest in reinvesting in and strengthening the MCPP-N agreement.²⁰

Most recently, MCPP-N has been used as the legal basis for the Rotational training of 700 USMC personnel in Værnes/Troms, starting in 2017, and up for evaluation in 2022.²¹ These activities are seen as in line with the re-negotiated agreement of 2006 (MCPP-N) and were judged not to be in violation of "basepolitikken" due to the troops being rotated on a regular basis. Controversially, half of these were deployed to Troms, much closer to the Russian border than under the original NALMEB and earlier MCPP-N deployments, but still more than 500 kilometers from the border. The ability of future US Marine Corps deployments to be underwritten by MCPP-N demonstrates the high level of flexibility BLDAs provide.

Conclusion

US-Norwegian bilateral defence agreements are a critical component of the US-Norwegian security cooperation and play a crucial role in enhancing NATO defense capabilities. Rather than representing an alternative to NATO, these arrangements have been embedded under the canopy of the NATO treaty and have often developed as NATO-centric defense initiatives. Historically, grass-roots policy entrepreneurship (including at venues like NUPI) has played a significant role in developing US-Norwegian defense cooperation, and this work should continue in the future.

Endnotes

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3. Interview with Anders C. Sjaastad, former Norwegian Defense Minister, Oslo, 27th of February, 2020.
4. Interview with defense official, Oslo, 3rd of June, 2019.
5. Interview with defence official, Oslo, 16th of September, 2019.
6. See Minnesotanationalguard.ng.mil, «46th US – Norway Reciprocal Troop Exchange to come to Camp Ripley», 05.02.2019. Available at <https://minnesotanationalguard.ng.mil/46th-u-s-norway-reciprocal-troop-exchange-to-come-to-camp-ripley/>
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8. Ingjald Tveiten, «Allierte forsterkninger og øvelser i Norge 2000–2014. Hvor godt er vi forberedt?», Oslo Files on Defence and Security, no. 3, (IFS: 2016), p. 17.
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15. See Jacob Børresen Gullow Gjeseth, and Rolf Tamnes, Norsk forvarshistorie, 1970-2000, Allianseforsvar I endring (Bergen: Eide forlag 2004), p.58.
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17. Proposition to the Norwegian Storting, no. 73, 1997-98 (our translation). Available at <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/stprp-nr-73-1997-98/id201981/sec9>
18. Rolf Tamnes, Oljealder: 1965 – 1995 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1997), p. 86.
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21. See Regjeringen.no, «Det amerikanske marinekorpsets øving og trening i Norge», 12.06.2018. Available at [https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/det-amerikanske-marinekorpsets-oving-og-trening-i-norge/id2604216/.](https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/det-amerikanske-marinekorpsets-oving-og-trening-i-norge/id2604216/)

