



Nordic partnership choices in a fierier security environment: Towards more alignment

Kristin Haugevik, Øyvind Svendsen, Katja Creutz, Mikkel Runge Olesen, Anna Lundborg Regnér and Jakob Linnet Schmidt.

Summary

Nordic states' partnership choices in security and defence are more aligned than they were a decade ago. When Danish, Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish government officials now identify key security challenges and partners, and reflect on the potential for Nordic cooperation, they have the same reference points and use similar wording. Since 2014, the toolbox for Nordic defence cooperation has also solidified and different formal affiliations with NATO and the EU seem to matter less than before. Furthermore, an array of multi- and minilateral cooperation structures

have emerged across and beyond the EU and NATO, expanding the possibilities for Nordic cooperation under a larger Euro-Atlantic umbrella. However, two limitations remain: First, Nordic security and defence cooperation still remains subordinate to and a supplement rather than an alternative to NATO. Second, putting Nordic response mechanisms into practice remains dependent not only on the context and issue at stake, but also on the political appetite of the individual Nordic governments to choose a Nordic solution.

A new security context

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world in early 2020, it challenged international cooperation structures. Responding to the crisis, many states turned inwards, prioritising tailored national strategies over coordinated measures. Even Nordic cooperation – which is usually deemed exceptionally close – suffered as borders closed and individual states chose different management strategies. All this occurred against a global backdrop of increased tension among the great powers and within the transatlantic and European security communities. This makes 2021 an interesting time to take stock of security and defence debates in the Nordic states. Which security challenges and partnerships are individual Nordic states highlighting in a fiery security environment? What potential do they now see for further Nordic security and defence cooperation?

This brief compares four Nordic states' perceptions of (i) main security challenges, (ii) key partnerships and (iii) future possibilities for Nordic security and defence cooperation. Focusing on Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, the brief tracks both official positions and views found in wider political and media debates. While recent years have seen intensified political efforts to strengthen Nordic security and defence cooperation, we find that there is still no 'common Nordic order' in the security and defence domain. While a joint Nordic security and defence toolbox is now largely in place, its effectuation depends not only on the context and issue at stake, but also on the political appetite of the individual Nordic governments to choose a Nordic solution. At the same time, we observe that there are more convergences in individual Nordic debates today than a decade ago. This, we suggest, could foster a common order in the future, should great power tensions manifest themselves more strongly in the Nordic region.

Shared security concerns

Comparing official discourses on security and defence in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden in 2021, we find striking similarities in their assessments of the security environment. Not only do the four states highlight many of the same security concerns, they also have similar ways of formulating them. First, government officials in all four states identify security threats and challenges to their states in broad terms, highlighting topics such as great power tensions, threats to the rules-based international order, autocratic forces on the rise, increased risk of the use of weapons of mass destruction, cybersecurity, foreign intelligence and information campaigns, global pandemics and climate change. These broad takes on security also reflect how the Nordics organise their security policies: Apart from in Finland, where the president is the main voice on foreign, security and defence policy, foreign ministers and defence ministers in the Nordic states have co-ownership of the security portfolio in the public domain.

Second, all four Nordic states now have a strong focus on security and defence challenges in their own neighbourhood, identifying the Arctic and the Baltic Sea geographical areas as key priorities. Inevitably, there is some variation in the weighting of these two, for example, with Norway focusing more on the Arctic, and Finland more on the Baltic Sea. The increased attention on the Nordic neighbourhood applies also to Denmark, which in the 1990s and early 2000s acquired a reputation as the most 'internationalist' Nordic state, and also increasingly as a 'military activist' state.

Third, all four Nordic states now explicitly identify Russia as a security challenge, linking their assessment to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and more broadly to misinformation campaigns and threats in the cyber domain. In the Danish official discourse, Russia is represented as a major security challenge; the immediate concern being that a misinterpretation could trigger a military conflict in the Nordic neighbourhood. In Sweden and Finland, stronger wording is now used to describe Russia as a security challenge. In Norway, officials routinely emphasise the importance of combining a strategy of 'deterrence' (through NATO) with one of dialogue and 'reassurance' (bilaterally). With a new Labour-led government in office from October 2021, Norwegian officials are once again foregrounding the importance of bilateral dialogue with Russia.

Finally, none of the four Nordic states portray China as a military threat in the Nordic neighbourhood, although China's growing interest and presence in the Arctic is problematised. In the Finnish government's Defence Report, released in September 2021, China's influencing methods are mentioned for the first time as a security concern. Further, in all the Nordic states, Chinese investments in critical infrastructure and raw materials are seen to pose certain risks due to the close ties between Chinese companies and the Chinese authorities. This concern was also voiced in debates about whether Chinese-owned Huawei should participate in building the 5G network in several of the Nordic states.

Partner preferences in sync

The Nordic countries are often portrayed as likeminded states with similar geographical and historical foundations. In 2021, public debates in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden appear more aligned than previously with regard to which institutions, networks and partners are emphasised and how they are represented. Against the backdrop of shifts in global power and concurrent insecurities, an overarching observation is that the appetite for challenging or adjusting existing partnerships seems low in all the Nordic countries. First, all four states now put a high premium on their relationship with the United States. Denmark and Norway remain the most committed Atlanticists, pinpointing NATO as the undisputed cornerstone of their security and defence policies and also prioritising bilateral ties with Washington during the Trump years. The future value

and desired depth of ties to the United States have been subject to some critical debate in both Denmark and Norway, but alternative positions on partnership choices remain marginal. Meanwhile, both Finland's and Sweden's Atlanticist inclinations have been strengthened in recent years, through partnership agreements with NATO and through bi- and trilateral agreements with the United States. In Finland, ties with the United States continue to be politically sensitive. However, Finland's and Sweden's new propensities are seen as a key enabler for further Nordic security and defence cooperation, including in the Arctic where NATO and Finland and Sweden are seen to have converging interests.

Second, all four Nordic states are generally positive regarding closer security and defence cooperation in the EU. This includes Denmark, whose opt-out continues to prevent it from participating in certain aspects of the EU cooperation on defence, but which fully participates in, for example, the European Defence Fund (EDF). Also, EU outsider Norway has opted in to a number of EU initiatives in the security and defence domain – including the EDF and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) (Denmark is not part of the latter). Despite some political dissatisfaction among EU sceptics, cooperation with the EU on security and defence is considered an opportunity for the Norwegian defence industry. Within the EU, Finland and Sweden are generally positive towards EU security and defence integration. Some difficulties are present, however, for instance with the Swedish concern about 'industrial strategic autonomy' for the EU which could harm the transatlantic relationship (which earlier was reason for a more sceptic position), and a Finnish debate about the limited effect of EU defence initiatives on Finnish defence capabilities. Some EU states are also seen to have a broader understanding of the defence domain than Finland.

Third, the UK's exit from the EU – Brexit – does not appear to have changed the Nordics' view on security and defence ties with London. In all four states studied here, the UK features in political debate as the most significant European partner outside the Nordic region. If nothing else, it is emphasised that Brexit has weakened EU defence, making closer bilateral cooperation more important now than when the UK was an EU member. That said, in Denmark it is worth noting that the gap between the UK and France as the most important defence partner in Europe has diminished. The degree to which this trend will continue will likely depend on Danish operational experiences from working more closely with the French in the coming years as well as future developments in the UK post-Brexit. While Germany is often highlighted as one of many likeminded security allies, none of the four Nordic states identify Germany as the key European security and defence partner.

Finally, there is full convergence among the four Nordic states in terms of ties to other security groupings across or outside of the formal structures of NATO and the EU. All four are part of the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), the relatively untested French European Intervention Initiative (EI2) and the German-led Framework Nations Concept (FNC). Thus, the Nordics are woven into a complex web of European and transatlantic initiatives, partnerships and institutions in security and defence. Pending political will, this could over time enable closer Nordic collaboration, the main barriers still being differences in their formal membership of NATO and their degree of integration with the EU. However, the Nordics are increasingly finding pragmatic ways to navigate around these obstacles.

Nordic takes on Nordic security and defence cooperation

Nordic government officials have highlighted that security and defence is a domain where business not only continued as usual during the Covid-19 pandemic, but where Nordic cooperation in fact progressed. During the pandemic, trilateral statements of intent on enhanced operational cooperation were signed between Finland, Sweden and Norway (2020) and Denmark, Sweden and Norway (2021). This reflects a tendency in recent years of Nordic cooperation progressing in the fields of military defence and civil security. The development of the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO) accelerated following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. While Sweden and Finland's non-alignment policies place restraints on the level of formal defence integration and cooperation that can be achieved in the region, NORDEFECO has nonetheless developed 'a new and upgraded operational role'. Bi- and trilateral defence agreements within the Nordic region have also materialised in recent years, several of which involve Sweden. These initiatives include a Military Strategic Concept agreed between Finland and Sweden (2019), and the abovementioned trilateral statements of intent. More broadly, in 2008, the Stoltenberg report proposed thirteen concrete measures through which Nordic foreign and security cooperation could be strengthened. Ten years later, a review conducted by Nordic foreign policy research institutes found that several of these initiatives had been put into practice. However, a general trend observed was that proposals for new formalised structures and units, or initiatives involving overlapping competencies to those found in NATO and/or the EU, were less likely to materialise.

With Finland and Sweden more aligned with NATO, Norway opting in to EU security and defence initiatives, and Denmark assuming a pragmatic approach to its EU defence opt-out, today there are fewer formal hindrances to furthering Nordic security and defence integration and cooperation. In all the Nordic states, Nordic security and defence cooperation is presented in favourable terms, and it is difficult to find voices critical of Nordic cooperation. To

the extent that there are domestic debates about Nordic cooperation at all, it is about the degree to which Nordic cooperation could – or should – serve as an alternative to other frameworks and structures. In the Finnish context, the Nordic dimension is highlighted as important ‘for selectively promoting [Finland’s] other central security and defence policy pillars, the EU’s common security and defence policy and cooperation with NATO’. In the Swedish debate, Nordic cooperation is presented as an argument for pursuing closer ties with NATO. For Norway, Nordic cooperation is mainly viewed as an intra-Nordic tool and subregional extension of NATO. This observation applies also to Denmark, where intra-Nordic security and defence cooperation is portrayed as being in the interest of Atlantic allies.

Conclusions

Overall, we find a distinct Nordic convergence not only in perceptions of key security challenges and partnerships, but also in the individual Nordic states’ positions on how Nordic security and defence cooperation should develop and for what purpose. Both in official discourse, and in the wider public and media debates in each national context, Nordic security and defence cooperation is considered important and, for the most part, politically uncontroversial. Furthermore, recent institutional developments have added to the density of structures enabling Nordic security and defence cooperation. The increased depoliticisation of cooperation with the United States and NATO in Sweden and Finland has been pivotal in this regard. However, the different formal relationships that the Nordic states have with NATO and the EU still act as barriers to making Nordic cooperation a first-order priority at the national level. In addition, putting Nordic response mechanisms into practice remains dependent not only on the context and issue at stake, but also on the political appetite of the individual Nordic governments to choose a Nordic solution.

Endnotes

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ⁱⁱ See e.g. Wivel, Anders (2020). Evig aktivisme i uendelig krig: sikkerhed, status og strategisk kultur i dansk udenrigspolitik. *Internasjonal Politikk* 78(3), 411–420. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23865/intpol.v78.2536>

ⁱⁱⁱ Closed roundtable discussion with Nordic officials, 12 October 2021.

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Kristin Haugevik is Senior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

Øyvind Svendsen is Senior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

Katja Creutz is Programme Director at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA).

Mikkel Runge Olesen is Senior Reseracher at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS).

Anna Lundborg Regnér is Analyst at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI).

Jakob Linnet Schmidt is PhD Fellow at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS).

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of International
Affairs

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NUPI
Norwegian Institute of International Affairs
C.J. Hambros plass 2D
PO Box 8159 Dep. NO-0033 Oslo, Norway
www.nupi.no | info@nupi.no

