



Security debates and partnership choices in the Nordic states: From differentiation to alignment

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Summary

What security challenges do the Nordic states highlight in a fluctuating security environment? Towards which partner institutions, networks and states do they orient themselves, and what role do they envision for further Nordic security and defence cooperation? Focusing on Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, this report maps and analyses present-day debates on security and defence in these four states. Examining both official positions and perspectives presented in the wider political and media debates in all four states, a key finding is that their perceptions of the security environment and of key partnerships have become more aligned over the past decade. Further, all four states are woven into a complex web of European and transatlantic initiatives, partnerships and institutions in security and defence. While Finland and Sweden remain outside of NATO and Norway and Iceland outside of the EU, the Nordic states' participation and degree of integration in European and transatlantic structures is more similar than it used to be. We also observe that the four states appear more aligned than before in their views on how Nordic security and defence cooperation should develop in the future, and for what purpose. While it is still premature to talk about a 'common Nordic order' in the security and defence domain, in all four states we find that there is interest in and commitment to further strengthening Nordic security and defence cooperation. A joint Nordic security and defence toolbox is now largely in place and ready to be employed. While 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, these formal obstacles now seem less problematic. The Nordics are increasingly finding pragmatic ways to navigate around such barriers. This, along with the overall trend of greater convergence in individual Nordic debates on security and defence, could foster a common Nordic order in the future.

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1. Introduction

The year 2021 was set to be a pivotal one in European and transatlantic security politics. In some areas, international turmoil was calming. Britain's extended exit from the EU had come to an end, as had the disruptive Trump presidency. With vaccine programmes underway, the global Covid-19 crisis appeared to be under better control. In other areas, storms were brewing. Relations between Russia and NATO were deteriorating; the bilateral trade row between the United States and China had intensified. The EU's value-based community was challenged by some increasingly illiberal member states seeking to undermine shared European institutions. These developments were also felt strongly in the Nordic region, which is inhabited by a group of small but internationalist states that are vocally committed to preserving a rules-based international order. What security challenges did the Nordic states highlight in this fluctuating security environment, and towards which partner institutions, networks and states did they orient themselves?

During the Cold War, the Nordic states chose their own, individual security paths. Whereas Denmark, Norway and Iceland opted for NATO membership, Sweden chose freedom from alliances in peacetime and Finland signed a Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union. Combined, these individual choices resulted in a 'Nordic balance' which may well have contributed to upholding peace and stability in the region as a whole.¹ After the Cold War, these individual differences faded as Finland and Sweden joined the EU (in 1995) and gradually moved closer to the transatlantic security community. This development also toned down some of the structural obstacles to enhanced Nordic security and defence cooperation. Since 2009, big leaps have been made in the development of a better equipped joint Nordic security and defence toolbox. The process of developing a Nordic cooperation structure with both political and military cooperation levels picked up momentum, first against the backdrop of the financial crisis in 2009; later in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and growing tensions in the Nordic neighbourhood.² While Nordic leaders have routinely expressed an interest in strengthening security and defence cooperation, research suggests that further formalisation hinges not only on operational and bureaucratic compatibilities, but also on the allocation of responsibilities between national, Nordic and NATO structures, and the political willingness and readiness of the individual Nordic states to opt for a common Nordic response in a given crisis.³

In this report, we present findings from a comparative study of security and defence debates in the four largest Nordic states – Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden – through 2020 and early 2021.⁴ Drawing on official documents, statements, parliamentary debates, media arti-

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1 Brundtland (1966).

2 Bengtsson (2020); Friis (2021).

3 See e.g. Bredesen & Friis (2019); Bengtsson (2020); Haugevik & Sending (2020); Friis (2021). For a comparative discussion of how the Nordic states responded to the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, see Creutz et al. (2021).

4 The study thus omits Iceland, which is considerably smaller than the other Nordic states in terms of popula-

cles, background interviews and closed roundtable discussions,⁵ we identify both prevailing and alternative perceptions of the international security environment (section 2); key partner institutions, networks and states in security and defence (sections 3 and 4); and possibilities for enhanced Nordic security and defence cooperation (section 5). An overarching finding is that the general perception of the security environment and of key partnerships in these four Nordic states, have become more aligned over the past decade. While Finland and Sweden remain outside of NATO and Norway and Iceland outside of the EU, the Nordic states' participation and degree of integration in European and transatlantic structures is more similar than it used to be. We also observe that views in the four states appear more aligned than before when it comes to how Nordic security and defence cooperation should develop in the future, and for what purpose. While it is still premature to talk about a 'common Nordic order' in the security and defence domain, in all four states we find that there is interest in and commitment to further strengthening Nordic security and defence cooperation. A joint Nordic security and defence toolbox is now largely in place and ready to be employed. All four states also participate in a number bi- and minilateral initiatives and constellations either within the 'Nordic club', or in 'Nordic Plus' formats, with for example the Baltic states. While 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, the Nordics are increasingly finding pragmatic ways to navigate around such barriers. This, along with the overall trend of greater convergence in individual Nordic debates on security and defence, could help foster a common Nordic order in the future.

tion. For a recent, comparative analysis of Iceland's security and defence policy, see Wivel et al. (2021).

⁵ Background interviews with officials working on foreign policy and defence were conducted in the Nordic capitals between March 2021 and August 2021. On 12 October 2021, the research team organized a closed, online roundtable discussion with 2-3 officials from each state.

2. Nordic perceptions of the international security environment

Comparing Danish, Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish discourses on security and defence in 2020 and 2021, we find striking similarities in their assessments of the contemporary international security environment. Not only did these four states' governments highlight many of the same security concerns, but they also had similar ways of formulating them. Four overarching observations can be made at the outset (findings from the individual states are presented in more detail below).

First, in all four Nordic states, governments identified security challenges in broad terms. Across the different societal levels, actors highlighted issues such as great power tensions, threats to the rules-based international order, autocratic forces on the rise, the 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 Nordic governments organise their security policies. Apart from 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, in all four states, governments had a strong focus on security and defence challenges in the Nordic neighbourhood, highlighting the Arctic and the Baltic Sea geographical areas as priorities. Inevitably, there was some variation in the weighting of these two, for example, with Norway focusing more on the Arctic, and Finland more on the Baltic Sea. Notably, the increased attention on the Nordic neighbourhood applied 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.⁶

Third, all four states explicitly identified Russia as a security challenge in official documents and speeches, linking their assessment to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and, more broadly, to misinformation campaigns and threats in the cyber domain. In the Danish official discourse, Russia was represented as a major security challenge; the immediate concern being that a misinterpretation could trigger a military conflict in the Nordic neighbourhood. Also, in Sweden and Finland, stronger wording was used to describe Russia as a security challenge than had been used previously. In Norway, government officials have long emphasised the importance of combining a strategy of 'deterrence' (through NATO) with one of dialogue and 'reassurance' (bilaterally) regarding relations with Russia. As a new Labour-led government entered into office in October 2021, Norwegian officials once again foregrounded the importance of bilateral dialogue with Russia.

Finally, neither of the four states portrayed China as a military concern in the Nordic neighbourhood, although China's growing interest and presence in the Arctic was problematised. In the Finnish Government's Defence Report, released in September 2021, China's influencing methods were raised for the first time as a security concern. Further, in all the Nordic states, Chinese investments in critical infrastructure and raw materials were seen to pose certain risks

⁶ See e.g. Wivel (2020).

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 5G networks in several of the Nordic states.

2.1 Denmark

In its 2020 unclassified risk assessment, the Danish Defence Intelligence Service highlighted the Arctic, Russia and China along with cyber and terrorist threats as the most significant topics relating to Danish security and strategic interests.⁷ All these topics recurred in Danish security and defence deliberations in 2020 and 2021, with Russia featuring as the most prominent security challenge. In the words of Danish Foreign Minister, Jeppe Kofod: ‘The United States takes a step backwards. China steps forward. And Russia steps on all of us.’⁸ Concerns about Russia manifested themselves both in the focus on cyber threats and, in geographical terms, with the situation in the Arctic and the Baltic Sea.⁹ This does not mean that there was any anticipation or fear of Russia intentionally launching a conventional military conflict with NATO, but rather a concern that misconceptions and errors in a tense situation could spiral out of control and lead to confrontation. As stated by the (now former) Danish Chief of Defence Bjørn Bisserup:

nothing indicates that Russia is interested in a conventional conflict with NATO. They will certainly lose it – or at least not win. ... After all, the biggest risk today is that a misunderstanding ends up catastrophically.¹⁰

However, Russia has in recent years modernised its military equipment and forces and thus appears to be a more capable military power. The 2008 Russo-Georgian War and especially the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and Russia’s annexation of Crimea at the same time signalled that Russia was prepared to use military force to achieve its political goals, for example, to change national borders. Uncertainty regarding Russia’s intentions contributed to making the security situation more unpredictable. In 2020-2021, a Danish priority was to avoid any Russian misinterpretation of NATO’s determination to counter Russian aggression.¹¹ In the official discourse, Russia has long been represented as a major security challenge; a representation which has essentially been unchallenged among Danish foreign and security policy elites.¹² But the view on Russia has sharpened in recent years, with some referring to Russia as a threat.¹³ A more aggressive Russia has also been one of the main impetuses for an increasing political consensus on the need to allocate more resources to the Danish defence budget since 2016. This manifested itself in a ‘substantial increase’ in the 2018 defence agreement and the 2019 supplemental agreement, where the political parties also agreed that the 2014 Wales Defence

7 Danish Defence Intelligence Service (2020).

8 Kofod (2020). All Danish quotes are translated by the authors.

9 Interviews, Copenhagen, 19 April 2021 and 27 April 2021. In the 2021 defence agreement on Arctic capabilities which bolstered surveillance in the Arctic and North Atlantic, Russia, with its increasing activity and military build-up in the region, was the only external actor mentioned explicitly in the agreement. See Danish Ministry of Defence (2021a).

10 *Politiken* (2020a).

11 Danish Defence Intelligence Service (2020); Interview, Copenhagen, 27 April 2021; *Politiken* (2020a). See also e.g. interview with Danish Minister of Defence Trine Bramsen and (now former) Danish Chief of Defence Bjørn Bisserup: *Berlingske* (2020a).

12 Prior, a prominent member of the Danish People’s Party voiced opposition. This was, however, an anomaly and has since been silenced. See Hansen (2018), pp. 5-8.

13 Hansen (2019), p. 5.

Investment Pledge would form the basis of a new defence agreement.¹⁴ This could, however, result in fractures in the broad political consensus as not all parties seem prepared to honour this.¹⁵

Unlike Russia, China was not portrayed as a direct military challenge to Denmark in the period examined here.¹⁶ While in 2020 and 2021 China continued its extensive military build-up and modernisation programme, including a bolstering of its capability to launch military operations on a global scale, the western Pacific Ocean was viewed as China's main geographical military priority. But China was seen to represent a challenge in other ways, not least in the Arctic where potential Chinese investments in critical infrastructure and raw materials were deemed to pose certain risks due to the interconnection between Chinese companies and China's political system. Like Russia, China was linked to disinformation and cyber operations in pursuit of its strategic interests.¹⁷

Other worrisome developments from a Danish point of view were the increased great power rivalry between the United States, Russia and China, mounting pressure on the rules-based international order, and autocratic forces on the rise.¹⁸ In an international situation where democracy, the rule of law and human rights were seen to be threatened, Foreign Minister Kofod often underlined the connection between Danish foreign policy interests and Danish values.¹⁹ However, besides stating that a value-based foreign policy necessitates strong cooperation with like-minded partners,²⁰ it remains to be seen how this approach affects Danish foreign policy in practice. Terrorism, especially in the form of militant Islamism, was also still perceived as a serious and present threat to the West. Pirate attacks were another cause for concern.²¹ As one of the world's largest seafaring nations, Denmark has a significant interest in maritime security.²² In cooperation with other countries, Denmark seeks to fight terrorist organisations, enhance maritime security and strengthen regional stability. Recent examples include sending Danish special operations forces to counter terrorism in the Sahel region and sending a Danish naval vessel to fight pirates in the Gulf of Guinea.²³

Denmark's military activism has evolved significantly over the years and is determined by external demands. At the same time, it has usually rested on a broad political consensus.²⁴ In the wake of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Social Liberal Party and the Socialist People's Party called for a reorientation of Danish foreign policy, with more emphasis on humanitarian and non-military instruments.²⁵ However, this did not appear to be the path taken by the Social Democratic government or the other parties of the broad consensus, as none of them have been eager to write off the military instrument.²⁶

14 Schmidt (2021), pp. 140-142; Danish Ministry of Defence (2018; 2019).

15 Danish Parliament (2021).

16 Interview, Copenhagen, 27 April 2021.

17 Danish Defence Intelligence Service (2020).

18 Interviews, Copenhagen 19 April 2021 and 27 April 2021.

19 On the connection between interests and values see e.g. *Jyllands-Posten* (2020); Kofod (2021a).

20 Kofod (2021b), pp. 16-19.

21 Danish Defence Intelligence Service (2020).

22 Kofod (2021b), pp. 24-25.

23 Bramsen (2021), p. 39-41; Danish Ministry of Defence (2021b; 2021c).

24 Jakobsen (2015); Mortensen & Wivel (2019).

25 Danish Social Liberal Party (2021); *Kristeligt Dagblad* (2021).

26 See e.g. Frederiksen (2021).

2.2 Finland

Those working with Finnish foreign and security policy tend to have a broad understanding of security challenges. In addition to military concerns such as Russia's actions in nearby regions,²⁷ this perception also includes, according to Finnish President Sauli Niinistö, nuclear weapons, terrorism, pandemics and climate change.²⁸ The same challenges were identified by some members of the parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee.²⁹ Other security challenges recurring in the Finnish debate in 2020-2021 were linked to technological development, 5G, the ability of crisis management operations to contribute to stability, as well as the disintegration of the rules-based international order.³⁰ All these challenges were also referred to in the 2020 Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy, which specifically highlighted great power competition as a broader trend affecting the global and regional security situation.³¹

In its 2021 Defence Report, the Finnish government assessed the security environment as complex and volatile. The broader focus had shifted from a Baltic Sea-oriented approach to Northern Europe.³² For representatives of the Ministry of Defence, the security challenges were described as more traditional and as mostly emanating from various states or regions. Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014, but also the massive transfer of troops to the Ukrainian border in April 2021, were concerning not only to Finland but to the rest of Europe. Russia's widespread subthreshold activities were also considered a security challenge. The same applied to China, which was mentioned for the first time in the Finnish government's Defence Report that was released in September 2021. Developments in the Sahel and Libya were also seen as challenges to Europe's stability and were closely monitored. Developments in Iraq and Afghanistan were also closely monitored due to their destabilising effects. Minister of Defence Antti Kaikkonen also emphasised the threat posed by cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, which was also highlighted in the 2021 Defence Report that raised the concept of 'broad-spectrum influencing'.³³

2.3 Norway

In Norway, a broad range of security challenges and concerns were also emphasised in 2020 and 2021. In general, the Norwegian government observed that the international climate was characterised by disorder and increased great power rebalancing. In addition to this broad diagnosis, in her 2021 annual address to the Storting, (now former) Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Søreide listed an array of security concerns: the coronavirus pandemic, foreign intelligence and information campaigns, protectionism, threats to human rights and democracy, humanitarian crises, climate change and conflicts, and regional instability.³⁴ While most of these were seen to not represent direct or immediate threats to Norwegian national interests or territory, they signify increasing global instability more broadly, which was represented as a longer-term threat to Norway as a (relatively) small state with a stated interest in upholding a rules-based international system. The one state which the Foreign Minister described most explicitly as a security concern in her address was Russia, emphasising in particular intelli-

27 Haavisto (2020b).

28 Niinistö (2020a).

29 Tuomioja (2020)

30 Interview, Helsinki, 6 May 2021.

31 Finnish Government (2020).

32 Pesu & Vanhanen (2021).

33 Kaikkonen (2021), p. 18, Finnish Government (2021), p. 18.

34 Søreide (2021).

gence and information campaigns.³⁵

In 2020-2021, the (now former) Norwegian minister of defence, Frank Bakke-Jensen was also active in the public debate on several contentious issues related to Russia.³⁶ They included secrecy surrounding a Norwegian citizen who was sentenced for spying in Russia and later released, the sale of the Bergen Engines factory to actors with financial ties to Russia, security in the Arctic and increased allied presence there, and NATO exercises in the High North during the pandemic. Most of Bakke Jensen's public engagements in 2020-2021 related in some way to Russia, and his overarching approach was to strike a balance between deterrence and reassurance, which has been the official Norwegian approach for several decades. The Norwegian long-term plan for defence (2020-2021) largely echoed these assessments.³⁷ The document highlighted the security situation in Norway's 'near abroad', particularly in relation to Russia, the strategic rivalry between the great powers, cyber threats, the increased risk of the use of weapons of mass destruction, structural development, procurement and system management in light of rapid technological development, and climate change.³⁸

Norwegian parliamentary debates during this period essentially focused on the same security and defence challenges as the those highlighted in official discourse. Conservative Party MPs had the toughest rhetoric on Russia, illustrated by accounts of Russia as, for example, 'the greatest risk factor for Europe in our time'.³⁹ MPs from the Labour Party also expressed concern about Russian foreign policy and conduct, especially in Russia's own neighbourhood, but also stressed the importance of keeping bilateral communication channels open. For example, the (now former) leader of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, Anniken Huitfeldt (Labour) noted how as a neighboring country, it is [in] Norway's interest to uphold continuous dialogue and contact with Russia, not least in difficult times where we meet an increasingly assertive Russia.⁴⁰

MPs from the Socialist Left Party were the most vocal critics of the Solberg government's approach to Russia in 2020-2021, with MPs questioning 'the connection between Russia in Ukraine and Russia in Northern Norway' and also taking a critical stance on the implications of both the increased military presence in Northern Norway and the bilateral defence agreement with the United States.⁴¹ In relation to China, Norwegian government officials offered less explicit security and defence assessments. However, parliamentarians across the political spectrum voiced concern about China's ambitions and presence in the Arctic, including its relationship with international law. MPs also especially problematised Chinese investment in Norwegian critical infrastructure and property.

The media debate on Norwegian security and defence policy dovetailed with the official discourse and the wider political debate. The most significant add-on was that the media debate also centred on how identified threats affect local communities in Norway. This was especially reflected in local debates in the northernmost part of Norway, where local voices expressed concern that Norway's approach to Russia was changing from a policy of reassurance to one

35 Søreide (2021).

36 Bakke-Jensen (2021a).

37 Norwegian Ministry of Defence (2020a)

38 Norwegian Ministry of Defence (2020a).

39 Tetzschner (2021).

40 Huitfeldt (2021a).

41 Eide (2021).

of deterrence. Some also argued that Norway's new cooperation agreement with the United States was diverging from Norway's established policy on not allow the stationing of foreign bases on Norwegian soil during peacetime.⁴² Combined, these notions can be interpreted as an expression of concern over aggravating Russia, with local communities becoming a site for confrontation.

2.4 Sweden

In 2014, the Swedish Defence Commission's report on the future development of Sweden's defence was delayed with the reason explicitly identified as Russia's annexation of Crimea.⁴³ From then onwards, Russian aggression became part of the national security debate. The challenge was perceived as multidimensional: territorial aggression alongside hybrid and cyber warfare, and (thus) challenging international rule and law.⁴⁴ As a consequence, party politics were toned down. Showing a united front and producing effective political decisions became a priority.⁴⁵ The developments that followed, including aggressive flying and military armament, were later a clear contributing factor to the December 2020 decision to significantly strengthen Swedish defence, with the initial aim to find agreement on related spending for the years 2021-2030. The prior negotiations exposed party differences in the Riksdagen however. Using increased Russian aggression as an argument, the opposition (primarily the Moderate Party and the Christian Democrats) advocated for a more significant financial allocation fearing a risk that the armament efforts would otherwise be underfunded, and stressing the need for a funding agreement for the entire period.⁴⁶ As the analysis was shared across parties, some voices in the government perceived the debate on funding more as a political game.⁴⁷ Agreement was eventually found for 2021-2025 with a follow-up station planned for 2023, one year after the next election.⁴⁸

As with Russia, the multidimensional security challenge from China was raised frequently in Swedish security and defence debates in 2020 and 2021.⁴⁹ The spring of 2021 witnessed debates concerning the right of Huawei to participate in building Sweden's 5G network. While the auction was initially open to all interested entities, a new law permitting the denial of certain entities after consultation with the Security Service and the armed forces⁵⁰ ultimately hindered Huawei despite court appeals. Government representatives stated that pressure from the United States had also been put on Swedish politicians to fall in line with the American decision on banning Huawei.⁵¹ This was connected to the debate on the implementation of a national screening mechanism for foreign direct investments. China cautioned against the screening mechanism being restrictive to Chinese investment, threatening potential retaliation by limiting Swedish business in China.⁵² Direct contact therefore occurred between industry representatives and the Minister of Trade, the first encouraging the latter to intervene not

42 See e.g. Hammerstad (2021); see also Bakke-Jensen (2021b).

43 Swedish Ministry of Defence (2014).

44 Swedish Government (2020); Interview, Stockholm, August 2021.

45 Interview, Stockholm, August 2021.

46 Swedish Parliament (2020a); *Europaportalen* (2020).

47 Interview, Stockholm, August 2021.

48 Swedish Parliament (2020a).

49 Interview, Stockholm, July 2021. See also Linde (2021), Swedish government (2020a).

50 Swedish Parliament (2021a).

51 *Dagens Nyheter* (2021a).

52 *Dagens Nyheter* (2021b); *Svenska Dagbladet* (2021a).

least to stop the banning of Huawei.⁵³

The challenge of Russian and Chinese aggression extended into the Arctic where both states were increasingly active as their commercial interests grew.⁵⁴ In connection with the Arctic Council's Ministerial Meeting, Foreign Minister Ann Linde expressed concern about the increased military activities.⁵⁵ Due to the rapid development in the region, Sweden also produced an Arctic strategy.⁵⁶ Nordic cooperation was emphasised here via forums such as the Nordic Council of Ministers as well as in bilateral relations.⁵⁷ Having similar threat analyses of the surrounding region was emphasised as an important factor for this specific area of cooperation.⁵⁸ In the parliamentary debate on the strategy, broad support was also voiced for Nordic cooperation, on the same grounds. It was nevertheless pointed out that the countries have varied conditions for participating,⁵⁹ painting a nuanced image of (future) regional cooperation. In the same parliamentary debate, Foreign Minister Linde noted the importance of the transatlantic link for the Arctic region's sustained security.⁶⁰ Although the United States is only one of the Arctic countries, the weight given to it demonstrates the importance of the partnership.

53 *Dagens Nyheter* (2021c).

54 Interview, Stockholm August 2021.

55 *Svenska Dagbladet* (2021a; 2021b); *Dagens Nyheter* (2021d).

56 Linde (2021).

57 Government Offices of Sweden (2020).

58 Interview, Stockholm, August 2021.

59 Government Offices of Sweden (2020).

60 Swedish Parliament (2021b).

3. Nordic approaches to transatlantic partnerships

Whereas the notion of the ‘the Nordic balance’ during the Cold War encompassed different partnership and alignment choices, in 2020 and 2021, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden were more in sync both in terms of *which* partner institutions, networks and states were foregrounded and *how* these were portrayed. Above all, all four states now put a high premium on their relationship with the United States. Denmark and Norway remained 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. While the future value and desired depth of ties to the United States were subject to some critical debate in both countries, voices calling for alternative partnership choices remained marginal. Meanwhile, both Finland’s and Sweden’s Atlanticist inclinations have been strengthened the last decade, through partnership agreements with NATO and through bi- and trilateral agreements with the United States. Finland’s and Sweden’s new propensities were seen as a key enabler for further Nordic security and defence cooperation, including in the Arctic where NATO, Finland and Sweden were seen to have converging interests.

3.1 Denmark

Since the founding of NATO, the security guarantee from the United States provided through Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty has formed the bedrock of Danish security policy. After the end of the Cold War, this only became more pronounced, which among other things led Denmark to prioritise contributions to US and NATO operations abroad. In pursuing a close relationship with the United States, Denmark has also traditionally strived to take on the role of bridge builder between the United States and Europe. However, in the last few years Denmark has moved away from bridgebuilding, now siding more unequivocally with the United States.⁶¹ In 2020 and 2021, this manifested itself in an even stronger emphasis on the unity with the United States and a more outspoken critical attitude towards Russia and China.⁶² This development accelerated during the Trump presidency, undaunted by the very public US-Danish controversy surrounding Trump’s attempt to buy Greenland, where Prime Minister Frederiksen’s rejection of Trump’s offer as ‘absurd’ caused Trump to both cancel a planned state visit to Denmark and to call Frederiksen’s comment ‘nasty’. The crisis ended a few days later after a telephone conversation between Trump and Frederiksen, but the incident nevertheless highlighted the vulnerability of small allies dependent on one security benefactor.⁶³

The alliance with the United States through NATO has also been the bedrock of the Danish strategy towards Russia. How to address China in global terms remained undecided in 2020-2021, but was indirectly linked to Russia-NATO relations, since securing support against China had gradually become a top concern for the United States in NATO. As such, Denmark supported a global focus in NATO, but was among a group of NATO countries not yet fully convinced on the substance of the United States’ approach to China.⁶⁴ However, NATO had at this point officially

61 Interview, Copenhagen, 27 April 2021. See also *Politiken* (2021).

62 See e.g. statements by Minister of Foreign Affairs Kofod and Minister of Defence Bramsen in *Berlingske* (2020b); *Information* (2021); *Jyllands-Posten* (2021a); Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2021).

63 *Politico* (2019).

64 Interview, Copenhagen, 27 April 2021.

acknowledged the strategic challenge from China – most recently in the June 2021 summit declaration that states needed to engage China with a view to defending the security interests of the alliance. From a Danish point of view, this development was a necessary rapprochement to the United States to ensure that the United States remained committed to deterring Russia in Europe, driven by a fear of abandonment that was intensified by the rhetoric and policies of the Trump administration.⁶⁵ In terms of national Danish policy initiatives, fear of US abandonment was another main reason behind the 2018 and 2019 allocation of more resources to the Danish defence budget.⁶⁶ Keeping the United States satisfied as an ally also played a key role in the 2019 Danish decision to increase situational awareness in the Arctic.⁶⁷ This shift took place during a period when Denmark was also changing its view of NATO in this region towards favouring the alliance taking on a more active role in the region.⁶⁸

Regarding US-Danish relations post-Trump, the Danish security establishment welcomed the new policies of the Biden administration. Not only was Biden's affirmation of the transatlantic bond a source of considerable relief, but Danish decision makers generally also found the Biden administration much easier to work with not least because its viewpoints were deemed to be significantly closer to Denmark's on many key issues, such as on climate change and even potentially on arms control.⁶⁹ However, in terms of the general direction of Danish security policy and the perceived need to position Denmark very close to the United States, the change of US administration changed little, and the Danish line of supporting key US interests, such as its new focus on China in NATO, remained in effect.

3.2 Finland

In recent years, the United States has come to be depicted as one of Finland's most important and closest partners.⁷⁰ Although the ties with the United States remain politically sensitive, Finnish security policy goes hand in hand with US relations, and foreign policy developments in the United States are followed more closely than ever.⁷¹ In 2020 and 2021, Finland's relations with the United States were seen as better than ever, and from the perspective of defence cooperation, it is irrelevant who occupies the White House.⁷² The investment in US relations was also extensive⁷³ and trust reigned.⁷⁴ However, there appeared to be a sense that this was a transitional period.⁷⁵ It was noted that the Biden administration's forthcoming National Security Strategy and National Defence Strategies must be closely followed so that Finland can adapt its strategy towards the United States if need be.⁷⁶ While the Baltic Sea region was still important to the United States, its focus on China may shift attention elsewhere.⁷⁷ Finland's decision to purchase 64 F-35 fighter planes in late 2021 is likely to further strengthen cooper-

65 North Atlantic Council (2021); Interviews, Copenhagen, 19 April 2021 and 27 April 2021.

66 Schmidt (2021), pp. 139-143.

67 Olesen et al. (2020), pp. 30-31.

68 Minister of Defence Bramsen explicitly presented this change in Bramsen (2021), p. 43.

69 Interview, Copenhagen, 27 April 2021. This point has also been openly laid out by both Minister of Foreign Affairs Kofod and Minister of Defence Bramsen. See Kofod (2021b), p. 16, Bramsen (2021), pp. 36-37.

70 Summanen (2021).

71 Interview, Helsinki, 6 May 2021.

72 Interview, Helsinki, 28 April 2021; Summanen (2021)

73 Interview, Helsinki, 30 April 2021.

74 Interview, Helsinki, 6 May 2021.

75 Interview, Helsinki, 28 April 2021; Hindren (2020).

76 Interview, Helsinki, 28 April 2021.

77 Interview, Helsinki, 30 April 2021.

ation with the United States.⁷⁸ It was also noted that the United States had adopted a broader view on security, including climate security – a stance that Finland agreed with.⁷⁹

In defence cooperation NATO was depicted as extremely important for Finland,⁸⁰ especially regarding European regional security and the Baltic Sea. NATO was described as a ‘key actor for advancing transatlantic and European security and stability’.⁸¹ The existing cooperation, within the framework of the Partnership for Peace programme (PfP), was described as being as strong as it can be without becoming a member of NATO.⁸² Domestic commentators described Finland’s relations with NATO as being engaged without setting a date for the wedding.⁸³ In the 2020 Government Report on Foreign and Security Policy, Finland explicitly stated that it hoped that NATO would continue its Open Doors Policy and Finland would retain ‘the option of joining a military alliance and applying for NATO membership’.⁸⁴ NATO membership was officially pursued by one only Finnish political party, Kokoomus (in opposition in 2021),⁸⁵ that argued that Finnish security would increase exponentially with membership.

Finland’s aim with the NATO partnership is, among other things, to strengthen its national defence capabilities and increase shared situational awareness.⁸⁶ These aspects were increasingly focused on as the operation in Afghanistan was being downsized.⁸⁷ It was acknowledged that the partnership with NATO was a deterrent.⁸⁸ However, the partnership seems to require constant effort and consideration, especially in relation to other forms of cooperation. In 2020-2021, Finland appeared cognisant of the need to demonstrate that Nordic cooperation was not a threat to NATO,⁸⁹ in addition to which it recognised that the EU’s capabilities should be strengthened without constituting a threat to NATO. Moreover, all NATO member states need to be reminded of why the partnership with Finland and Sweden is important.⁹⁰ However, Finland’s position as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner was considered beneficial.

3.3 Norway

The Norwegian long-term plan for defence (2020-2021) discussed the effect of central partners on the country.⁹¹ Importantly, it noted how the United States was preparing for and adjusting to increased great power balancing. The plan did not evaluate this assessment but identified it as something Norway must adapt to. In connection with this, the long-term plan noted changes in the US Marine Corps which had implications for the US military’s storage of equipment in Trøndelag, as well as changes to the structure of the US presence in Norway, including through Collocated Operating Bases (COB) and infrastructure efforts within the European Deterrence

78 Interview, Helsinki, 30 April 2021.

79 Interview, Helsinki, 6 May 2021.

80 Interview, Helsinki, 30 April 2021.

81 Finnish Government (2020), p. 30.

82 Pouta (2019).

83 Meriläinen (2021).

84 Finnish Government (2020), pp. 26, 31.

85 Simola (2020).

86 Finnish Government (2020).

87 Finnish Defence Committee (2021a).

88 Interview, Helsinki, 6 May 2021.

89 Interview, Helsinki, 28 April 2021.

90 Interview, Helsinki, 6 May 2021.

91 Norwegian Ministry of Defence (2020a)

Initiative (EDI).⁹²

Labour, the largest opposition party in the Storting before the September 2021 election, followed the Solberg government's line in welcoming Norway's new Supplementary Defence Cooperation Agreement with the United States,⁹³ reaffirming that 'the United States is Norway's most important ally, we are an Atlantic state'.⁹⁴ In the Storting, the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party were the most vocal critics of the agreement, stressing the importance of maintaining national defence capabilities, warning against 'outsourcing' the defence of Norway,⁹⁵ and expressing concern that the new stationing of American troops in Norway could lead to further 'excavation' of Norway's base policy.⁹⁶ In the media debate, there was overall support for the new bilateral defence cooperation agreement between the United States and Norway, but a few critical points recurred. First, some expressed concern that Norway was becoming too reliant on the United States in security and defence matters. For instance, one of Norway's largest daily newspapers, *Aftenposten*, warned in an editorial against the United States becoming a 'sleeping pillow'.⁹⁷ Second, some expressed concern that the agreement would lead to increased, or even permanent, allied presence in Norway, and as such represent a divergence from Norwegian base policy.⁹⁸ Third, some observers expressed concern as to how the agreement would be perceived by Russia, providing potential for exacerbation of tensions, a concern that Norway would be caught in the middle of the great power rivalry between the United States and Russia, and escalation of tensions around targets on Norwegian soil (especially in Tromsø).⁹⁹ Finally, the cooperation agreement also focused on societal security, especially regarding the potential for docking of US nuclear carrying submarine vessels in the northernmost parts of Norway. Local voices expressed concern about the potential for a nuclear accident, and that the local areas where allied troops and infrastructure were stationed could become military targets.¹⁰⁰

In her annual address to Parliament in 2021, Foreign Minister Søreide touched upon several cooperation initiatives, but NATO was clearly emphasised as the bedrock alliance in Norwegian security and defence policy.¹⁰¹ Overall, there was little debate on the issue of Norwegian NATO membership in the parliament during the period examined here. The most NATO- (and US-) critical parties in the Storting remained the Socialist Left Party and the Red Party (which together held around 12,5% of the votes until the 2021 election). There continued to be relatively strong public support for NATO membership in the Norwegian population.¹⁰² In a debate on the new long-term defence plan, the leader of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence observed that Norway 'as a small and elongated country with enormous maritime zones and a big neighbour' remains 'completely reliant on NATO and a strong defence of our own'.¹⁰³

92 Norwegian Ministry of Defence (2020a)

93 Norway & the United States (2021).

94 Huitfeldt (2021b).

95 Navarsete (2021).

96 Lysbakken (2020).

97 *Aftenposten* (2021).

98 VG (2021)

99 Heffermehl (2021).

100 See e.g. Gilbert (2021).

101 Søreide (2021).

102 Svendsen (2021).

103 Huitfeldt (2020).

3.4 Sweden

The United States and the UK are acknowledged as important partners for Sweden.¹⁰⁴ In 2020 and 2021, the Swedish defence minister described the transatlantic link as decisive for Sweden's security.¹⁰⁵ A bilateral statement of intent was signed in 2016,¹⁰⁶ and two years later a trilateral statement of intent was signed including Finland, strengthening the relationship with both partners.¹⁰⁷

In December 2020, a parliamentary majority in favour of pursuing 'a NATO option' (a declaration of membership being an option if desired) for Sweden was announced.¹⁰⁸ This was made possible by the far-right Sweden Democrats' policy shifting from their previous 'anti-NATO' position. This shift was likely the result of a strategy of more cooperation with the other opposition parties, as elections approach in 2022.¹⁰⁹ The four other parties in favour of the option were also advocating for pursuing full membership.¹¹⁰ This group had over the course of the spring been more vocal, turning the debate into one of membership rather than an option. The Löfven government had deepened Sweden's relationship with NATO and other actors while still guarding its military non-alignment by not making the commitments legally binding; a balancing act termed the 'Hultqvist doctrine'.¹¹¹ Representatives of the parliamentary majority argued that a NATO option would send 'a signal to Russia that we are prepared'.¹¹² The situation in the Arctic region was also used as an example of where a closer relationship with NATO would be beneficial, if not necessary, for both Sweden's and the region's security.¹¹³ In addition, the differences in Nordic states' relationship status with NATO was used as an argument for pursuing a closer relationship by stating that full members always will be bound by other regulations and responsibilities than non-members if faced with aggression. Thus, indicating Sweden would not be guaranteed as extensive support as if it was a member despite having several Nordic agreements. In addition, the industrial dimension was mentioned, where members preferred to purchase from each other rather than those outside the organisation.¹¹⁴ Consequences of not being a NATO member thus seemingly extended beyond security assurances. However, the defence and foreign ministers argued that uncertain times like these must not lead to sudden shifts, while pointing to Russian aggression as a cause of the uncertain times. Instead, it was argued security policy required stability, long-term strategic thinking and predictability.¹¹⁵

104 Swedish Government (2020).

105 Hultqvist (2021a); See also Swedish Government (2020).

106 Swedish Ministry of Defence (2016).

107 Swedish Government (2020).

108 *Dagens Nyheter* (2020).

109 *Politico* (2020).

110 The Moderate Party, the Liberals, the Centre Party and the Christian Democrats. See Swedish Parliament (2020b).

111 See e.g. Kunz (2015); Salonijs-Pasternak (2016); Wieslander (2017),

112 *Dagens Nyheter* (2021e); see also *Svenska Dagbladet* (2020).

113 Swedish Parliament (2021b).

114 Interview, Stockholm, August 2021.

115 Hultqvist & Linde (2021); see also Linde (2021).

4. Nordic approaches to European security and defence cooperation

In 2020-2021, all four Nordic states studied here appeared generally positive regarding closer European security and defence cooperation, including in the EU. This included Denmark, whose opt-out continued to prevent it from participating in certain aspects of the EU cooperation on defence, but which fully participated in, for example, the European Defence Fund (EDF). Also, EU outsider Norway has opted into 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 was considered an opportunity for the Norwegian defence industry. Within the EU, Finland and Sweden were generally positive towards EU security and defence integration. Some difficulties were present, however, for instance with the Swedish concern that ‘industrial strategic autonomy’ for the EU could harm the transatlantic relationship (which previously led to a more sceptical position), and the Finnish debate about the limited effect of EU defence initiatives on its own defence capabilities. Some EU states were also seen to have a broader understanding of the defence domain than Finland.

The UK’s exit from the EU – Brexit – did not appear to have changed the Nordics’ view on security and defence ties with London in 2020-2021. In all four states studied here, the UK featured in political debate as the most significant European partner outside the Nordic region. If nothing else, it was emphasised that Brexit had 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 their most important defence partner in Europe had diminished. The degree to which this trend will continue will likely depend on the Danish operational experience from working more closely with the French in the coming years as well as future developments in the UK post-Brexit. While Germany was often highlighted as one of many likeminded security allies, none of the four Nordic states identified Germany as their number one European security and defence partner.

There was also full convergence among the four Nordic states in terms of ties to other security groupings across or outside the formal structures of NATO and the EU. In 2021, all four were 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).

4.1 Denmark

US-Danish relations as described above hinge on Denmark’s position that no alternative currently exists to the security alliance with the United States, which has its anchoring in NATO. All other security arrangements therefore remain distinctively secondary to this alliance.¹¹⁶ That includes EU defence cooperation where the Danish defence opt-out puts further limits on Danish engagement. The consequences of the defence opt-out have thus become increasingly significant as defence cooperation within the EU has been strengthened in recent years. As of 2021, Denmark was, for instance, not able to participate in PESCO.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless,

116 Interviews, Copenhagen, 19 April 2021 and 27 April 2021. See also Frederiksen (2021).

117 Nissen et al (2020), pp. 69-76.

Denmark still saw potential in closer EU cooperation on security and defence issues. In addition, Denmark was eager to see the EU do more to stand up for democracy and human rights,¹¹⁸ and supported an increased EU focus on new issue areas such as cyber threats.¹¹⁹ Finally, Denmark also strived to get the most out of Danish participation in the EDF – an area of EU defence cooperation which the opt-out does not significantly affect.¹²⁰ However, the future of the defence opt-out constitutes a possible subject of conflict within the broad political consensus. The Social Democratic Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen has stated that the four Danish opt-outs are the foundation of Danish EU policy.¹²¹ In contrast, the other parties of the broad consensus, with the exception of the Danish People's Party, have wanted to abolish the defence opt-out.¹²² Some of the parties have even been arguing that developments in Afghanistan call for an immediate abolishment of the opt-out,¹²³ however opinion polls show little support for this.¹²⁴

The UK has traditionally taken the role of the second most important Danish security ally due to a long tradition of UK-Danish operational cooperation and the degree of shared security interests. Recent years, however, have seen the UK's international focus somewhat distracted by domestic concerns connected with Brexit, while France has simultaneously taken on a greater role in international politics. While the UK was in 2020-2021 arguably still Denmark's preferred number two security partner, not least because UK involvement in security cooperation through NATO is largely unaffected by Brexit – the role of France had increased, while the role of the UK had slightly declined.¹²⁵ Whether this trend will continue remains to be seen and will likely depend on the relative success of ongoing cooperation with the UK and France. Compared to the UK and France, cooperation with Germany was a lesser priority for Denmark, except to some extent within the maritime domain, in the Baltic Sea area, not least because of significant differences in Danish and German strategic culture and their general approach to the use of force.¹²⁶

Like European defence cooperation, the many smaller European security cooperation initiatives that have sprung up in recent years have all been welcomed by Denmark, but have been seen exclusively as supplementary to NATO. Most prominent among them are the British JEF, the British-led security forum Northern Group, the French EI2 and the German FNC. In operational terms, these initiatives are still relatively untested. JEF demonstrated its ability to facilitate the large exercise Baltic Protector in 2019,¹²⁷ the meetings in EI2 have been used, among other things, to discuss matters related to interventions in the Sahel, while the FNC has been more focused on building new military capacities over a longer timeframe.¹²⁸ In 2020-2021,

118 See Kofod (2021b), pp. 17, 19.

119 See Bramsen (2021), p. 45.

120 Nissen et. al. (2020), p. 70.

121 *Berlingske* (2018).

122 *Politiken* (2020b).

123 *Berlingske* (2021); *Jyllands-Posten* (2021b).

124 *Altinget* (2021).

125 Nissen et. al. (2020), pp. 52-55; Olesen (2020), pp. 28-29; Interviews, Copenhagen, 19 April 2021 and 27 April 2021. This trend is also supported by surveys of Danish foreign and security policy experts where we see that the status of the UK as a preferred partner has been slightly declining for the last couple of years while France, Germany and Norway have risen in status. See Breitenbauch et al. (2020), p. 38.

126 Nissen et. al. (2020), pp. 52-55.

127 UK Royal Navy (n.d.).

128 Interview, Copenhagen, 27 April 2021; Swedish Ministry of Defence (2020); Nissen et. al. (2020), pp. 52-55.

the chief reason for Danish participation in these cooperation initiatives, however, lied in managing relations with the founder countries – the UK, France and Germany.

4.2 Finland

Finnish defence cooperation is part of everyday activities and aims to deepen integration and interoperability through exercises with partners.¹²⁹ This can be understood as a deterrent as Finland is better able to receive political and military assistance. During the last government, a dozen cooperation agreements were concluded, and the current government remains very active in the field.¹³⁰ Finland has agreed defence cooperation documents with nine different states,¹³¹ and in June 2021 it hosted both Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) and JEF meetings. The centrality of defence cooperation was also reflected in the 2021 Defence Report. Its essential message was that Finland should develop interoperability with all central partners in all circumstances, that is in times of both peace and war¹³² – a fact that brings official policy in line with the reality that has long prevailed in Finnish defence policy.¹³³ According to the 2021 Defence Report: ‘International defence cooperation strengthens Finland’s defence capability’.¹³⁴ However, unprecedented is the report’s mentioning that such cooperation ‘raises the threshold against military activity directed against Finland’.¹³⁵

Finland’s longstanding position is that the EU is a strong security provider, a fact that Finland has actively sought to develop via influencing from within.¹³⁶ In the field of security, the EU has been the lodestar for Finland, and cooperation within the EU has had primacy when it comes to European security.¹³⁷ This was confirmed by the 2020 Government Report, which stated that ‘the European Union is the key...security community for Finland’s external relations’.¹³⁸ Furthermore, ‘Finland supports the strengthening of the EU’s common foreign, security and defence policy’, while it is recognised by one interviewee that there have been some difficulties and slowness in developing the security cooperation. However, small steps in the right direction are continuously taken,¹³⁹ even though more remains to be done in terms of common security and defence, as well as strategic culture.¹⁴⁰

For Finland, solidarity in the EU has been of utmost importance regarding security policy,¹⁴¹ although it is recognised by the Defence Committee of the Parliament that other EU member states do not actively discuss the issue.¹⁴² This means that Article 222 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) and the mutual assistance clause of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), Article 42(7), are often explicitly referred to by the government,

129 Finnish Defence Forces (2021).

130 Interview, Helsinki, 28 April 2021.

131 Kauhanen (2020).

132 Kuusela (2021).

133 Pesu & Vanhanen (2021).

134 Finnish Government (2021), p. 27.

135 Ibid.

136 Interview, Helsinki, 6 May 2021; Niinistö (2020b); Finnish Government (2020), p. 10.

137 Interview, Helsinki, 6 May 2021.

138 Finnish Government (2020), p. 27.

139 Interview, Helsinki, 6 May 2021.

140 Finnish Government (2020), p. 28.

141 Ibid.

142 Finnish Defence Committee (2021a).

but also the Defence Committee of the Parliament which wants to see Finland pursue more concreteness into the solidarity clauses.¹⁴³ The 2021 Defence Report also spelled out that ‘Finland is ready to provide and receive assistance’ in accordance with these regulations.¹⁴⁴ The EU solidarity clauses were also a concrete motivation for enacting a new Finnish law on decision-making pertaining to international assistance.¹⁴⁵ In 2020-2021, Finland was also open to security and defence collaboration in different country groupings outside EU structures on the premise that it enhanced general European security.¹⁴⁶ For example, Finland was part of the German-led FNC, the UK’s JEF and also participated in EI2 initiated by France. While hosting a JEF meeting in June 2021 in Helsinki, Defence Minister Kaikkonen noted that JEF is important to Finland because it consists of a small and agile group of important partners¹⁴⁷ that operate in areas such as the Baltic Sea and Northern Europe that are significant for Finland.¹⁴⁸ The UK was explicitly mentioned as an important country to cooperate with on foreign and security policy,¹⁴⁹ and that there was a need to build a new relationship with the UK both bilaterally and as a part of the EU.¹⁵⁰ Brexit was not seen to have affected the continued European security and defence policy cooperation,¹⁵¹ even though the Defence Committee of the Parliament held that Brexit had negatively affected EU’s defence capabilities.¹⁵²

In 2021, the Defence Committee of the Parliament was of the view that European defence initiatives had so far had little impact upon Finnish defence capabilities, but that Finland should remain open to further defence cooperation.¹⁵³ It was noted that continental Europe has a broader understanding of defence than Finland. However, the Defence Committee held that the EDF was a good initiative, but that the Finnish defence sector must be allowed a genuine opportunity to cooperate with other European defence industries.¹⁵⁴ PESCO should be developed as it plays a vital role in EU defence cooperation¹⁵⁵ without causing any division between the EU member states¹⁵⁶ – a concern that was repeatedly stressed by the Defence Committee. When it comes to transatlantic relations, it was considered important that the EU and the United States strengthen their relations in the coming years. One of the interviewees viewed the concept of European ‘strategic autonomy’ as important, originally stemming from the defence policy sector.¹⁵⁷ Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto also explicated that Europe needs to be more active in transatlantic relations.¹⁵⁸

According to the interviews with defence ministry representatives all cooperation forms and partnerships were necessary. They had carefully been considered, investments were made

143 Finnish Defence Committee (2021b).

144 Finnish Government (2021).

145 Laki kansainvälisen avun antamista ja pyytämistä koskevasta lainsäädännöstä, 418/2017.

146 Finnish Government (2021), p. 43; Interview, Helsinki, 6 May 2021.

147 Karvala (2021).

148 Rissanen (2021).

149 Finnish Government (2020), [p. 26, 34](#).

150 Ibid., p. 34.

151 Westerlund (2020).

152 Finnish Defence Committee (2021b).

153 Finnish Defence Committee (2021b).

154 Ibid.

155 Finnish Government (2021), p. 41.

156 Finnish Defence Committee (2021b).

157 Interview, Helsinki, 28 April 2021

158 Haavisto (2020a),

strategically and all forms of cooperation or partnership were constantly reviewed. For example, the aim of EI2 was to develop a common strategic culture, whereas JEF was more focused on operational and rapid reaction capabilities.¹⁵⁹ For Finland it was important to cooperate on security and defence matters with all states surrounding the Baltic Sea, which is exemplified by its participation in the Northern Group. Yet, the minister of defence expressed some scepticism about the number of recent defence cooperations agreed, arguing that more is not necessarily better, and that European defence cooperation in particular was fragmented.¹⁶⁰ Critics in the media observed that whenever a larger European nation is constructing a new form of cooperation, ‘little Finland’ will join in,¹⁶¹ and a more strategic approach has been called for.¹⁶² The parliamentary Defence Committee also cautioned the government to participate only in collaborations that have some tangible added value for Finnish defence.¹⁶³

4.3 Norway

Despite not being a member of the EU, Norway has been positively inclined to developments in EU defence. In her 2020 address to Storting, Foreign Minister Søreide stressed Norway’s intention to take part on a case-by-case basis in PESCO,¹⁶⁴ especially military mobility, and in 2021 Norway was involved in a PESCO project with Canada and the United States.¹⁶⁵ With military mobility being one of the clear areas where the Norwegian government saw potential for increased Nordic cooperation, PESCO would be an EU initiative benefitting that goal. While government representatives have routinely stressed NATO’s cornerstone position in Norwegian security and defence policy, they have usually also deemed increased cooperation with European allies, including through EU structures, as welcome supplements to NATO’s structures. In 2020 and 2021, MPs across the political spectrum noted that with the United States focusing more on Asia and domestic issues, especially during the Trump years, European NATO members ‘must take more responsibility for their own security’,¹⁶⁶ and that Norway needed ‘more legs to stand on’.¹⁶⁷ The Centre Party was the loudest critic of Norwegian participation in EU structures in the Storting, expressing concern that ‘the EU’s parallel defence race will not strengthen European security, but make politics more fragmented’.¹⁶⁸ Norway’s participation in the EDF was secured by the Progress Party via revisions of the national budget in 2020. While the government had not included EDF participation in their initial proposal, only the Centre Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Red Party voted against Norwegian participation (February 2021). MPs from the two smaller parties in Erna Solberg’s coalition government summarised the outcome as something they were ‘particularly pleased about’,¹⁶⁹ and ‘a win-win situation, both for defence capabilities and industry’.¹⁷⁰

In the 2020-2021 national budget, the Norwegian Ministry of Defence confirmed that post-

159 Interview, Helsinki, 30 April 2021.

160 Huhtanen (2020); Kaikkonen (2020).

161 Huhtanen (2020).

162 Ibid.; Pakarinen (2020).

163 Finnish Defence Committee (2021b).

164 Søreide (2020).

165 Norwegian Ministry of Defence (2021).

166 Wold (2020); Hutfeldt (2020).

167 Hutfeldt (2021b).

168 Navarsete (2021)

169 Elvestuen (2020).

170 Toskedal (2020).

Brexit, the UK ‘increasingly presents itself as Norway’s most important European ally’.¹⁷¹ The long-term defence plan (2020-21) also noted that the UK was increasingly becoming Norway’s most important ally in Europe,¹⁷² highlighting the need for close dialogue with London on training and exercises in Norway. The UK-led JEF was mentioned in favourable terms in the plan, and it was noted as positive that Sweden and Finland are also participating. The long-term plan also notes positive developments in security and defence cooperation with both France and Germany.

In parliamentary debates, MPs across the political spectrum have noted the importance and necessity of linking with individual European allies in a more uncertain European security context. The UK has often been identified as a prioritised European partner, along with Germany, the Netherlands, France and the Nordic states. In the media debate, the relationship with and the importance of the UK as an ally is largely overshadowed by the United States. In 2020-2021, the UK’s importance was not stressed, but there was no explicit criticism of UK policies either. One notable exception was the UK’s decision to increase its nuclear arsenal by 40%.¹⁷³ Organisations such as the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) claimed the decision would ‘exacerbate a dangerous arms race between the world nuclear powers’.¹⁷⁴ The notion that the armament was necessary to protect neighbours such as Norway was not well received.

Like the other Nordic states, Norway has in recent years joined a number of bi- and multi-lateral initiatives within or outside the EU’s and NATO’s structures. Norway has participated in the British-led JEF and the German-led FNC since 2014, and joined the French-initiated EI2 in 2019.¹⁷⁵ The above-mentioned initiatives have been mentioned in positive terms by the government. In its plan for cooperation with Europe in 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Norway would prioritise participation in FNC, JEF, EI2, the Northern Group and NORDEFECO. On EI2, the minister of defence observed that Ei2 promises to become a defence and security cooperation structure which could contribute to supplementing other European cooperation initiatives. From the Norwegian side, it would be politically attractive to partake in substantial European security and defence cooperation within the framework of the EU.¹⁷⁶ In the wider political debate, the Centre Party was the most vocal critic of EI2, observing that NATO has been the world’s most successful defence alliance, and for Norway it is bad news if NATO is weakened due to France’s ambition to have an alliance where they are in the driver’s seat. Norway relies on the United States and the UK as good allies. We have a historical cooperation with them. We will continue with that, and neither of those states are members of the EU.¹⁷⁷

4.4 Sweden

The resurrected debate on EU’s strategic autonomy has served as evidence of the strong transatlantic relationship. In the past, Defence Minister Hultqvist has stated Sweden’s opposition

171 Norwegian Ministry of Defence (2020b).

172 Norwegian Ministry of Defence (2020a). During the Cold War, Norway’s traditional key ally, the UK, was reframed as the chief *European* ally and contact point. See Haugevik (2015).

173 Udgaard (2021).

174 Wiedskjold (2021).

175 Svendsen & Rieker (2020).

176 Bakke-Jensen (2019).

177 Navarsete (2021).

to an industrial strategic autonomy,¹⁷⁸ and the EU minister has made it clear that Sweden is ‘determined about safeguarding the EU’s openness’.¹⁷⁹ This stance has likewise been reflected in parliament.¹⁸⁰ The American (and Norwegian) participation in PESCO announced in the spring of 2021¹⁸¹ thus indicated a success for the Swedish push for inclusive third-party participation, a position based on its important non-EU defence partners.¹⁸² However, notably absent in this round of third parties to PESCO was the UK. London had also long been an important bilateral defence partner for Sweden in EU security and foreign policy. The terms for the relationship on both levels nevertheless remained unclear.¹⁸³ Consequently, Swedish defence policy can be expected to be impacted in the future.¹⁸⁴ Swedish interviewees underlined that without an agreement with the EU, London is no longer included in Sweden’s unilateral Declaration of Solidarity.¹⁸⁵ Swedish participation in the JEF was therefore perceived as even more important post-Brexit, as it permitted continued exercises with British forces and secured their engagement in Sweden’s surrounding region.¹⁸⁶ Sweden was therefore working to include them in the EU’s security policy community again, which also would mean bringing them back under the Declaration of Solidarity.¹⁸⁷ Struggling to reorient itself after Brexit may partially explain why Sweden according to interviewees has yet to ‘punch above its weight’ in the EDF.¹⁸⁸ While Nordic cooperation should not be seen as a given in any context, the EDF was a joint interest. A Nordic dialogue therefore seeks possible joint initiatives,¹⁸⁹ which was welcomed by Sweden.¹⁹⁰

178 Swedish Parliament (2018).

179 Dahlgren (2021).

180 Swedish Parliament (2020c).

181 Council of the EU (2021).

182 Regnér & Håkansson (2021).

183 Interviews, Stockholm, July 2021 and August 2021; Linde (2021); Swedish Government (2020).

184 Interview, Stockholm, August 2021.

185 Interviews, Stockholm, July 2021 and August 2021.

186 Swedish Government (2020), p. 69.

187 Swedish Government (2020).

188 Interview, Stockholm, July 2021.

189 Interview, Stockholm, August 2021.

190 Interview, Stockholm, July 2021.

5. Nordic perceptions of intra-Nordic cooperation

Nordic government officials have stressed that security and defence is a domain where business not only continued as usual during the Covid-19 pandemic, but where cooperation in fact progressed.¹⁹¹ 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 (NORDEF) accelerated following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. While Sweden and Finland's non-alignment policies continued to place restraints on the level of formal defence integration and cooperation, NORDEF nonetheless developed 'a new and upgraded operational role' during this period.¹⁹² 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 2009, the Stoltenberg report proposed thirteen concrete measures through which Nordic foreign and security cooperation could be strengthened.¹⁹³ 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 with those found in NATO and/or the EU, were less likely to materialise.¹⁹⁴

With Finland and Sweden more aligned with NATO, Norway opting into EU security and defence initiatives, and Denmark assuming a pragmatic approach to its EU defence opt-out, today there are fewer formal obstacles to furthering Nordic security and defence integration and cooperation. In all the Nordic states, debates in 2020-2021 indicated that Nordic security and defence cooperation was presented in favourable terms, and it was difficult to find voices critical of Nordic cooperation. To the extent that there were domestic debates about Nordic cooperation at all, it was 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 was 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'.¹⁹⁵ In the Swedish debate, Nordic cooperation was presented as an argument for pursuing closer ties with NATO. In Norway, Nordic cooperation was mainly viewed as an intra-Nordic tool and subregional extension of NATO. This observation applied also to Denmark, where intra-Nordic security and defence cooperation was portrayed as being in the interest of its Atlantic allies.

5.1 Denmark

Historically, the Danish approach to defence cooperation with its Nordic neighbours was hes-

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

192 Dahl (2021).

193 Stoltenberg (2009).

194 Haugevik & Sverdrup (2019).

195 Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (n.d).

itant.¹⁹⁶ Even when Nordic defence cooperation received a boost from the Stoltenberg report of 2009 as well as through the formation of NORDEFECO that same year, Denmark remained sceptical of how Nordic cooperation could work across institutional barriers generated by the divergent membership statuses of NATO and the EU. Such difficulties were further exacerbated by differences in the perceptions of Russia. However, that changed after the Ukraine crisis in 2014. First, the relevance of Nordic cooperation grew, because the backyard of the Nordic countries – the Baltic Sea – was now increasingly becoming a relevant area of operations.¹⁹⁷ Second, because it led to a change in the perceptions of Russia, especially in Finland and Sweden, to the extent that the five Nordic countries are now seeing more eye to eye on Russia than has previously been the case. In practice, that has resulted in increased Danish interest in cooperating with its Nordic neighbours on various projects in a NORDEFECO framework, perhaps most importantly within the sphere of military mobility through agreements on easy access to each other's territories in peacetime.¹⁹⁸ This policy change has been unproblematic in political terms as there is practically no opposition to Nordic cooperation from the Danish public.¹⁹⁹

Not all Nordic cooperation happens within NORDEFECO however, significant cooperation also occurs on a bilateral or trilateral basis. Most recently, in September 2021, the defence ministers of Denmark, Norway and Sweden signed a statement of intent on closer cooperation 'in line with the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO) vision for 2025',²⁰⁰ with the aim of strengthening cooperation on especially maritime and aerial surveillance and exercises.²⁰¹ However, in strategic terms, Denmark's greatest Nordic turn lies perhaps not in its increased direct cooperation with the Nordics, but in Danish NATO policy. As Finland and Sweden became more interested in increasing their cooperation with NATO, Denmark, along with the Baltic countries, played a key role in driving that agenda forward within NATO because closer cooperation was deemed to greatly benefit Danish security interests in the Baltic Sea.²⁰² This Danish policy is likely to be particularly robust going forward, not least since it represents an issue area where Danish ideas of Nordic solidarity and Danish realpolitik calculations merge particularly well.

5.2 Finland

In the Finnish political establishment, in general there was in 2020-2021 broad support for Nordic cooperation, but especially for defence cooperation, which was understood as being more concrete than security policy.²⁰³ This position has strengthened since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, which shifted the focus from dividing lines between the Nordic countries to a common perception of the security environment. In 2020-2021, the other Nordic

196 A key moment for Denmark in this regard was when Danish hopes for Nordic cooperation in Kosovo through NORDCAPS in 1999 were disappointed by the lack of interest from the other Nordics. See Jakobsen (2006).

197 Danish Ministry of Defence (2020).

198 Nissen et. al. (2020), p. 56; Olesen (2020), p. 29.

199 A poll from 2010 showed that only 3% of the Danish population was against Nordic cooperation. See Oxford Research (2010).

200 Swedish Ministry of Defence (2021).

201 Danish Ministry of Defence (2021d).

202 Interview, Copenhagen, 27 April 2021. See also *Altinget* (2018) for an example of the very positive Danish responses to Finland and Sweden strengthening their dialogue with NATO.

203 Interview, Helsinki, 6 May 2021.

countries considered Finland and Sweden strategically important to NATO even though they were not members.²⁰⁴ All bi- and trilateral initiatives and structures were also seen to reinforce NORDEFECO, and the philosophy behind Nordic defence cooperation was strengthened.²⁰⁵ The Finnish concept of comprehensive security was also developed in the other Nordic countries (cf. *civilförsvar*; *totalförsvar*). Some critical comments have been presented domestically arguing that Nordic defence cooperation is nice but in reality not efficient enough.²⁰⁶ Similar criticism has been presented concerning the bilateral cooperation between Finland and Sweden.²⁰⁷ Such comments are, however, relatively rare.

NORDEFECO is considered a very important and pragmatic form of cooperation between close and understanding neighbours.²⁰⁸ The Nordic partners are the first to be contacted if anything happens. It is pointed out in the interviews that Nordic defence cooperation is practical and easy, and that trust reigns. People know each other, making cooperation easier. Some factors exist, however, that affect cooperation. First, for Finland, Nordic cooperation ends if NATO takes over command from Denmark and Norway. Hence, Nordic cooperation is limited to the period before NATO acts.²⁰⁹ A second inhibiting factor regards defence material cooperation and the prevailing imbalance between Nordic defence industries. The Swedish defence industry is a huge player, which makes procurements difficult as witnessed by the joint Nordic combat uniform.²¹⁰ In contrast, the fact that the Norwegian Kongsberg Defence System owns half of the Finnish defence company Patria is seen as inducing cooperation.²¹¹

According to the 2020 Governmental Report on Foreign and Security Policy, Sweden was Finland's most important bilateral partner. The 2021 Defence Report further explicated this as a 'strong' position.²¹² Both countries shared the assessment of the changes in their operating environment, and it was considered that there were no 'predetermined limitations' to developing bilateral cooperation.²¹³ Indeed, this was confirmed by some of the interviewees. The political will to deepen cooperation with Sweden is remarkable.²¹⁴ The broader goal of the cooperation was to strengthen security in the Baltic Sea region, while simultaneously improving the defence capabilities of Finland and Sweden. However, the durability of this cooperation was dependent on the Swedes to rebuild lost capabilities.²¹⁵ It might also become challenging to explain the ever-deepening cooperation with Sweden as both countries are formally non-aligned.²¹⁶ Researchers have also called for improved 'strategic interoperability' between the two countries.²¹⁷

204 Interview, Helsinki, 28 April 2021.

205 Interview, Helsinki, 30 April 2021.

206 Meriläinen (2021).

207 Muurinen (2020).

208 Interview, Helsinki, 30 April 2021.

209 Ibid.

210 Interview, Helsinki, 30 April 2021.

211 Ibid.

212 Finnish Government (2021), p. 44.

213 Finnish Government (2020), p. 29.

214 Rydell & Forss (2020).

215 Oksanen (2020); Muurinen (2020).

216 Interview, Helsinki, 28 April 2021.

217 Pesu & Iso-Markku (2020).

Sweden's NATO debate was similarly followed scrupulously because of the 'national trauma' regarding Sweden and the way it applied for EU membership without informing Finland. However, in 2020-2021, Finnish commentators did not consider it likely that Sweden would apply for NATO membership on its own, let alone without informing Finland.²¹⁸ The support for cooperation with Sweden was strong also among parliamentarians: half of those who answered a recent poll on security and defence policy published in June 2021 felt that Finland should form a defence union with Sweden.²¹⁹ Also, many of them were prepared to send troops to Sweden in the case of a conflict even if Finland had not (yet) been attacked.²²⁰ The common destiny of Sweden and Finland was widely appreciated.

Both the 2020 Government Report and the 2021 Defence Report stated that Finland had developed and would continue to develop its collaboration with Norway both bilaterally and trilaterally together with Sweden. One sign of the deepening relations was the signing of an updated cooperation agreement with Norway in June 2021, another one was the placing of Norway before the United States in the listing of bilateral cooperations in the 2021 Defence Report.²²¹ According to commentators, Norway has helped Finland understand the Northern Atlantic and the northern seas.²²² It is a valuable partner also in issues pertaining to 5G, the Arctic and Chinese infrastructure investment.²²³ In defence cooperation, a trilateral memorandum of understanding was signed in September 2020 between Finland, Norway and Sweden, which nonetheless excluded cooperation in times of war if Norway had rendered command to NATO.²²⁴ Some commentators held this as a restriction to cooperation with Norway. Extending Finnish-Swedish cooperation to Norway has not been considered problem free in parliament. A small opposition within the leftist government parties sees Norway as a link to NATO,²²⁵ which has been interpreted as a lack of the traditional need for consensus regarding defence policy. Yet, the government programme of Prime Minister Marin lists more cooperation with Norway as a specific objective.²²⁶ Cooperation including Norway is understood to shift focus from the Baltic Sea to the North and the Arctic,²²⁷ although one interviewee holds that Norway now also sees itself as a Baltic Sea nation.²²⁸

5.3 Norway

Nordic security and defence cooperation is generally referred to in positive terms in the Norwegian official discourse. In 2020, most remarks on Nordic cooperation concerned societal security issues such as coordinating the response to forest fires and the coronavirus pandemic. In her 2021 address to the Storting, Foreign Minister Søreide stressed how the global context was of increasing importance to Norway's Nordic affiliation and used the pandemic to illus-

218 Interview, Helsinki, 28 April 2021; Pääkirjoitus (2021).

219 Approximately 39% of the Finnish Parliamentarians answered the survey.

220 Salenius-Pasternak (2021).

221 Finnish Government (2021), p. 44.

222 Pyykönen (2021).

223 Interview, Helsinki, 6 May 2021.

224 Interview, Helsinki, 30 April 2021; Andelin (2020).

225 Kauhanen (2020).

226 Finnish Government (2019).

227 Pihlajamaa & Koivula (2020).

228 Interview, Helsinki, 28 April 2021.

trate the importance of developing and increasing the efficacy of cooperation with the EU and the Nordics.²²⁹ Foreign Minister Søreide and Minister of Finance Jan Tore Sanner's joint op-ed in *VG*, the largest newspaper in Norway, on Nordic day 23 March 2021, provides an interesting representation of governments views on the security and defence utility of Nordic cooperation. Overall, they emphasised how the Nordic countries cooperate internationally: including by coordinating Sweden's and Finland's relationships with NATO and securing a Nordic voice in the UN Security Council by supporting each other's campaigns for a seat there.²³⁰

In 2020-2021, Norwegian government officials described NORDEFECO as a valuable forum for dialogue on security and defence issues, and a welcome supplement to NATO. Moreover, increased Nordic cooperation on training and exercises was seen to have strengthened security ties between the Nordic countries, the United States and the UK.²³¹ In 2020, Norway's minister of defence argued that Norway wanted to strengthen three areas within NORDEFECO: 'total defence', training and exercises, and cyber defence and digital threats. While acknowledging that there were limitations to Nordic defence cooperation, he highlighted one big positive: a well utilised graded video teleconference system allowing for effective communication between representatives from the Nordic countries.²³²

In the wider political debate, there were few voices critical of Nordic security and defence cooperation as such. Nordic cooperation was also subject to little debate in the Norwegian media. Across the political spectrum, MPs stressed the value of cooperating closely with the other Nordic states. However, some variation was found in positions on whether Nordic security and defence cooperation could represent a viable alternative to NATO and EU cooperation; and whether ambitions for and achievements in Nordic security and defence cooperation corresponded. Whereas the two largest parties in the Storting, the Conservative Party and Labour, operated a clear status hierarchy with NATO at the top, the Socialist Left Party and the Red Party both stated in their party platforms that they wished to replace NATO membership with strengthened Nordic security and defence cooperation.

In 2020, Norway, Sweden and Finland signed a trilateral statement of intent aiming to improve the three countries' operative defence cooperation.²³³ In the Norwegian national budget, it was noted as positive for Nordic cooperation in general that Sweden and Finland have been increasing their cooperation with NATO.²³⁴ The long-term plan for defence highlighted the opportunities for cooperation between Norway, Sweden, and Finland on military mobility, that is, the ability to make use of each other's infrastructure to transport allied military troops and supplies during crises and armed conflict.²³⁵ In September 2020, the defence ministers of Denmark, Norway and Sweden signed a statement of intent to cooperate further

on areas of common concern and interest, such as the southern parts of Scandinavia (Kattegat, Skagerrak, the Baltic Sea, the North Sea, the Danish straits and other surrounding areas as required) as well as on improving interoperability among our armed forces that

229 Søreide (2021).

230 Søreide & Sanner (2021).

231 Søreide (2020).

232 Bakke-Jensen (2020).

233 Bakke-Jensen et al. (2021).

234 Norwegian Ministry of Defence (2020b).

235 Norwegian Ministry of Defence (2020a).

enable common military action if decided.²³⁶

5.4 Sweden

While the value and importance of Nordic cooperation was frequently underlined in the Swedish debate in 2020-2021, it was nevertheless framed as a supplement to cooperation with NATO and on the EU level. The 2020 defence bill declared the relation with NATO as the most important international cooperation in developing the armed forces' capabilities 'to face a qualified opponent',²³⁷ thereby indicating the importance of the organisation for national defence capabilities and security. The EU was stated to be the most important foreign and security policy arena,²³⁸ and constituted the foundation for the unilateral Declaration of Solidarity.²³⁹ These priorities arguably formed part of Sweden's limiting conditions regarding Nordic cooperation. The added value of Nordic initiatives was thus seemingly the shared assessment of the security environment, which was not necessarily shared (urgently) by the rest of the EU or NATO.

In 2020-2021, Sweden sought more extensive Nordic cooperation with Finland, Denmark and Norway.²⁴⁰ The trilateral statement of intent with Finland and Norway on operational cooperation served as evidence of how Nordic defence relationships had deepened in recent years.²⁴¹ As a consequence of the concretisation of the NORDEFECO Vision 2025,²⁴² it signalled a commitment to further relations. Despite an awareness of the differing national conditions and challenges they pose, Sweden perceived there was a strong joint will to explore 'the grey-zone' for how far cooperation could go.²⁴³ However, out of all the Nordic partnerships and relationships, the bilateral one with Finland stood out as being the only one with joint operational planning. It is motivated not least by a historically strong relationship but also their shared 'military non-alignment' status.²⁴⁴ Sweden seeks to develop it as far as both sides permit.²⁴⁵ An opportunity for this would have arisen if Finland had purchased Sweden's JAS 39 Gripen fighter aircraft (instead of US F-35s). Nonetheless, Finland still remains Sweden's closest ally in defence and security policy with continued development of the bilateral defence cooperation planned.²⁴⁶ As with all other defence cooperation Sweden has entered, the one with Finland is not binding. The far-right Sweden Democrats have nevertheless repeatedly advocated for this specific relationship to be formalised as a legally binding defence union.²⁴⁷

236 Swedish Ministry of Defence (2021).

237 Swedish Government (2020), p. 73.

238 Linde (2021).

239 Swedish Government (2020).

240 Swedish Government (2020).

241 Interview, Stockholm, August 2021.

242 Swedish Government (2020).

243 Interview, Stockholm, August 2021.

244 Swedish Ministry of Defence (2021).

245 Swedish Government (2020).

246 Hultqvist (2021b).

247 Swedish Parliament (2020d). See also *Altinget* (2020).

6. Conclusion

In this report, we have identified 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.

For *Denmark*, Russia was identified as the dominant security challenge in 2021. Denmark was firmly orientated towards the transatlantic with the main priority being maintaining US engagement in Europe. No partnerships or alliances were valued more than the ones with the United States and NATO. Recent years have seen a substantial increase in Danish interests in Nordic cooperation, albeit from a relatively low starting level. Denmark enthusiastically supported closer cooperation between NATO and Finland and Sweden. Possible future fractures resulting in shrinking consensus include defence spending, military activism and the defence opt-out.

For *Finland*, the field of partnerships or cooperation on defence appeared saturated as the main focus was on 'maintaining the defence cooperation network and developing the contents of the cooperation'.²⁴⁸ It was also recognised that the focus on several partnerships consumes a substantial amount of financial and personnel resources of the Ministry of Defence.²⁴⁹ Some researchers have called for more clarity on the net of partnerships that Finland has agreed, and some have pointed out that the meaning of Finland being 'militarily non-aligned' has changed during recent years to a position between being non-aligned and aligned.²⁵⁰ This shift has not been communicated well to the general public however.²⁵¹ Although there were no ongoing grand debates about Finnish defence policy and partnerships, the implicit strategic question regarding international cooperation seemed to be how Finland's current networks compared to full NATO membership and Article 5 protection.²⁵² Meanwhile, the global security situation was becoming more complex and volatile, with new security challenges emerging in addition to traditional ones. Broad-spectrum influencing was increasingly being debated. Finland's numerous partnerships in security and defence matters formed a network aimed at improving interoperability with central partners in all circumstances. All forms of cooperation were assumed to complement each other, although critical remarks were made about the necessity of the numerous partnerships and the lack of strategic thinking concerning them, including by high-level politicians. The EU remained a main security provider for Finland, in addition to which defence cooperation with NATO was considered important for Finnish and European security. Nordic cooperation, and relations with Sweden and Norway in particular, were strengthened while the strategic focus was shifting from the Baltic Sea to Northern Europe. There were, however, some critical views on how far Nordic cooperation can take Finnish defence.

In *Norway*, a number of challenges to global stability and order manifested themselves in the security discourse in 2020-2021, but few were seen to represent a direct threat to Norwegian interests and territory. Issues which routinely has triggered debate included EU membership,

248 Finnish Government (2021), p. 40.

249 Ibid.

250 Kivinen (2020); Pesu (2018).

251 Interview, Helsinki, 28 April 2021; Kivinen (2020); Pesu (2018).

252 Karvala (2021).

participation in international military operations, the balance between deterrence and reassurance in Norway-Russia relations, and the presence of US military bases on Norwegian soil. Over time, there has been a clear hierarchy in Norwegian partner preferences in security and defence, with the United States on top of the pyramid of dyadic constellations, and NATO on top of the pyramid of institutional cooperation. As long as NATO's number one position is not threatened, Norway has generally been positive about partaking in new European security and defence initiatives, as part of EU+ formats or in cooperation structures across or beyond the EU and NATO. Nordic security and defence cooperation – institutionally and in bi- and trilateral constellations – is valued and was in 2020-2021 referred to in positive terms and was seen to both reinforce and supplement other cooperation initiatives.

In *Sweden*, Nordic cooperation was emphasised as important during the period examined here, but seemingly limited to the regional context, not least as it was seen as useful in meeting shared security concerns such as Russia. This should however not come as a surprise as it was stated to be supplementary to NATO and the EU, with the bilateral relationship to the United States also considered vital. Nordic (and other) cooperation does however no longer seem enough in terms of security guarantees for a majority in parliament. This may be due to their nonbinding nature, which begs the question of whether Nordic (and other) cooperation would be considered sufficient if their legal status changed. NATO membership was seemingly presented as the solution that would guard both regional and national security, and potentially also have beneficial industrial impacts. The status quo might be seen as an effort to compensate for a lack of NATO membership to some, but in the period studied here it also functioned as a strategic choice of defence effort, deepening relationships with a smaller set of countries with joint threat analysis and thereby allowing concentrated efforts. Sweden can therefore be expected to maintain the status quo which means seeking further Nordic cooperation with countries they value in a bi- and trilateral context, ready to approach the challenges that varying national limits produce.

Overall, we find that when Danish, Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish government officials in 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. The increased depoliticisation of cooperation with the United States and NATO in Sweden and Finland has been pivotal in this regard. 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. However, the Nordics seem to increasingly be finding pragmatic ways to navigate around structural and practical obstacles. This navigation is helped by the fact that all the Nordics are woven into a complex web of European and transatlantic initiatives, partnerships and institutions in security and defence. With the notable exception of NATO and the Danish EU defence opt-out, the level of participation and integration is very similar in the four states. This, and the trend of greater convergence in individual Nordic debates on security and defence, could in the future help foster a common Nordic order in the security domain.

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