



Nordic Airpower Cooperation and Finland's F-35 decision: Towards a New Era?

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Key Take-Aways

- The Finnish Air Force will receive 64 F-35 Lightning II 5th generation fighter aircraft with high-end weapon systems to replace its F/A-18 fleet by 2030.
- Taken together with other moves towards greater system similarity and interoperability across the Nordics, the decision paves the way for further regional cooperation on airpower in the years ahead.
- For more than a decade, the Nordic countries' fighter forces have cooperated closely through the Cross Border Training regime as well as tactical and joint multinational exercises. This cooperation has become intertwined with broader regional security and defence integration since 2014.
- This yields both tactical and strategic effects, improving the Nordic countries' ability to provide for regional security within a European and trans-Atlantic framework. It should remain a policy priority to sustain and enhance Nordic airpower cooperation.

Introduction

The Nordic countries cooperate closely in the air domain. With Finland procuring the F-35 Lightning II, Nordic airpower cooperation is set to evolve further in the years ahead as both Denmark and Norway already have selected the same fighter jet. Since 2008, Nordic airpower cooperation has evolved substantially, becoming a comprehensive regime of routine cross-border training, tactical, and joint exercises. After Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014, this cooperation has become embedded in broader regional and transatlantic security and defence integration. This policy brief traces the development of Nordic air force cooperation, reviews its strategic role in regional security, and discusses how it might evolve in the years ahead.

Background

The current Nordic airpower cooperation traces its roots back to the Second World War, the Cold War, and the post-Cold War periods. A number of Danes, together with some Swedes, volunteered to join the Royal Norwegian Air Force in World War II, and they served as integral colleagues in the Norwegian squadrons based in the United Kingdom. Sweden also allowed US military transport aircraft to fly from Kallax air force base in Luleå, Northern Sweden to airdrop supplies to resistance units and agents in Northern Norway, and transport personnel and supplies to Finnmark after this Norwegian territory was liberated. During the Cold War, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark cooperated on air safety, allowing fighter aircraft from the three countries to use airfields in neighbouring countries as divert fields in case bad weather precluded landing at bases in the home country. In preparing for such contingencies, a limited number of cross border familiarization flights were conducted, but these did not include interaction between air force units.

After the Cold War ended, Finland and Sweden abandoned neutrality for military non-alignment policies and increasingly cooperated closely with the US and NATO. Finland and Sweden largely mirrored each other in entering successive cooperative arrangements with NATO, such as Partnership for Peace (PfP) and Enhanced Opportunity Partner status. Furthermore, they both contributed forces to NATO out-of-area operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq. ¹A PfP air force exercise emerged in this period to familiarize Swiss, Finnish, and Swedish air forces with NATO procedures and standards, including the use of English as working language. The first Nordic Air Meet (NAM) exercise was held at Ørland, Norway in 2001, and the last was held Northern Sweden and Finland in 2012 with units from Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States.

In this period, the Nordic defence cooperation also increased at the political level, where regional cooperation was seen as a supplement to European and trans-Atlantic cooperation. The Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) was established in 2009, unifying existing structures. The post-Cold War defence cuts were a major driver behind this increase, cooperation being seen as a pertinent approach for maintaining complete and balanced forces despite force reductions. Nonetheless, substantive initiatives for joint procurement and system standardization largely faltered, and the goal of regional defence integration was largely abandoned by 2014.²

Tactical integration

The Russian change of posture from 2007 onwards, led to a substantive increase in Russian military activity in the vicinity of the Nordic countries. This may have set the stage for a new form of regional air force cooperation. A pre-existing bilateral agreement between Finland and Sweden on training between their air forces was expanded, and from 2009, Norwegian F-16s based at Bodø and

Swedish JAS Gripen from Kallax trained together about once a week over Northern Scandinavia, with Finnish F-18s from Rovaniemi participating once a month. The trilateral Cross Border Training (CBT) arrangement soon became a flagship in Nordic military cooperation, its success caused by the operational units being allowed to design a concept with high operational effect and low costs. The aircraft flew from their home bases, thus avoiding any deployment costs, and the pilots themselves designed their optimal training scenarios. CBT was first based on a trilateral air force agreement and attached to NORDEFCO in 2012.

Following an initial spike in activity to prepare for the forthcoming international exercises, the number of CBT events later stabilized at around 50 per year, with the number of aircraft varying from 4 to 20, occasionally including participation of US Air Force (USAF) fighters. The biannual Arctic Challenge Exercise (ACE) was first held in 2013 and has increased in size to where it in 2019 included 100 aircraft from 9 countries, including both NATO and PfP members. Denmark has joined ACE and participated in 2019 and 2021. In ACE, the participating units are spread to several bases in northern Finland, Norway, and Sweden, with aircraft exercising together across the borders. Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and the US has signed agreements to develop and maintain ACE as a so-called flag level exercise. A third cooperative arrangement is the annual Arctic Fighter Meet (AFM), where aircraft practice close-range dogfighting with short-range weapons. Beginning as a bilateral Finnish-Swedish activity, Norway has participated from 2007. AFM has also seen some USAF participation. Different to the bi-/annual exercises, the weekly/monthly cross border training also gains a strategic rationale, as it establishes joint Nordic manoeuvres as part of the normal situation, which reduces the escalatory saliency of joint crisis response.

Extensive long-term cooperation has enabled the Swedish and Finnish air forces to integrate closely with NATO forces, becoming fully interoperable with alliance aircraft and units. An illustration of this came in 2011, when the Swedish Air Force deployed JAS Gripen fighters, with tanker and intelligence aircraft support, to NATO's operation Unified Protector in Libya. Another example is the joint training with Gripen and US strategic bombers over Sweden in 2020 and 2021. Given their high degree of peacetime interoperability, the Swedish and Finnish air forces could be expected to integrate near-seamlessly with NATO air units in crisis and war. Sweden and Finland are not members for NATO – and as such are not covered by any formal mutual defence arrangement – but at the same time they are likely to join a NATO-based coalition in face of a mutual threat. Having the technical and tactical interoperability in place, improves the viability of contributing ad hoc to collective defence. In the future Denmark and Norway will have a total of 79 F-35s. The Nordic fighter aircraft force will be at 243 if a coalition is expanded to include 64 F-35s from Finland and 100 Gripen from Sweden.

Strategic convergence

Russia's action in Ukraine in 2014 prompted a reappraisal of the security situation in the Nordics. Through successive armaments programmes and a heavy emphasis on its northern region, Russia has enhanced its ability to challenge Nordic security and limit freedom of movement in the Norwegian and Baltic seas.³ These developments – including Russian mock air attacks against Sweden and Norway – have made the Nordic countries look to closer regional integration to strengthen their security. The regional defence cooperation framework has been formally expanded within a transatlantic context through a series of bi- and multilateral agreements.⁴ This has included closer Swedish and Finnish cooperation with the United States, and Nordic defence cooperation expanding from peacetime towards a greater emphasis on joint crisis management and contingency planning.

For Sweden and Finland – pursuing Allied security cooperation without formal alliance membership – Nordic defence cooperation has served as part of their strategy to achieve closer integration with NATO and especially the United States. They also participate with NATO and NATO members on initiatives such as the Strategic Airlift Capability, Strategic Airlift International Solution, Movement Coordination Centre Europe, the NATO Response Force, and the Joint Expeditionary Force.⁵ Cooperation includes multinational joint exercises, such as Aurora 17, Trident Juncture in 2018, and Northern Wind in 2019.

The Nordic governments have initiated an expansion of the scope of air force cooperation. In 2017, Finland and Sweden signed the bilateral Air Picture Agreement to exchange information. Later, Denmark and Norway joined in, and the cooperation was formalised as the Nordic Enhanced Cooperation on Air Surveillance. Also, NATO's Air Situational Data Exchange enables information sharing with PfP nations. On ground-based air defence, the Nordic countries conduct the annual Nordic Helmet staff and table-top exercise.⁶ Furthermore, Finland has procured the Norwegian Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System and joined the multinational user group.

What does the future hold?

On December 10, 2021, the Government of Finland authorized the procurement of 64 Lockheed Martin F-35A Block 4 Lightning II aircraft, based on the results of the HX fighter programme evaluation.⁷ The F-35 had been assessed as the most capable of the contenders, both in combat, reconnaissance, and survivability. Furthermore, it was found to be well-suited to the prevailing operating conditions in Finland. The weapons package offered with the F-35 consists of an extensive suite of modern air-to-air and air-to-surface systems, including the Norwegian Joint Strike Missile (JSM). The first F-35s will be flown to Finland in 2026, with deliveries to be completed in 2030.

The introduction of new fighter aircraft in Finland, as well as in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, will impact future collaboration. The first three are at various stages of transitioning to the F-35 Lightning II, while Sweden will procure new Gripen E models and update existing airframes. Furthermore, Swedish industry participates in the UK's 6th generation Tempest programme. Then, what does the future hold for Nordic air force cooperation? The annual Arctic Fighter Meet exercise and the biannual Arctic Challenge Exercise will most likely continue and develop further, and the weekly/monthly Cross Border Training regime is set to change in form, if not in scope, as Norway from 2022 will participate with F-35s based at Ørland in Mid-Norway instead of F-16s from Bodø.

The F-35 community in Europe will expand to include Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Switzerland, and United Kingdom. Additionally, the USAF will replace their F-15Cs in the UK with F-35s. About 1/3 of the F-35s in Europe will be in the Nordic states. Accordingly, existing drivers and avenues of cooperation will diminish, and new ones will emerge. As new platforms become operational, Nordic air force cooperation will be embedded in a wider European and transatlantic pattern of collaboration with 5th generation fighters and future air combat systems. This is set to fulfill an important role within the regional security cooperation, sharpening skills and enhancing integration at both tactical, operational, and strategic levels.

Summary

The Nordic states air forces have cooperated closely, especially after Russia reinvigorated its military posture in the region from 2007-2008. With regional security policy and military strategy becoming more closely integrated after 2014, this tactical activity has become a key part of an emerging strategic-level pattern of cooperation. Closer political and military integration has enabled regional security cooperation to proliferate across unit types and activities. With the introduction of new generation fighter aircraft in the short term, and future air combat systems in the longer term, cooperation is set to change, but given its dual imperative is bound to continue and expand as new avenues emerge. Especially, the continuation of CBT in the short and long term has both a tactical and strategic rationale.

Finland's decision to procure the F-35 Lightning II will enable even closer airpower cooperation in the Nordics and in a broader European and trans-Atlantic framework, both in peace, crisis, and armed conflict. System similarity with Norway extends to the JSM, which opens the possibility for joint development of this weapon system and its operational use. As such, the procurement sets the stage for closer collaboration at both the tactical, operational and military-industrial levels.

Endnotes

¹ Anna Wieslander, “‘The Hultqvist doctrine’ – Swedish security and defence policy after the Russian annexation of Crimea,” *Defence Studies*. (2021); Gene Germanovich, James Black, Linda Slapakova, Stephen J. Flanagan and Theodora Ogden, *Enhancing US-Finnish and regional defence cooperation. An exploratory analysis*. (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2021).

² Håkon Lunde Saxi, “The rise, fall, and resurgence of Nordic defence Cooperation,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 95, no. 3 (2019)

³ Norwegian Intelligence Service, “Fokus” [Focus], (Oslo: Norwegian Intelligence Service, 2018).

⁴ Kristin Haugevik, Øyvind Svendsen, Katja Creutz, Mikkel Runge Olesen, Anna Lundborg Regnér and Jakob Linnet Schmidt, “Nordic partnership choices in a fierier security environment: Towards more alignment.” *NUPI Policy Brief*, no. 9 (2021).

⁵ NATO, “Relations with Finland.” (2021) https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49594.htm; NATO, “Relations with Sweden.” (2021) https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_52535.htm

⁶ See NORDEFECO’s Annual Reports from 2014 through 2020. All are available at <https://www.nordefco.org/Annual-Reports>.

⁷ The Finnish Defence Forces, “The Lockheed Martin F-35A Lightning II is Finland’s next multi-role fighter.” (Dec 10, 2021) <https://puolustusvoimat.fi/en/-/1951206/the-lockheed-martin-f-35a-lightning-ii-is-finland-s-next-multi-role-fighter>.

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