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Nordic Security: Moving towards NATO?

Russia's military aggression in Ukraine has also been a wake-up call for the Nordic countries of Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark. Despite a common sense of Nordic identity, their security and defense policies have differed. Since 2014, the renewed Russian threat in their vicinity has triggered closer cooperation. Their defense policies are currently being revised, but the main focal point is NATO rather than the notion of a Nordic security community.

By Jannicke Fiskvik

Events in Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 challenge the post-Cold War geopolitical situation in Europe. This has also strongly affected the Nordic region. For the first time since World War II, a state that shares borders with Finland and Norway has seized a part of a neighboring country by military means. Accordingly, Nordic governments are rethinking their own security strategy. Although Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark seek good long-term relations with Russia, they were all decisive in demonstrating support for Ukraine and condemning Russian military aggression. A non-response would have signaled a tacit acceptance of Russia's violation of international law.

A Norwegian submarine in a fjord near Bergen during NATO's Submarine Warfare Exercise "Dynamic Mongoose 14". *NATO*

The Nordic states are all committed to maintaining their contribution to international security and international law. They also share similarities of culture, climate, demography, historical heritage, and a strong sense of Nordic community. However, despite the many similarities and geographical proximity, the countries have differed in their security and defense policy and outlook. Moreover, two of them are EU members (Sweden, Finland), one is only a member of NATO (Norway), and one is a member of both NATO and EU (Denmark). The different alignments have made Nordic defense cooperation challenging – a cooperation that has always been somewhat informal and diffuse in nature. Has Russian aggression changed the conditions for Nordic defense cooperation?

The formal security policy and the security policy situation in the Nordic countries has been much the same as in 1949. *Practical* security policy, however, has changed significantly in all four states. Finland and Sweden have both drawn considerably nearer to the North Atlantic alliance, and dramatically intensified their relations with NATO since 2014. They play a crucial role in NATO's defense planning for a Crimea-type scenario in the Baltic Sea region, as the strategic importance of Northern Europe has grown.

Nordic Defense Cooperation

During the Cold War, defense cooperation between the Nordic countries was highly constrained. Negotiations on a Scandinavi-

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an defense union in 1948–9 failed to bridge national interests, and Nordic governments opted for different security policy alignments. Denmark and Norway joined NATO in 1949 as founding members, while Finland and Sweden remained unaligned. A Nordic Council was established in 1952, but was hampered by an informal ban on discussions of foreign policy and was restricted to non-security related cooperation. Nevertheless, notwithstanding their different security policy alignments, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden cooperated informally on military matters such as intelligence and air operations. Despite its official neutrality policy, Sweden secretly cooperated with NATO during the Cold War in preparing for a potential Soviet attack.

With the end of the East-West confrontation, Finland and Sweden regained more freedom of maneuver in their foreign policy. The two countries joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program in 1994, and became EU members in 1995. Moreover, the prohibition against foreign-policy coordination in the Nordic Council was lifted in 1991, making it possible to strengthen Nordic cooperation in the security and defense field. Cooperation was intensified and new institutions were established, including for defense procurement and coordinating military peace support operations. Intra-Nordic defense cooperation was still very informal, and several planned procurement projects were abandoned.

Denmark is now focusing more on defense in the nearby area, and Sweden is turning its focus back eastwards towards Russia.

In the late 2000s, there was a new drive for enhancing Nordic defense cooperation. The Nordic Defense Cooperation (NORDEFCO) organization was set up in November 2009, facilitating cooperation in the fields of support structures, procurement, development, and planning. While all decision-making is based on consensus, each country has the possibility to opt out of any activity or project. The creation of NORDEFCO was mainly based on economic considerations. Like other European countries in the post-Cold War era, the Nordic countries have faced shrinking budgets, rising costs of defense equipment, and demands that they take part in international military operations. The armed forces of all four countries have undergone major reforms, although at different times and at different speed.

In the wake of the Russian-Georgian War of 2008, the Nordic countries looked ever more askance to their large neighbor in the east. The Finns were particular wary of tensions between the Baltic States and Russia, while the Norwegians kept their eyes on the High North. Still, the events of 2008 did not lead to any large reevaluations of Nordic security policy thinking. The Swedish assessment was that Russian motives for the intervention were driven by an expansionist geostrategic agenda in the Caucasus, and did not concern the Baltic area. After 2014, however, Russia's course of action has been viewed as the biggest challenge to Europe's security. Worries in the Nordic countries have been growing, especially concerning the Baltic Sea region.

Finland: Bordering on Russia

Finland responded immediately to Moscow's decision to annex Crimea by supporting the Ukrainian side. Helsinki issued an urgent call for political dialog, and the role of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has been of key importance. During 2014, Finland increased its financial support and the number of observers involved in the OSCE field mission to Ukraine. With EUR 2 million and 19 observers, it is one of the largest contributors to the mission. Although Finland has been cautious about imposing economic sanctions on Moscow over Ukraine, the EU sanctions are seen as a legitimate way of influencing Russia.

Finnish defense policy is marked by continuity. Due to geographical proximity and the long shared border, Russia is, and has long been, perceived as the main potential threat that guides Finnish strategic thinking. This latter point was reemphasized by the Finnish minister of defense following the Russian-Georgian War in 2008. Events in Ukraine have led to concerns that Finland's defense capability will deteriorate without increased investment.

The growing assertiveness of Russia has revived discussions about Finland's defense strategy, particular regarding the possibility of NATO membership. Although membership does not have majority support, there is now a greater readiness to discuss the issue. Russia's recent role has in many ways reinforced the already existing positions among the Finnish public; those in favor of joining NATO continue to argue that Finnish capabilities are insufficient, and that Russia may already consider Finland a de-facto NATO member. Opponents are still concerned that NATO membership will cause Finland to be designated a potential enemy of Russia, and provoke retaliation from Moscow. As part of the current debate and in connection with the forthcoming whitepaper on security policy, there will be a new study on the potential implications of full Finnish NATO membership.

While the Finnish Defense Forces are undergoing a major reform, the defense doctrine is still based on the basic principles of maintaining national capabilities with territorial defense and general conscription. An interesting and contradictory point in current Finnish defense thinking is that Finland must continue to have a credible defense on its own, even as a completely independent national defense is no longer viewed as a viable concept.

Sweden: Protecting Gotland

In the 2015 Swedish Defense Bill, the events in Ukraine are described as the greatest challenge to the current European security structure. In light of Russian aggression, the Swedish government emphasized the need for strong European cooperation with the EU at the core, and was one of the initiators of the EU Advisory Mission to Ukraine. For Sweden, the European and transatlantic agreements to support Ukraine, as well as a clear and principled policy to counter Russia, have been important. Sweden also contributed funding and personnel to the OSCE.

A serious concern in Sweden is that Russia has demonstrated its ability to gather its military resources quickly and carry out complex operations in its neighborhood without any warning. The annexation of Crimea accelerated a debate on the capabilities of the Swedish armed forces and the military presence on Gotland – a strategically important Baltic island where spending cuts in recent years have all but eliminated defenses. After the events in Ukraine, from a Swedish point of view, the Baltic Sea region is the area most exposed to increased Russian military activity. A potential crisis or conflict situation in Sweden's vicinity is believed to be possible, given the limited military resources of the Baltic States, the relative closeness to Russia, and the need of the West to move military units quickly.

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Sweden's partnership with NATO is characterized as comprehensive and well developed. Since 2013, Sweden has participated as a partner in the NATO Response Force (NRF). Moreover, in 2014, Sweden signed an agreement with NATO regarding host nation support. The government intends to increase Swedish participation in NATO's most advanced and complex exercises, primarily within the NRF framework, as well as in NATO's large-scale exercises. In this regard, the importance of participating in exercises taking place in the vicinity of Sweden is emphasized.

Over the past years, the Swedish Armed Forces have undergone major changes. The aim of the 2009 Defense Bill was to complete the transition to a flexible, modern, and professional force that is able to operate with international partners. The 2015 Defense Bill, however, shifts the focus back to territorial defense, where the main priority of the armed forces is to prevent an armed attack. However, unlike during the Cold War era, the measures are not taken based exclusively on Swedish conditions considered in isolation. Today, Swedish defense thinking also takes into account the larger Baltic Sea, as well as European and the global contexts.

The Geostrategic Position of the Nordic Countries

Denmark: Eyeing the Baltics

The Danish response to the events in Crimea and eastern Ukraine has been framed by its status as a member of both the EU and NATO. As an EU member, it has been important for Denmark to show that Russia's actions have consequences. At the same time, Copenhagen has emphasized the necessity of maintaining a dialog between Russia and the EU. The immediate Danish military response following the Ukraine crisis was undertaken in the framework of NATO.

The first Danish military reaction was to contribute six F-16 fighter aircraft to the Baltic Air Policing mission. This was the first time Danish forces have been used in connection with crisis management for NATO's new members. During 2014, Denmark contributed to a number of reassurance measures managed by NATO. Among other outcomes, the Ukraine crisis led to several military exercises, which are normally performed in Denmark, being moved to the Baltic countries. Moreover, troops and equipment have been sent to the Baltics and Poland amid the crisis in the Ukraine – giving a clear signal of solidarity to NATO countries that feel vulnerable.

Regarding the geopolitical situation, it is widely agreed that Denmark enjoys an advantageous location, geographically speaking. Accordingly, Russia is not seen as a direct threat to Danish territory, as seen by the fact that Russia is barely mentioned in the current Defense Agreement for the period of 2013–7. Considering the implications of the Ukraine crisis for Danish security and defense policy, it would seem that the need to defend the country's immediate neighborhood is on the agenda. Shortly after the Cold War, Denmark adopted an active foreign policy and moved away from territorial defense. Territorial defense will probably not be reinstated, but the focus is likely to move more to the Baltic States now that the conditions for its active foreign and security policy have changed. Unlike during the Cold War period, Denmark's strategic border has moved eastwards after NATO enlargement. As for Nordic defense cooperation, Denmark has been an outlier in terms of its view of Nordic security challenges – largely due to its global outlook. Post-2014, however, Denmark is seeking more military cooperation with its neighbors. In 2015, Denmark signed an historical agreement with Sweden on increased military cooperation that enables Danish military aircraft and ships to operate in Swedish airspace and waters. A contributing factor to this decision was increased Russian activity in the Baltic Sea region.

Norway: Defending the High North

Like the other Nordic countries, Norway perceived the annexation of Crimea and Russia's military actions in eastern Ukraine as marking a considerable change in the security political situation in Europe. The Norwegian government joined the EU economic sanctions on Russia and condemned Russia's actions together with other countries in the region. On the military side, Norway, like Denmark, responded to the tense situation through NATO. During 2014, the Norwegian Armed Forces contributed ships and command personnel to NATO's standing mine-clearing force in the Baltic Sea as part of reassurance measures. At the end of 2014, the Norwegian army participated in a long-term exercise in Latvia, signaling Norway's support of its allies in the East. Moreover, the Norwegian

Air Force participated in the Swedish-led observation flights over Ukraine during the Crimea crisis.

Although Russia is rarely described as a threat, Norway pays close attention to the High North, which adjoins both countries. The Arctic has always been central to Norwegian security and defense thinking, including after the end of the Cold War, due to the fear that its allies were losing interest in the northern flank. In 2014, due to increased Russian activities in Norway's vicinity, measures were taken to increase Norway's military presence in the north. For Norway, the annexation of Crimea showed that Russia has the ability and the will to use military force to reach political goals abroad. The combination of Russian great-power ambitions, military armament, and interests in the northern areas – with many important Russian military installations being situated on the Kola Peninsula – are considered a challenge to the future stability of the High North.

Three premises have been central in the debate about Norwegian defense. First, Norway is a small state with a great power as a neighbor; second, the ability to defend Norway depends on military aid from its allies; and third, Norway is different from other small states due to its vast ocean areas, which over time have been vastly expanded through the conventions on the law of the sea. Russia is a key factor in Oslo's security and defense policy thinking, and the Norwegian military presence in the High North has only been strengthened due to Russian behavior, both in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.

A Nordic Security Community?

Historically, geopolitics has divided the Nordic region more often than it has unified it on hard security issues. In spite of a shared geographical space with shared problems, Nordic security priorities are disparate. After the end of the Cold War, each country has faced a different point of the compass; Norway with its focus in the north, Finland orienting itself eastward, Sweden looking to the west, and Denmark with its global engagement to the south.

Has Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine significantly changed the conditions for defense cooperation between the Nordic countries? After Crimea, there is a common Nordic view that the security situation in their vicinity has notably deteriorated. Accordingly, Russia's actions have brought the different Nordic geopolitical outlooks closer together. Denmark is now focusing more on defense in the nearby area, and Sweden is turning its security focus back eastwards towards Russia. While there is no discontinuity in Finnish defense policy, the acknowledgement of the country's dependence on external support for its defense is notable. In Norway, there has been an increased focus on the High North and territorial defense since 2014.

On the one hand, there are no clear signs that Russia has pushed the Nordic countries significantly closer to each other. On the other hand, the countries are no longer nervous about provoking Russia by increasing their cooperation, either. In 2015, the Nordic defense ministers stated in a joint feature article that they sought to strengthen Nordic defense cooperation, particularly on information-sharing, joint military training, and coordinating activities overall. They confirmed that the situation was no longer "business as usual" and stated that the Nordic countries had to adjust themselves to a new normal condition. However, Nordic cooperation is to take place within the framework of NATO and the EU, and the emphasis is on maintaining the transatlantic link. In other words, the change toward a Nordic security community seems to be taking place in a transatlantic context, and more specifically through NATO.

The priorities and refocus of NATO after the Wales 2014 summit have affected Denmark and Norway, but also the non-aligned countries Finland and Sweden. The public and political debates in the two latter countries over possible NATO membership are more heated, although it does not seem likely that they will join anytime soon. Both governments have commissioned reports on the potential implications of a NATO membership, even though they currently seem unwilling to risk a reaction from Moscow by joining the alliance. In this regard, events in one of the Baltic States are more likely to serve as a game-changer. After Wales 2014, both Finland and Sweden are seeking closer cooperation as PfP countries to the extent that they may be regarded as informal NATO members. If the Ukraine scenario were to be repeated in the Baltics, there is a possibility that Finland and Sweden may join NATO in response to Russian threats. In this situation, the issue of NATO membership will arguably gain further incentive. Finland and Norway are expected to publish new security and defense whitepapers this year, while Denmark is preparing a new defense agreement for its armed forces. The documents will likely reflect the changed conditions post-2014.

Jannicke Fiskvik is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Historical Studies at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim. She was a Visiting Fellow at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich from August to December 2015.

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Feedback and comments: analysen@sipo.gess.ethz.ch
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