

# Swedish–Norwegian Defence Cooperation: New opportunities?

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## Introduction

Swedish–Norwegian defence cooperation has encountered rough seas in recent years, but now seems to have entered smoother waters. This is due to both push and pull factors: push because the new security environment has increased the likelihood of a crisis in the Nordic/Baltic region, which would probably involve all Nordic states, irrespective of NATO or EU membership. Pull because of the renewed US engagement in the region, because of the EU incentives for industrial defence cooperation – and because geographical proximity in itself creates possibilities for shared solutions and practices. This Policy Brief focuses on Swedish–Norwegian defence cooperation in the broader Nordic/Baltic context. We begin by reviewing recent developments in Swedish defence policies, and the implications of previous failed joint Swedish–Norwegian projects. We then turn to opportunities that may emerge as a result of the mentioned push and pull factors. These opportunities are to be considered as ideas; they have not been thoroughly discussed and assessed, but may serve as starting points for follow-on debates and explorations.

## Recent developments in Swedish defence policy

Sweden – like Norway and many other European states – drastically downsized its armed forces in the decades following the end of the Cold War. In 2015 this trend turned, with the passing of a defence bill which gave a net financial increase to the Swedish armed forces, for the first time in 20 years. The Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the submarine intrusion into the Stockholm archipelago the following October had significantly hardened the public mood, and opened possibilities for a more hard-nosed and urgent approach towards security policy – even leading to an unusual bidding contest with Sweden’s major political parties competing over who was most ‘pro-defence’ (Dalsjö 2017). This signalled a dramatic political shift regarding NATO membership, as well as in defence and security policy as a whole. Most tellingly perhaps, today all the parties from the former government alliance (the Conservatives, the Left, the Christian Democrats and the Centre Party) are in favour of NATO membership for Sweden (Britz 2016).

Moreover, in 2014 Sweden joined NATO’s new partnership format, the Enhanced Opportunity Programme (EOP). Traditional red lines, like contingency planning for receiving and providing mili-

tary assistance, were crossed in 2016 when the Parliament ratified a Host Nations Support agreement (HNS), clarifying Sweden’s role as a host nation for NATO military exercises or crisis-management operations. The possibility of joint military planning and joint action with Finland in the event of crisis or war was also raised in the 2015 defence bill, albeit with the caveat that there would be no formal guarantees for this.

Sweden has also, to a much greater extent than Norway, taken the new security environment into consideration in its national strategic doctrines. Seven politico-strategic papers have been published since 2014, all addressing the new security challenges represented by Russia.<sup>1</sup> Most recently, in June 2017, Sweden joined the British-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), in which also Norway and Denmark take part.

Since coming into government in 2014, Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist, from the traditionally NATO-sceptical Social Democratic Party (SD), has pursued a new middle course in Swedish security policy, halfway between neutrality and NATO membership. Internally in the SD, ruling out NATO membership (for now) has mollified the anti-NATO wing of the party, while simultaneously opening for stronger links to the USA and deeper international defence cooperation. Some observers see this as a strategy that seeks to confirm Sweden’s non-aligned status formally, but without digging too deep trenches that might obstruct future movement on the NATO question (Dalsjö 2017).

The ‘Hultqvist doctrine’ is based on a combination of strong national defence and close bilateral relations – primarily, but not exclusively, with the USA and Finland. In recent years Sweden has also signed several bilateral MOUs, with the USA, UK, Denmark, and Germany, among others. An MOU with Poland has also been considered. Proponents in the supportive bilateralist camp argue that pragmatic but informal arrangements like these that can yield rapid, tangible benefits for Sweden and partners are better than relying on what at times has been described as a cumbersome and too bureaucratic NATO (Lindestam & Thorell 2015).

The bilateralism currently dominating Swedish defence policy can be understood as a strategy of ‘grappling hooks’, whereby the number of available options for military cooperation strengthens Swedish security while still upholding the principles of freedom of

action and non-alignment – in other words, seeking closer cooperation short of collective defence. Robert Dalsjö has termed this ‘positive freedom of action’ or a ‘keeping all doors open’ policy.

When it comes to the Nordic dimension of Swedish security policy, there is general cross-party agreement on the importance of Nordic cooperation in security and defence, with some variations in opinions as to the nature and extent of such cooperation. In some cases, the positions on Nordic cooperation vis-à-vis NATO have also been incorporated, as with the Conservative Party, which has taken the new security situation in the Baltic Sea as an opportunity to advance their arguments for Swedish NATO membership. For example, possible cooperation between the Swedish Finnish Naval Task Group and NATO forces operating in the Baltic Sea has been mooted to strengthen security and stability in the Baltic region (Widman 2016). In 2016 the Conservative Party suggested that the Swedish armed forces should undertake a study outlining possible next steps for NATO accession – drawing on the 2016 Bringéus Report, which concluded that lack of NATO membership relegates Sweden to a twilight zone in terms of contingency planning (Enström & Wallmark 2016; Dalsjö 2017). The Left Party, which is critical to EU defence cooperation and has proposed that Sweden should leave the European Defence Agency (EDA), recently expressed concerns that deeper EU cooperation would involve closer defence cooperation with NATO countries as well (Sveriges Radio 2016). The right-wing Swedish Democrats are not supportive of NATO membership, but are very positive to Nordic cooperation – even the possibility of extending cooperation to include mutual defence obligations has been raised (Forslund 2017).

## Norway and Sweden: past hurdles

Hence, in Sweden, there are genuine political ambitions for enhancing the Nordic defence dimension and cooperation with Norway. However, we can also note the relatively broad-based perception in Swedish defence circles of Norway as having lost a significant degree of trust recently. This reduced confidence in Swedish–Norwegian cooperation has been caused mainly by the experience of failed projects on joint procurement and acquisition. When Norway in 2013 decided to withdraw from the Archer artillery project, after years of joint R&D, Sweden was taken by surprise, apparently without warning or being given an opportunity to resolve the situation. On the political level, the perception in Sweden has since been that this is simply not done at such a late stage in a project cycle. Parallel to the Archer process, the attempt at joint procurement of military trucks from MAN Rheinmetall also went awry, with accusations of disorderly tendering processes.

Swedish misgivings about Norway’s reliability regarding cooperation on defence materiel were corroborated when in April 2016 the Norwegian government announced that two French and German companies would be the final two candidates for its planned procurement of new submarines – meaning that the Swedish company SAAB Kockums had been ruled out in the initial evaluation round. From the Swedish perspective, it was particularly regrettable that the Norwegian press release cited the need for ‘an existing submarine design’, ‘extensive experience’ and the wish to ‘avoid large development with the risk, uncertainty and cost such a project entails’ – all seen as reflecting badly on Swedish submarine production.<sup>2</sup> This came on top of an already limping relationship, caused

by the Norwegian decision in 2008 to buy Lockheed Martin’s F35 fighter jets, ruling out SAAB’s JAS Gripen. The Swedish view here was that the Norwegian deliberations had created an unnecessarily long process with SAAB, allegedly involving high costs for the company.

Admittedly, there has been a lack of understanding from the Swedish side as to how Norwegian priorities have been guided by NATO concerns. Other identified obstacles and lessons learned from Swedish–Norwegian procurement and acquisition projects include poor clarity as to intentions and objectives at the outset of projects; differences in leadership, management, organizational structure and culture within the defence materiel administrations; and subsequently deteriorating levels of trust. Even language has been cited as a barrier to efficient cooperation (Undén 2014). Therefore we ask: how might the new security context provide opportunities for reviving Swedish–Norwegian cooperation on security and defence?

## New opportunities, push and pull factors

Until now, inter-Nordic cooperation projects have been based mainly on a long-term resource strategy. With defence structures being reduced while the relative costs increased, the main incentive for Nordic defence cooperation has been to save money. Cooperation efforts like joint upgrades of defence materiel, joint acquisition and procurement programmes, and joint force generation were all aimed at accommodating the need for more cost-efficient solutions.

The actions of the Russian Federation have now changed this. This push factor has made NATO ‘return home’, deploying its Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltics and Poland. It has also led the USA to increase its defence spending in Europe manifold. The US Marines now have a permanent rotational presence in central Norway, training and participating in exercises also in Sweden. This engagement may serve to forge new bilateral cooperation between Sweden and Norway. If the United States were to support Sweden in an international security crisis, Norway could hardly remain a passive bystander: that would undermine its political credibility vis-a-vis both Stockholm and Washington. This new US engagement may therefore be considered a pull factor towards enhanced bilateral defence cooperation.

Another new pull factor is the EU Joint Defence Fund, launched on 7 June 2017, which may provide opportunities to overcome previous hurdles in defence materiel cooperation. Following the publication of the European Defence Action Plan by the European Commission in November 2016, the EU will support complementarity in European defence by offering grants for collaborative R&D, joint acquisitions and procurement of capabilities. Too often, investments have failed to transition into actual capability development, with projects ending up in the ‘valley of death’ (Fiott 2017). The new EU fund may offer a way to overcome the challenges of pulling a project through the life-cycle from research to development to joint capabilities, also for Norway and Sweden – within the framework of NORDEFECO, or in cooperation with other EU countries. Yet another pull factor is the spatial location of the Nordic states as a geopolitical buffer zone. Traditionally delineated more by the great powers in the West and the East than by any endogenous efforts, the Nordic countries have tended to look beyond the region for security guarantees (Breitenbauch et al. 2017). This shared geopolitical fate is caused by the inescapable realities of geographical proximity and

thus strategic dependency. At time, these realities seem to slip the minds of policy and defence planners, with each country's defence planning being guided by its own distinctive geographical outlook: Norway to the Atlantic and the High North, Sweden and Finland to the Baltic Sea, and Denmark to out-of-area missions.

Ultimately, however, the Nordic region constitutes one strategic space. Even Atlanticist Norway, with its recent deployment of a military contingent in Lithuania as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence, is strategically bound to developments in neighbouring Sweden and Finland, not to mention the Baltic Sea. Access to Swedish territory will be indispensable if NATO – and Norway – should be called upon to defend the Baltic states. Using Swedish airspace to fly combat sorties would be the most attractive option for NATO, as the access points around Poland and Germany would be Russian-defended airspace. Also crucial would be the ability to deny an opponent such access (Stratfor 2013). In short, a potential security crisis in the Baltic region is likely to be a shared crisis. Further, modern weapons technologies, like precision-guided long-range missiles, contribute to the creation of a single strategic space. Cruise missiles launched from the Kola Peninsula, or from a submarine off the Norwegian coast, can reach the Baltic Sea; and missiles launched from Kaliningrad oblast or the Baltic Sea can reach Norway and the High North. All this adds to the strategic interdependency of the Nordic countries, their armed forces and political decision-makers.

These developments also offer new possibilities and opportunities for renewed Swedish–Norwegian defence cooperation. This could move beyond the financial incentives, and focus on force generation and towards operational cooperation. There are many shared threats and challenges in the Nordic/Baltic and Swedish–Norwegian context, most of which are below an 'Article 5 situation' – but also far more likely. These include hybrid or grey-zone situations. The potential for greater planning, training and exercising to resolve such crises is therefore high – and in principle not especially politically sensitive.

However, heightened Swedish–Norwegian operational cooperation would require a shared strategic outlook. Sweden has adopted several strategic documents discussing the new regional security dynamic and the implications and role of the armed forces in this context – but Norway has not. A starting point could be to engage in bilateral strategic dialogue on the shared security challenges facing the two countries – and the role of the armed forces in dealing with them.

With this strategic-political 'chapeau', various new/old areas of operational cooperation between Sweden and Norway could be envisaged:

- **Cross-border training (CBT):** Exploring the possibilities for expanding the scope and geographical extent of the CBT framework, from the Arctic to the Baltic Sea. This could also ensure more extensive monitoring/air surveillance. Exercises could aim at ensuring operational cooperation during a grey-zone scenario and/or crisis management.

- **Multinational military cooperation:** exploring possibilities for a 'plug and play' for Norwegian and Swedish defence forces in the German-initiated Framework Nations Concept (FNC). This idea – that small armies could add their specialized capabilities as part of clusters within a larger military power and 'framework nation' which will provide logistics and C2 – could fit well with the Swedish 'grap-

pling hooks' strategy. Moreover, Sweden and Finland have substantial land and maritime capabilities that would constitute a relevant aggregate for a conflict scenario in the Baltic Sea, thus representing a conceivable contribution to the FNC. Cluster-based activities (planning and exercises) would have to take place below the level of NATO's Article 5.

- **Hybrid and grey-zone scenarios situational awareness:** Norway and Sweden could aim to produce wider situational awareness of hybrid threats to the Nordic space by expanding the scope of information sharing. From international missions in Bosnia, Kosovo and Mali, the Nordic countries already have significant practical experience with collocation and intelligence sharing which could be transferred to and developed within the Nordic regional context (Tarp in Storm Jensen 2016). Norway and Sweden might also consider establishing a joint system for indications and early warning. This could involve, at a minimum, the recording of events and sectoral anomalies, as well as exchange of information. Given the nature of hybrid threats, relevant information will often pertain to the civil sphere, thereby avoiding the problem of classified information. Further, information sharing could be enhanced through the development of a joint analysis component responsible for interpreting and systematizing incoming data. Lastly, there is considerable potential for Norway and Sweden to initiate a joint approach for regional crisis management in the event of a hybrid war scenario. Russia's ability to deploy forces abroad, rapidly and on large scale should also motivate Norway and Sweden to explore ways to ensure rapid force deployment on each other's territories in case of crisis.

- **Exercising for operations in the Nordic strategic space:** Regarding joint exercises, geographical proximity is the key advantage and rationale for Norway and Sweden, as explained above. A starting point for planning bilateral exercises would be to map areas that both countries have a common interest in protecting, in the north or south. This could take the form of a tabletop exercise for which a sorting tool could be developed that would account for the main strategic considerations and the most vulnerable geographical nodes, like crisis management or the protection of common supply lines. Another conceivable scenario for joint exercises would be a potential transfer of US troops through Norway to Sweden – a scenario that may have become increasingly likely since January 2017, which saw the deployment of 300 US Marines in Norway. Norwegian participation in Swedish naval exercises in the Baltic Sea, and vice versa in the Norwegian Sea and the Arctic, would enhance a common understanding of each other's operational and strategic environments. To create strategic synergies, exercises should be iterative – but do not necessarily have to be large-scale. They can even be experimental in nature, focused on stimulating joint planning and produce valuable knowledge that can be further used to strengthen strategic defence efforts in an integrated manner.

### Conclusions

Overstretch is arguably the main challenge for small states that seek to hedge their security bets through several partners. There are simply not enough resources in terms of troops, planes and ships, to engage several allies or partners on a regular basis. Partnerships require engagement, alliances require commitment. This applies to Sweden and Norway alike. Norway has traditionally given priority to exercising with its NATO allies, and is likely to continue to do so.

Sweden may also prefer to spend time with the bigger powers like the USA, UK and Germany – in addition to Finland – rather than Norway. Nevertheless, geographical proximity, a common strategic space, shared risks and new opportunities may open up new ways of enhancing shared Nordic security. These should be pursued with an eye to greater security and operational effects – not cooperation for the sake of cooperation. Swedish–Norwegian bilateral defence cooperation is still fragile: it is beginning to recover after some heavy blows, but cannot sustain major new setbacks. Creative but sober and impact-focused re-engagement on regional crisis management may infuse this relationship with greater energy and enthusiasm.

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#### Notes:

1 These are:

- Försvarspolitik inriktning – Sveriges försvar 2016-2020, Regeringens proposition 2014/15:109;
- Försvaret av Sverige: Starkare försvar för en osäker tid, Ds 2014:20 (Regeringskansliet/ Försvarsdepartementet)
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