

# The risks of being an ally

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## Summary

States join security alliances to increase their level of security vis-à-vis neighbours that may pose a threat. The deterrence logic that was the main rationale for joining NATO in 1949 still represents the cornerstone of Norway's security policy. However, belonging to a military alliance can also pose challenges. This policy brief focuses on some possible negative spillover effects that could emerge from being member of a military alliance.

The focus here is on current challenges within NATO, and the possible implications for Norway. First, we present a broader conceptual framework. What are the internal and external challenges facing NATO? How do NATO and its members deal with them? We then proceed to the implications for Norway. Due to structural factors that shape relations in Norway's strategic environment – including the location of Russian strategic bases close to the border, and the clear asymmetry in capabilities – negative developments in other regions and theatres may influence Norwegian security directly.

We argue that, in order to minimize the likelihood of negative trends spilling over to Norway's strategic neighbourhood, it is important to communicate the special features of this neighbourhood clearly to other members of the alliance. Further, to facilitate intra-alliance trust and cohesion, Norway should also emphasize NATO's internal, shared value-base, in order to make the alliance better prepared to meet external security challenges.

## What challenges face NATO today?

NATO is a military, hierarchical and hegemonic alliance characterized by imbalances in capabilities among its members. Its main objective is to deter potential aggression against its member states and to help repel an aggressor in case of attack.

The literature on alliances provides insights into the challenges an alliance may have to deal with<sup>1</sup>. There is a good understanding of what factors may bring about the demise of an alliance, and what could be considered the worst-case scenario for smaller members dependent on the assistance of their more powerful alliance partners.

Alliances face problems when:

- the conditions that promoted their creation are no longer present;
- their objectives are poorly defined;
- their members have differing priorities;
- there is a lack of a common strategic vision;
- the level of trust among members is low;
- their governance structures are poor;
- they have problems with planning;
- support for them is weak;
- they are unable to adapt to changing conditions; and
- they do not invest enough in their capabilities.

Some of these challenges feature on the current NATO agenda<sup>2</sup>. Among the external challenges are instability in the Middle East, the impasse in Afghanistan and a resurgent Russia that challenges the existing security order in Europe. While demanding, these external challenges also contribute to giving NATO a new purpose and lease of life.

However, the ability of the alliance to cope with such external threats depends on its capacity to deal with some grave internal challenges. Most obvious here is the challenge of internal burden-sharing – only five NATO members spend 2% or more of their GDP on defence. That has been a problem for a long time, but US President Donald Trump has now placed it at the top of the agenda. The failure of NATO members to maintain their capabilities by not providing sufficient funding undermines not only the internal cohesion and solidarity of the alliance, but also its military capabilities and thus its ability to react adequately to external challenges.

Another internal challenge concerns the regional differences in strategic perspectives, which influence member-state priorities. For instance, NATO countries located in the vicinity of the Russian Federation are more concerned about its strategic resurgence and how a more aggressive Russia may pose a threat. Other NATO countries, more preoccupied with challenges that stem from 'South', broadly understood, do not necessarily share the outlook of their partners located on the Eastern flank.

NATO has officially adopted a 360-degree approach to security, and aims to deal with security challenges along its entire perimeter. However, the most exposed member-states do not feel completely sure that, at the crucial moment, all the other members would come to the rescue. For instance, a recent PEW survey shows considerable variation in the willingness to send national forces to help other NATO member-states facing Russian aggression. In some key countries, like Italy, Germany and the UK, under half express willingness to intervene<sup>3</sup>. Such doubts were further strengthened when, during his first visit to Brussels, President Trump described NATO as an 'obsolete' organization and failed to express US commitment to Article 5.

The willingness of members to come to the rescue of other NATO states may also be influenced by a further important internal challenge that acts to undermine mutual trust and readiness to help. NATO defines itself as a normative community of values based on liberal and democratic principles – but some member-states do not live up to these shared expectations, thereby undermining the internal cohesion of the alliance. In Turkey, Hungary and Poland, semi-authoritarian parties voted into power by democratic means have subsequently cracked down on democratic processes. Also other countries, like Slovakia, the Czech Republic and even the USA, have been exhibiting disturbing trends as regards democracy<sup>4</sup>.

Undermining democratic procedures and checks and balances domestically may have a negative impact on how these states are perceived by other member-states. Even more importantly, it affects the accountability and predictability of policymakers. In the absence of proper checks and balances, they may make grave miscalculations or take calculated, excessive risks, in turn resulting in irrational or harmful decisions with negative consequences not only for their own countries, but for their allies as well.

More generally, it could therefore be argued that NATO today is facing realist, institutional, and identity-related internal challenges – all with potential negative spillover effects on Norway and its situation.

In **realist terms** NATO as a military alliance has returned to its core task as provider of security to its members, also in relation to a more aggressive and challenging Russia. The need to keep the USA interested in European affairs has the same realist rationale: US military capabilities are indispensable to give NATO deterrence the credibility necessary for dealing with the renewed challenge posed by Russia. Also the question of internal burden-sharing within the alliance should be understood in realist terms:

the member-states need to develop military capabilities to ensure an adequate level of credible deterrence.

As for **institutional challenges**, NATO was established in order to provide an institutional framework for security cooperation among its members. Such a multilateral institutional framework was viewed as a better solution than bilateral agreements or unilateral actions. NATO was not intended to deal exclusively with military questions: it was also to serve as a platform for multilateral political cooperation and coordination. The highly institutionalized framework has helped the alliance to cope with several fundamental issues, including overcoming the challenge of no longer having an external existential threat to deal with after the end of the Cold War<sup>5</sup>.

The key institutional challenges facing NATO today are related to the possible weakening of the trans-Atlantic link. In a time of growing strategic uncertainty, some members may seek to strengthen their bilateral ties with the USA as additional security insurance. This in turn might trigger dynamics that further undermine internal cohesion in NATO as well as mutual trust among its members, who may start competing to become favourite partners of Washington. A further pressing institutional challenge is the need to strengthen the European leg of the alliance and find a viable platform for security cooperation with the EU. NATO will have to contribute to (re)create a viable pan-European collective security framework. In addition, the question how to organize relations with like-minded European non-NATO states poses an institutional challenge – for instance, concerning NATO's relations with aspiring members like Ukraine and Georgia, or with Sweden and Finland.

Finally, as to **normative challenges**, it is important to remember that, from the very beginning, NATO has also had a normative justification that functioned as its 'normative glue'. NATO was an alliance of states built on solid democratic foundations. When new states wanted to join the alliance, their decision was motivated not only by shared threat perceptions but also by the commitment to live up to democratic ideals. In joining NATO, states not only joined a military alliance that would provide assistance in dealing with security-related challenges, or an international organization that offered a framework for facilitating security cooperation: they also became members of a specific identity community that is based on a given set of democratic norms and values and a shared collective identity.

The 1995 NATO document that drew up the roadmap for further enlargement listed the normative and axiological requirements all new members must meet when joining the alliance. Today, however, this normative and identity-related dimension of the alliance is coming under increasing pressure. The main guarantor, the USA, is experiencing what is sometimes referred to as an anti-liberal turn, while certain European member-states, like Turkey, Poland, Hungary – and more recently, also Italy – are pursuing policies with a clear anti-liberal or even anti-democratic tinge.

### The challenge of being an ally: lessons for Norway

Norway, like other states with limited resources, must cope with a range of structural security-related challenges related to the asymmetry between aims and the resources at its disposal. Over the past 70 years, the situation of Norway has changed dramatically in many aspects, but the strategic structural challenge has remained the same. NATO membership is therefore still viewed as the best option for dealing with external security challenges<sup>6</sup>.

Unlike the other NATO members bordering on the Russian Federation (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland), Norway does not have negative historical experiences from having Russia as a neighbour. Throughout its history as a NATO member, Norway has conducted a relatively balanced policy towards the USSR/Russia, based on the three principles of (sufficient) deterrence, (self-chosen and necessary) reassurance, and (willing) engagement. After the end of the Cold War, Norway has sought to transform the Russian–Norwegian border region into an area for mutually advantageous transborder cooperation, thereby also seeking to ease strategic tensions in relations between Russia and the West as broadly understood, including NATO. However, perceptions have changed after the 2014 Russian aggression against Ukraine, which demonstrated not only Moscow's willingness to use military force, but also its increased military capabilities. There is a growing realization of the possibility of a conflict between Russia and the West breaking out elsewhere and having immediate implications for bilateral relations between Norway and Russia.

One major reason is the fact that some of Russia's key strategic assets are located at bases only some 100 km from the Norwegian border. A potential worst-case scenario for Norway would be that, in response to NATO engagement in other theatres, Russia might launch a pre-emptive operation against Norway to gain increased strategic depth to protect these assets. Such NATO engagement could be caused by Russian actions against a NATO member – whether purely accidental, based on a miscalculation or misinterpretation of facts, or deliberate. Alternatively, it could be the result of one or more NATO allies, emboldened by their membership in the alliance, adopting imprudent policies towards Russia or taking a (mis)calculated risk of confronting Russia, in turn triggering a military response. Such scenarios pose a huge strategic challenge for Norway: in a situation when the alliance ought to come to the rescue, it might be engaged elsewhere, perhaps lacking the resources and/or will to support Norway. That makes avoiding such a scenario a matter of paramount importance.

As a small neighbour, Norway has limited opportunities to shape opinion and developments in Russia. As a member of NATO, however, it can influence the policies of the alliance and its members, so as to reduce the risk of confrontation. By same token, it is crucial for Norway to understand that what other alliance members might choose to do in relation to Russia may impact on the security situation of Norway as well.

The most negative, most dangerous scenario for Norway would be a military incident between a NATO member and Russia escalating into full-scale conflict. The Turkish downing of a Russian military aircraft in November 2014 was an event that could have triggered such a military confrontation. Fortunately, the situation was settled relatively quickly and constructively, without further escalation. Russian reluctance to react militarily has also been confirmed on other occasions – as in February 2018, when the USA employed military power against Russian troops (the Russian private military security company Wagner Group) operating in Syria; or the loss of a Russian intelligence-gathering aircraft Il-20 over Syria in September 2018.

Growing political tensions between a NATO member and Russia is another scenario that should be considered. One possible example: Russia's refusal to return the wreckage of the Polish presidential aircraft that crashed in Smolensk in 2010 might provoke Polish right-wing activists to organize violent demonstrations against Russian diplomatic missions in Poland. In response, Russia could opt for what would be considered disproportionate measures, in turn provoking the Polish authorities to react disproportionately in order to rally public support. In this way, a chain of violent events could be set in motion. Unless such a chain spirals out of control, the direct bearing on the security situation in Norway would be limited – that is, unless similar violent protests were organized, for instance, by Polish activists in Oslo. That could have negative impacts not only on Norwegian–Russian, but also potentially on Norwegian–Polish relations, undermining mutual trust within the alliance.

A third scenario is related to the presence of a sizeable Russian diaspora (former and current Russian citizens as well as persons with dual citizenship) in all NATO countries, including Norway. A conflict between the authorities in a NATO country and the Russian minority in that country might provoke Russia to intervene politically (openly), and/or launch a covert operation to support this minority. That could trigger an Article 4 response, with the involved authorities requesting political and technical assistance from NATO. Such a move could in turn be used by Moscow propaganda as 'proof' of a NATO-led operation directed against Russia, thereby fuelling anti-Westernism to get Russians to rally behind the regime. There is a relatively low probability that such a situation would trigger an armed conflict between Russia and NATO: Russia would be more likely to resort to other measures. However, the main point here is to make clear how events and incidents in one NATO member may escalate and travel from one region to another, with fairly direct impacts on Norwegian–Russian relations.

Faced with possible risks like those outlined briefly above, Norway should:

- embark on an active policy of communication with other NATO members, to get them to understand the strategic dilemma caused by the special strategic nature of the Norwegian–Russian neighbourhood;
- by sharing Norway's experience from bilateral relations, persuade other NATO allies to act

prudently in their relations with Russia; this should reduce the risk of an increase in tensions being misinterpreted or misused by the Russian side;

- adopt measures to counteract any further weakening of mutual trust among NATO members – for instance, by raising the level of defence spending to the NATO target, demonstrating that Norway is willing to take its fair share of responsibility;
- invest in making the alliance better prepared to meet current and future internal and external challenges by reiterating the importance of the normative and axiological dimension of cooperation. All members must adhere to the basic liberal and democratic principles of the alliance: that is a fundamental precondition for NATO's ability to function as a common platform for dealing with security-related issues.

<sup>4</sup> Eisen and Kirchick (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Johnston (2017).

<sup>6</sup> W.Y. Lindgren and N. Græger (2017) 'The Challenges and Dynamics of Alliance Policies: Norway, NATO and the High North', in M. Wesley (ed.), *Global Allies: Comparing US Alliances in the 21 Century* (Canberra: Australian National University), 91–113.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See L.S. Kaplan (2004), *NATO Divided, NATO United: the Evolution of an Alliance* (Westport, CT: Praeger); G.H. Snyder (1997), *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press); J.S. Duffield, C. Michota, and S.A. Miller (2008), 'Alliances', in P.D. Williams (ed.), *Security Studies: an Introduction* (London: Routledge), 291–306; S.A. Johnston (2017), *How NATO Adapts: Strategy and Organization in the Atlantic Alliance since 1950* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press).

<sup>2</sup> N. Eisen and J. Kirchick (2018), 'Yes, Russia is a Threat to NATO. So Are the Alliance's Anti-democratic Members', *Washington Post*, 11 July.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/07/09/nato-is-seen-favorably-in-many-member-countries-but-almost-half-of-americans-say-it-does-too-little/>.

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