



The Shifting Boundaries of Nordic Defence Cooperation

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Introduction

Once again, the boundaries of Nordic security and defence cooperation may be shifting. The last major shift occurred in 2014, when Russia's annexation of Crimea and incursion into Ukraine led to a so-called 'new normal' and prompted the Nordic countries to seek enhanced cooperation as a means of improving their common security.¹ Today's changes, though, are rooted in the rapid rise and expansion of European defence cooperation. Spanning industrial collaboration, capability development, training and operations, planning, as well as other strategic measures, this new European momentum has manifested itself in several new multilateral frameworks, including the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Framework Nations Concept (FNC), the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), and the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). Additionally, the EU and NATO have signed two joint declarations in the past few years, acknowledging the importance of closer cooperation.

Such developments, and especially these new multilateral frameworks, offer considerable scope for small states to work together in leveraging and negotiating mutual interests. This is particularly the case for the Nordic countries, which already have a long tradition of defence cooperation within NORDEFECO.

However, larger questions regarding the relationship between NATO, EU, independent initiatives and regional frameworks such as NORDEFECO remain largely unresolved.² Indeed, with so many parallel initiatives emerging, there is a risk they could undermine each other and become a drain on scarce resources.³ This is the key issue this research paper aims to address. In doing so, it will take stock of recent developments in Nordic defence cooperation, before situating Norway within current European developments and highlighting some of the convergences and possibilities a stronger European defence agenda may bring.⁴

A Nordic strategic space

Established in 2009, NORDEFECO – the primary vehicle for Norwegian defence cooperation – has had its share of good and bad days.⁵ However, since the events of 2014, NORDEFECO has embarked on a more ambitious agenda, starting in 2015 with a joint statement from Nordic defence ministers acknowledging the deteriorating security situation not only in Eastern Europe but also in Northern Europe, bringing with it an increased likelihood of incidents and crises.⁶ In 2018, NORDEFECO's newfound vigour resulted – under Norwegian chairmanship – in a political document entitled 'Vision 2025', outlining 16 targets for cooperation. The document is significant on a grand strategic level, as it extends the commitment to cooperation on defence issues beyond peacetime to include situations of 'crisis and conflict'.

In practical terms, several Vision 2025 targets have already been implemented. In 2019, the 'Easy Access' agreement came into full force, simplifying military mobility across borders through minimising the bureaucratic and legal obstacles faced by Nordic countries in accessing each other's sea, land and air territories (the agreement has also been hailed as a blueprint for some aspects of the EU's Military Mobility project).⁷ Furthermore, the signing of an amended Alternate Landing Bases agreement (the so-called 'ALB II') in November 2019 means Nordic states can now use each other's flight bases to land armed aircrafts, as well as to stockpile certain military equipment with each other. In other words, Nordic cooperation has embarked a path characterised by transborder awareness and rapidly changing legal and bureaucratic boundaries.

At the 2019 NORDEFECO Ministerial Meeting, Nordic cooperation acquired a new political and practical dimension with the announcement of a joint crisis consultation mechanism. The purpose of the mechanism is to strengthen coordination and the exchange of information during crisis and conflict, as well as to coordinate policy lines during international crises.⁸

The crisis mechanism sits atop an established system of secured but unclassified information exchange, including of radar data (NORECAS) and a secure VTC line between the Nordic defence ministries. Though the Easy Access, ALB II and NORECAS agreements are currently limited to peacetime, it is highly likely they will be formally extended into situations of crisis and conflict, as it makes little sense to move forward on some aspects of cooperation while holding back on others. In a 2019 joint op-ed marking NORDEFECO's 10th anniversary, the five Nordic defence ministers appeared to confirm this trajectory, stating that 'the Vision ... reflects the common understanding that a serious security crisis in the Nordic region would affect us all, and that we need to be prepared and equipped to act together in peace, crisis and conflict'.⁹ Taken together, these developments have strategic implications, as it becomes increasingly plausible the Nordic countries will be each other's first responders in a crisis.

The shifting boundaries of Nordic defence cooperation are also reflected in recent military exercises. Perhaps most symbolically, in May 2019, 'Arctic Challenge' – NORDEFCO's biennial air force exercise – was elevated to a so-called 'qualified flag exercise'. As one of the largest exercises of its kind in Western Europe that year, it was reflective of Nordic ambitions regarding improved joint training and interoperability. It also marked the first time Denmark had participated. Generally, Sweden, Norway and Finland have been the closest partners in the Nordic context, with Denmark appearing less concerned with such cooperation. However, the perceived rise of a Russian threat since 2014 has shifted Denmark's operational focus closer to home, including the Baltic Sea and the Arctic.¹⁰

Other military exercises conducted over the past couple of years have carved out what can now be regarded as a new Nordic operational space. Furthermore, Nordic countries have shown more engagement with each other's defence concepts, in large part due to Sweden and Finland actively cultivating links with NATO. In November 2018, for instance, the two countries participated in 'Trident Juncture' as non-NATO states, a high-visibility exercise focussed on the collective defence of Norway under Article 5. Along with Sweden and Finland, the exercise featured 29 NATO allies. For Sweden, this was an opportunity to train its contingent in the NATO Response Force (NRF). Among Swedish military personnel, Trident Juncture was informally conceived of as a 'Support Norway' exercise.¹¹ Additionally, through the hosting of three US Air Force units at the Norrbotten Airbase in Luleå, the exercise provided an opportunity for Sweden to put into practice NATO's Host Nation Support (HNS) agreement.¹²

Similarly, the HNS agreement facilitated the participation of NATO forces in Sweden's 2017 'Aurora' exercise, which represented a substantial test of the country's integration with NATO procedures and operations.¹³ In turn, the March 2019 Swedish army exercise 'Northern Wind' provided an opportunity for Norway and Finland – alongside the US and UK – to further test the Swedish defence concept. For the Norwegian–Swedish relationship, the event was particularly special, as it was the first time the full Norwegian 'Brigade Nord' had participated in an exercise abroad, as well as the first time Norway had deployed such a large volume of troops to Sweden. Moreover, it was the first time Sweden had hosted such a high number of foreign troops (totalling 7,000) during a military exercise.

In sum, the Nordic countries are forming a joint strategic space: legally, politically and geographically/operationally. Joint military exercises are growing in number, space and frequency, thereby moulding the boundaries of cooperation. While still in its early stages, EU/NATO cooperation – such as the Military Mobility project (MMP) – is likely to have further integrative effects on this space, with future exercises continuing to transcend traditional dividing lines between the Nordic NATO and non-NATO countries. Finland, for example, plans to conduct a large army exercise in 2021, bringing together military units from various NATO member countries.¹⁴

European defence cooperation: a new action space?

A number of European defence initiatives have emerged over the past few years, giving impetus to increased coordination, cooperation and, in some instances, even integration. Driven by both external and internal developments – such as Trump's presidency and the ensuing ambivalence in the transatlantic security relationship, Brexit, and a more assertive Russia – Europe's security and its capacity to defend itself is now at the forefront of European discourse. Key initiatives include the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and France's European Intervention Initiative (EII), which seeks to elevate cooperation to a politico-strategic level and improve Europe's military agility. Other frameworks, such as the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and Germany's Framework Nations Concept (FNC) – both principally independent from NATO but nevertheless endorsed at the 2014 NATO Wales Summit – have also finally been operationalised.

Importantly, the Nordic countries have all – on their own terms – either decided to join, or expressed an interest in joining, the new initiatives. Is this, then, an opportunity to bring new dimensions to Nordic cooperation?

In answering this question, it is worthwhile noting that the above-mentioned initiatives are organised according to a general principle of modularity, with participating states encouraged to cluster around different initiatives. Even so, countries are granted sufficient flexibility to choose preferred projects according to national needs and interests. It is also expected that most projects will take form in bottom-up fashion, with participating states and their technocratic communities taking the initiative. Such logic has been characteristic of Nordic cooperation since its inception.

Bearing in mind the prospects for increased regional cooperation, where are the Nordic countries located amid

these emerging European defence dynamics? Based on a series of interviews conducted with officials from the Norwegian Ministry of Defence in autumn 2019, little consideration, coordination or strategic thinking appears to have been devoted in Norway to advancing or maintaining a common Nordic/NORDEFECO approach. In addressing this lack of attention, the remainder of this research paper will examine the opportunities for and limitations to Nordic defence cooperation in the European context across two categories of initiatives: capability development and force generation.

Capability development: PESCO and FNC

Launched in December 2017, the aim of PESCO is to address the collective capability shortfalls of the EU by putting in place a comprehensive and coherent spectrum of defence capabilities. This is to be achieved by forming project groups to jointly invest in, plan, develop and operate capabilities. As of November 2019, 47 projects have been adopted, of which Norway has identified about five or six it would be interested in joining should it be invited to do so as a third party. These projects – among which is the MMP – are primarily seen as fulfilling Norwegian operational and capability needs. Sweden and Finland have each joined a handful of projects, while Denmark, having opted out of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), is prevented from participating in PESCO, including the MMP.¹⁵

However, in line with many EU member states, Norway is sceptical about the increasing number of projects generated by PESCO, fearing that grand ambitions may come at the expense of structure, coordination and, ultimately, strategic impact.¹⁶ Additionally, wary of any signs that PESCO may undermine NATO, Norway has been careful to ensure that projects it may participate in are benchmarked to the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP).¹⁷ In this context, it is worthwhile noting that while the capability shortfalls identified by NATO and the EU are almost identical, prioritisations may differ.¹⁸ Even so, the EU's Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and the NDPP have been forging stronger ties, offering opportunities for increased interoperability between EU and NATO members.

In terms of capability development, the German FNC – which currently incorporates 24 capability projects – also comes into play. Like PESCO, it seeks to address existing shortfalls by promoting cooperation and integration. The FNC also offers a backbone of German military formations, into which small nations can plug their specialised capabilities. By 2032, it is expected to function as a framework for deployments, notably on Europe's eastern borders.¹⁹

While the FNC is held in high regard in Norwegian defence circles as a particularly functional way of pursuing defence cooperation, the country has thus far made limited investments in the initiative. Norway has not, for example, joined the larger formations due to limited force availability, which prevents it committing troops beyond existing NATO arrangements, such as the NATO Response Force (NRF), the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force and (VJTF) and the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP).²⁰

On the capability side, Norway is currently an active participant in four FNC capability clusters, and is a backseat observer in seven. The decision to join these clusters was based on the expected benefits it would bring to specific but small Norwegian defence communities, including in research, in terms of international exchange and development of expertise.²¹ While Sweden and Finland are also part of the FNC's capabilities work, neither seem to think it will enhance their capabilities in the short run.²² Joint capabilities development among the Nordic countries is deliberately kept separate from the FNC and PESCO, instead remaining within NORDEFECO's capabilities cooperation (COPA CAPA).

The Nordic countries' interest in the FNC should instead be interpreted mainly as a way of enhancing their bilateral relationships with Germany.²³ Mouritzen refers to this kind of low-key beauty contest as 'parallel' or 'divergent' action: although the Nordic countries have a common task environment, as well as common interests and values, the more they cooperate in relation to this environment, the more they will typically compete vis-à-vis greater powers.²⁴

With a reformulated European security and defence architecture in the making, the Nordic countries would be better placed seeking convergence, rather than sliding into divergence. In the medium term, for example, the FNC may get a more prominent role, especially in view of Germany's upcoming EU presidency in 2020. It is also expected that the FNC will eventually establish links with PESCO. With this in mind, and taking into account existing resource limitations, the Nordic countries should begin identifying synergies and opportunities – that is,

determining which capabilities are strategically appropriate to meeting security needs within the Nordic region, and how best to develop them into an effective joint defence posture. There is no logical reason why NORDEFECO should be kept separate from the larger European defence project. As Biscop has observed, although avoiding duplication is important, cooperation, integration, synergies and the benefits of scale should be the focus going forward, both between countries and frameworks.²⁵ In this regard, NORDEFECO offers an ideal venue for such technocratic efforts.

Force generation: JEF and E12

Since June 2018, all the Nordic countries have been participants in the JEF, a British contingency force that can operate unilaterally but will ideally seek to incorporate forces from like-minded allies.²⁶ Its core purpose is to offer a rapid reaction force capable of deploying to a full spectrum of operations, from high-intensity war-fighting to deterrence missions and humanitarian assistance. While it is mainly designed to complement NATO, it is also ready to assist the EU, UN and other organisations.

For Norway, the JEF's rapid deployment ability fulfils important aspects of Norway's operational needs in terms of strengthening military robustness and readiness. The multilateral nature of the JEF has also been described as an important component of 'collective defence' and 'deterrence' in Norwegian defence policy.²⁷ Finland, Denmark and Sweden largely share the same view, emphasising the benefits of enhanced deterrence and military assistance. The JEF's commitment to the Baltic Sea – evident during the 2019 BALTOPS exercise, in which it led an Amphibious Task Force command – is particularly welcomed. In other words, the JEF offers the Nordic countries an opportunity to simulate scenarios and conduct exercises – such as crises demanding rapid deployment capabilities – utilising additional resources that would otherwise be unavailable. However, while such opportunities are considered favourable to Norwegian security interests, especially for crises located on a level 'below Article 5', Norway nevertheless prefers to see the JEF as being, wherever and whenever possible, compatible with NATO and used in support of its missions.²⁸

In resource terms, Norway's ability to deploy internationally is contingent on availability, with its current defence structures lacking the capacity to sustain force readiness both nationally and on behalf of multinational rapid reaction forces. As such, disposing of precious resources at the expense of NATO would be unthinkable. This means Norway has no standing force contributions committed to the JEF. Sweden, on the other hand, has registered two Visby-class corvettes, but these will be omitted from the force pool when the JEF is on standby for the VJTF.

Launched by President Macron in June 2018, the European Intervention Initiative (E12) is also independent from the EU and NATO. In terms of planning, the E12 is comprised of optional working groups formed around shared regional, conceptual or operational strategic concerns. While also based on the idea of rapid mobilisation and deployment of coalitions of the willing, the E12 additionally seeks to elevate European military cooperation to a politico-strategic level by developing 'a shared strategic culture between participating states ... focussing on strategic foresight and intelligence sharing; scenario development and planning; support to operations, and lessons learned and doctrine'.²⁹

For Norway, the prospect of improved coordination and crisis management preparedness, as well as the E12's supplementary role vis-à-vis NATO, represent key advantages to joining. Indeed, during the run up to Norway's bid for participation, it was careful to consider whether the E12 would in any way negate NATO.³⁰

The E12 is still in its initial phase, and so it is difficult to predict how it will evolve. At the same time, alongside the JEF, it appears to be the most promising venue for enhanced Nordic cooperation. Denmark, as a founding member, seems to have taken the lead in supporting its Nordic neighbours to join the initiative, succeeding with Finland, which became a participant in 2018, and Norway and Sweden, which followed suit in 2019. One of the E12 working groups reportedly concerns the Nordic region.

For now, it is a clear expectation that the E12 will focus largely on the Sahel, above all Mali. This is a region where the Nordic countries also have interests. Indeed, NORDEFECO already facilitates Nordic deployments to the region, including a Nordic-initiated rotation scheme for transport aircraft. Additionally, NORDEFECO recently deployed a Mobile Training Team consisting of Finnish and Swedish forces to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Norway has also supported the Swedish contingent solve urgent operational needs by leasing critical base camp material as part of a pilot aimed at establishing a full-blown Nordic Pool of Base Camp Material.

In sum, both the JEF and the E12 are useful forums in which the Nordic countries can define strategic priorities and operational concepts, as well as promote concrete ideas about what form European defence should take in the Nordic region.

Conclusions

Nordic defence cooperation is taking on new dimensions. 'At home', the Nordic countries have seized the initiative in lessening the legal, political and bureaucratic obstacles to military cooperation, making it more likely that they will be able to support each other in situations of crisis and conflict. They are also conducting more cross territorial exercises and engaging with each other's defence concepts. Moreover, due to the HNS agreement, Sweden and Finland are better placed than ever to render assistance to their NATO neighbours. Taken together, it is fair to say that a distinct Nordic strategic space is taking form.

The emergence of European defence cooperation, while still nascent, offers a range of tools to further substantiate cooperation between Nordic countries. As this paper has argued, the new European formats like PESCO, FNC, JEF and E12 offer a strategic opportunity to address joint defence concerns. More specifically, they allow states to seek convergence, synergies and benefits of scale in the fields of capability development and force generation. For the Nordics, NORDEFECO offers a readymade forum where some of these opportunities can be seized, and from which Nordic cooperation can be pushed further.

In such an endeavour, the Nordics will be forced to think harder about their institutional arrangements, including how they make use of scarce military resources across an expanding spectrum of frameworks, national and international commitments. One caveat to be noted is that, while the Nordic countries are usually in favour of mutual cooperation, they often prioritise potential bilateral gains in their quest to seek closer defence relations with major European powers. If cooperation is approached wisely, however, the Nordic countries may find productive means of advancing a joint agenda, even if this does imply that some traditional security policy taboos may have to be broken.

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