



Norwegian Institute  
of International  
Affairs

# Norwegians adapting to a changing world

Øyvind Svendsen and Åsmund Weltzien



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**Visiting address:** C.J. Hambros plass 2d  
**Address:** P.O. Box 7024 Dep.  
NO-0130 Oslo, Norway  
**Internet:** [www.nupi.no](http://www.nupi.no)  
**E-mail:** [post@nupi.no](mailto:post@nupi.no)  
**Fax:** [+ 47] 22 99 40 50  
**Tel:** [+ 47] 22 99 40 00

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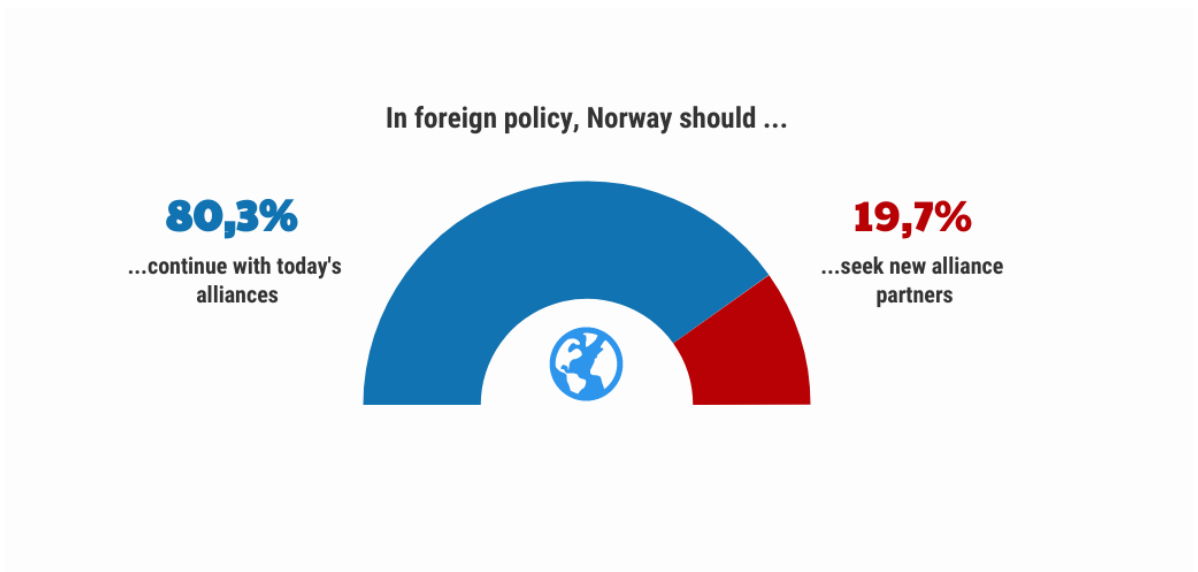
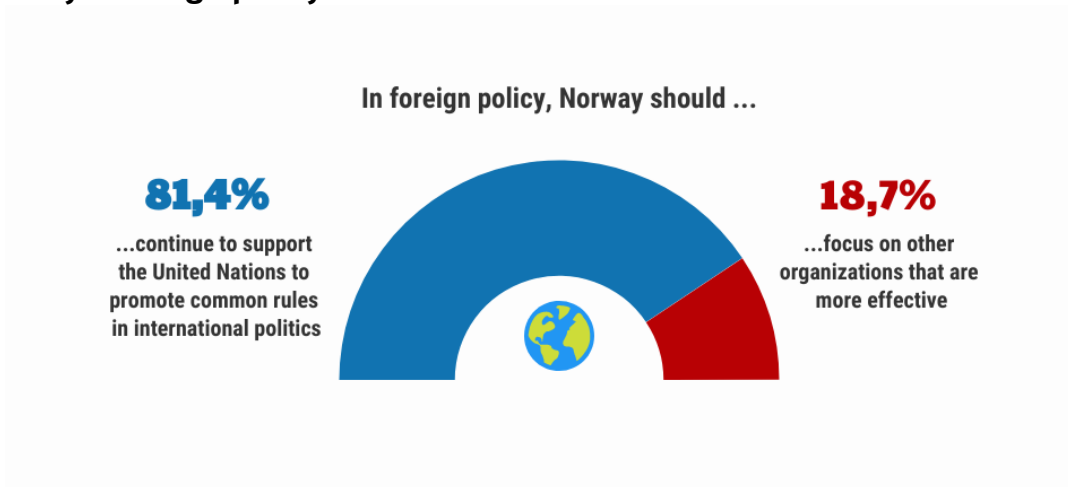
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# Norwegians' attitudes to foreign policy issues

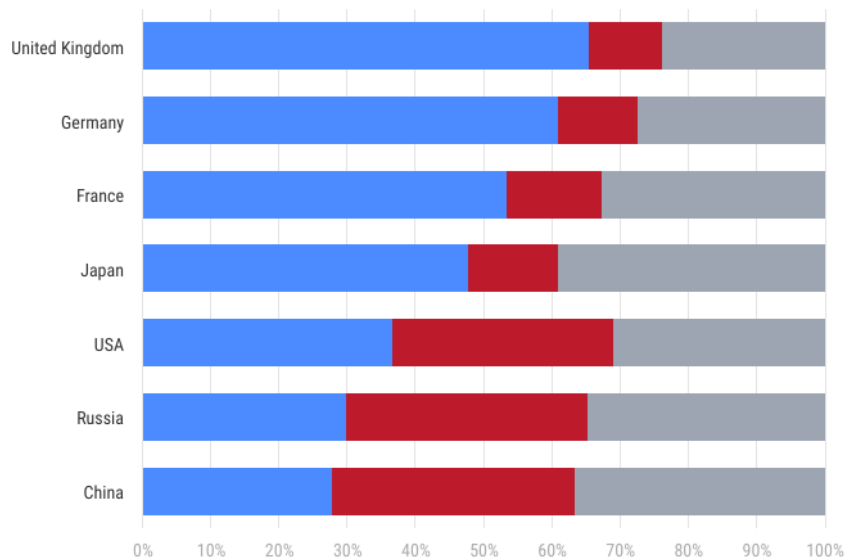
A Sentio Research Group representative inhabitants survey in Norway commissioned by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.

## Norway's foreign policy



## Norway's relation to other countries

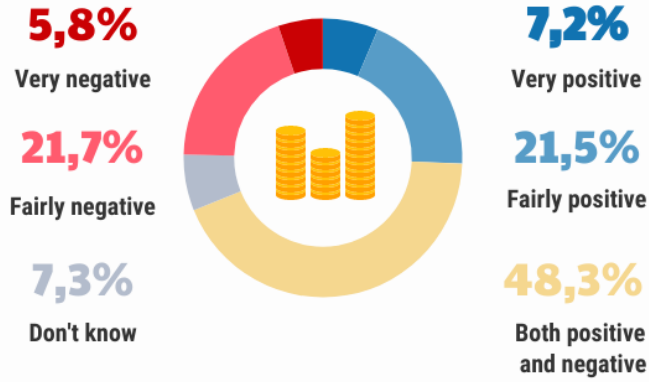
Should Norway cooperate **more** or **less** with these countries in the future? **Uncertain** is marked in gray.



When you consider Norway's relationship with Russia, what is, in your opinion, most important?

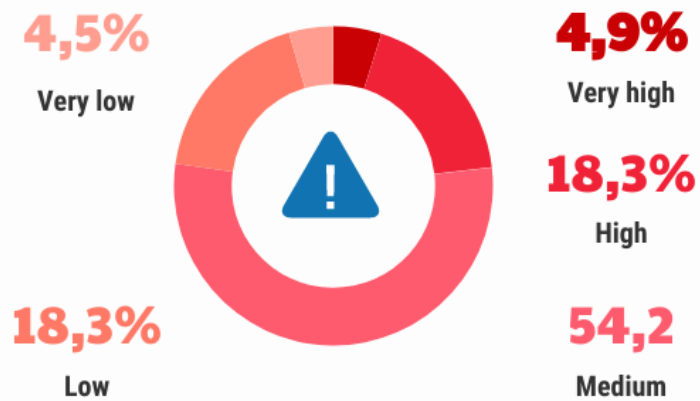


### What is your general attitude towards foreign investments in Norway?

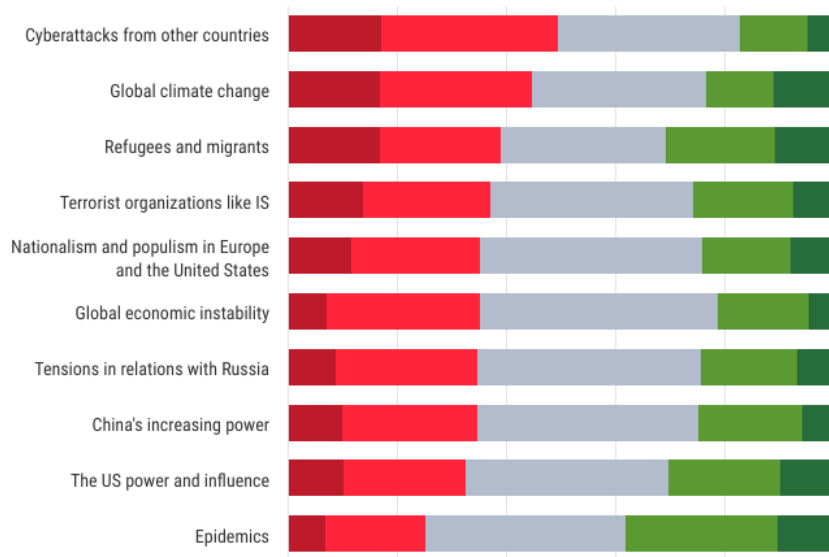


### Perceptions of threats and security policy

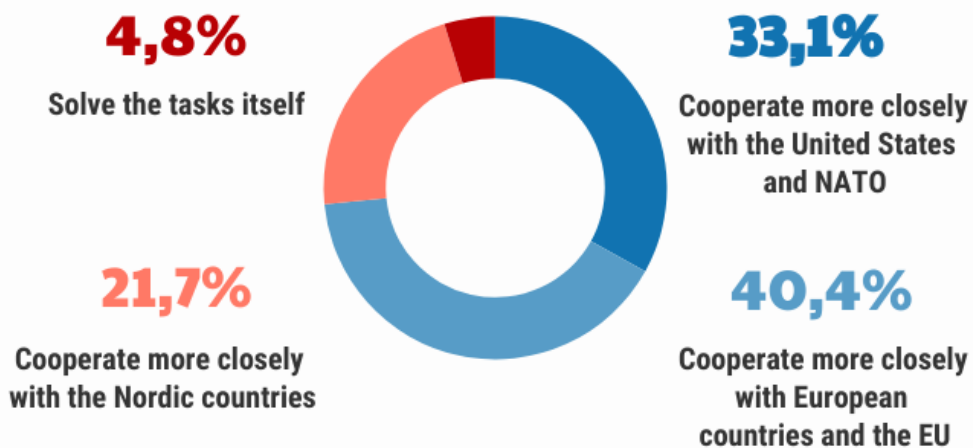
#### How do you perceive the level of security threats against Norway?



**How high is the threat from the following to Norway? From **very high** threat to **very low** threat.**

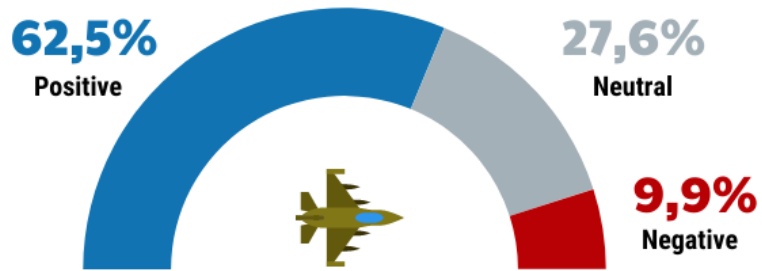


**In the future, what should Norway emphasize in its work on security policy threats?**

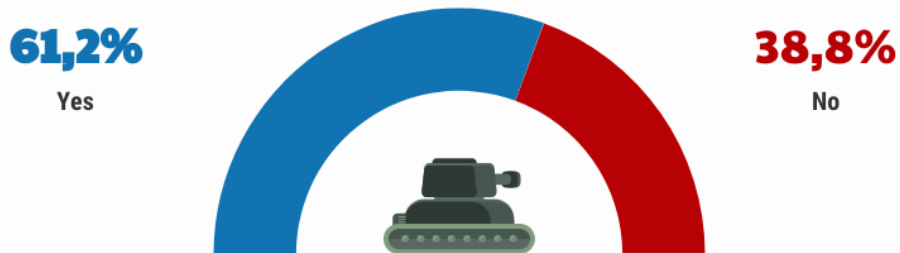




Do you look positively or negatively at NATO?

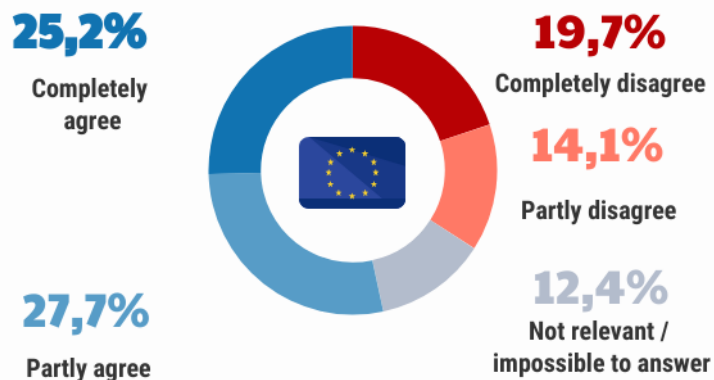


Should Norway work towards a NATO with greater independence from the United States, even if this means a big increase in defense budgets for the other member states?

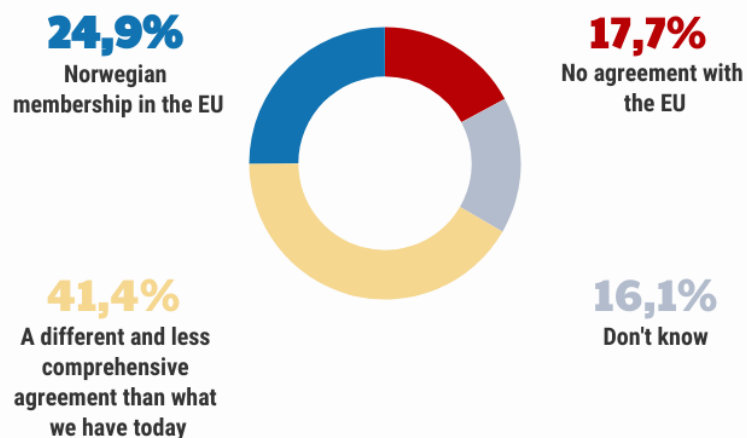


## Norway and Europe

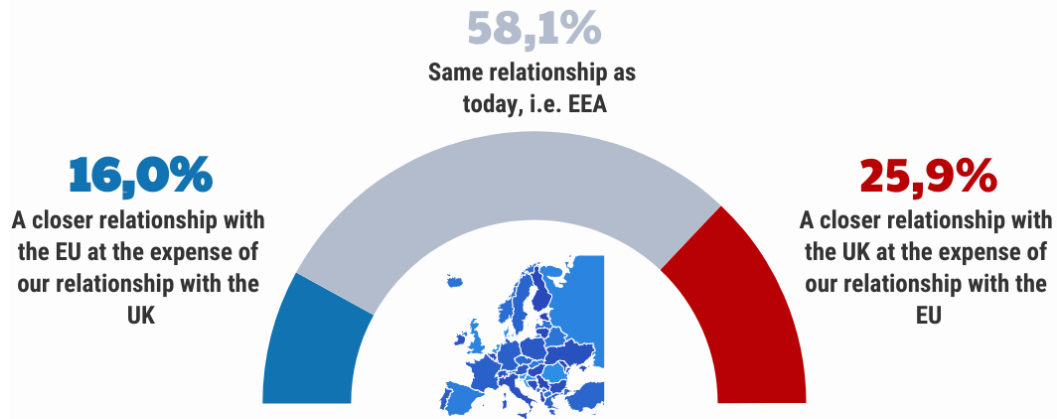
Norway's relationship with the EU is regulated through several agreements, such as the EEA Agreement and the Schengen Agreement. Should Norway cooperate more closely with the EU on security policy issues?



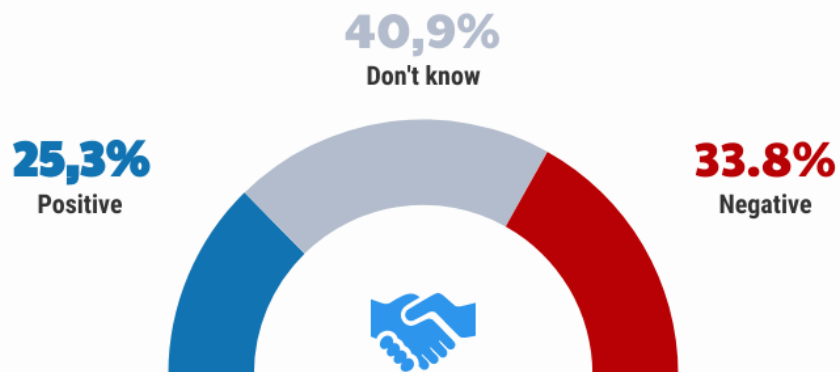
Should the EEA Agreement terminate, what do you think would be the best type of affiliation with the EU for Norway?



### What kind of relationship should Norway have with Europe after Brexit?



### Will Brexit have a positive or negative impact on cooperation in Europe?



## Norwegians' views of China

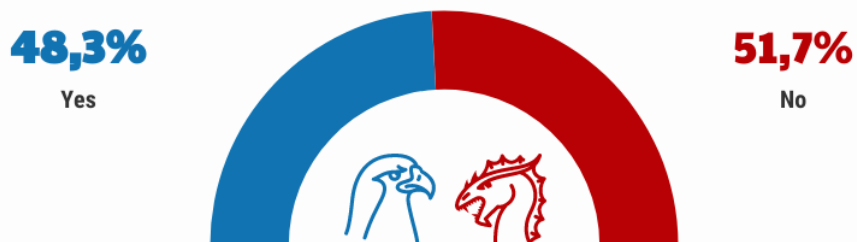
China's influence in the world is increasing. In your opinion, should we ...



Should Norway more strongly defend our own political attitudes in our relationship with China, even though this may come at the expense of our economic interests?



Should Norway and Europe follow the US policy with a tougher stance on China?



## Introduction

How should Norway organize its foreign policy in response to a changing international political context? Some of the core principles of the rules-based liberal international order are being challenged by states such as China and Russia.<sup>1</sup> The rapid rise of China especially, and the relative decline of the U.S. puts into question some of the established practices that states have based their foreign policies on for quite some time. Also, the transactionalist foreign policy pursued by the Trump administration, the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union and the general surge of anti-liberal political forces in the West, are examples of how the liberal international order is being challenged also from within.<sup>2</sup>

This report analyses foreign policy opinions in the Norwegian population in light of the above-mentioned context. The analysis is based on survey data from an opinion poll conducted by Sentio Research on behalf of NUPI between 20-25 February 2020. Respondents were sampled to be nationally representative based on age, gender and regional differentiation. The survey was conducted as an online panel survey and we asked questions about a range of topics in Norwegian foreign policy, all of which are presented in the report. Even though the survey was conducted before the global outbreak of COVID-19 hit Norway, we find that the results are still interesting as an exploration of Norwegians' opinions on Norway's foreign policy. How do Norwegians perceive of world politics today, how do they prefer to see Norway act on the world stage in response to new challenges and changing state dynamics? The rapid changes in international politics brings to the fore a range of dilemmas and priorities that all states championing the liberal international order must deal with. In Norway for instance, this was evident with the normalization agreement made with China following years of ice-cold relations after the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to Chinese human rights activist and regime critic Liu Xiaobo in 2010. This example illustrates the dilemma of the changing world order and how Norway, and its fishing industry particularly, sought to balance the need for access to the Chinese market with the liberal right to criticise the domestic political situation and human rights violations in China.<sup>3</sup>

These difficulties and dilemmas seem to be reflected in how the respondents consider different Norwegian foreign policy options. Based on our analysis of the survey data, we might argue that Norway is reluctantly stumbling into global change. On the one hand, Norwegians want to see their country wave the flag of the liberal international

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<sup>1</sup> Cooley A and Nexon D (2020) *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Ikenberry GJ (2018) The end of liberal international order? *International Affairs* 94(1): 7-23.

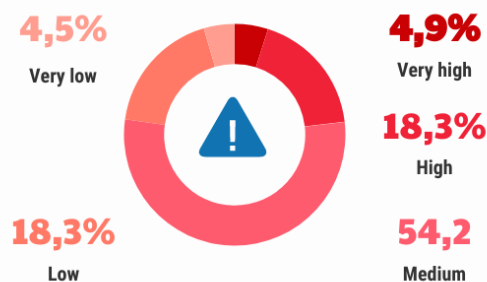
<sup>3</sup> See Bos L (2016) Norway-China Relations 'Unfrozen'. *The Diplomat*, 21 December 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/12/norway-china-relations-unfrozen/>.

order and defend the status quo from which the country has benefitted greatly. On the other hand, the realities of the major global changes are creating dilemmas that could make it difficult for a state like Norway to maneuver on the international political scene. This dilemma is expressed in the pragmatism that the respondents want to see Norway apply in its foreign policy. Naturally however, Norway has interests in the institutions that make up the core of the liberal international order, such as NATO, the UN and a well-organised global economy. Thus, the respondents' preference for defending the current international order could perhaps be interpreted more as an interest-based position than an expression of worry concerning emerging great power competition or a changing of the international order as such.

## Pragmatism towards great powers, but climate change considered most serious threat

Tensions are high in international politics with unprecedented global challenges unravelling at a time when increased cooperation between states seems difficult to achieve. However, our respondents expressed a sober view on the threats facing Norway. A little over 50 % of the respondents said they considered the threats against Norway to be of a medium severity. Less than 25 % said that Norway faces a high or very high level of threats. Medium assessments – or normal distribution – was the trend in the responses also when we asked about the severity of specific threats to Norway. ISIS, economic instability, migration, tensions with Russia, US power and influence, and nationalism and populism in Europe, were all assessed as medium threats on a 5-point scale ranging from a very low to a very high threat.<sup>4</sup>

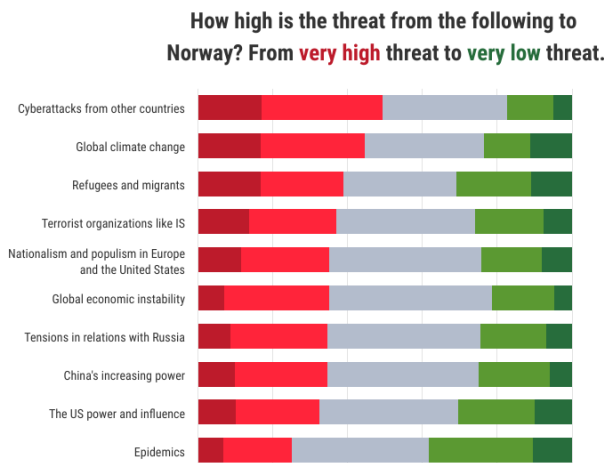
How do you perceive the level of security threats against Norway?



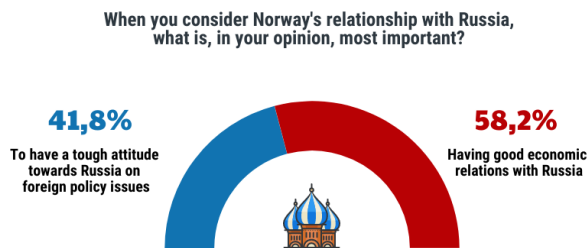
Furthermore, Norwegians appear optimistic in their consideration of traditional security threats. Less than 10 % of the respondents considered military conflict in their immediate area one of the most pressing security challenges. Terrorism, Europe's global influence, economics and unemployment were considered by only a few (less than 20 %) to be one of the most important threats facing Norway. Slightly more, around a quarter of the respondents, considered immigration, crime and increased cost of living as pressing security threats. These responses perhaps reflect the changing nature of foreign policy and international security, as at least the two latter are areas traditionally associated with justice and home affairs and not foreign policy per se. Relating to this, it is perhaps no surprise that around 50 % of the respondents considered cyber-attacks from other countries a high or very high security threat. We assume that in the Norwegian context – as in many other countries – this has strong affiliations to

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the only threat that had a slight tendency towards being considered a low threat was epidemics. The survey was conducted in February 2020, before the global outbreak of COVID-19.

neighbouring Russia. These challenges also reflect the difficulty in dealing with the changing international context as Norway has always sought to both be critical against Russia from within NATO and other Western institutions, and simultaneously preserving good neighbourly relations in the High North.



Asked whether being tough on Russia in foreign policy or preserving good economic relations with its neighbour to the east is most important for Norway, almost 60 % of the respondents opted for close economic ties over a tough line. Considered in light of the international political situation, this might be an expression of a certain pragmatism in facing global change. At the same time, this might be specific to Norway due to the close geographic proximity and historical relations between Russia and Norway. This balancing act has been central to the Norwegian approach to Russia and the Soviet Union for decades.<sup>5</sup>



One area stands out in the responses on threats to Norway, however. Almost 50 % of the respondents list climate change and the environment as one of the most

<sup>5</sup> Wilhelmsen J and Gjerde K (2018) Norway and Russia in the Arctic: New Cold War Contamination? *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 9: 382-487.



important threats currently facing Norway. Some 20 % expressed that climate change and the environment represented a low or a very low threat to Norway. We also asked some questions about how Norway should address challenges related to climate change and the environment. Interestingly, almost 65 % of the respondents found that Norway is a pioneer in climate policy, and 70 % expressed that Norway should have at least the same targets as the EU in this area. Only 15 % answered that Norway should cooperate with China on climate policy, whereas 85 % think Norway should approach climate policy in cooperation with its traditional alliance partners.

In sum, respondents expressed a fairly modest view on the threats facing Norway with most issue areas being considered as a medium threat. This perhaps stands in contrast with the consideration of the major changes unravelling in international politics. However, the complexity of contemporary security challenges was expressed in the responses, and cyber threats and climate change both exemplify that Norwegians are acutely aware of these changing dynamics. We might also argue that the balancing act of interests in relation to Russia and the opposition to cooperation with China on climate change illustrates that the population is fairly pragmatist and aligned with the Norwegian government when it comes to Russia, but that the population is more hesitant in its views on dealing with the rise of China on the world stage. We will explore this in the succeeding sections.

## Norwegians champion a multilateral order

Our survey data suggests that Norwegians are stark defenders of a liberal international order based on inter-state cooperation to solve global challenges. Norway is strongly embedded in the liberal international order and has been committed to its principles since the end of the second World War.<sup>6</sup> Hence, it is not surprising that a start majority of the respondents express an interest in defending the status quo. 80 % of the respondents answered that Norway should continue to pursue its foreign policy in existing alliances, while only 20 % answer that the country should seek new alliance partners. In fact, more than 60 % of the respondents expressed a positive attitude towards NATO and only 10 % a negative one. This was also reflected in views on collaboration with other European States: More than half of the respondents thought that Norway should cooperate more with France, Germany and the United Kingdom, and only a few opted for less cooperation with these countries, although between a quarter and a third of the respondents answered that they were unsure.

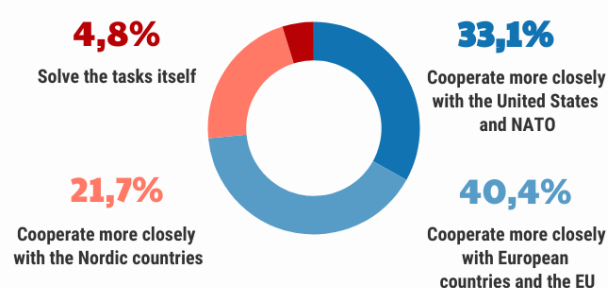


Interestingly, only 37 % of our respondents want Norway to cooperate *more* with the United States. This is a striking figure, when we see that 32 % of the respondents want Norway to cooperate *less* with the United States. This could be interpreted as reflective of the changing balance in world politics, but also as an expression of dissatisfaction with the Presidency of Donald Trump. The long-term validity of this finding is therefore uncertain, and positions may well change if Trump does not secure a re-election this fall. Still, when asked about whether European states should increase their defence budgets in order to make NATO less dependent on the United States, 61 % answered yes and 39 % no. When asked what kind of cooperation Norway should pursue in the future, 33 % responded that Norway should cooperate more closely with NATO and the United States, 22 % preferred closer Nordic cooperation, while the largest share, 40 %, thought Norway should seek more cooperation more with European allies and the

<sup>6</sup> Reinert T (2018) Norway champions the liberal international order. *Brookings*, 17 January 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/01/17/norway-champions-the-liberal-international-order/>.

EU. It is too early to say whether these answers are representative of general or lasting shift in opinion, but our findings do indicate that we see an increasing trend in the Norwegian population that European states should take more responsibility in foreign, security and defence policy, which in effect means becoming less dependent on US support<sup>7</sup>.

In the future, what should Norway emphasize in its work on security policy threats?

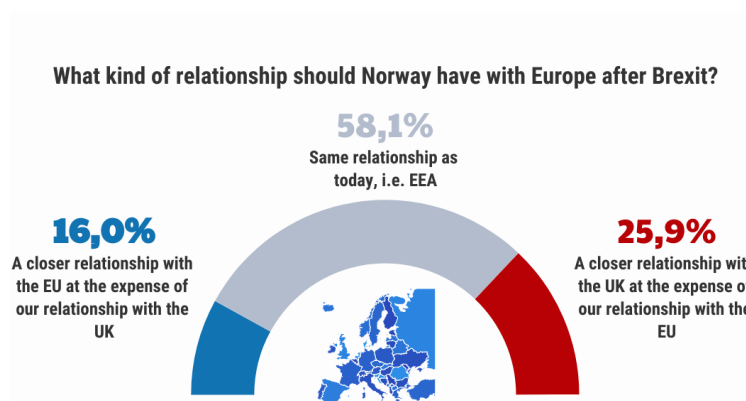


Other long-standing and important principles in Norwegian foreign policy are still very much present in the survey data. 81 % of the respondents found that Norway should continue to support the UN in promoting a rules-based international order. Norway was in the running for a seat on the UN Security Council when the survey was conducted, and when reviewing the approximately 2000 articles in which Norwegian media have covered the campaign over the last year, it becomes clear that many are critical of the high costs and limited influence such a candidacy may offer. Still, the support for using the UN as a vehicle for a rules-based order is high. The respondents also reflected some of the traditional small state issues in international politics. The respondents were split near the middle on whether Norway should pursue its own interest despite protests from its allies or be considerate towards allies by making compromises.

Despite the strong support for multilateralism, the ambivalent view in the Norwegian population on the EU persists. Whereas more than 60 % of our respondents agreed or partially agreed that Norway should cooperate more with the EU on security policy, the overall view on the relationship with the EU comes across as more ambivalent. Norway has rejected membership in the EU on two occasions – in 1972 and 1994 – and has since the latter been tied to the EU through the EEA agreement. Despite consistently strong support for the current set-up, only 44 % answered that they would vote for the EEA agreement if a referendum on it was to be held now, with some 24 % stating that they were uncertain. Furthermore, 41 % said that if the EEA agreement were to cease to exist, Norway should pursue a less comprehensive agreement, and 18 %

<sup>7</sup> Holm, M (2019) *Liberale verdifelleskap og selvbilder i praksis: Hvordan Norge gikk til krig og hva vi kan lære, Libya: Krigens uutholdelige letthet*, Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 54-77.

would prefer a no-deal scenario. Only 25 % would vote for full membership in the EU in such a scenario. This is testament to fairly consistent attitudes towards the EEA agreement, but there might be a slight indication of some decline in support for it when compared to previous surveys.<sup>8</sup> Despite this, 58 % of the respondents answered that in the context of Brexit, Norway should continue its current relationship with the EU, i.e. through the EEA agreement. Interestingly, only 16 % would see closer cooperation with the EU at the cost of cooperation with the United Kingdom, while 26 % wanted Norway to cooperate more with the United Kingdom if a choice had to be made. Here the Norwegian public and the Norwegian government are out of sync, as the Government has stated that if forced to choose, the relationship with the EU will take precedence over the relationship with the UK. 25 % said Brexit would have a positive impact on European cooperation, 34% said it would be negative but here uncertainty reigned: 41 % said they didn't know. The ambivalence in this is related to how many respondents defend the status quo in light of Brexit but would also vote for a less comprehensive relationship with the EU in a thought scenario where the EEA agreement ceased to exist. This ambivalence is not new in survey data on Norwegian opinions on European cooperation. A fair interpretation of the data from the survey, however, is that in light of Brexit, Norwegians want to cooperate with European states on both sides of the English Channel, and thus want to see the negative impact of Brexit be limited when it comes to foreign policy cooperation<sup>9</sup>.



All in all, we find that the Norwegian population has a preference for preserving and nurturing the country's existing alliances and alliance partners. Expectedly, Russia and China are the only countries in our survey that a majority of the respondents wanted to cooperate less with.

<sup>8</sup> Sverdrup U, Svendsen Ø and Weltzien Å (2019) Holdninger til EØS-avtalen etter 25 år: Stor oppslutning, men liten kunnskap. *Internasjonal Politikk* 77(4): 366-377.

<sup>9</sup> Haugevik, K. M. (2017) Hva betyr brexit for utenforlandet Norge?, *Internasjonal Politikk* 75(2), 152-166.

## China considered an increasing concern

The example in the introduction about the Nobel Peace Prize to dissident Liu Xiaobo, the angry Chinese response and the process towards normalisation of the Sino-Norwegian relations illustrates that Chinese power and influence in world politics is a concern for a small state like Norway. Norwegian authorities have taken a fairly cautious approach to China, which has been subject to debate in Norway. Analysing our survey data, there seems to be quite a bit of scepticism toward the rising influence of China in international politics among the Norwegian population, at least when compared to views on traditional alliance partners.

64 % of the respondents answered that China's increasing influence in international politics is negative against 36 % who found it positive. The same applies to the growing Chinese economy: 36 % thought that Norway should welcome Chinese foreign investments in Norway, whereas 64 % expressed Norway should protect its economy from Chinese investments. 57 % found that China's influence in international fora is negative against 43 % who thought the opposite. The views on China were not limited to economics only, however. 74 % of the respondents said that Norway should defend its political beliefs in relation to China, even though it could hurt the country's economic interests. As such, a significant number of respondents expressed an interest in seeing Norway promote and defend liberal principles in relation to China, also if it were to bear economic costs<sup>10</sup>.

Should Norway more strongly defend our own political attitudes in our relationship with China, even though this may come at the expense of our economic interests?

**73,9%**

Yes



**26,1%**

No

China is also the country in our survey that our respondents have the least interest in seeing Norway cooperate more with in the future. 28 % wanted Norway to cooperate more with China, 35 % wanted to cooperate less and 37 % were uncertain. There are nuances in Norwegians' views on China, however. Concerning the shifting balance between the United States and China, it is interesting to note that despite the

<sup>10</sup> Andersen, M. S. og Sverdrup, U. (2020) Holdninger til utenlandske investeringer fra Kina i de nordiske land, *Internasjonal Politikk* 78.

sceptical views on cooperation with China, our respondents were split down the middle when it came to the US approach to China. Asked whether Norway and Europe should follow the tough US attitude towards China, 52 % answered no. Similarly, when asked if China's increasing power represents a threat to Norway, there are small variances when compared with the same question for other kinds of threats, including increased tensions with Russia. The scepticism against these countries is perhaps not surprising, whereas an increasing scepticism towards the United States. might be. In relation to China, Russia and the United States in the future, the question is how Norway will relate to great power competition if the general opinion in Norway is becoming slightly more Europeanist, downplaying the transatlantic orientation. However, for the time being, this shift in opinion is fairly minor and important variables such as who is President in the United States, is likely to influence views.

## Conclusion

International politics is changing, and this will have consequences for the US-led liberal international order, of which Norway has been a staunch supporter. This report finds that Norwegians broadly are interested in preserving the status quo where multilateralism and global cooperation characterise world politics. Yet, Norwegians are quite sceptical about cooperating closely with Russia and China, and we see an increasing scepticism also towards the United States. This scepticism is minor in comparison to the former, but we do see a slight Europeanist trend in opinion, where there is broad support for cooperation with European partners Germany, France and the United Kingdom. Also on Brexit, we find that Norwegians want cooperation in foreign policy not to be hampered by the troubled British exit from the EU.

There is also an emerging pragmatism in our survey data on Norwegian foreign policy when we analyse it in light of the changing international order. We see this especially in how support for US policies has shifted somewhat, and that there seems to be a growing interest in seeing Norway and Europe take more responsibility for itself in foreign policy. In general, however, Norwegians are only moderately concerned about the threats facing Norway. Climate change and cyber-attacks are considered the most serious threats to Norway, illustrating that this time around perhaps, shifting balance of power and increased great power competition will look different than it has in the past. At least according to the Norwegian population.



## Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

Established in 1959, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs [NUPI] is a leading independent research institute on international politics and areas of relevance to Norwegian foreign policy. Formally under the Ministry of Education and Research, NUPI nevertheless operates as an independent, non-political instance in all its professional activities. Research undertaken at NUPI ranges from short-term applied research to more long-term basic research.



**Øyvind Svendsen** is Research Fellow and member of the research group for global order and diplomacy at NUPI. He is also a PhD fellow at the University of Copenhagen and he has a master's degree in International Relations Theory from the London School of Economics.

**Åsmund Weltzien** is Head of Communications at NUPI. He has a Cand.polit. degree in social anthropology from the University of Oslo.

### NUPI

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs  
C.J. Hambros plass 2D  
PB 7024 St. Olavs Plass, 0130 OSLO  
[www.nupi.no](http://www.nupi.no) | [post@nupi.no](mailto:post@nupi.no)

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