



From partners to allies: Finland and Norway in a new era

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SUMMARY

Finland's decision to apply for NATO membership in 2022 altered Nordic security and defence dynamics. It also reset Finland's relations with its neighbouring states – including longstanding NATO member Norway. In this policy brief, we discuss the evolving relationship between Finland and Norway. Despite their history as peaceful neighbours, divergent security arrangements generated political distance between Finland and Norway during the Cold War. After the end of the Cold War, their security policies gradually became more aligned, as evident also in heightened Nordic security cooperation, Finnish and Swedish participation in NATO exercises, and, more recently, the signing of a series of defence agreements with each other as well as with Sweden and the United

States. Following Finland's NATO accession, both states have anticipated a deepening of the Finnish-Norwegian alliance. We identify some areas where Finland and Norway may benefit from collaborating and exchanging perspectives in the coming years, including in the management of shared institutional frameworks, security concerns in the Arctic and Baltic Sea regions, the future relationship with the United States, and a more antagonistic Russia.

Finland's decision to apply for NATO membership in 2022 altered Nordic security and defence dynamics. It also reset Finland's relations with its neighbouring states – including longstanding NATO member Norway. While Finland and Norway have enjoyed peaceful neighbourly relations for more than a century, different security arrangements created political distance – at times also friction – between them during the Cold War. From the early 1990s onwards, the two states gradually became partners also in the foreign and security domain. With Finland's entry into NATO, the two states have for the first time become formal defence allies. Both states are now committed to – and sheltered by – Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. As also Sweden prepares to join NATO, Nordic solidarity commitments have effectively been extended beyond peacetime.

This policy brief traces historical developments in the Finnish-Norwegian bilateral relationship, analyzing the two states' changing perceptions of one another as neighbours, partners, and allies. We argue that while Finnish-Norwegian cooperation accelerated from the mid-1990s onwards, Finland's NATO application has paved the way not only for a more mature relationship, but also for reinvigorated narratives about Finnish-Norwegian 'likemindedness'. Differences in Finnish and Norwegian security outlooks remain and should not be underestimated. However, with formal boundaries removed, the two states increasingly seem to find accord at the procedural level and in ways of doing things.

2 Peaceful but distanced neighbours

Finland and Norway are neighbouring states, with a 736 km long land border. Both are relatively young as sovereign states – Norway separated from Sweden in 1905 and Finland gained its independence from Russia in 1917. For both states, their foreign and security policy orientation has been shaped by their geopolitical location in the northernmost part of Europe, and as Nordic and Arctic states bordering Russia.

Diplomatic ties were established in 1918, and historians generally describe the early bilateral relationship as amicable, apart from some friction related to Finnish national tribal activism in Northern Norway (dubbed 'the Finnish danger' in parts of Norwegian domestic discourse).¹ When the Soviet Union attacked Finland in 1939, prompting the Winter War, 700 Norwegian volunteers fought on Finland's side. However, Stalin's decision to ally with the Western powers against Nazi Germany, put Finland and Norway on different sides of the Second World War. In 1941, diplomatic relations were put on hold. While they were resumed after the war, Finland's signing of the *Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance* with the Soviet Union in 1948 and Norway's subsequent entry into NATO, created political distance between the two neighbours through the Cold War. Whereas Norway sought to strengthen its bilateral ties with the United States, the *Friendship Treaty* restricted Finland's room for foreign and security policy maneuver, prohibiting it from joining organizations considered hostile

to the Soviet Union. Nordic cooperation was no exception. The 1962 *Helsinki Treaty*, the legal framework for formal Nordic intergovernmental cooperation, limited cooperation to "legal, cultural, social and economic fields", as well as transport, communications, and environmental protection. For Finland, Nordic cooperation nonetheless came to serve as a 'window to the West', allowing Nordic community building without upsetting the delicate 'Nordic balance'.²

During the Cold War, Finnish decision makers often deemed relations with Norway challenging. President Urho Kekkonen's (1956-1982) lukewarmness towards Norway's NATO membership is well-known. In 1977, a diplomatic scandal arose, when a cartoon in the Norwegian newspaper *Nationen* portrayed Kekkonen as Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev's hunting dog. The president was offended, and Norwegian Prime Minister Odvar Nordli had to make a secret trip to Helsinki to apologize in person.³ Also Kekkonen's successor, Mauno Koivisto (1982-1994), described the relationship with Norway as one of Finland's most sensitive and difficult. The core issue was Helsinki's concern that allied presence in Norway would put increased Soviet pressure on Finland – a concern which was rooted in a wider Finnish recognition that the Nordic states' security doctrines were interdependent.⁴ By a similar token, Oslo expressed concern about certain Finnish initiatives, which were seen to be directed at limiting US and NATO activities in Norway. While the thesis about 'the Nordic balance' was probably oversimplified,⁵ this line of reasoning had profound impact on Norwegian foreign and security policy during this period. Towards the end of the Cold War, increasing interface – including in Nordic institutional formats – gave Finland and Norway a better understanding of one another's security concerns and approaches. A senior Norwegian diplomat recalls how he, as a young diplomat in the mid-1980s, was instructed to "get up and defend the Finns", should someone in NATO or other forums criticize Finnish security policy or use the negatively loaded term 'Finlandization'.⁶

Towards more alignment

With the end of the Cold War and dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Nordic states gradually broadened their security collaboration – in Nordic contexts, but also bilaterally and in multilateral settings such as the United Nations. In 1994, Finland and Sweden joined NATO's *Partnership for Peace* program, and the year after, both states became full members of the EU. While the Nordic countries maintained different formal affiliations with NATO and the EU, Nordic cooperation gradually extended to the security domain. During this period, Finland began to portray Norwegian foreign and security policy in more positive terms, and Norwegian interest in and attentiveness towards Finnish politics and society increased. Finland's investments in education, research, innovation, and national defence were, for example, often cited in the Norwegian political and media discourse.

In 2008, against the backdrop of the international financial crisis and the Russian-Georgian war, the Nordic foreign ministers tasked a group led by Norwegian diplomat and

ex-Foreign Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg with exploring possibilities for enhanced Nordic foreign, security and defence collaboration. The subsequent report identified thirteen ways in which this could be done. In 2009, NORDEFECO was established, formalizing Nordic defence cooperation to “strengthen the participants’ national defence”. During this period, Nordic cooperation rose on the Finnish security and defence agenda, bringing more depth and substance also to Finnish-Norwegian collaboration. In 2012, Finland’s President Sauli Niinistö observed that Finland and Norway were “welded together by sheer geography”, sharing a relationship beyond the traditional diplomatic jargon of “good and well-functioning relations”.⁷ Following Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Finland and Sweden increased their military training and exercise with the other Nordic states, including as part of the Norwegian-hosted NATO exercise ‘Trident Juncture’ in 2018. From 2016 and onwards, Finland, Sweden, and Norway signed a series of bi- and trilateral defence agreements, with each other as well as with the United States. The Finnish government’s 2021 defence report identified Norway as one of three key bilateral partners for Finland – alongside the United States and Sweden – stating that “[d]efence cooperation with Norway will be increased and deepened, both bilaterally and together with Sweden”.⁸

New allies – new opportunities

Already before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, researchers observed that the Nordic states’ security and defence policies had become much more aligned. Offering analogous assessments of the security environment, the five states increasingly took part in the same security initiatives, signaled the same partner preferences, and expressed similar levels of commitment to Nordic security cooperation.⁹ Still, Finland’s and Sweden’s decisions to apply for NATO membership altered not only their individual foreign, security and defence policies, but also marked the beginning of a new era for security relations in the Nordic region. For Finland and Norway, a new potential for security collaboration had been unlocked.

In 2023, following Finland’s entry into NATO, Finnish policymakers expressed gratitude for Norway’s support in the accession process, highlighting the role played by Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre’s personally.¹⁰ During his visit to Oslo in October 2022, Niinistö said anticipated that the relationship’s importance would “only grow” with Finland inside NATO. By a similar token, Støre observed that “Norway has no better friend, I have no better interlocutor, than Finland and President Niinistö”.¹¹

According to inside observers, the bilateral relationship has “never been closer and better”. Upcoming Finnish white papers on, respectively, foreign and security policy and defence policy are expected to devote significant attention to Norway. Norway’s experience as a Nordic NATO member has been an important reference point for Finnish evolving approach to and policy within the alliance. In the fall of 2023, a public seminar in Helsinki explored how Norway has balanced its role as a NATO ally, with a principled and

value-based approach to international affairs.¹² Inside observers have described Norway as a “model and tutor” for Finland in NATO,¹³ even if Finland will not necessarily copy Norwegian policies. Unlike Norway, Finland has for example decided not to have any self-imposed restrictions on allied presence in the North.

Finnish-Norwegian connection points

There are several areas where Finland and Norway may benefit from comparing notes and exchanging viewpoints in the coming year. One such topic relates to the maintenance of relations with the United States, especially if Donald Trump or someone sharing his international outlook enters the White House after the 2024 presidential election. A second topic concerns the future dynamics between Russia and the West, where both Finland and Norway have considerable experience with peaceful, pragmatic management of everyday relations with Russia. Questions about the management of the two states’ land borders to Russia form a key part of this, as exemplified in recent domestic debates about how to respond to migrant flows via Russia suddenly appearing at the Finnish and Norwegian borders. As noted by Niinistö during his Oslo visit in 2022: “Russia will not disappear. It will continue to be our neighbour, even if there is no turn for the better. Finland can never afford to ignore it. NATO membership will not change that reality. In this, too, I think there is a lot Finland and Norway can learn from each other”.¹⁴

A third point relates to how – with the notable exception of the EU – Finland and Norway operate within the same institutional frameworks. Norway’s role as a prospective mentor for Finland in NATO has been mentioned. Similarly, Finland, along with Denmark and Sweden, has served as a key information and access point for Norway in relations with the EU. With the rules-based international order under pressure, there is a potential for Finland and Norway to cooperate more closely – with each other and the other Nordic states – in the context of other multilateral forums and platforms. Norwegian lessons learned will for example be highly relevant in Finland’s upcoming bid for a seat at the UN Security Council (2029-2030), as part of the prearranged Nordic rotation system.

Fourthly, Finland and Norway will have a shared interest in highlighting the security connection between the Arctic and Baltic Sea areas. With both states inside NATO, new possibilities have emerged for cooperation on capability development – including procurement and acquisitions – and in operational terms where deterrence on NATO’s Northern Flank is now supported by a potent and interoperable fighter plane structure. Furthermore, new investments in infrastructure and military mobility in Northern Fennoscandia would be vital enablers of more intense allied operational cooperation. Finally, while Finland is keen to learn from Norway’s NATO experience, the organization of Finland’s national defence and total defence concept will serve as important models and reference points as Norwegian security and defence structures adapt to a new security context.¹⁵

Endnotes

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- ¹³ Roundtable discussion, Oslo, March 2023.
- ¹⁴ Niinistö, S. (2022). Keynote speech at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Oslo, 10 October.
- ¹⁵ See e.g., NOU (2023: 14). Forsvarskommisjonen av 2021. Forsvar for fred og frihet.

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