

The defence of northern Europe: new opportunities, significant challenges

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NATO's Vilnius summit in July 2023 marked a turning-point in northern European security: Finland participated as a full NATO member for the first time, while Turkey and Sweden resolved major hurdles impeding Sweden's membership. For the first time, the Nordics will be united in a military alliance encompassing not only northern Europe but also the broader transatlantic region. The accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO will foster deep Nordic defence integration and fortify northern European security. Yet several obstacles must be overcome before this shift becomes a reality. NATO enlargement needs to be operationalized, meaning that substantial work remains to be done to implement the alliance's collective defence ambitions. Equally important, after years of neglect the Nordic countries have a long journey ahead to rebuild their high-end defences and invest in preparations for allied assistance. Over time these measures, in combination with more extensive US and British engagement in the region, can shift the strategic balance in favour of NATO, from the Baltic Sea to the High North.

This article aims to unpick the opportunities and challenges in northern European security. Beginning with a brief historical overview of the Swedish and Finnish defence relationships with NATO and their Nordic neighbours, we then examine the significant revisions that are under way in NATO's defence plans, force model and command structure. Subsequently, we scrutinize the Nordic defence buildup and integration, highlighting five potential areas for enhanced cooperation. Finally, we explore the crucial roles played by the United States and the United Kingdom in bolstering credible deterrence and defence in the region. Our analysis is based on open-source data and insights gained from numerous conversations with staff and military personnel from NATO and the Nordic countries, and other experts.

Nordic security preceding the 2023 turning-point

NATO was born in response to the expansionism of Joseph Stalin, with 1949 marking a watershed moment in the security of Norway, Denmark and Iceland,

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which were among the alliance's twelve founding members. Similarly, Russian aggression in 2022 unleashed a fundamental shift in the security orientation of Finland and Sweden, making both countries apply for NATO membership less than three months after Russia initiated its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

However, the decades-long pattern established in the post-Second World War era first began to unravel in 1992, when Finland—following a clear strategic compass—seized the opportunity to end the Finno-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance. Three years later, Finland and Sweden joined the EU. Since then, both have entered into deep defence cooperation with the West, particularly in the wake of Russian aggression in 2014. This has resulted in a series of affiliations and operational arrangements with both the US and UK. Moreover, in 2014 NATO designated Finland and Sweden as eligible candidates for Enhanced Opportunities Partnership and entered into host nation support agreements that, pending national decisions, would enable support to be provided during a crisis.

From the 1990s there was also a surge in Nordic defence cooperation, primarily in alignment with international operations. This gained further momentum in 2007–2008, when defence chiefs from Norway, Sweden and Finland proposed extensive joint capacity-building with the promise of significant economic benefits. Despite limited success, the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO) was established in 2009 as a framework to maximize the benefits of Nordic defence collaboration. After 2014, the focus shifted to preparations for joint defence operations,¹ with Finnish and Swedish forces participating in all major regional exercises, including the 2018 NATO Trident Juncture Exercise.² While Finnish and Swedish membership of NATO was not considered especially likely at that time,³ prudence dictated that Nordic countries should make preparations for joint defence during crisis or wartime. This duly took form in the 2018 joint vision of Nordic defence cooperation to 2025. In the political guidance document, all five Nordic countries agreed to enhance their 'defence capability and cooperation in peace, crisis and conflict'.⁴ By 2018 the functional ties binding Finland and Sweden to the western bloc had become so extensive that the relationship had taken on the characteristics of a semi-alliance, albeit lacking a guarantee of assistance. Going forward, these two states' membership of NATO will bring Finland and Sweden under the umbrella of article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and, in due course, will contribute to altering the strategic balance in northern Europe. Nevertheless, the necessary framework is not yet complete.

¹ Håkon Lunde Saxi, 'The rise, fall and resurgence of Nordic defence cooperation', *International Affairs* 95: 3, 2019, pp. 659–80, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz049>.

² NATO, 'Trident Juncture 2018', <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/157833.htm>; Thomas Nilsen, 'Northern Sweden and Finland play key role as NATO kicks off Trident Juncture', *Barents Observer*, 23 Oct. 2018, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2018/10/nato>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 12 Jan. 2024.)

³ Ann-Sofie Dahl, 'Sweden and Finland: to be or not to be NATO members', in Karsten Friis, ed., *NATO and collective defence in the 21st century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 77–85.

⁴ Nordic Defence Cooperation, 'Nordic Defence Cooperation vision 2025', 13 Nov. 2018, <https://www.nordefco.org/Files/nordefco-vision-2025-signed.pdf>, p. 1.

Rebuilding NATO's collective defence: plans, forces and command structure

While the collective defence guarantee enshrined in article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty⁵ is crucial to the security of member states, what has made the alliance unique historically is its extensive integrated defence in peacetime. Following years of crisis operations out of area, however, the collective defence construct is yet to be fully rebuilt; doing so requires the development of defence plans, forces and command structures.

Defence plans

In this respect, the 2014 NATO Wales summit represented a watershed moment for the alliance. NATO members agreed at the summit to increase defence spending, revise the role of the NATO Response Force (NRF) and develop regional defence plans for the whole of Europe, which the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) was entrusted with drafting. This led to the formulation of five regional Graduated Response Plans. The plan dedicated to the northern region, which was based on an existing contingency plan, included Norway, Iceland and the northernmost part of the North Atlantic. It was approved in 2017 and revised three years later. These new plans were considerably more robust than those which had preceded them, since they were synchronized with national plans and could draw reinforcements from the NRF and its Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, created after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. At this stage, however, the NATO force pool was limited, meaning that the northern region could not rely on being prioritized during a crisis.⁶

The next step materialized from 2020, when NATO approved the Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA), which binds three new regional plans into a theatre-wide approach tailored to deal with NATO's two principal threats—Russia, and terrorism in its broadest sense.⁷ The DDA family of plans includes five functional and three regional headquarters and plans.⁸ This step represents a significant elevation of the northern region, which has evolved into a broader north-western region stretching from North America and Greenland to Iceland, Britain and Norway, as well as the northern waters. Swedish and Finnish NATO membership further amplifies the significance of the north-western region. As such, it is crucial that both countries be incorporated into NATO's plans as soon as possible, thereby underscoring the alliance's slogan of defending 'every inch of its territory'. Both countries are well prepared to join the alliance, having for many years actively participated in operations out of area, engaged in

⁵ NATO, 'The North Atlantic Treaty', 4 April 1949, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm, art. 5.

⁶ Rolf Tamnes, 'The significance of the North Atlantic and the Norwegian contribution', in John Andreas Olsen, ed., *NATO and the North Atlantic: revitalising collective defence*, Whitehall Paper 87 (London: RUSI, 2017), pp. 8–31.

⁷ Stephen R. Covington, 'NATO's concept for deterrence and defence of the Euro-Atlantic area (DDA)', Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, 2 Aug. 2023, <https://www.belfer-center.org/publication/natos-concept-deterrence-and-defence-euro-atlantic-area-dda>.

⁸ NATO, 'Military command structure', https://shape.nato.int/military_command_structure.

joint exercises and training, held representation in allied staffs, and contributed to NATO's science and technology organization. However, there is a substantial task at hand to align Swedish and Finnish national planning structures with the intricate NATO planning cycles and to train a significant number of staff officers for service in NATO staffs. This process will inevitably take some time.

Defence forces

The defence plans cannot, however, be viewed in isolation from defence forces. Admiral Rob Bauer, the chair of NATO's Military Committee, put it in September 2023 as follows:

The plans that Allies agreed in Vilnius will impact the development of all our armed forces for decades to come. We are taking bold steps to further strengthen our deterrence and defence posture. The centrepiece of all this are [*sic*] the DDA family of plans. This includes the Regional Plans, which are geographically specific plans that describe how we will defend key and relevant places within our Alliance. The Regional Plans are underpinned by objective, threat-based Force Structure Requirements, which detail precisely which assets or capabilities are required in a crisis or conflict scenario.⁹

As Bauer indicates, dedicating a clearly defined number of forces to each of the plans will make a huge difference. With its New Force Model (NFM), NATO plans to have 100,000 troops available within 10 days (tier 1), 200,000 troops within 30 days (tier 2) and 500,000 troops within 180 days (tier 3).¹⁰ The goals are tremendously ambitious. To succeed, member states will not only have to dedicate a greater share of their current forces to NATO, but they will also need to eventually enlarge their force structures.

The forthcoming contributions by Finland and Sweden to NATO's force pools will therefore be important, particularly for local and regionally deployable forces. Both countries possess substantial ground forces, while their air power capabilities will increase significantly over the coming years, making them valuable assets for joint and combined operations in the region. The two states also have invaluable contributions to make in the maritime domain. Whereas defence against invasion was the overriding naval objective during the Cold War, countries around the Baltic and North Sea must now take part in securing economic and defence interests during times of both peace and war. This will involve protecting energy infrastructure and supplies, safeguarding lines of communication at sea, denying Russia freedom of manoeuvre, maintaining sea control and taking part in blue-water operations outside the Baltic and North Sea. Currently, however, there are major shortcomings in capacity. The German Navy's programmes for procuring more capable submarines, frigates and patrol

⁹ Government of Norway, 'Admiral Rob Bauer's opening remarks at the NATO Military Committee Conference 2023 in Oslo', 16 Sept. 2023, <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/grams-speech-at-the-nato-military-committee-conference-2023/id2994317>.

¹⁰ Sven Biscop, 'The New Force Model: NATO's European army?', *Egmont Policy Brief* 285, 2022, https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2022/09/Sven-Biscop_PolicyBrief285_vFinal.pdf.

aircraft suggest that it will be the key naval player in littoral or brown waters, and will eventually take a more active part in allied blue-water operations. Sweden is also poised to strengthen its navy, including enhancing its ability to operate as part of NATO's maritime fleets.¹¹

Command structure

Lastly, re-establishing a tailored command structure is essential to the reconstruction of collective defence. By 2012, NATO had streamlined the organization to three functional commands and two joint force commands (JFCs) headquartered in Brunssum (Netherlands) and Naples (Italy), none of which held geographic responsibility. This changed over the following years. In 2018, the two JFCs were assigned regional responsibility for northern and southern Europe, respectively. More importantly from a northern vantage point, the US reactivated its Atlantic or Second Fleet, which had been deactivated in 2011, while NATO created a JFC for the Atlantic. Both were situated in Norfolk, Virginia, under a single dual-hatted commander. This transition took a significant step forward in 2023 when NATO concluded that Norfolk should be part of the command structure and staffed on a par with the other two JFCs, and that all Nordic countries should eventually fall under its command.¹² The new headquarters is scheduled to become fully operational by 2025.

While NATO has come a long way in rebuilding a strong collective defence, diverging priorities of its members sometimes pose challenges. One issue is the staffing of headquarters, which presents a major issue every time the organization expands. Staffing often becomes politicized, with allies expecting their fair share of 'flag' posts and prestigious facilities on home soil.¹³ France, in particular, tends to rebuff any major increase in the number of positions funded by the alliance. The Norfolk headquarters will need a minimum of 500–600 officers. While the US will contribute significantly to this total, it is insistent that other alliance members should step up. Nations in the north-west regions bear particular responsibility for filling the positions—while it will cost them a lot in personnel, it is a price they will have to pay for credible protection.

In theory, an obvious solution exists. NATO currently maintains more than 800 staff officers at Allied Command Transformation (ACT), located not far from

¹¹ John R. Deni, *Finland and Sweden in NATO: looking beyond Madrid* (Washington DC: Atlantic Council, 2022), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Finland-and-Sweden-in-NATO-looking-beyond-madrid.pdf>; Per Edling and Fredrik Hesselman, *En svensk marin i Nato* [A Swedish navy in NATO], (Stockholm: Royal Swedish Society of Naval Sciences and Royal Academy of Military Sciences, 2023), <https://kkrva.se/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/En-marin-for-NATO-lagupplost-sidvis.pdf>.

¹² General Major Rolf Folland, 'Norsk luftmakt i endring: styrke gjennom utvikling' [Changing Norwegian airpower: strength through evolution], *Lufled*, vol. 3, 2023, pp. 14–17 at p. 15, https://issuu.com/konsis/docs/lufled_nr_3_2023. See also Eric Adamson and Minna Ålander, 'Finland and Sweden are ready. Is NATO?', The Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences, 10 Aug. 2023, <https://kkrva.se/en/finland-and-sweden-are-ready-is-nato>.

¹³ Flag posts typically carry influence, prestige and symbolism—as found in Terry Terriff et al., "One in, all in?" NATO's next enlargement', *International Affairs* 78: 4, 2002, pp. 713–29, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.00276>.

JFC Norfolk. This number is expected to increase, reflecting NATO's bureaucratic idiosyncrasies. ACT was established in 2003 to provide training and testing, and act as a kind of allied think tank. Now, at a time of urgent global upheaval, serious consideration should be given to moving the majority of these positions to the operations pillar under SACEUR, particularly JFC Norfolk.

Nordic defence buildup and regional cooperation

While the joint NATO effort is key, the alliance's strength ultimately rests on the defence investments and capabilities of its member states, as set out in article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty.¹⁴ More recently, the war in Ukraine has heightened the sense of urgency among NATO countries. This includes the Nordic states, all of which, except Iceland—which does not have armed forces of its own—have committed to meeting NATO's goal of allocating at least two per cent of annual GDP to defence expenditure. Finland easily meets this requirement already, while Denmark and Sweden will reach the stipulated level in 2024, and Norway plans to reach it in 2026.¹⁵ Although all four countries have initiated considerable increases in defence spending, a significant part of this has gone to assisting Ukraine, replacing stocks and compensating for much higher costs and inflation.

In reality, considering the challenges faced, the investments made thus far in rebuilding high-end defence following years of neglect and out-of-area expeditionary operations have been extremely modest. This is particularly evident in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. According to the Norwegian Defence Commission's report, presented to the national government in May 2023, a dramatic disparity exists between the country's defence capabilities and the current and emerging security challenges faced.¹⁶ Similarly grave situations can be found in Denmark and Sweden. Given this context, the Nordic countries' potential over-reliance on their NATO allies raises troubling questions about regional influence and freedom of manoeuvre within the alliance during times of both peace and war.

While closer Nordic cooperation will alleviate some of these challenges, impediments remain. The region's countries are often viewed as likeminded, but in fact their strategic outlooks differ between those looking to the east, north or south.¹⁷ Progress may also be hampered by different bureaucratic cultures and ways of organizing defence, as demonstrated by NORDEFECO's relative lack of success in

¹⁴ NATO, 'The North Atlantic Treaty', art. 3.

¹⁵ Danish Ministry of Finance, 'Regeringen præsenterer 2030-plan: Danmark rustet til fremtiden' [The government presents 2030 plan: Denmark prepares for the future], 7 Nov. 2023, <https://fm.dk/nyheder/nyhedsarkiv/2023/november/regeringen-praesenterer-2030-plan-danmark-rustet-til-fremtiden>; Government Offices of Sweden, 'Military budget initiatives for 2024', 22 Sept. 2023, <https://www.government.se/articles/2023/09/military-budget-initiatives-for-2024>; Government of Norway, 'Norwegian Government plans to meet NATO's 2% goal by 2026', 2 May 2023, <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/norwegian-government-plans-to-meet-natos-2-goal-by-2026/id2975079>.

¹⁶ Norwegian Defence Commission, *Norwegian Defence Commission of 2021* (Oslo: Government of Norway, 2023), https://files.nettsteder.regjeringen.no/wpuploadsot/sites/495/2023/06/forsvarskommissjonen_kort-versjon-1.7_singel.pdf.

¹⁷ Karsten Friis, 'Analysing security sub-regions: forces of push, pull and resistance in Nordic defence cooperation', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6: 4, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogabo09>.

joint procurement.¹⁸ Even so, there is great potential for extensive Nordic defence cooperation within a NATO framework. Together, the states are stronger and can design a far more credible forward strategy. The strategic depth enjoyed by northern Europe will increase significantly, providing opportunities to recover from initial setbacks and safely deploy reinforcements into rear areas.

Five areas related to Nordic defence buildup and regional cooperation hold particular significance. First, there is the importance of having a robust command structure. The Cold War demonstrated the merits of integrating NATO regional and national headquarters by dual-hatting key positions.¹⁹ A similar approach in the Nordic region and elsewhere could help strengthen NATO without increasing personnel costs, providing greater capacity at headquarters while also ensuring national military and political involvement during peace, crises and conflict.

Several ideas have been proposed regarding the Nordic area's future command design. Some have argued in favour of JFC Norfolk establishing a European footprint—for instance, a forward joint task force that could help prepare NATO operations and provide assistance during any subsequent campaign.²⁰ The Norwegian Joint Headquarters in Bodø (Norway) stands out as the most appropriate choice for this role, as it is the only Nordic headquarters already fit for joint NATO operations, both technically and in terms of organization and staff knowledge.²¹

There is also a case for a Nordic army corps or division headquarters tasked with combining land forces and rebuilding competence above brigade level, which is currently the highest-level headquarters the Nordic countries have.²² This would be in line with a 'building-block' logic and NATO's above-mentioned NFM, which encourages allies to 'cooperate and organize the tier 1 and 2 forces in large multinational formations'.²³ Some would argue that Finland should host such a headquarters, as it possesses the largest land force among the Nordic countries and is best positioned to coordinate operations along the long northern European border with Russia. On the other hand, Sweden also plans to substantially strengthen its land forces and develop division-level abilities.

Designing command organizations often involves balancing a wide range of political and operational considerations. In northern Europe, the main challenge rests in the operational field: how to bind together the two regional commands in the Baltic Sea region. The problem is by no means insurmountable. Unlike during the Cold War, there is only one supreme commander—SACEUR—while the functional commands bind regions together. Nevertheless, the Baltic Sea and Baltic Approaches must be given a place in command arrangements. During the

¹⁸ Saxi, 'The rise, fall and resurgence of Nordic defence cooperation'.

¹⁹ Svein Efstad, 'Norway and the North Atlantic: defence of the northern flank', in Olsen, *NATO and the North Atlantic*, pp. 59–74.

²⁰ Ole Magnus Rapp, 'Jobber for ny Nato-kommando' [Working for a new NATO Command], *Klassekampen*, 13 July 2023, <https://klassekampen.no/artikkel/2023-07-13/jobber-for-ny-nato-kommando>.

²¹ Hilde-Gunn Bye, 'New chief in the North: the Norwegian Joint Headquarters is unique in European context', *High North News*, 29 Nov. 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/new-chief-north-norwegian-joint-headquarters-unique-european-context>.

²² Deni, *Finland and Sweden in NATO*.

²³ Sven Biscop, 'Battalions to brigades: the future of European defence', *Survival* 62: 5, 2020, pp. 105–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2020.1819654>.

Cold War, the issue was resolved in 1962 with the establishment of Allied Forces Baltic Approaches as a separate subordinate command under NATO's Northern Command. Today's solution could involve placing the region under Allied Maritime Command in Northwood, UK. More importantly, any maritime construct will be reliant on German leadership and forces. Germany's maritime component command headquarters in Rostock, established with multinational contributions, is set to become fully operational by 2025.²⁴ In line with Germany's higher ambitions, the command could assume regional responsibility in the Baltic Sea region. It could also, in principle, serve as a deployable high-readiness forces headquarters throughout NATO's area of responsibility, although British—and American—leadership is the more obvious choice in northern waters. This also underscores the distinction between the High North and Baltic Sea maritime theatres, and the limits of integrated Nordic naval cooperation.

Second, unlike in the maritime domain, there is huge potential for developing close air power cooperation among the Nordic countries. In recent years, the countries have intensified joint training and exercises, notably their weekly Cross Border Training with fighter jets and the biannual Arctic Challenge Exercise.²⁵ Building on this, the countries' combined total of almost 150 fifth-generation F-35 aircraft and 120 Swedish Gripen fighter aircraft²⁶ offers NATO's functional air command in Ramstein (Germany) considerable air power, providing a significant deterrent and combat force in the northern region. Moreover, helicopters, transport planes and other assets can be utilized in combination with the combat aircraft. The Nordic air chiefs have signed a Nordic Air Commanders' Intent,²⁷ which will 'lay the foundation for a unified Nordic air defence' to be implemented along four parallel tracks: a Combined Joint Air Operations Centre—North (CJAOC—N) from 2025;²⁸ flexible, resilient deployment of air forces using each other's airfields; joint airspace surveillance; and joint education, training and exercises.²⁹

Third, the Nordic countries have a strong, longstanding tradition of total defence, based on the idea that they can compensate for their small size by mobilizing both military and civilian resources when faced by crises, including hybrid threats. Since pursuing different institutional solutions in each nation might complicate Nordic integration, now is the time to strengthen total defence in each of the countries and initiate more extensive cooperation across borders. Logistics, storage, communications and energy are all sectors that could benefit from Nordic total defence cooperation.³⁰

²⁴ DEU MARFOR: *German maritime forces staff* (Rostock: German Marine Command, 2021), <https://www.bundeswehr.de/resource/blob/5218404/a6a5ad4353a45a725ab32fc14c1a1b93/broschuere-deu-marfor-eng-data.pdf>.

²⁵ Saxi, 'The rise, fall and resurgence of Nordic defence cooperation', p. 667.

²⁶ Robin Häggblom, Anders Persson and Per Erik Solli, 'A flexible and resilient Nordic air base concept', *Stratagem*, 30 Jan. 2023, <https://www.stratagem.no/a-flexible-and-resilient-nordic-air-base-concept/>.

²⁷ 'Nordic air chiefs: we must have one unified air defence', *Defense-aerospace.com*, 27 March 2023, <https://www.defense-aerospace.com/nordic-countries-agree-to-combine-air-forces-integrate-operations>.

²⁸ Folland, 'Changing Norwegian airpower', pp. 14–17.

²⁹ Valerie Insinna, 'Norwegian air chief wants "Nordic Air Operations Center" if Sweden, Finland join NATO', *Breaking Defense*, 8 July 2022, <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/07/norwegian-air-chief-wants-nordic-air-operations-center-if-sweden-finland-join-nato>.

³⁰ Norwegian Defence Commission, *Norwegian Defence Commission of 2021*.

At the same time, it is necessary to expand logistical infrastructure from west to east and south to north, thereby allowing reinforcement forces and materials to be transported to the front lines. Harbours, airports, railways and roads must be strengthened, enlarged and made more resilient. This huge and expensive, but crucial, task will need to include hubs in Aarhus (Denmark) and Gothenburg (Sweden) for maritime transportation, as well as bases in mid- and northern Norway for supporting campaigns in the north of Norway, Finland and the Baltic region.

Fourth, while bilateral intelligence-sharing between the Nordics is already high, there is significant potential for increased intelligence cooperation within a NATO framework. By joining NATO, Finland and Sweden are set to become part of the alliance's internal systems for sharing intelligence assessments. Moreover, deeper strategic defence cooperation between the Nordic countries entails corresponding operational and tactical intelligence-sharing. To this end, the Nordics could establish joint intelligence task forces—for instance, during Nordic exercises—exchange intelligence liaison officers and provide joint assessments to NATO where appropriate. Additionally, Nordic unification within the western bloc could serve as a catalyst for deeper intelligence cooperation with US agencies, notably in space endeavours, thereby enhancing the Nordic partners' value in the eyes of their American counterparts.

Lastly, Nordic training and exercises could be aligned to allied defence plans without restrictions. Here, the year 2024 will serve as an initial litmus test for integrated cooperation, as the biannual Norwegian-led Cold Response Exercise has been transitioned into an article 5 exercise renamed Nordic Response, aimed at testing NATO defence plans in the High North and associated with NATO's Steadfast Defender exercise.³¹

The significance of the United States and the United Kingdom in northern Europe

While NATO offers a crucial framework for security in northern Europe, the contributions of the US and UK are indispensable when it comes to upholding the alliance's guarantee. The engagement of the two countries may increase further in the coming years, reflecting their firm policy towards Russia, as well as the integration of Finland and Sweden into the alliance.

American interest in the Arctic has been growing for some time, with the US viewing it as a potential corridor for heightened competition and confrontation with Russia and China. This may lead to increased US naval activities in the Arctic Ocean, including exercises centred on the Polar ice rim.³² More importantly, the US is enhancing its engagement in northern Europe and the High North. For

³¹ Norwegian Ministry of Defence, 'Nordic response 2024', <https://www.forsvaret.no/om-forsvaret/operasjon-og-ovelser/ovelser/nr24>.

³² Lee Willett, 'US navy chief calls for RIMPAC-style exercise in Euro-Atlantic region', *Naval News*, 18 May 2023, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/05/us-navy-chief-calls-for-rimpac-style-exercise-in-euro-atlantic-region>.

instance, having left Iceland's Keflavik airbase in 2006, US forces returned in 2016.³³ Regular flights involving P-8 patrol aircraft are launched from the base into the North Atlantic and the High North. Keflavik's significance is further evidenced by the deployment of bomber aircraft to the airbase and its use in major exercises like Northern Viking and Dynamic Mongoose.³⁴

Similarly, bilateral military collaboration between the US and Norway is expanding across multiple domains. In particular, there has been a substantial increase in intelligence and surveillance cooperation. The US Air Force is actively working to improve the infrastructure of bases, while the US Marine Corps has revitalized its engagement based partly on the revised Marine Corps Prepositioning Program—Norway (MCPN—N) of 2005.³⁵

Since 2014, the US has also expanded its military cooperation with Finland and Sweden in all fields. The US Marine Corps and other forces take part in regional exercises such as Sweden's Aurora series, while US bomber and intelligence aircraft fly across Finnish and Swedish territories. With the two countries' membership of NATO, the coming years will see a substantial increase in US engagement levels. This growing engagement has flagged the need to regulate the rights and obligations of US forces. Although the US and Iceland inked an agreement in 2017 after relatively straightforward negotiations, discussions with Norway proved much more difficult due to sensitivities around transferring national control and authority to the US. It took almost five years to conclude the 2022 Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement, which paved the way for US access to and investments in four Norwegian bases and facilities, primarily financed through the US Department of Defense's European Deterrence Initiative. Similar defence cooperation agreements have recently been signed with the other Nordic countries, providing for US investments and engagement across a wide range of agreed areas as time goes on.³⁶

British engagement with Nordic states has followed a similar path, albeit on a more modest scale. The UK has gradually resumed its position as a leading security player in northern Europe, occupying a key role in NATO's new north-

³³ Trude Pettersen, 'U.S. military returns to Iceland', *Barents Observer*, 10 Feb. 2016, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2016/02/us-military-returns-iceland>.

³⁴ Government of Iceland, 'Defence exercise Northern Viking 2022 to take place in Iceland', 24 March 2022, <https://www.government.is/diplomatic-missions/embassy-article/2022/03/24/Defence-exercise-Northern-Viking-2022-to-take-place-in-Iceland/>; Government of Iceland, 'Exercise Dynamic Mongoose taking place in the North Atlantic', 24 April 2023, <https://www.government.is/diplomatic-missions/embassy-article/2023/04/24/Exercise-Dynamic-Mongoose-taking-place-in-the-North-Atlantic/>.

³⁵ Patrick Cullen and Ole Martin Stormoen, 'US-Norway Bilateral Defense Agreements: a partnership that strengthens NATO', *NUPI Policy Brief*, no. 6, 2020, <https://www.nupi.no/en/publications/cristin-pub/us-norway-bilateral-defense-agreements-a-partnership-that-strengthens-nato>.

³⁶ See US Department of State, 'Agreement between the United States of America and Iceland', 17 Oct. 2017, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/17-1017-Iceland-Defense-Coop-Notes.pdf>; US Department of State, 'Agreement between the United States of America and Norway', 17 June 2022, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/22-617-Norway-Defense-SDCA-Ready-for-Review.pdf>; Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 'Defence cooperation agreement with the United States (DCA)', <https://um.fi/defence-cooperation-agreement-with-the-united-states-dca->; Government Offices Sweden, 'Defense cooperation agreement with the United States', 6 Dec. 2023, <https://www.government.se/government-policy/military-defence/defense-cooperation-agreement-with-the-united-states>; Danish Ministry of Defence, 'New agreement strengthens defense cooperation between Denmark and the United States', 19 Dec. 2023, <https://www.fmn.dk/en/news/2023/new-agreement-strengthens-defense-cooperation-between-denmark-and-the-united-states>.

west regional defence plan.³⁷ Norway, the US and the UK have established a close partnership when it comes to maritime operations involving P-8 aircraft in the northern triangle, operating from Norway, the UK and Iceland. More generally, the Royal Navy, including its aircraft carriers, plays a vital part in the northern region's maritime domain.

Britain's key security and defence instrument is the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), established in 2014 at the NATO Wales summit and led from Standing Joint Force Headquarters in Northwood. It is designed to be an early responder to crises, including hybrid attacks on critical infrastructure, and to act as a precursor to eventual NATO engagement. More recently, JEF has shifted its focus towards northern Europe. A large number of northern European states have joined this British-led force, although the conspicuous exceptions of Germany and Poland have prompted some observers to question its relevance and significance. It is also pertinent to ask how JEF fits into the proliferation of initiatives aimed at protecting critical infrastructure, and how it aligns with NATO's new plans.³⁸

Allied operations into the Norwegian Sea have become the new normal. In 2018, for the first time since 1991, the USS *Harry S. Truman* carrier strike group crossed into the Arctic Circle.³⁹ In 2023, the newest and largest US carrier, USS *Gerald R. Ford*, made its inaugural voyage to Norway and participated in the Arctic Challenge Exercise.⁴⁰ In addition, US submarines are docking in Tromsø in northern Norway,⁴¹ and the US has begun flying long-range bombers over Arctic waters. The so-called Bomber Task Force has been deployed regularly to Europe, training and exercising with allies, including in the north.⁴² Meanwhile, the new British carrier HMS *Queen Elizabeth* sailed into northern waters in 2022 and 2023,⁴³ and the US and UK navies conducted a joint drill in the Barents Sea in 2020, marking the first such exercise since the 1980s.⁴⁴ In addition, other NATO countries—particularly the Netherlands, France and Germany—are also

³⁷ Ed Arnold, 'The UK contribution to security in northern Europe', RUSI Policy Brief, 17 Oct. 2023, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/policy-briefs/uk-contribution-security-northern-europe>.

³⁸ Sean Monaghan, 'A new vision to deal with familiar threats in northern Europe', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 27 Oct. 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-vision-deal-familiar-threats-northern-europe>.

³⁹ Megan Eckstein, 'Truman carrier strike group operating north of Arctic Circle; first time for US Navy since 1991', US Naval Institute News, 19 Oct. 2018, <https://news.usni.org/2018/10/19/truman-carrier-strike-group-operating-north-arctic-circle-first-time-us-navy-since-1991>.

⁴⁰ Astri Edvardsen, 'US carrier strike group trained with British and Norwegian forces in the High North', *High North News*, 12 June 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/us-carrier-strike-group-trained-british-and-norwegian-forces-high-north>.

⁴¹ Hilde-Gunn Bye, 'One of US' largest nuclear submarines docked in Tromsø', *High North News*, 15 Sept. 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/one-us-largest-nuclear-submarines-docked-tromso>.

⁴² US European Command, 'Bomber Task Force Europe', <https://www.eucom.mil/topic/bomber-task-force-europe>.

⁴³ Royal Navy, 'HMS *Queen Elizabeth* completes one of the narrowest harbour entries in her history', 22 Nov. 2022, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2022/november/22/221122-hms-queen-elizabeth-in-oslo>; Thomas Nilsen, 'HMS *Queen Elizabeth* carrier group sails north for NATO training', *Barents Observer*, 21 Sept. 2023, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2023/09/hms-queen-elizabeth-carrier-group-sails-north-exercise>.

⁴⁴ 'U.S. Navy and British Royal Navy conduct military exercise in Barents Sea', *Navy Recognition*, May 2020, <https://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/news/defence-news/2020/may-2020/8392-u-s-navy-and-british-royal-navy-conducts-military-exercise-in-barents-sea.html>.

becoming increasingly active in the north.⁴⁵ There are compelling reasons to believe that key NATO allies will sustain or increase their engagement in the region over the coming years. Such engagement represents a crucial addition to Nordic and NATO's plans and activities, not least in a period when growth in Nordic defence structures is occurring, but at a relatively slow pace.

Conclusion and policy implications

Nordic defence cooperation is currently buoyed by a positive momentum, with numerous initiatives taking place at many levels. The Nordic states are poised to strengthen their defence posture, to cooperate more closely among themselves and to actively engage with NATO. Furthermore, NATO is in the process of significantly strengthening its deterrence and defence—both in general and as it works towards integrating Finland and Sweden fully in the alliance. Notably, the US and UK are increasing their engagement, deployments and operations in northern Europe.

A number of weaknesses and hurdles must, however, be addressed before the deterrence and defence of the region attain a fully credible level. Achieving this requires coherence and coordination among the various parallel initiatives and processes. NATO must lead from the top, by integrating Finland and Sweden in the regional defence plans, by substantiating the NFM and by continuing the reform and development of the command structure. Similarly, the regional states must make substantial bottom-up investments to enhance their defence, enabling them to respond to crises swiftly and to seamlessly receive allied support and reinforcements if needed. In addition, they should seek closer defence cooperation in the five areas this article has discussed: dual-hatted new multinational headquarters, air power, total defence, intelligence and exercises.

At the same time, NATO must prepare for a more fundamental shift in global geopolitics. With the US increasingly focused on security challenges in the Indo-Pacific, countries in the Nordic and northern European regions need to assume greater responsibility for their own defence. Although new US investments in northern Europe are anticipated, national and NATO defence structures should strive to avoid being overly dependent on US assistance, except for the nuclear deterrent and key enablers. This presents both a challenge to Nordic defence cooperation and a unique opportunity to enhance it.

Such challenges are not only substantial, but compounded by a wide range of risks of a less existential character. Hence, the building of military defences must be accompanied by investments in societal resilience, protection of critical infrastructure, resistance to influence operations and other non-military security tasks. This will require substantial resources, and cannot be achieved without a shared understanding among both leadership and populations that prioritization and sacrifice are required.

⁴⁵ Duncan Depledge, 'Train where you expect to fight: why military exercises have increased in the high North', *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 3: 1, 2020, pp. 288–301, <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.64>.