

NORDIC FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY COOPERATION

THE NEW STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT AS A CATALYST FOR GREATER UNITY?

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- The deterioration of the Nordic states' immediate security environment after the Ukraine crisis has given a new sense of relevance to Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation.
- The focus of the cooperation has shifted to issues of regional security, with the Nordic states exchanging views on and information about developments in the Nordic-Baltic region.
- Despite increasing interest, the Nordic states' levels of commitment to Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation and their preferences regarding its future vary.
- Moreover, Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation continues to be characterised by informality, fragmentation and a lack of clear political guidance.



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INTRODUCTION

The idea of closer foreign and security policy cooperation between the five Nordic states – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – has gained increasing attention since the late 2000s. This process was set in motion by changes in the Nordic states' strategic environment: the gradual weakening of formal multilateral institutions, the deepening of the economic and financial crisis in Europe, and the growing strategic importance of the Nordic-Baltic and the Arctic region.¹ The Stoltenberg Report, commissioned by the Nordic foreign ministers in 2008 and published in 2009, represented an early milestone, putting forward concrete proposals on deepening Nordic foreign, security and defence policy cooperation. The year 2009 also saw the establishment of NORDEFECO as an overarching structure for Nordic cooperation in defence. A symbolic step was the adoption of the Nordic declaration of solidarity in 2011.

In recent years, the strategic environment around the Nordic states has undergone changes of an even more crucial nature. Since the Russian aggression in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, the Nordic-Baltic region has been at the forefront of the political confrontation between Russia and the western community of states, witnessing heightened military activity. More recently, the prospect of Brexit and the continuing uncertainty about the United States' foreign policy posture under President Donald Trump have added to the complexity of the situation, challenging traditional partnerships and established ways of doing things in and outside the Nordic-Baltic region. Together, these changes currently shape the conditions for Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation. The predominant expectation is that there are now ever stronger incentives for the Nordic states to intensify their cooperation.

Against this backdrop, this Briefing Paper takes stock of recent trends in Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation. The paper has two main objectives: the first part seeks to portray the complex, fragmented

and rather obscure universe of Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation, whereas the second part analyses what the current dynamics at the regional, European and global level mean for this cooperation. The paper argues that the deterioration of the Nordic states' immediate security environment has given a new sense of relevance to Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation. The focus of this cooperation has very much turned to issues of regional security. However, the Nordic states' levels of commitment to Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation and their preferences regarding its future vary. Moreover, the informal, fragmented and leaderless nature of this cooperation poses limitations of its own.

INFORMAL COOPERATION AT MULTIPLE LEVELS

Nordic cooperation has well-established traditions and builds on a solid institutional framework, which consists of two main bodies: the inter-parliamentary Nordic Council (established in 1952) and the intergovernmental Nordic Council of Ministers (established in 1971). However, the remit of these institutions does not extend to foreign and security policy matters, which were almost completely excluded from the Nordic agenda during the Cold War years. Hence, Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation takes place outside the formal institutional framework for Nordic cooperation.

The main drivers of Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation are the foreign ministries of the Nordic states. The foreign and security policy cooperation between the five Nordics – a constellation known as N5 – takes place at different levels. The Nordic foreign ministers form the highest level, usually meeting approximately three times a year. Below them, the political directors of the Nordic foreign ministries hold regular meetings of their own. The Nordic secretaries of state as well as the directors of individual units meet regularly as well. A further important layer in the cooperation is formed by the Nordic embassies that cooperate more or less closely in their respective countries, with the Nordic embassy in Berlin and the

¹ T. Tiilikainen & K. Korhonen (eds.), *Norden – Making a Difference? Possibilities for enhanced Nordic cooperation in international affairs. The Norden 2020 project report*, FIIA Report 29. Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2011.

Nordic House in Yangon acting as the flagships of this cooperation.

The defence ministers of the Nordic states also meet regularly in the N5 constellation, sometimes together with the foreign ministers. The defence ministers' meetings serve as a further channel to discuss foreign and security policy matters. However, much of the defence ministers' work is also dedicated to practical defence cooperation, which forms a separate sub-field of Nordic cooperation and follows its own procedures. The area of defence cooperation is mostly outside the scope of this paper.

Although there is no formal link between the N5 cooperation and the formal Nordic institutions, the country holding the annually rotating presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers also chairs the foreign and security policy cooperation. However, the sphere of foreign and security policy is kept separate from the rest of the Nordic agenda and continues to be defined by a high degree of informality. Unlike in the areas of formal Nordic cooperation, there is no joint administration, institutional memory, budget or annual presidency programme.

Due to its informal nature, Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation involves neither explicit top-down political guidance nor clear bottom-up dynamics. Instead, the cooperation has grown organically and builds heavily on mutual trust, past experience and personal contacts. The informality of Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation also has an impact on its output: the cooperation is mostly about exchanging information and views rather than about coordinating policies or agreeing on joint positions.

A FRAGMENTED MOSAIC OF FORMATS

While the N5 format builds the core of Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation, the cooperation extends way beyond this constellation, creating a large, but fragmented mosaic of formats. First, the N5 cooperation is supplemented by the bilateral cooperation between individual Nordic states, with the Finnish-Swedish relationship providing the most important example. Secondly, there are several formats including all five Nordic states and their close partners. The most central among these is the cooperation between the five Nordic and the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania). Since 2000, this format has been known as the Nordic-Baltic 8 or NB8.

The NB8 cooperation involves annual meetings between the Nordic and Baltic prime ministers as well as between the Nordic and Baltic foreign ministers. The defence ministers have meetings in the NB8 format as well. As is the case with the N5 format, the cooperation is informal in nature. Overall, the NB8 cooperation has a strong security policy orientation, but it has also gained some importance within the UN and is well established at the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Alongside the NB8, there is also a broader format for dealing with security matters in Northern Europe, which brings together civil servants from the NB8 countries and the US. This format is called Enhanced Partnership in Northern Europe (shortened to e-PINE), but its importance is limited. Another format in which both the Nordic and the Baltic states feature prominently is the so-called Northern Group, which also includes the UK, Germany and Poland. Unlike the N5 or the NB8, the Northern Group only involves the defence ministers and ministries of its 11 members. Recent years have also seen a so-called 'US-Nordic leaders' summit', which came together at the initiative of the Obama administration in Washington in May 2016. The summit followed a joint meeting between the Nordic states' political leaders and President Obama in Stockholm in September 2013. There has been some interest in using this '5+1' format with other states as well.

Nordic foreign and security policy also extends to some institutional platforms, most notably to the UN, where the 'Nordic brand' is strong. Cooperation within the UN is more concrete than in many other formats, encompassing weekly meetings, coordinated candidacies for key positions within the UN structure and, when possible, the promotion of joint views vis-à-vis other UN bodies and members. Ever since the Cold War days, the Nordic states have also had close cooperation regarding UN peace operations.

Finally, the Nordic states have varying ties with the EU and NATO, which has placed limitations on Nordic cooperation within these organisations. Denmark is the only Nordic state that is a member of both the EU and NATO, but its engagement in the EU is conditioned by opt-outs that were negotiated in the 1990s, extending amongst others to the EU's security and defence policy. Iceland and Norway, for their part, are both NATO members, but remain outside the EU, whereas Finland and Sweden are both members of the EU, but have not joined NATO. In practice, the most established format for Nordic cooperation within the

EU has been the so-called Nordic-Baltic Six (NB6), a constellation formed by the three Nordic EU members and the three Baltic states. The NB6 has occasionally coordinated views before European Council and Foreign Affairs Council meetings, but does not form a permanent coalition within the EU.

As Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation takes place in several formats and on different platforms, there are very few actors in the Nordic states with a clear overview of the whole field. This fragmentation provides a further explanation for the lack of clear political guidance and leadership in Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation.

AN INTENSIFYING EXCHANGE OF VIEWS ON REGIONAL SECURITY

An important feature of the intensifying Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation in the early 2010s was the Nordic states' comprehensive approach to security. In February 2014, only shortly before the annexation of Crimea, the Nordic foreign ministers adopted a statement on deepening and widening Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation, which aptly reflected the focal points of Nordic cooperation pre-Ukraine.² The statement laid down a very broad agenda including topics such as crisis prevention and resolution, crisis management, sustainability, combatting climate change, counter-terrorism and cyber issues.

However, since the events in Ukraine, this agenda has narrowed down significantly, with issues of regional security turning into a priority area. Thus, among the key topics of the Nordic foreign ministers' meetings since 2014 have been the Ukraine crisis, Russia's foreign and security policy posture as well as the security situation around the Baltic Sea. Debates about Russia's role in Syria or possible changes in the transatlantic relations have also been conducted with their implications for regional security in mind. This does not mean that other questions – including UN matters – would have disappeared from the Nordic agenda, which continues to be broad and flexible. However, the balance has clearly tilted in favour of hard security in the Nordic-Baltic region. The only other issue area to gain a similar urgency has been the refugee crisis, which led to tensions among the Nordics, most notably between Denmark and Sweden.

2 Joint statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden on Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation – building security in a comprehensive manner.

Unlike in the case of the refugee crisis, the views of the Nordic states on Russia and regional security have been largely in congruence with each other: the five have clearly condemned Russia's violations of international law in Ukraine and highlighted the need to defend the European security architecture. The most widely noted common statement on regional security during recent years has undoubtedly been an op-ed by the Nordic defence ministers in the Norwegian daily *Aftenposten* in April 2015.³ In the op-ed, the defence ministers described Russia's aggression in Ukraine as the greatest challenge to European security and blamed Russia for the worsened security situation in the Nordic-Baltic region. They also emphasised that the Nordic countries would meet this situation with solidarity and deepened cooperation. The defence ministers' text provoked a prompt response from the Russian foreign ministry, which expressed its concern about Nordic defence cooperation being increasingly directed against Russia.⁴

While the op-ed itself signalled that the Nordics have a shared understanding of the situation, the events after its publication also revealed some of the underlying differences among the Nordic five. In Finland, the op-ed caused a political controversy, with then Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja emphasising that the article had been written without prior consultation with Finland's foreign policy leadership. This demonstrates that despite their similar views on Russia's role since 2014, the Nordic states adhere to different styles in their Russia policies. Officials contrast Finland's low-key pragmatism vis-à-vis Russia with Sweden's more value-based approach. These differences mean that further-reaching foreign policy coordination would be difficult even within the small and tightly knit N5 group.

However, in the new strategic context, the differences should not be over-exaggerated. For example, in September 2015 the Nordic and Baltic foreign ministers released a joint NB8 statement, which effectively repeated much of what the Nordic defence ministers had written in their op-ed months before, describing Russia's behaviour in Ukraine and more broadly as a challenge to European security, and highlighting that

3 Ine Eriksen Søreide et al., 'Fem nordiske ministre i felles kronikk: Russisk propaganda bidrar til å så splid', *Aftenposten*, 9 April 2015, <https://www.aftenposten.no/mening/kronikk/i/wnao/Fem-nordiske-ministre-i-felles-kronikk-Russisk-propaganda-bidrar-til-a-sa-splid>.

4 'Russia concerned about Finland and Sweden's "increasingly strong" link to NATO', YLE Uutiset, 12 April 2015, https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/russia_concerned_about_finland_and_swedens_increasingly_strong_link_to_nato/7923834.

the Nordic and Baltic countries face the challenge ‘with mutual solidarity and co-operation’.⁵ Overall, the events in Ukraine and their repercussions in the Nordic-Baltic region have clearly given an increased sense of relevance to Nordic foreign and security policy. Participants affirm that all five Nordics are increasingly interested in using the Nordic framework to discuss issues of regional security. On the other hand, with the exception of some joint statements, the cooperation has not led to more comprehensive efforts at policy coordination.

DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATIONS, DIFFERING STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Although the interest in Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation has increased among all the Nordics, their level of commitment to and preferences regarding this cooperation vary. This is where the different institutional affiliations as well as strategic outlooks and priorities come into play.

Throughout the post-Cold War era, Nordic foreign and security policy has lived in the shadow of the EU and NATO. Either one or the other forms the primary international framework for all Nordic states, and Nordic cooperation in all its variants is seen as a supplementary form of cooperation at best. The value of Nordic cooperation for the individual Nordic states is therefore largely defined by whether and how it can supplement their engagement in the EU and/or NATO. In the current situation, there are several forces at play that affect the calculations of the Nordic states in this regard.

For non-NATO members Finland and Sweden, the new strategic context has been an incentive to expand and strengthen their foreign, security and defence policy networks, including their bilateral cooperation and the Nordic format. Most notably, the two countries have also sought ever-closer cooperation with NATO. Both joined NATO’s Enhanced Opportunities Partners programme at the Wales summit in 2014. Moreover, they have been invited by NATO to attend meetings dealing specifically with the security situation in the Nordic-Baltic region, thus giving rise to the so-called ‘28+2’ format.

In view of Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation, the growing willingness of Finland and Sweden to engage with NATO has differing consequences. For Finland and Sweden, the Nordic format now offers a

further, increasingly important access point to NATO discussions. They would welcome further Nordic coordination in NATO matters in order to have strong support within the Alliance and to be able to promote issues that are of most interest to them, including the use of the 28+2 format. However, the Nordic NATO members do not share this view entirely. While they see Finland and Sweden’s strengthening relationship with NATO as a positive development – indeed, Norway has acted as an important partner for Finland and Sweden inside NATO – they are also wary of blurring the divide between membership and non-membership. That is why their readiness to expand Nordic coordination in NATO matters has its limits.

Alongside NATO, both Finland and Sweden have deepened their ties with the United States. Also in this context, Helsinki and Stockholm see the value of the Nordic frame. In both countries, there is an interest in turning the ‘N5+US’ format into a more permanent constellation. The other Nordics are more hesitant. While it is acknowledged in Denmark and Norway that the Nordics would gain more visibility in Washington together than they do individually, the Danes and the Norwegians also consider that they would benefit less than Finland and Sweden, as they already have strong bilateral bonds with the US.

At the same time, the uncertainties surrounding the US foreign and security policy posture under President Trump have also forced the Nordic NATO members to re-evaluate their relationship with the US and other key actors. However, Denmark in particular seems to react to the change in US leadership by investing even more in the transatlantic partnership and the country’s interest in Nordic cooperation continues to be limited. Norway, on the other hand, has signalled willingness to build closer relations with individual European allies as well as to promote cooperation between the EU and NATO. In this context, the usefulness of the Nordic format for Norway might increase, as it has traditionally represented a very important channel for Norway to receive information about developments in the EU. However, NATO’s role as the backbone of Norway’s security and defence policy remains unquestioned.

The EU is currently undergoing significant developments as well. The prospect of Brexit has led to questions about the future relationship between the EU and the United Kingdom as well as the direction of the post-Brexit EU. Both processes present important questions for the Nordic states, but their implications for Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation

⁵ Statement by Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden on regional security, 3 September 2015.

remain unclear. When it comes to the United Kingdom, all of the Nordics have an interest in maintaining close relations. The 'N5+1' and other formats, such as the Northern Group, could serve as instruments for managing relations with the UK in the future. As for the dynamics within the EU, Finland in particular has high hopes pinned on the EU's security and defence policy. Although Sweden has been more hesitant, its interest has also grown recently as a result of the challenges of the transatlantic relationship. In the event that the developments in the EU pick up speed, this might mean that both Finland and Sweden, currently the most Nordic-minded states, would invest even more in the EU. On the other hand, more radical developments within the EU could also underline the value of having a Nordic voice in the Union, generating interest in closer Nordic coordination on EU policies.

The Nordics' views on the future of Nordic cooperation are also shaped by their diverging strategic priorities. Traditionally, Finland has concentrated on relations with Russia, while Sweden turned its attention across the Baltic Sea to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Norway has the High North in its sights, and Denmark has upheld a global outlook in order to strengthen its partnership with the United States. Although the changing strategic context in the Nordic-Baltic region has meant that all Nordics now consider Russia and regional security as central issues, differences still remain. For instance, Sweden's commitment to the Baltic countries means that Sweden would like to expand the involvement of the Baltic trio in Nordic cooperation. In practice, Sweden would prefer to deal with many issues in the NB8 format rather than in the N5 format. Finland, however, remains a firm proponent of the N5 format. This is partly related to the fact that the idea of taking responsibility for the security of the Baltic states remains a controversial one in Finland. As for Norway, it tends to put the High North on the Nordic agenda, but does not see the N5 as a central format for dealing with this agenda item.

Finally, as the sphere of foreign and security policy has developed into one of the most important areas of Nordic cooperation, the formal Nordic institutions have become increasingly interested in foreign and security policy matters. This sentiment was most recently echoed by the Nordic Council, which adopted a new international strategy in 2017, urging the Nordic governments to cooperate more closely on foreign policy. Similarly, the Secretariat to the Nordic Council of Ministers is already engaged in projects with a clear

foreign policy dimension and would be ready to extend its role. However, there seems to be a broad consensus among the Nordic foreign ministries that Nordic foreign and security policy should remain informal, despite the limitations this entails.

CONCLUSIONS

The events in the Nordics' immediate security environment have underlined the importance of the Nordic states in addressing matters of regional security, which have turned into a priority area. Despite the fact that the Nordics have taken a very similar view of the situation in the Nordic-Baltic region, their cooperation focuses on the exchange of views and information rather than on further-reaching policy coordination. This is also due to the nature of Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation, which continues to be characterised by informality, fragmentation and the lack of clear political guidance. However, there is little appetite in the Nordic countries for formalising this cooperation or making it more binding in nature.

For all of the Nordic states, Nordic cooperation is supplementary to the EU and/or NATO. Thus, the value of Nordic cooperation is largely defined by whether it can complement these primary frameworks. As in the past, the calculations of the Nordic five with regard to the usefulness of Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation differ. Currently, Finland and Sweden are the most committed states. In the new strategic context, they see Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation as an additional layer in their multi-faceted foreign, security and defence policy networks. For them, the Nordic format also represents an important access point to NATO discussions and a potentially useful framework for engaging with the US. The Nordic NATO members, for their part, do not recognise the same benefits. Even though their interest in Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation has grown in recent years, its value for them continues to be more limited. Whether and how the dynamics in a post-Brexit Europe will influence Nordic foreign and security policy remains to be seen. Despite the obvious need to focus on developments in the Nordic-Baltic region, the Nordic states should continue to invest administrative and political resources in their traditional and efficient cooperation in the UN.