

THE NORDIC COUNTRIES - DIVIDED AND UNITED

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“The world will never be the same again” - so the saying goes in Europe and elsewhere. And as we, in early April 2022, see the horrible pictures from Ukraine, it is hard to think otherwise, knowing well that things may become even worse if the war spreads and weapons of mass destruction are used. European countries have traditionally differed in their contacts with and their attitudes to Russia. As for the Nordic region, the geographical closeness to their powerful neighbor has made people sensitive to Russia’s policy and its implications for Nordic security. This closeness is undoubtedly among the reasons for the considerable changes that took place in 2014 following the annexation of Crimea and the aggression against Donetsk and Luhansk. Not only did the Russian activities affect the Nordic countries’ views on Russia, but also their cooperation with each other. The issue now is which impact the aggression of 24 February 2022 will have on these countries.

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Background

While some perceive the Nordic countries as a unit in the field of security and defense, the region is highly heterogeneous. Denmark is a member of both the EU (albeit with an opt-out for security policy) and NATO, whereas Norway and Iceland are members of NATO only, and Finland and Sweden of the EU only. This division for a long time led to restrictions on Nordic cooperation among all five countries.

The fall of the Berlin Wall had a profound impact on the security situation of the Nordic countries, leading Finland and Sweden to apply for EU membership quickly and to join in 1995. Both countries also changed their doctrines, removing terms related to neutrality and replacing them with the term military non-alignment. Nonetheless, at this time, none of them considered applying for NATO membership. A new situation for Nordic cooperation made it necessary for the Nordic countries to now address security issues.

In 2007 a new impetus for closer cooperation was taken by the Norwegian and Swedish supreme commanders, with their Finnish counterpart joining in 2008. They believed small states, like the Nordic ones, were no longer capable of financing balanced and modern forces solely through national funding. Combined production, joint exercises, etc. would result in lower costs for the individual countries. The result of this initiative was the establishment of the Nordic Defense Cooperation (NORDEF) in 2009, which unified several cooperation structures.

Presented by former Norwegian Defense Minister and Foreign Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg in 2009, the Stoltenberg Report attempted to strengthen the political dimension of cooperation as well. The report included a solidarity clause to which the five countries were positive. However, it also showed the limits of closeness as all countries emphasized that their first priority was NATO and the EU, respectively.

As seen from the description above, while all five countries are part of Nordic cooperation, the core initially consisted of Finland, Norway and Sweden, especially in military matters. Denmark was at this time less interested, primarily due to its geographical position on the European continent rather than the Scandinavian peninsula, whereas Iceland's geographical position and lack of military forces make some issues even less relevant.

The Impact of 2014

For the Nordic countries the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 removed any illusions they might have had about this country's intentions against other European countries. Consequently, Nordic security cooperation from then on included issues of territorial defense. As for Swedes, the realization that their country may be a future target for Russia came already in 2013. The decisive event was when on Easter Friday, 2013, Russian bomber planes made a mock attack on Stockholm and southern Sweden, turning away just outside the territorial border. A similar event later took place against the Danish island of Bornholm.

One effect of this was that NORDEFECO grew to include a broad spectrum of security and defense issues, from civilian emergency preparedness to simplified procedures for gaining access to each other's airspace and territorial waters as well as mutual use of air and naval bases. Moreover, the NORDEFECO Vision 2025 of 2019 set out to improve the Nordic ability to act together in peace, crisis, and conflict.

Another effect of the events of 2014 was that the borders between NATO and non-NATO countries gradually became less important. A crucial step was taken in 2020 when Finland, Norway and Sweden announced that they would harmonize their national operational planning in order to be able to conduct coordinated military operations during crises and conflicts in areas of common concern. The indicated area is the northernmost part of the three countries in which their air forces have pursued weekly Cross Border Training practice since 2008. Denmark, Norway and Sweden concluded a similar agreement in 2021 to enable common military action, which focused on the sea lanes in the Kattegat, Skagerrak and North Sea.

Among the Nordic countries, the bilateral cooperation between Finland and Sweden stands out. Formally initiated in 2014 and based on a high level of confidence, its primary aim is now to be able to act and conduct operations together during peace, crisis and war. For giving or receiving assistance, the consent of the respective parliaments is required only in case of a military attack. Many activities are pursued, such as operational planning and the set-up of a standing Naval Task Group. While Finland and Sweden have not exchanged any mutual defense guarantees, no predetermined limits are set on cooperation.

Nordic cooperation largely emanates from the closeness felt by the countries in the region and the realization that any problem or threat unavoidably affects all. Yet, not that long ago, a Nordic NATO country helping out in the defense of a non-NATO country was unimaginable. The impaired security situation, and the fact that, in a military sense, the area forms a single operational unit, are undoubtedly vital factors behind the change that took place. So is the consent of others who see the need for a joint approach. Not only are the Nordic countries dependent on the U.S./NATO for their security, but also the U.S./NATO need access to Nordic territory if the Baltic countries are under threat. This dual dependency is visible in the exercises involving many NATO members that frequently take place in the Nordic area.

Furthermore, Finland and Sweden cooperate closely with NATO, being members of the Partnership for Peace since 1994 and since 2014 being Enhanced Opportunities Partners. In 2018 the two countries entered an agreement with the United States to strengthen the already existing bilateral and multilateral agreements.

Other developments in the north also contribute to this increasingly rich security landscape: The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), led by the UK and established under NATO, gathers ten countries in Northern Europe, among them Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. Like the Nordic cooperation groups, JEF may react quickly and thereby serve as a valuable force in a crisis or as a bridging mission.

While the Nordic countries differ in their institutional affiliations, they don't see the EU and NATO as competing with each other. Instead, they have embraced the great variety of initiatives, seeing them as filling different roles and thereby adding to Nordic security.

The Future

Finland's and Sweden's close cooperation with NATO has not gone unnoticed by Russia, which has recently threatened the two countries with military policy measures if they apply for membership. The effect has, however, not been what Russia must have hoped for: support for membership has increased sharply in both countries, and the issue of whether to apply is now vividly discussed. Such a development could not have occurred at this pace under normal circumstances. Both countries said at the outset that they hope to come to the same decision, but at the time of writing, Finns seem to be close to agreeing to apply for membership, whereas Sweden is lagging. If only Finland became a NATO member, bilateral cooperation would unavoidably weaken, which would be much regretted by both.

The Nordic countries also pursue their policies in a European and transatlantic context. Both EU's recently presented Strategic Compass and NATO's Strategic Concept are likely to be subject to adjustment due to Russia's aggression. It is in the Nordic countries' best interests to maintain cohesion, since they are small and close to Russia, something that can't be taken for granted. Europe includes many dividing lines, which Russia has already shown its skill to exploit, and the next presidential election in the U.S. may again lead to the splits that we saw a few years ago.

Globally, there are likewise reasons for concern. A containment policy against Russia is a likely reaction, seen as necessary to prevent this country from pursuing similar acts as against Ukraine. We don't know what the Russian reaction will be, or even more importantly, what China's response will be. It is possible that the world will change in ways we cannot currently imagine for both big and small countries.