



ISSUE BRIEF

Securing Northern Europe: Toward A Comprehensive Approach

JUNE 2019 ANNA WIESLANDER & ELIN SCHIFFER

This issue brief is based on discussions at three high-level international conferences that took place in Stockholm, Sweden, during 2017-2018. The conferences were arranged by the Atlantic Council Northern Europe Office, two in collaboration with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and one with the Swedish Armed Forces. The discussions focused on

- *an assertive Russia, and its consequences for Northern Europe as a coherent strategic area;*
- *the dependency of the transatlantic link for the security of the region, and the effects of its changing nature on Northern Europe; and*
- *the European Union's ambition to strengthen defense cooperation, and its implications for security in the region.*

We are grateful to all the speakers at the conferences for sharing their expertise and insights. The authors of this report are solely responsible for its content and recommendations.

Introduction

As late as 2013, Northern Europe was viewed as a low-tension area compared to other parts of the world. The main focus was on cooperation, confidence-building efforts, and contributions to international crisis-management operations. Since then, Northern Europe has become a high-tension area on the front lines of some of the world's most important geopolitical developments.

Together, northern and Baltic Sea states cover land and maritime areas in numerous directions: an Atlantic coast in the west; a northern coast stretching up to the high north and the Arctic; and the Baltic Sea coast in the east and southeast, in close proximity to Russia and

The Atlantic Council Future Europe Initiative seeks to galvanize the leadership and strategies that will promote a strong, stable, and competitive Europe allied with the United States. In recent years the Council has expanded its presence in Northern Europe with an office in Stockholm, Sweden. The office works in particular with forging a strong US-Northern Europe agenda in light of the deteriorated security situation in the region and the challenges facing the transatlantic relationship in a changing environment.



On their way to NATO exercise Trident Juncture 2018 in Norway, a British Army convoy crosses the Oresund bridge which connects Sweden and Denmark. *Photo Credit: NatoChannel*

its enclave Kaliningrad, which have extensive military capabilities. Altogether, Northern European states—Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, and the United Kingdom—need to, independently and jointly, control a strategically important territory, notwithstanding the differences in the various nations' bilateral and multilateral security arrangements. This is a challenging task, but the countries above also boast substantial resources, with a total joint gross domestic product (GDP) of \$8.50 trillion; by comparison, Russia has a GDP of \$1.57 trillion (as of 2017).¹ As to the percentage of the global economy, Northern Europe represents 7.49 percent, while Russia represents 3.07 percent.²

Going forward, Northern Europe will need to navigate a world of increasing great-power competition, as illustrated by the growing presence of Russia and China in the Arctic, which will require continued intra-European and external cooperation to ensure regional security. In particular, Northern European states should

consider three challenges, which also present a unique window of opportunity to develop a comprehensive regional approach: a revisionist Russia, the future of the transatlantic link, and the development of a credible European defense.

Up until now, the tendency has been to separately address the Baltic Sea, the North Atlantic, and the Arctic. One premise of the conferences has been that Northern Europe, due to its high degree of security interdependency, should be viewed as one militarily and politically strategic area. To this end, this report explores both military and political reasons for a more coordinated perspective for Northern Europe, laying the foundation for joint perceptions of the region's challenges, interests, and opportunities. The analysis also includes policy recommendations for actors who wish to pursue these perspectives further, with the ultimate aim to promote peace and stability in the region and beyond.

1 "GDP (Current US\$)," World Bank, accessed May 8, 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org>.

2 "GDP Based on PPP, Share of World," International Monetary Fund, accessed May 8, 2019, <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/>.

Challenges ahead

A revisionist Russia

With Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and aggression in eastern Ukraine in 2014, the security situation in Northern Europe drastically deteriorated. Since then, Northern European countries, as well as institutions such as NATO and the European Union (EU), have responded to the new security environment by changing and developing patterns of defense, deterrence, and cooperation. The strategy toward Russia builds on a dual-track approach of deterrence and détente, inspired by the Harmel Report of 1967.³ The rationale of the approach is that sound defense and a strong posture provide allies with confidence to play a leading role in resolving the political conflicts of the day, and to indulge in arms-control efforts.

As defense and deterrence develop, roads for dialogue are increasingly examined. NATO upholds its political dialogue with Russia in the NATO-Russia Council. Cooperation with Russia in the Arctic Council has continued to function since 2014. However, uncertainties prevail with regard to Russia, which conducts information operations toward its neighbors in the region and continues its military build-up. The challenges posed by a revisionist Russia—spanning the military, political, and cyber domains—remain on the top of the agenda throughout Northern European capitals.

Tensions with Russia are a reflection of international politics increasingly driven by growing great-power competition. This competition also includes China, which is increasingly visible and active in the region, not least in the Arctic. Because all states in Northern Europe are members of either the EU or NATO, or both, the strategic frontier between the West and the East has a strengthened northern dimension, which puts Northern Europe in the center of a geopolitical contest.

Militarily, the West is still adapting to efficiently meet the Russian military build-up and creation of an anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capability in Kaliningrad and in the Arctic. Since 2017, NATO has permanently rotating troops on the ground in the Baltics and Poland through the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), in addition to the NATO air-policing mission, which guards the airspace of the three Baltic states. NATO has also

adapted its command structure, with a new command for the Atlantic in the United States, and for European mobility in Germany. In addition, the United States has substantially increased its presence in the region through troops, exercises, and preposition of materiel.

Military nonaligned Sweden and Finland have deepened their cooperation with NATO in areas connected to territorial defense, due to the high degree of security interdependence in the area. If there were an attack on the Baltic states, Sweden and Finland would be directly affected. Russia would have incentives to grab Swedish territory, and to prevent Finland from getting involved in a conflict. Thus, countering these incentives must be part of the regional deterrence calculus.

“The increased degree of military activity in the North Atlantic and the Arctic presents a rising challenge.”

Over the last few years, a range of elections in Europe and the United States have become the targets of disinformation and so-called “fake news,” challenging key principles of open and democratic societies. Perpetrators of disinformation campaigns seek to decrease trust in democratic institutions, undermining multilateral institutions such as the EU and NATO by coercing people into believing that democratic institutions and elected leaders are corrupt and failing. Accordingly, more robust and resilient societies are fundamental for a strong defense. While Northern Europe might be on the front line in defending against such attacks, the states in the region are sufficiently cohesive, as well as experienced in galvanizing their societies in defense. Hence, they are in a good position to lead by example and strike a balance between people protection and defense.

The increased degree of military activity in the North Atlantic and the Arctic presents a rising challenge. Russia has recreated the Bastion, a system of layered defense around the Arctic, aiming at deterrence by de-

³ The 1967 “Report of the Council on the Future Tasks of the Alliance” was initiated by Belgian Foreign Minister Pierre Harmel at a time when the existence of the Alliance was put into question.

nial. This creates a real escalation risk. A large portion of the Russian second-strike capability is based on the Kola Peninsula, a crucial staging point for operations in the North Atlantic. In a crisis, Russia would want to increase its air defense around the Kola Peninsula, and Swedish and Finnish territory could therefore be of interest—which would also affect NATO operations in the high north, especially over northern Norway. Meanwhile, there exists no predominant arena to discuss the new geopolitical climate in the Arctic, and the level of transparency is low. By tradition, NATO has not indulged in multilateral discussions on the Arctic, out of consideration for Arctic countries such as Norway and Canada. Because of Russia's assertive behavior, and the modernization of its armed forces initiated in 2011, it is essential that Northern European states pursue a coherent response to future developments in the North Atlantic and the Arctic. Dialogue and cooperation in areas such as research, environment, sustainability, search and rescue, and border control should be maintained, but the increasing levels of military activity must be addressed as well.

Policy recommendations

- Northern European countries need to more extensively exchange information about the Russian threat, which consists of many puzzle pieces including cyber, disinformation, energy security, military, use of money, and abuse of the legal system.
- Northern European states need to get better at hybrid warfare, since actors such as Russia are using a full spectrum of tools. To this end, Northern European societies need to become more resilient, which includes fighting corruption and safeguarding the role of mass media and a free press.
- There is a strong need for continued investment in total defense, which includes education for the general population, as well as bridging gaps between the public and private sectors, while preserving open societies.
- Militarily, Northern European states should focus more on jointness, in both the maritime and air domains. It could include sharing aerial and maritime pictures, which can be done without any special formats. Countries could connect with each other more, and focus on regional solutions with regard to air defense, anti-submarine warfare, critical infrastructure, and cyber. Within these areas, Baltic Sea countries could become more integrated, and perform more scenario-based exercises.
- The enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) needs more air defense and reinforcement regarding air and maritime assets.
- Northern European states need to have a coherent response to current activities in the Arctic. There is a significant need for an encompassing strategy that accounts for the security implications of a militarized Arctic for Northern Europe, and an arena in which policymakers and other relevant actors could discuss military security in the Arctic.
- To counter Russian attempts to create a sphere of interest in the Arctic, the EU and NATO must ensure that current relationships are integrated into regimes, treaties, and institutions. These should carry mechanisms for resolving future disputes over sea lines of communications and natural resources.
- The issues that affect Northern European security should be addressed in existing institutions and working formats, at various levels. There is an institutional fatigue, with a low interest in creating new formats. Instead, Northern European countries could be more explicit, and push common agenda issues and interests in the EU, NATO, and, to some extent, in the UN and other international agencies.
- NATO should develop an Arctic policy, and the political dimension of military activities in the region could be discussed in the NATO-Russia Council. Increased transparency regarding military capabilities, and exchange of information on exercises, could pave the way for confidence-building measures.

A new transatlantic bargain

The transatlantic link is essential for deterrence and defense in Northern Europe. Since the inauguration of President Donald Trump in 2017, relations with the United States have developed unevenly across Northern Europe. The Baltic states, Poland, and Norway have seen an increase in US military presence, while Sweden and Finland have deepened their bilateral and trilateral defense relationships with the United States. However, while practical military cooperation has intensified, the overall trust and confidence in

US commitments to NATO, and overall in Europe, are questioned due to harsh rhetoric and diverging foreign policy goals. The large degree of uncertainty—as well as rapid developments in other parts of the world, such as China and Syria—has left Europe scrambling for an adequate strategy fit for a new transatlantic bargain.

Accordingly, Northern Europe could, in the longer term, find itself in a situation in which the United States is either politically unwilling to come to its assistance, or militarily unable to do so due to strained capabilities. Both scenarios lead to the same conclusion: Europe needs to be able to do more, and faster. While neither political leaders nor experts in Europe foresee the complete disappearance of the United States in Europe, it is possible that the United States will prioritize interests elsewhere. In the new US National Security Strategy, China is identified as a major global competitor, and already under President Barack Obama there was a “pivot to Asia.” During the first two years of the Trump administration, it has become a priority for the United States to show its posture against a more powerful and capable China.

For Northern Europe, the eastward focus of the United States creates a new security environment, where European nations would need to be “first responders” in the event of a crisis in their immediate neighborhood, if the United States is occupied elsewhere. In the long run, this could mean that the United States will be more interested in seeking cooperation with Europe against China, based on a “defense of consolidated democracies,” than in assisting Europe with deterrence against relevant regional threats.

To act as effective first responders, Europeans will have to become far more militarily capable. Currently, both the forces and formats are small and adapted to be used elsewhere. Capabilities must be deployable. The level of readiness and reinforcements must increase. During the Cold War, the Alliance strived to always be strong enough not to be the one to escalate, forcing the Soviet Union to face the decision of escalation. Today, because of weak reinforcements levels, Russia can force escalation onto NATO, which builds stress into NATO’s decision-making system.

The ability to reinforce involves three things: speed, quantity, and quality. NATO allies and partners need to think about large-scale scenarios that require larger, heavier forces. Forming larger formations requires

larger quantities of troops and materiel. Moreover, plans must be in place across all domains; otherwise, Europe will not be able to be a first responder. More broadly, Europe needs to work actively to increase interoperability and like-mindedness. A 360-degree approach is needed to build deterrence, which should include political cohesion and solidarity focused on a common destiny.

“The real challenge is less about US disengagement in Europe and more about rebalancing the transatlantic relationship.”

In Northern Europe, with the implementation of its new strategy and the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), NATO has created a more robust tripwire and, thus, more deterrence. With the eFP, NATO signals a readiness to fight. However, the eFP must be connected to greater follow-on forces, which enforce the frontlines. If the follow-on forces are not there, NATO response will be limited, and the risk of a nuclear escalation increases.

The real challenge is less about US disengagement in Europe and more about rebalancing the transatlantic relationship. As the transatlantic link is likely to become more transactional and conditional, it becomes increasingly important for countries and institutions alike to become more self-sufficient. Self-sufficiency spans all aspects of defense.

For Northern European states, this is especially tricky, as every country has a unique relationship with the United States—as either a NATO member, a NATO partner, and through bilateral as well as trilateral agreements. The lack of an overarching framework makes the nature of security cooperation in Northern Europe hard to grasp. The patchwork of EU and NATO memberships in Northern Europe has direct operational implications. In order to take on more responsibility, while nurturing the transatlantic link, Northern European states must embrace this new reality.



US Marines traverse arctic terrain on skis near Moen, Norway as part of Exercise White Claymore in February 2018 .
Photo Credit: NATO.

Policy recommendations

- Northern Europe should actively seek to avoid competition, and should instead seek to strengthen its common bloc in several policy areas. In particular, Northern European states could take the initiative to develop a coherent European view on a new transatlantic partnership, in which Europeans can act as first responders, and pursue it.
- In order to deal with larger formations and follow-on forces across all domains, including air defense, NATO allies and partners need a coherent assessment and roadmap for creating larger quantities of troops and materiel. In light of this, conventional forces are essential, but there must also be a full spectrum of options to counter Russia. One option would be to build a coherent regional A2/AD capability to provide deterrence by denial.
- In order to develop interoperability and be prepared to act jointly in a crisis situation in the Baltics, Sweden and Finland should exercise with the eFP forces and take part in the NATO Air Policing Mission.

The development of a credible European defense

In 2016, EU member states started boosting European defense cooperation through a range of initiatives, both inside and outside of the EU framework. With the establishment of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF), and the Coordinated Annual Review of Defence (CARD), the EU has added much-needed momentum to the debate about European defense. The EU plans to dedicate 13 billion euros for defense cooperation in its next long-term budget, adding yet another incentive in the area.

France and Germany are the prime drivers of deeper European defense cooperation, but their lack of a common strategic culture is slowing progress. For Germany, the self-proclaimed new responsibility in international security affairs, as declared in Munich in 2014, has been further spurred by the uncertainty caused by the Trump administration for the future of transatlantic relations. Furthermore, with the United Kingdom preparing to leave the EU, Germany has sought to amplify its role as the “glue” in the EU, focusing on defense cooperation as a way to keep Europe together.

For France, the mission defines the coalition. By launching the European Intervention Initiative (EI2) outside of the EU framework, France has sought to build a coalition of the willing that can develop a more coherent strategic culture and, hence, deploy effectively when needed. EI2 brings in the UK as well as Denmark, countries that are essential for European security but are not part of the future Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

While France has an advantage in knowing what it wants, its implementation and communication strategies have been less successful. Hence, France risks being a leader without followers in European defense. One example is the widely debated concept of greater European “strategic autonomy.” For France, autonomy is different from independence. Autonomy is a nation’s ability to choose its independence. Germany, on the other hand, is not sure that strategic autonomy should be achieved at all, but believes that if it is, it should not be established in opposition to the United States.

Regardless of the differences between French and German approaches, Europe can by no means handle a major crisis or war on the continent alone. The dependency on the United States and its extended deterrence may prevail for many years to come, given the level of European capabilities and the pace at which they develop. Nations included in both NATO and the EU show a strong preference for NATO as the organization that implements collective defense. Accordingly, the development of EU military capability must be compatible with NATO needs and standards. CARD, the EU’s new planning instrument, must fit within NATO’s Defence Planning Process (NDPP). If this is done correctly, CARD could mitigate the gaps and shortfalls found in NDPP. PESCO could then pick up projects that address these capability needs.

For Northern Europe, with its dependency on the United States for regional security, NATO compatibility and continued interoperability are of utmost importance. Complementarity is also essential for maintaining efficiency in national defense planning. An additional dimension—one of special importance for securing Northern Europe—is the access of other countries to EU defense cooperation: Norway, the United States and, after Brexit, the UK. When the UK has left the EU, a basis for a real, enduring, and legitimate partnership between Britain and the EU must be found. All the major defense investments are in areas

where the UK can rely upon, or is dependent on, US systems and defense-industrial capabilities. If these issues are not addressed, there is a major risk of a split into a US-UK axis and an EU one on security and defense, which would divide the transatlantic community in fundamental ways.

Steps taken toward increased EU-NATO cooperation are valuable for Northern Europe. For the military, addressing capability gaps—as defined by NATO with regard to, for example, strategic transport, air-to-air refueling, and air defense—could help secure the region, deepen integration, and facilitate reinforcement. The ongoing PESCO military-mobility project led by the Netherlands is a good example, and should be followed. Furthermore, the EU and NATO need to cooperate closely on the softer end of the hybrid-threat spectrum—including strategic communication, infrastructure, cyber, and energy security. New technology is another field of particular interest to this high-tech region. In contrast to Americans and the Chinese, Europeans have tended to neglect the geopolitical and military aspects of new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics, and the level of cooperation and coordination at the EU level is low. Therefore, earlier EU cooperation is needed on, for instance, the pooling of data. Additionally, more investment and R&D on new technologies are needed to foster geopolitical thinking.

Finally, the European defense initiatives taken outside of the EU framework can serve as important drivers for capability development, in order to increase readiness and reinforcement. EI2, the British Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), and the German Framework Nations Concept (FNC) all represent new approaches to European multinational cooperation, in which a major NATO state takes it upon itself to act as a framework nation for groups of smaller allies, in order to develop forces and/or capabilities in concert. Both the JEF and FNC have clear Northern European participation and dimensions, which can be used both for future, larger formations, and to address defense gaps in the region.

Policy recommendations

- Northern European states should be more engaged and vocal in the debate around and formation of a European defense dimension, in order to address the security needs of the region and promote a holistic view of European security and strategic autonomy.

- Northern European states should work together—for instance, through existing formats such as the Northern Group, Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8), Enhanced Partnership in Northern Europe (E-PINE), and Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO)—to define concepts and interests, and promote concrete ideas about what European defense cooperation should look like in Northern Europe. Communication with Berlin and Paris should be improved and intensified.
- PESCO projects that are of particular relevance for Northern European security should be initiated, in order to develop joint capabilities and procurement. Air defense, surveillance, and cybersecurity are areas that could be explored further.
- Northern Europe should push for NATO compatibility, and for the access of non-EU states to EU defense cooperation, in order to assure efficient regional collaboration, as well as a preserved transatlantic link.

Conclusion

- For the first time, Northern Europe is on the global front line of systemic competition.
- For Northern Europe, the eastward focus of the United States creates a new security environment, where European nations would need to be “first responders” in the event of a crisis in their immediate neighborhood, if the United States is occupied elsewhere.
- By actively promoting Northern Europe as one militarily and politically strategic area, states in Northern Europe would develop a stronger voice in the debate about European security toward the EU, the Franco-German engine, and the United States.
- The Northern European states should do more to cooperate among themselves, to optimize external outreach and minimize competition. This could be done by: solidifying the Northern Group and NORDEFECO; initiating PESCO projects with a Northern European dimension in the fields of intelligence and situational awareness; pushing for third-party participation, establishing a structure for political consultation in case of crisis, and developing advanced exercises with the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) units in the Baltics and Poland.
- Northern European states should direct and enhance their capability-development efforts jointly, along with the full hybrid spectrum. Every Northern European state has unique competencies and traditions that could enhance those of others, if shared and developed in concert. The same goes for joint planning.
- Conflict-prevention measures should include a coherent regional anti-access/area-denial capability to provide deterrence by denial.

Anna Wieslander is the Director for Northern Europe and Head of the Atlantic Council's office in Stockholm. She concurrently serves as secretary general of the Swedish Defence Association. She has previously served as deputy director for the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, head of the Speaker's Office at the Swedish Parliament and in various positions at Swedish Ministry of Defence.

Elin Schiffer is a Project Assistant at the Atlantic Council's Future Europe Initiative and its office in Stockholm. Before joining the Council, she graduated from the Swedish Defence University with a BSc in political science and security studies.

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