



Atlantic Council

Northern Europe Office Stockholm

The 4th International Baltic Sea Security Conference:

Great power competition in Northern Europe and effects on security cooperation

October 5-6, 2021

Background:

The fourth international Baltic Sea Security Conference (BSSC) on October 5-6, 2021, organized by the Atlantic Council Northern Europe Office in cooperation with the Swedish Armed Forces, took place with a new 2021-2025 Swedish Total Defence strategy in place. The BSSC was thus a timely platform for representatives of the Nordic and Baltic states, Germany, France, the UK, Netherlands, United States, and NATO to discuss the strategic outlook and shared challenges in Northern Europe. Against the backdrop of increased global great-power competition, restoring transatlantic ties and deepening European defense cooperation was of central concern.

A Swedish outlook on regional security

They **first day** of the conference was framed by an introduction from a Swedish military perspective, which stated that Russia had clearly demonstrated that it did not hesitate to use military force to obtain political goals. Since 2014, there had been a military build-up in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic with advanced weapon systems and expanded and more complex exercises. Unresolved conflicts impacting the region included Ukraine and the knock-on effects of unrest in Belarus.

Sweden had adapted in several ways to meet the evolving security situation. Unable to defend against an armed attack alone, Sweden had enacted a “solidarity-based security policy.” This policy meant not remaining passive if another EU or Nordic state suffered a crisis or was attacked and expecting the same in return.

Indeed, since 2015, Sweden had substantially increased defence spending and developed several regional defence arrangements, particularly with Finland. Sweden had also worked closely with NATO, despite not being a member, to confirm its position as a relevant, professional, and trustworthy partner.

The chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and the surprise announcement of the AUKUS alliance, had cast additional doubt on US commitment to Europe. Still, Sweden viewed steps towards greater European defense as necessary but no substitute for NATO’s collective defense and American commitment Europe’s security.

“The United States is back” – what does it mean for Northern Europe?

The conference’s **first session** asked, “if the United States is back?” under the Biden administration and assessed the implications for Northern Europe. The conclusion “sort of,” with Europe needing to “wake up and smell the post-American coffee,” called for a reconceptualization of the transatlantic relationship. Europe needed to realize that the United States was strained externally and deeply divided domestically.

America’s priority on China, in combination with a declining threat perception of Russia, would lead to Northern Europe becoming decreasingly important for the US. Speakers emphasized, however, that the US needed to balance its China versus Russia focus,

and called for a more nuanced perception of Russia. Russia's strengths should neither be downplayed nor its weaknesses overstated.

To credibly deter Russia and develop a common threat perception on China, Europe needed to engage the US on "strategic autonomy" to calibrate the future of transatlantic burden sharing. There was uncertainty about what strategic autonomy meant within Europe while the US lacked political capital for engagement on the issue and a clear definition of the EU as a security partner. Several speakers emphasized that the timing was right for a new transatlantic deal on how to balance American and European responsibilities and resources towards common security.

Threat assessment: Perspectives from the region

The **second session** gave a threat assessment from within Northern Europe to pave the way for a more coordinated perspective. Given the high degree of security interdependence of Northern European countries, Northern Europe should be viewed as one militarily and politically strategic area. The panel explored how Russian and Chinese activities were perceived as well as overall challenges and opportunities ahead.

Noteworthy was the substantial common ground on Russia that had developed over the past decade, with Moscow continuing to be of great concern and a major challenge to its neighbors due to its assertive behavior and military build-up. At the same time, Russia, with territory in the Baltic and Arctic, had legitimate interests in the region and was an actor that needed to be managed accordingly. China had no such position, though Beijing, like Moscow, attempted to carve out spheres of interests and project itself as a "near-Arctic" state. There was not yet a common perspective within the region on how to deal with China. Its increased political and economic presence in the region was viewed as a challenge to the West—though the three Baltic states had notably different strategies towards China. Chinese-Russian cooperation was generally seen as a "marriage of convenience," but it would still be naive to think that the EU could break this marriage apart. The dynamics between China and Russia should be closely monitored.

Several speakers spoke about the need to "raise the bar" versus Russia and warned against a sense of fatigue, such as with the sanctions regime. Dialogue could be offered within areas such as health, climate, and the environment, but if they were not picked up, additional areas should not be identified. It was important that Russia also responded in a constructive manner. Dialogue should not be seen as the opposite to firmness.

In the Arctic, Russia's dual-track strategy of maintaining a peaceful and cooperative stance in regional forums, such as the Arctic Council, while heavily investing in the militarization of the Arctic, should be countered. Russia was playing a "double game", and the best way for the West to ensure a viable and sustainable defence of Arctic countries was to copy the strategy, one speaker suggested. As there was no real legal remedy of countering Russia's military buildup on its own, undisputed territory—and

securitizing regional fora like the Arctic Council would poison much needed cooperation on other issues—the best framework for building deterrence and defence was NATO.

An American outlook on security in Northern Europe

The **second day** of the conference began with an American military outlook on Northern Europe, using the US Armed Forces' commitment to Europe as a point of departure for the discussion. It was underlined that US interests in Europe were long lasting and that American presence ultimately served to preserve peace on the continent. The central approach was to “compete, deter, prepare” in order to sustain American long term military advantage. The large amount of joint exercises with allies in the region, while costly, demonstrated stake and commitment to the region. Such exercises, particularly for the Baltic states, increased regional readiness and interoperability capabilities. Security cooperation also included a special focus on malign influence operations.

The increased focus on China, it was stated, did not change US commitment to Europe, with force numbers in Europe increasing; the upcoming force posture review would, in all likelihood, not see a troop reduction in Europe.

Addressing concerns over increased unpredictability as part of US military strategy, it was noted that US activities in Europe were coordinated and calculated as not to cause miscommunication and misinterpretation. Russia was often told about exercises in advance, but the notice was a double-edged sword with Russian media accusing the US of provocation. If an operation was believed to too inflammatory, it may be moved or minimized. Conversely, operations could be ramped up if generating pressure was the goal.

Great Power interests in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic

The conference's **third session** “Great power interests in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic” addressed the deteriorating security climate and increased geopolitical competition in the region. The discussion clearly illustrated how Northern Europe was on the front lines of some of the world's most important geopolitical developments, including the defense of the international rule-based order.

Panelists raised several concerns, including the lack of trust in American engagement and power projection, particularly after the withdrawal from Afghanistan; the lack of a UK strategy for the region and its tilt to the Indo-Pacific; and Europe's inability to invest sufficiently in its defence and to provide security for the region. Germany was a loyal ally but lacked a strategic mindset and willingness to act quickly when needed. Furthermore, though France had recently started several initiatives in the Baltic Sea region, it remained uncertain if this interest was long-term. At the same time, Russia was on the offense in the Arctic and Baltic, with an emotional attachment to both and a record of using military force upon its neighbors. China was stepping up its interests

and presence while articulating an increasingly assertive behavior in Europe in general, and in the Arctic in particular.

Speakers stressed the need for credible deterrence today: There was no more time to sit around and talk!

The Nordic countries needed to frame their strategic thinking within the context of a single front running from Alaska, over Canada and the North Atlantic, through the Nordics, and down to the Baltic states. The United States was indisputably focused on China. Europe therefore had to stand ready to supplement the US for its own defense. A withdrawal from the North Atlantic could be a reality one day!

Nearby great powers such as the UK, France, and Germany needed to develop persistent engagement for the Baltic Sea area and the Arctic and provide deterrence in a careful manner. Watching and waiting was simply not enough. Readiness and reinforcement must be improved. It was emphasized that there was a lot that the UK and France could provide through joint leadership, supported by Germany and a clear dialogue with the US on burden-sharing.

Europe as first responder

The conference's **fourth and final session** assessed the current and potential future capabilities of Europe providing for its own regional security.

Europe as a first responder was called "long overdue." It was suggested that first responder capabilities could be categorized into three tiers:

Tier 1: Europe currently had the capacity to be a first responder with low reliance on the US when conducting humanitarian, anti-terror, and peace keeping operations at the lower end of military resources, equal to many of the on-going CSDP missions.

Tier 2: To be a first responder for more high-end military missions and training missions, Europe lacked key enablers for deployment such as airlift, air-to-air refueling, command and control, etc. This could be addressed by providing necessary duplications with the US, within a NATO or EU framework.

Tier 3: Europe relied heavily on the US in demanding, large-scale operations and great power competition where European states could join coalitions of the willing and ad-hoc formats, or act within NATO.

At a minimum, Europe needed to become a first responder in tiers one and two and could make better use of regional cooperation within for instance the JEF or Nordefco to build capabilities, share threat assessments, and cooperate on operational planning. The EU also possessed a strong hand in its broad tool kit of non-military measures such as sanctions and foreign aid, which could provide a sustainable response if the political will was present. A more ambitious level would be establishing a highly operational

European Force by 2030, able to conduct multi-domain tasks in full interoperability with the US if needed.

In defending Europe's territorial integrity, Germany had to be the backbone for military and political reasons. The US was shifting to defend interests in Asia and only maintain deterrence in Europe while the UK was withdrawing most its land forces from the continent, making the Bundeswehr crucial for the reinforcement of the Europe's eastern flank and the defense of continental Europe. However, Germany had little appetite to become Europe's major land army. Therefore, Nordic and Baltic states needed to bring concrete proposals to Germany; smaller states could not wait around for Germany to act. For instance, the Framework Nation Concept could be revived with Germany as the lead nation for regional capability development. If the Franco-German axis did not articulate and implement a defence strategy, Europe's ambitions of strategic autonomy would be dead on arrival.

Europe also needed to double-down on what it did best: fundraising and procurement. Substantial investment in defense equipment was needed to close gaps in interoperability and readiness levels. The EU should consider a recovery fund for defence procurement to fill necessary gaps. New technologies were particularly rife for collaboration and procurement as there were few entrenched national interests and regulation hindering intra-European cooperation.

The US and Europe may have increasingly different security priorities (i.e. China vs Russia), but it did not mean they disagreed on the threats. Greater defense investment would prove to the US that Europe was not simply "nice to have" but was a powerful and essential asset to Washington.

Concluding reflections

New global power dynamics were the common thread throughout the conference. Like other parts of the world, Northern Europe had entered an era of heightened tensions. Developments elsewhere also risked spilling over and triggering a crisis in the region. To meet these inter-connected challenges, transatlantic security cooperation remained highly relevant, but it needed to adapt to new circumstances to be successful.

The underlying questions throughout the sessions were 1) the future of US commitment to European security and 2) if European strategic autonomy was the way forward. Regardless of how the future of burden-sharing looked, Europe needed, one way or the other, be able to provide for its own security. The time to start preparing was now.

In a new era of great power competition, it was no longer necessary for states to resort to open warfare to reach their goals, though direct military action was still on the table. States could continue to develop new means and tactics to project power and reach strategic goals below the threshold of outright warfare, blurring the line between peace, competition, crisis, and war. This future of warfare, combined with new technologies, raised questions about deterrence, de-escalation, and cross domain strategies and operations.