

Roundtable on Security and Defence in the Nordics – National Priorities and International Cooperation

Eva Hagström Frisell

The Nordic countries are in the process of strengthening national defence capabilities, while also promoting international defence cooperation to new levels. The deteriorating regional security situation and national constraints demand new solutions to old problems. What are the most pressing needs in the national defence efforts of the Nordic countries? What operational benefits can emerge from enhanced cooperation between the Nordic countries? What is the status of the transatlantic relationship and how should the Nordic countries adapt to changing US security and defence priorities?

On 23 May 2019, FOI's project on Northern European and Transatlantic Security (NOTS) held a roundtable to discuss these issues. Twenty security and defence experts from the Nordic countries participated in the gathering, which was held in Kista, Stockholm. Without attributing interventions to individual experts, the aim of this brief is to summarise the proceedings.

NATIONAL DEFENCE EFFORTS IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES – PRIORITIES AND CHALLENGES

The first panel addressed the national defence efforts of the Nordic countries. The first panellist claimed, somewhat provokingly, that Sweden's defence policy had contributed to a security deficit in the region. After having bought into the peace dividend in the post-Cold War period, the strategy of the current Minister of Defence was characterised as one of picking the low-hanging fruit to increase national defence capabilities, while promoting closer coordination with international partners, primarily the US and NATO. The Parliamentary Defence Commission's recent report, from May 2019, aims to improve the warfighting capability of the Swedish Armed Forces, and proposed how this could be achieved. However, failure to agree on the economic underpinnings of the proposal has left it somewhat in limbo, although an agreement between some of the political parties was later reached.

Norwegian defence authorities are in the middle of their process of preparing the next long-term defence agreement. At the same time, the country's politicians are debating a substantial increase in the defence budget. The second panellist stressed that in the next agreement Norway has to address three long-term uncertainties: Russia, the strength of the transatlantic Alliance, and the future defence budget. The current major shortfalls in Norwegian defence relate to force readiness, logistics, and training. Even an increase of the defence budget to 2 per cent of GDP could prompt a completely new defence concept.

The third panellist claimed that the Finnish Defence Forces were in better shape than ever. Finnish defence policy was characterised as having a high degree of continuity and broad support in society, due to the system of conscription and the concept of 'total' defence of the society. Its wartime defence forces amount to 280,000 fully-equipped soldiers. Finland has in recent years increased both the firepower of its air force and the readiness of its forces, while improving tactical mobility. The only major uncertainty relates to the future defence budget, which needs to finance the replacement of the F-18 fighter aircraft and the major navy vessels. Furthermore, the importance of a functioning international rules-based order and of international cooperation – with the Nordic countries, EU, other European states, and NATO, as well as the US – was underlined.

When it comes to cyber security, the fourth panellist stressed that in 2003 Norway became the first Nordic country to establish a strategy on the issue, and was then followed by the other Nordic countries. In general, these strategies tend to have a sectoral approach, which has to be combined with a responsibility to act. Moreover, in their work on cyber security, the different international cooperation formats have varying profiles. NORDEFECO, for example, has adopted a pragmatic approach that is delivering results in several areas, such as secure communications, intelligence-sharing, training, and exercises.



The subsequent discussion focused on the opportunities for enhancing cooperation in security and defence between the Nordic countries, in Europe, and with the US. All of the Nordic countries are experiencing an increase of military expenditure, but the question is whether that will be sufficient to build the required capabilities. For some countries, a more pertinent question relates to the need for a new concept for defence.

NORDIC DEFENCE COOPERATION – POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS

The second panel discussed the opportunities for enhanced Nordic cooperation on defence. The first panellist pointed out that Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, in 2014, represented a watershed in Danish security and defence policy. It led, among other things, to new Danish interest in NORDEFECO. Denmark promotes pragmatic cooperation in NORDEFECO, focusing on concrete outputs. Denmark further believes that closely linking Nordic cooperation to the transatlantic alliance is essential.

A conclusion from a recent Norwegian study that took an innovative approach to Nordic cooperation is that an outsider's view might reveal even more opportunities for cooperation than an insider's. Nordic cooperation furthermore constitutes a classic case of the collective-action problem. According to the second panellist, there are few limitations to Nordic defence cooperation. The Nordic countries do not need to balance Russia, but should focus on enhancing national and combined capabilities through cooperation.

The Finnish approach to Nordic defence cooperation is that it must be threat-driven, focus on operational effectiveness, and increase deterrence. The 2017 legislation on providing and receiving support not only relates to Sweden, but is also open to other countries. According to the third panellist, trust – both at the political and societal level – and sufficient national capabilities are the two key components for effective Nordic defence cooperation.

The ensuing discussion suggested that incremental, pragmatic, and innovative steps could be fruitful in building trust among the Nordic countries. Nordic defence cooperation could also constitute – together with other measures – a form of hedging against decreased American engagement in Europe. At the same time, cooperative efforts are limited by the lack of national resources, the different interests and strategic cultures between the Nordic countries, and the lack of common defence planning.

THE TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONSHIP – THE FUTURE ROLE OF THE US IN NORDIC SECURITY AND DEFENCE

The third panel addressed the topical question of the future of US engagement in the Nordic region. The first panellist stressed that the study of transatlantic relations entails many aspects. It can focus, e.g., on NATO as an organisation, or the concrete US commitment of troops and bases in Europe. It is also important to note that the current situation is not equivalent to the Cold War. Despite the return of geopolitics, the main differences between now and then are that China is the main US adversary, the US cannot play Russia off against China, and the US has its own interests in being present in Europe, for example for supporting operations in Africa and the Middle East.

The second panellist argued that the return of power politics and geopolitical conflict means that values and trust are no longer the starting point of transatlantic relations. US security and defence relationships will increasingly focus on strategic interests. In addition, it is important to note that power politics also reaches out beyond geographical control to logistical infrastructure, financial power, and democratic vulnerabilities. Conflict will enter into new dimensions, while China is an emerging actor that has not had a significant presence in Europe until now, which Europe will have to address.

The third panellist argued that the previously robust transatlantic relationship is at risk, due to the unpredictability of the US presidency in the short term, combined with long-term uncertainty about US engagement in Europe. At the same time, the panellist stressed that the US military presence in Europe is stronger today than before 2014. As small states, the Nordic countries need to cooperate in their relationship with the US and in other institutional frameworks. The Nordic countries should focus on becoming first responders in a crisis and ensure the security of supply in the region.

The final discussion concluded that the Nordic countries are attractive defence partners for the US, both for as long as Russia represents a threat to NATO and the countries apply their effort to the collaboration. The question, however, is whether the US will have the resources to support the Nordic countries in the event of a simultaneous conflict with China. Another important issue is how the Nordic countries can develop a strategic approach towards China's increasing influence in Europe and beyond.