



TEPSA POLICY PAPER

'NORDIC DEFENCE COOPERATION – INSPIRATION FOR THE EU OR A LESSON IN MATCHING EXPECTATIONS?'

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1. THE NORDICS: NEW DEFENCE VISIONARIES FOR THE EU?

The idea of deepening defence cooperation among the Nordic countries may still come as a surprise to many, all the more so as these countries now seem to be leaders in this field. Not only do they have practically daily concrete examples of cooperation – such as the 3-week training exercise in joint air surveillance in the Icelandic airspace in February 2014 – but also a recently-adopted political vision for the future development of this cooperation.

The contrast with EU defence cooperation seems remarkable indeed. In December 2013 the European Council was supposed to get defence policy back on the table again after several years of relative silence regarding this aspect of European integration. While defence policy questions did indeed occupy a central role in the meeting, the results were not particularly surprising. The European Council identified priority actions: increasing the effectiveness, visibility and impact of CSDP; enhancing the development of capabilities and strengthening Europe's defence industry, and promised to assess concrete progress on all issues in June 2015, providing further guidance.² Observers were indeed warning against expecting too much from this meeting: while, for instance, a common strategic vision would be needed, it was seen as being far from realistic to hope that all of the expectations would be met.³

Meanwhile, a defence vision did emerge, but in the Northern part of Europe. The five Nordic countries agreed and adopted a vision for Nordic defence cooperation at the Nordic Defence Ministerial in Helsinki on the 4 December 2013. The vision, the ministers stated, will: “form the basis for the political guidance of the Nordic defence cooperation as we move towards 2020”.

For many, this may come as a surprise. After all, the Nordic countries are usually seen as ‘soft’ civilian power builders, peacekeepers or mediators, and when the ‘Nordic model’ is evoked, it usually denotes welfare policies. Now, however, a distinct Nordic model of strengthened defence cooperation emerges, including at times far-reaching discussions on joint ownership of defence equipment or organising joint air and maritime surveillance.⁴ This is surprising

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² European Council Conclusions, European Council 19/20 December 2013. EUCO 217/13 CO EUR 15 CONCL 8 <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?l=EN&t=PDF&gc=true&sc=false&f=ST%20217%202013%20INIT&r=http%3A%2F%2Fregister.consilium.europa.eu%2Fpd%2Fen%2F13%2Fst00%2Fst00217.en13.pdf>

³ Joe Coelmont, available at <http://www.euglobalstrategy.eu/nyheter/opinions/coelmont-the-desired-strategic-outcome-of-the-eu-council-on-defence>.

⁴ Hanna Ojanen (2013) ‘The Old-World Peripheries, North and South-East: Nordic and Turkish Views and Strategies’, in Huldt, Bo, Pekka Sivonen, Tomas Ries and Camilla Huldt (eds.) *The Emerging Global Security Environment. Strategic Yearbook 2012-2013*. The Swedish National Defence College and the Finnish National Defence University (pp. 117-134).

even for those well-acquainted with Nordic cooperation: for all its long history and achievements, it has traditionally excluded security and defence matters.

2. THE RISE OF NORDIC DEFENCE COOPERATION

While defence has been far from being the focal point of Nordic cooperation – after all, the different security policy orientations of the five countries made this field rather sensitive – particularly during the Cold War – it has never been totally absent, either. The Nordic defence ministers met regularly already in the 1960s, mainly to discuss cooperation in the field of UN peacekeeping. However, since the early 1990s, questions of defence cooperation started to come up: the meeting agenda gradually enlarged to, for example, cooperation in the arms industry, plus research and joint procurement.

With Finland and Sweden joining the EU in 1995, and in particular with the rapid moves within the European Union in the years 1996-2003 towards a common security and defence policy, the Nordic countries had even less impediments to also cooperating among themselves in this field.

After the period 2003-2004, progress in European defence was no longer that visible. In the North, meanwhile, it was. The commanders-in-chief of Finland, Norway and Sweden identified in 2008 specific areas for cooperation. In 2009, a cooperation structure for Nordic defence cooperation, NORDEFECO, was established, comprising five cooperation areas: strategic development, capabilities, human resources and education, training and exercises, and operations.

Also in 2009, Thorvald Stoltenberg, a prominent former Norwegian politician, was commissioned by the Nordic foreign ministers to list proposals for cooperation in foreign and security policy. The list is impressive, and worth citing in full. It comprises 13 proposals:

- A Nordic Stabilisation Task Force,
- Nordic cooperation on surveillance of Icelandic airspace,
- A Nordic maritime monitoring system,
- A Maritime response force,
- A Satellite system for surveillance and communications,
- Nordic cooperation on Arctic issues,
- A Nordic resource network to protect against cyber-attacks,
- A disaster response unit,
- A war crimes investigation unit,
- Cooperation between foreign services,
- Military cooperation on transport, medical services, education, materiel and exercise ranges,
- An amphibious unit,
- A Nordic declaration of solidarity.⁵

The list could be seen as literally suggesting mere proposals or ideas for further debate. There was, after all, nothing profoundly new in them. In the distinct Nordic way, proposals often

⁵ Thorvald Stoltenberg, Nordic cooperation on foreign and security policy. Proposals presented to the extraordinary meeting of Nordic foreign ministers in Oslo on 9 February 2009.

Thorvald Stoltenberg, available at http://www.mfa.is/media/Frettatilkynning/Nordic_report.pdf



stem from something that is actually already taking place, that is anchored in the segment of society concerned and that can be expected to take off. All cooperation furthermore rests on the solid basis of the outstanding legitimacy of Nordic cooperation, the result of its long historical legacy. Compared to other forms of international cooperation, citizens seem almost to give a *carte blanche* to politicians when operating in this field. Opinion poll results in Finland showed in 2012 an unbelievable 91% support for Nordic defence cooperation.⁶

Against this background, it is interesting to see how even the potentially controversial proposals of Stoltenberg were actually put into practice. At first, a solidarity declaration, particularly when presented as *binding* – sounding in effect somewhat like a *defence alliance* – was considered problematic. Some politicians were quick to say that there was no actual need for such a formalisation as it would ‘go without saying’ that the Nordics would help each other in need. Still, the Nordic foreign ministers in 2011 gave a solidarity declaration, stating that: “Should a Nordic country be affected, the others will, upon request from that country, assist with relevant means. The intensified Nordic cooperation will be undertaken fully in line with each country’s security and defense policy and complement existing European and Euro-Atlantic cooperation”. To take some of the possible edge off such a declaration, these sentences were introduced by a stress on how *natural* such action really is and on how the factual scope of implementation would in all likelihood revolve around threats other than classic attacks by a third state: “On the basis of common interest and geographical proximity it is natural for the Nordic countries to cooperate in meeting the challenges in the area of foreign and security policy in a spirit of solidarity. In this context, Ministers discussed potential risks inter alia natural and man-made disasters, cyber and terrorist attacks.”⁷

The second problematic issue was that of air surveillance, particularly the concrete case of Iceland where NATO has taken on this function. After intensive debates, especially in Finland, even this activity was decided upon, although once again it had to be carefully framed. The three-week Iceland Air Meet exercise in February 2014 is a Nordic exercise comprising Finnish fighter jets and helicopters, fighters from Sweden and Norway, air fuelling capacity from Sweden, the Netherlands and the US. Such an activity, as common-sense as it could appear in the light of the Stoltenberg proposals and the actual need to help Iceland in this – could not be framed as proper air surveillance. Rather it was framed as training, or as an exercise in cooperation with unarmed fighters, running parallel with the NATO air surveillance operation, of which Norway is in charge on this occasion, and where NATO Combined Air Operations Centre Uedem, Germany, provides the coordination. From NATO’s point of view, mixing the two was not a good idea. Seen from Finland, the exercise could not be framed as something that brings Finland closer to NATO, nor could it be framed as something that would challenge NATO, or the EU for that matter, into thinking that Nordic cooperation could somehow be a substitute for these. Politicians would thus highlight that such an exercise does not *contradict* but *complements* EU and NATO activities, and could thus focus, when presenting the exercise, on practicalities, such as the (incidental) possibility to help the Icelandic coastal guard, while there anyway.⁸

⁶ The Advisory Board for Defence Information, ‘Finns’ opinions on Foreign and Security policy, Defence and Security issues’, available at http://www.defmin.fi/files/2248/Survey_in_english_28_11_2012.pdf.

⁷ <http://www.formin.fi/public/default.aspx?contentid=217312>

⁸ YLE news 31 January 2014

http://yle.fi/uutiset/ilmavoimat_harjoittelee_ismannissa_taistelulentoja_ja_kansainvalista_yhteistyota/7061106?ref=leiki-uu



The caution no doubt also stems from outsiders' reactions to deepening Nordic defence cooperation – as Forsberg notes, Russia first showed some suspicion, particularly if there was a clear connection to NATO, while the US was first critical too, because of the possibility of loosening loyalty to NATO. Even the general public appears doubtful: half of the otherwise very enthusiastic Finns actually opposed the Icelandic air surveillance operation when asked in 2012.⁹

While some remnants of traditional caution in framing joint Nordic activities remain, what is new is the more pronounced promotion of its results. Not only have the EU and NATO made references to the Nordic model in defence cooperation: even the Nordic politicians themselves have started to put it forward more than they had done previously. To give one example, the Finnish Minister of Defence Carl Haglund in his recent speech in the USA made special reference to the signing of the NORDEFECO "Vision 2020" at the December Defence Ministerial in Helsinki, as sending "a strong signal of political commitment of taking the work further". He particularly mentioned the growing interest from the outside in contributing to NORDEFECO's activities. At the same time, when describing the flexibility of the structure and activities, he also affirmed the principle of aiming to create tangible results, firstly within the NORDEFECO structure, and only thereafter inviting external participation on a case-by-case basis. Such a gentle way of drawing a borderline between the Nordics and others is also recurrent in Nordic cooperation.

While admitting that: "NORDEFECO is by no means the only efficient example of this type of work", the minister came to the conclusion by arguing that: "experience shows that multinational cooperation is more effective and easier in small groupings, where less time is spent on negotiating and more in doing. I believe this factor has contributed to the rise of regional defense cooperation formations. Nations may have differing strategic policy choices, i.e. be allied or non-allied, yet a range of things that can be accomplished; from operations to training and exercises, armaments cooperation, and even in capabilities development. Actually, regional cooperation can offer new choices."¹⁰

3. SUBREGIONAL COOPERATION – THE ONLY HOPE FOR DEFENCE INTEGRATION IN EUROPE?

The Nordic defence cooperation can be seen as a good example of the practical implementation of such general ideas or goals as pooling and sharing. Yet, compared to the idea of an ESDP covering the entire Union, such 'mini-defence unions' also come with clear risks. These include notably duplication of capabilities, strategic disconnection between the actors and even increasing mistrust caused by the formation of closed smaller circles. Differentiation in this field has its problems: it would weaken the already frail unity, it leaves some countries behind, and may confuse the external world as to who is part of what and who the Union represents.¹¹

⁹ Forsberg 2013, "The rise of Nordic defence cooperation: a return to regionalism?" *International Affairs* vol. 89 (5) (p. 1177).

¹⁰ Remarks of the Minister of Defence of Finland Carl Haglund, The Atlantic Council of the United States, January 2014, available at

http://www.defmin.fi/ajankohtaista/puheet/puolustusministeri_carl_haglundin_esitelma_atlantic_council_of_the_united_states_acus_-tilaisuudessa.5748.news

¹¹ Behr and Ojanen (2014) see above.



Still, there are good grounds to single out regional defence formations in the development of European defence cooperation. It is often seen that progress in security and defence can only come through some kind of differentiated integration: not all member states are likely to be ready for such cooperation because of the sensitivities of the field and because of the marked differences between the member states' defence policies. Indeed, the treaties provide many different forms of differentiation for this: constructive abstention, enhanced cooperation, delegation of missions, permanent structured cooperation – but of these, only constructive abstention has actually been used, and even then only once. Instead, bilateral and regional cooperation seems to flourish outside the treaties, having led to what Valasek has called 'islands of cooperation'¹², sometimes with a link to the European Defence Agency EDA. These comprise bilateral defence treaties, multilateral and regional cooperation, joint acquisition of military platforms and capabilities, joint battle groups, joint ammunition storages, exchanges, joint defence colleges, and the many examples include Baltic cooperation, Benelux Defco and the Visegrád group.¹³

The Nordic framework serves as a good illustration of why such frameworks may be successful. Cooperation is not only based on the goal of saving money in a dire economic situation: other factors also play a role, including a common threat perception or a common identity, factors that are more easily found in groups of countries with a longer history of cooperation and geographical proximity. The economic side might not even be decisive in the end. As Forsberg points out, the economic rationale of securing a functioning defence for the small states in an environment of shrinking budgets and increasing costs certainly plays a role. When asking about the success of Nordic defence cooperation in concrete terms, however, the estimates are cautious: not much in terms of savings can actually be shown, at least not yet. In the Nordic context, what also pushes the countries together are geostrategic changes in the security environment. These would include the reduced US reduced military presence (particularly in Iceland), Russia's military rebuilding and great power aspirations and the growing importance of the Arctic. At the same time, the 'Nordic identity' is a push factor too: it facilitates informal cooperation and is a label that makes it easier for the decision-makers to sell international military cooperation to domestic audiences, as Forsberg notes.¹⁴

Still, even this cooperation is not without its troubles and complications. As Forsberg points out, even in the Nordic setting, a lack of trust and bureaucratic obstacles such as different planning cycles or rules for classified information may hinder cooperation. Moreover, he sees a lack of leadership that cannot be remedied because Nordic cooperation is so strongly based on the idea of equality.¹⁵ And, quite naturally, changes in the environment work as a push factor only if perceived and interpreted similarly. In reality, not even countries geographically and culturally close to each other necessarily draw the same conclusions from changes in their security environment. The five Nordics also differ as to the degree of interest in this cooperation; Denmark perhaps has been driving it the least.

¹² Tomas Valasek, *Surviving Austerity: the case for a new approach to EU military collaboration*. Centre for European Reform, April 2011, available at http://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/rp_981-141.pdf.

¹³ Timo Behr and Hanna Ojanen (2014) 'Differentiated integration in security and defence: The only way forward?', in Jokela, Juha (ed.) *Multi-speed Europe? Differentiated integration in the external relations of the European Union*. FIIA Report 38. Helsinki: Ulkopoliittinen instituutti, available at <http://www.fia.fi/fi/publication/392/multi-speed-europe/>

¹⁴ Forsberg, Tuomas (2013) (pp. 1161-1181).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, (p. 1179).



What this case shows in the end is that in the context of European integration, EU-wide and regional undertakings may be taking turns in bringing defence integration further. A larger framework is a good background and even a legitimiser for smaller-scale cooperation, while cooperation in smaller groups may achieve more in practical terms and thus inspire others, gradually becoming a general model.

4. NORDIC SPECIALITY: INSTEAD OF VISIONING, MATCHING EXPECTATIONS

Nordic defence cooperation contributes to the process of defence integration in Europe. Nordic and EU defence cooperation and integration clearly proceed via interaction; they can take turns in leading the development, but they also need each other. What the contribution of the Nordic defence cooperation model exactly consists of deserves, however, closer attention. At a surface level, the recent Nordic vision might be such an element, particularly as European defence clearly lacks one. Yet, when looking closer, the achievement of a political vision for defence cooperation may not be what matters. There might not be that much of a vision in that vision, either. The vision to form the basis for the political guidance of the Nordic defence cooperation, labelled “Nordic Defence Cooperation 2020” states:

*“By 2020 we envision an enhanced political and military dialogue on security and defence issues and actively seek for new possibilities for cooperation. We create efficient and cost-effective solutions based on a shared understanding of our mutual potential and challenges. We are committed to enhanced cooperation and coordination in capability development and armaments cooperation. We coordinate activities in international operations and capacity building, human resources, education, training and exercises. We seek to increase pooling of capabilities and to deepen cooperation in the area of life-cycle support of our defence inventories”.*¹⁶

Rather than a vision capable of inspiring, the text reads like a description of a situation that could already be that of today’s, in the typically Nordic tradition. Calling this a ‘vision’ seems more of an effort at adopting a language and a mode of proceeding that is actually not theirs but rather European or transatlantic.

Integration projects in the EU typically build on visions, and nourish off expectations: the EU feeds such expectations in order to construct a drive for development. The CSDP and CFSP are good examples of construction by expectation; the promises would be that the EU could deal with conflicts in its neighbourhood, crises around the globe, even strengthen other organisations and international norms. Continuous difficulties in matching these expectations keep progress at bay. Often, as a matter of fact, the EU has had to transpose the expectations, for instance, gearing them away from international influence towards more internal scopes, as when the EU battle groups are presented as a way to enhance interoperability and national capacities instead of having an impact on actual crises.

In the Nordic context, not much is promised, and the expectations are kept low. Here then is a *major* difference between the two modes of defence cooperation, the Nordic and the European; they are different in nature and have separate identities. This is also why there can be a relevant Nordic contribution to the European project: a different way of proceeding, not driven by high visions but rather by low-key everyday needs, highlighting what already exists,

¹⁶ Adopted at the Nordic Defence Ministerial in Helsinki on the 4 December 2013, Press Release, Ministry of Defence of Finland, 4 December 2013, available at http://www.defmin.fi/en/topical/press_releases/2013/nordic_defence_cooperation_2020.5697.news



instead of visioning what there could or should be in the future. Thus, NORDEFECO is presented by a simple sentence noting that its “main aim and purpose is to strengthen the participant nations’ national defence, explore common synergies and facilitate efficient common solutions”.¹⁷ This sounds clear and understandable; moreover, the inside, or domestic concerns, are clearly put first. This low-key advancing along the lines of “flexible, pragmatic, transparent”¹⁸ cooperation might also be a good idea for the EU.

¹⁷ NORDEFECO homepage, available at <http://www.nordefco.org/>

¹⁸ See press release above, footnote 16.



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