Strengthening partnerships: Nordic defence collaboration amid regional security concerns

While still nascent, Nordic defence co-operation within the NORDEFCO framework has been increasing in recent years, driven in large part by the growing tensions with Russia and encouraged by the United States and NATO. Erik Brattberg reports

Driven by Russia's growing military assertiveness in the Baltic region in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, defence collaboration between the five Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden has intensified in recent years under the common Nordic Defence Co-operation (NORDEFCO) umbrella.

After decades of informal defence co-operation, NORDEFCO was established in 2009 to strengthen national defence capabilities, promote synergies, and promote effective collective solutions. It is important to note that NORDEFCO remains fundamentally a co-operation framework rather than an organisation with a standing secretariat. While agreements are made by consensus, there is also a high degree of flexibility, with co-operation frequently occurring both bilaterally or trilaterally between the five members.
Co-operation currently spans across four areas: operations, training, capabilities, and armaments. A joint article signed by the Nordic defence ministers in 2015 about the value and unity of Nordic defence co-operation demonstrates the growing significance attached to NORDEFCO in the Nordic states. According to the defence ministers, closer Nordic defence co-operation "contributes to increase regional security and raises the bar for military incidents".

Ongoing key NORDEFCO efforts include enhancing co-operation on air surveillance and information exchange by sharing radar data to improve regional situational awareness. This issue is a priority given the upswing in incidents involving Russia in the skies over the Nordic-Baltic region over the past few years. In 2016 a secure communications system between the Nordic capitals was established, along with a new project to map regional security incidents and propaganda activities. Work on the possibility of extending the secure communications system to the Baltic states is currently being explored.

The Nordic states have also reached an 'Easy Access' agreement to enable greater access to each other's air, land, and maritime territories during peacetime. This co-operation is currently limited to unarmed military aircraft, but could potentially be extended to armed aircraft in the future. There are also agreements in place between Denmark, Norway, and Sweden on the use of...
alternative landing bases in the case of inclement weather conditions in order to promote efficiency and aerial safety.

In 2015 several NORDEFCO Action Plans (NAPs) were developed to advance the Vision 2020 goals agreed on in 2013 for specific NORDEFCO areas, such as policy, capabilities, international operations, armament, as well as training and exercises. The Vision 2020 plan mentions increased joint international operations and more expansive training and exercises between the Nordic armed forces, expansion in logistics resource planning, and the establishment of a Nordic-Baltic Battalion Task Force (BTF) as a regional rapid response unit.

A USMC amphibious assault vehicle prepares to make a beach landing during Exercise 'Cold Response 2016' in Namsos, Norway, on 3 March 2016. The United States has been increasing its profile in Nordic military exercises in recent years in response to the Ukraine crisis. (US Army)

Political and military dialogue between the Nordic capitals has intensified in recent years. Ministerial meetings now occur twice annually, with additional meetings with the chiefs of defence, the military committee, and the political directors regularly taking place in between. The chairmanship rotates on an annual basis, with Finland holding it in 2017.

Besides intra-Nordic security co-operation, closer co-operation and dialogue is taking place between the Nordic and Baltic countries (the so-called 'NB8') amid growing security concerns over Russia. For the Baltic states, co-operation with their Nordic neighbours presents an opportunity to bolster their own standards and strengthen regional security. In a joint statement in 2015 the eight Nordic and Baltic defence ministers agreed on greater collaboration in cyber security and operations as well as developing bilateral or multilateral acquisitions of armaments. The defence
ministers also pledged to "continue to explore new possibilities for co-operation and, through these measures, we take our responsibility to strengthen the security in the Nordic and Baltic region".

Increasingly, activities under NORDEFCO are being extended to the Baltic militaries under the umbrella of joint Nordic-Baltic defence projects. Guidelines for enhancing co-operation with the Baltic states were developed by NORDEFCO's Military Coordination Committee in 2016. However, there is little appetite to formally bring Baltic states into NORDEFCO as full members. NORDEFCO is also developing ties with other third parties, including the Northern Group, which consists of the eight Nordic and Baltic states plus Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and the United Kingdom. During the Swedish chairmanship in 2016 high-level meetings took place in Stockholm with officials, such as the US deputy secretary of defence, Robert Work, and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.

The US role in the Nordic-Baltic region has also increased following the Ukraine crisis, including a higher US profile in Nordic military exercises. Washington is supportive of NORDEFCO as well as bilateral Swedish-Finnish defence co-operation and deeper Nordic-Baltic collaboration. This growing engagement by the United States in the region's security has been highly welcomed by the Nordic capitals. Both non-NATO countries Finland and Sweden signed their own separate defence co-operation memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with the United States in 2016. Further underscoring the deepened US-Nordic ties was the first-ever US-Nordic Leaders' Summit in Washington in May 2016. What the incoming Trump administration's level of engagement towards the Nordic-Baltic region will be remains to be seen, however.

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**Operations**

International operations have been a key driver for closer Nordic defence collaboration in recent years. The experience in Afghanistan in particular - where all Nordic forces contributed to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) - illustrated the need for greater co-ordination on international operations, such as information sharing, medical evacuation (medevac), and logistics. Nordic co-operation in Afghanistan has logically focused on medevac helicopters, logistics, and the operational mentoring of the Afghan security forces.

With the drawdown of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, efforts have been made to jointly capture lessons learned from the experience. Meanwhile, the Nordic states continue to provide training and assistance to NATO's Operation 'Resolute Support' in Afghanistan.

The worsening of the regional security situation in the Nordic-Baltic area also means that the focus has shifted back from out-of-area missions to territorial defence tasks. That said, international operations still remain a core component of NORDEFCO co-operation.

Ongoing efforts focus on exploring how to better co-ordinate Nordic contributions to international operations, especially UN missions, with a view to strengthening the sustainability of such efforts. A particular area of priority is of Nordic contributions with an airborne transport capacity to UN missions on a rotational basis. In June 2016 Denmark, Norway, and Sweden signed a letter of intent with Belgium and Portugal on contributing with a tactical air transport capability on a rotational basis to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). The Nordic countries have agreed on rotational contributions of a tactical air transport capability in
Mali until the end of 2018. In addition, Nordic defence ministers agreed in November 2016 to continue support to the Eastern Africa Standby Force (EASF) initiated in 2009.

A Royal Norwegian Air Force C-130J Hercules transport aircraft arrives in Kidal, northern Mali, in support of the UN's MINUSMA mission in February 2016. The Nordic countries have agreed on rotational contributions of a tactical air transport capability to the UN's MINUSMA mission until the end of 2018. (Norwegian MoD)

Denmark, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway deployed a Nordic-Baltic team to Georgia to assist with developing a joint training and evaluation centre as part of the NATO-Georgia package agreed on at the 2014 NATO summit in Wales. The Nordic countries have also been active in Ukraine as part of the Nordic-Baltic Assistance Programme (NBAP), focusing on anti-corruption, cyber defence, and operations as well as trainings and exercises.

The Nordic Battlegroup, one of the European Union's rapid-deployment battlegroups, which includes all Nordic and Baltic states except Denmark (which opts out of the EU's Common Defence and Security Policy), was on standby readiness in 2015.
Capabilities and procurement

Capabilities co-operation within NORDEFCO focuses on achieving certain operational, economic, and technological advantages through the assessments of national development plans and processes.

Key priorities include achieving co-operation on logistics and lifecycle support for equipment, as well as joint maintenance and logistics support for the tactical air transport aircraft. Other ongoing priorities are developing joint long-range air surveillance sensors and a common Nordic military uniform. Co-operation on logistics is particularly important for the eventual establishment of the Nordic-Baltic BTF as envisioned by NORDEFCO's Vision 2020 plan. Going forward, joint procurement in certain capability areas aimed at achieving economics of scale is a priority.

Increasingly, NORDEFCO has been expanded to not only deal with issues of military interoperability and armaments issues, but also with defence industrial co-operation. In March 2015 the Nordic countries agreed to deepen the industry component of Nordic defence co-operation, including developing and improving procurement procedures. This industry dialogue with the Joint Nordic Defence Industry Cooperation Group, a co-ordination body for the Nordic countries' national defence industrial associations, is led by NORDEFCO's armament co-operation unit.
A Norwegian F-16 Fighting Falcon aircraft takes off from Keflavik air base in Iceland during the Nordic cross-border training exercise 'Iceland Air Meet 2014'. (Norwegian MoD)

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