

Avoiding War: How Should Northern Europe Respond to the US-Russian Rivalry?

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Abstract

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Northern Europe has increasingly aligned its national defence arrangements with the United States and NATO. This contrasts with the Cold War period, when Sweden and Finland were neutral, and Norway and Denmark put self-imposed restraints on their NATO memberships. Providing Northern Europe with a stable "buffer" between East and West, this so-called Nordic balance kept the United States and Soviet Union at an arm's length. Since 2014 however, Northern Europe has *de facto* slid from "buffer" to "springboard" for US forces. This slide may counter Russian assertiveness, but there is also reason to argue that it may increase regional tension and unpredictability. If so, this may leave the entire region with less rather than more security. Using the case of Norway, it is argued that too close an alignment with NATO may have accelerated Norway's role as a "springboard" for US forces. This is because cost-intensive reforms needed to accommodate US expectations abroad have also exacerbated critical vulnerabilities at home. Increased dependency on US forces thereby makes difficult the balance between deterrence and restraint *vis-à-vis* Russia.

Keywords: *Security; military; Norway; Russia; United States; NATO; Sweden; Finland.*

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1. Introduction

Using the case of Norway, this article explores how Northern Europe can respond to Russian aggression without creating a security dilemma on their doorstep.¹ Since Russia's war against Georgia in 2008 and its annexation of Crimea in 2014, Sweden,

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Finland, Poland, Germany and the Baltic states have been exposed to military rearmament, hostile intelligence gathering, and considerable power rivalry. This is mainly due to a deteriorating security situation in the Baltic Sea Region, where the United States and 19 other NATO members have deployed four multinational battlegroups to Poland and the Baltic states. As one of the most contentious regions in Europe, Russia argues that the presence of the US and NATO significantly reduces its strategic warning time.² This has put Russian commands in Murmansk and St. Petersburg, and their subordinate fleets in the Barents and Baltic Seas, on high alert, and subsequently legitimised unexpected ‘snap exercises’, dangerous brinkmanship and violations of Swedish and Finnish airspace on the part of Russia.

From a US perspective, however, military firmness is meant to stabilise the region, partly by deepening military cooperation with Sweden and Finland because the Nordic territories provide US forces with a ‘strategic depth’ that makes regional deterrence more credible;³ and partly by deploying a *tripwire* of approximately 4500 NATO-troops from 20 member states along the Russian border to communicate resolve if the sovereignty of Poland, Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania is violated.

This “tit-for-tat” logic has spurred a new security dilemma in Northern Europe. Ironically, it leaves all the involved states and their inhabitants with less, rather than more security. How the two non-alignment states of Sweden and Finland, which are “trapped between neutrality and NATO”⁴ respond to this situation, will be a significant determinant in shaping the regional security situation. The core challenge seems to revolve around a typical rim state dilemma: How can we deter Russia while keeping a non-provocative posture? This dilemma became more acute after Russian forces twice violated Georgian and Ukrainian sovereignty in 2008 and 2014, raising questions about who would be next. In particular, subtle efforts to pursue political objectives through a spectre of military and non-military instruments in Ukraine, Georgia and the Baltic states has fuelled Western mistrust.

This anxiety has been exacerbated by Russia’s forward deployment of S-400 surface-to-air missiles and nuclear-capable missile systems to Kaliningrad, and by Russian jets occasionally flying dangerously close to civilian and military aircraft and vessels in the Baltic Sea.⁵ Russia’s offering Eurosceptic parties in Western Europe cooperation, loans, political cover and propaganda has added to this, as have findings from the United States’ Senate Committee on Intelligence, claiming that Russian cyber operations towards the US presidential election in 2016 “... were more extensive than the hack of the Democratic National Committee...”⁶

Managing tension can partly be achieved by tying US forces closer to Northern European defence arrangements, as in Sweden and Finland’s *Host Nation Support* arrangements with NATO and the US.⁷ It can also be done through a show of military force, as in the exercises carried out with nuclear-capable *B 52H* bombers and more than 100 western jetfighters not far from the Russian border.⁸ This kind of political communication signals deterrence, which is a way of scaring Russia into believing that potential costs will rapidly outweigh expected benefits if armed conflict breaks out.

The smaller states of Northern Europe therefore seem to emphasise deterrence over restraint. This strategy is not from a position of strength. Arguably, it stems from a position of weakness deeply rooted in national shortcomings not least inside Sweden's Armed Forces.⁹ The extent and tempo at which Sweden and Finland abandoned their role as buffer states between East and West is of an unprecedented magnitude.¹⁰ From their role as a stabilising bridge between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War, Sweden and Finland are – together with the previously sceptical NATO members Norway and Denmark – increasingly becoming key actors in a geopolitical standoff between the United States and Russia in Northern Europe.

In order to discuss how Northern Europe should respond to Russian aggression, this article uses Norway as a case. By scrutinising Norway's experience between 1998 and 2018, the article first describes NATO's effect on Norwegian security and defence policy. Thereafter, NATO alignment is viewed in relation to Norway's contemporary policy towards Russia. Finally, three implications with relevance to Northern Europe are deduced, with a particular emphasis on Sweden and Finland.

This approach allows us to analyse Northern Europe's security problem from a new angle: Rather than focusing on Russian assertiveness, the focus here is on Norway's alliance management. The key finding is that Norwegian alignment with NATO has energised its dependence on the US through Norway's attempts to be "a good ally" and "best-in-class". Loyal fulfilment of cost-intensive reforms for 'out-of-area' operations has led to chronic shortages of manpower, spare parts, and logistics at home. The implications of this is a national force that is more inclined to escalate minor crises with Russia. If not, a bilateral *fait accompli* may occur before US reinforcements arrive. Time has become a critical factor. This logic provides grim prospects for regional diplomatic relations with Russia. As Sweden and Finland slide towards the West, this situation deserves attention.

The findings, which are put forward later in the text, are important. They bring to the table broader security implications that go beyond positive assumptions of a "Swedish policy of deterrence", as presented by Fredrik Westerlund in 2017.¹¹ His well-crafted analysis should nevertheless be balanced by the importance of self-imposed restraints and assurances towards Russia. Changing Russia's behaviour cannot be achieved by threatening behaviour only. Crisis-management mechanisms incentivising confidence, cooperation and compromise are also needed. Here, Robert Dalsjø and Thomas Hultmark provide valuable insight into how "the carrot and the stick" needs to be balanced if Russia is to change its behaviour. Unfortunately, "a more offensive and proactive stance to the more traditional reactive and reticent tools" is currently emphasised,¹² and the crucial imperative of how to balance escalation with restraint is omitted from the discourse. Coupled with strategic guidelines from Sweden's *Military-Strategic Doctrine 2016*, which claims that crises should be addressed more offensively,¹³ a competitive zero-sum logic seems to be more important than providing security gains for Sweden, Finland and Russia. First, however, the art of alliance management needs to be explained theoretically.

2. Alliance Theory

One way to comprehend the impact of alliances is to describe small states' motives for membership. Stephen M. Walt's authoritative definition of alliances as "a formal or informal relationship between two or more sovereign states" is most commonly used.¹⁴ In our context however, this definition is too wide because Sweden and Finland are not NATO-members. As pointed out by Stein Rynning and Oliver Schmitt, it fails to grasp the fluid boundaries between formal allies, strategic partners, and like-minded friends. Defining alliances as "a formal or informal association of states for the (threat of) use of military force, in specified circumstances, against actors external to the alliance" is more appropriate.¹⁵ While elaborating on the Norwegian case, it allows us to keep two of NATO's most valuable partners in mind.

Of particular interest is the impact of alliances in war. In other words, will alliance membership make member states more secure, or less secure against a neighbouring state's military aggression? Most often, small states prefer alliances in order to balance a potential adversary. This is particularly so if adversaries are positioned along your border because such a deployment may pose an imminent threat if it serves the adversary's interest.¹⁶ However, smaller states may also choose to bandwagon in order to "secure strategic gains despite their material disadvantage".¹⁷ This may include self-imposed restraints that are meant to preclude provocation and suspiciousness. But no matter what a minor client state chooses, they will always have to address the perennial risk of being abandoned by their patron. This threat is also shared by the patron, which – according to Glenn Snyder's *Alliance Politics* – may become entrapped in wars initiated by a client state's fear of being abandoned.¹⁸

From a small state perspective therefore, alliance management is very much about balancing between a policy of invitation and a policy of restraint.¹⁹ To get "a hook in the nose" of a larger patron will inevitably equalise local power asymmetry *vis-à-vis* an assertive neighbour, thus providing a strong incentive to balance against the most dangerous threat.²⁰ But inviting allies may also cause unnecessary and excessive power rivalry and militarisation on the client's territory. Such a situation may easily induce a spiral of tension and mistrust, which again ends up in a security dilemma where all states – large and small – become less secure rather than more.²¹ A certain degree of bandwagoning towards potential adversaries may therefore be necessary, not least to preclude suspiciousness from neighbours who are easily provoked.

In theory as in practice therefore, finding the right balance between "the carrot and the stick" is difficult. This is particularly so when the client needs the patron more than the other way around. Smaller states that depend upon foreign aid are more anxious of being marginalised, which is why they often put aside myopic national interests for the sake of a common good together with the patron. Being perceived as a "free-rider" would be detrimental, as egoistic behaviour undermines the ties that bind larger and smaller states together in a common destiny. As a sign of obedience and loyalty therefore, clients are more inclined to accommodate allied injunctions

set forth by its patron. This may ultimately foster a shared sense of mutual respect, recognition and reciprocity for each other's security needs. It may even provide the client with more attention and access to the patron's ear. This is why, according to Walt, smaller states seek alliances with a larger state.

As seen from an external neighbour's perspective, this kind of alliance management is not without problems. This is because a client's benevolence towards its patron also leads to a shift in the local balance of power. The client will therefore have a common interest with the suspicious neighbour in keeping the level of militarisation as low as possible, almost as "a secret pact".²² But at the same time, obedience to a patron's expectations also needs to be displayed through firm commitments. Because of this, clients easily end up in situations where the patron becomes increasingly influential. Dependency on the patron therefore makes it difficult to balance between allied expectations and assurances towards an (increasingly) suspicious neighbour.

This may ultimately lead to a change in the security strategy of the small state. Rather than focusing on absolute security for the small state *and* its neighbour, 'security' becomes an indivisible asset in a 'relative zero-sum game', with the client and patron situated on one side, and an increasingly assertive neighbour on the other.

Based on these theoretical assumptions, it is likely that Norway's alliance management in NATO is characterised by a constant fear of US abandonment. This anxiety is a primary motive for gaining as much security as possible through a strategy of accommodation in NATO. Even though this may stir increased Russian apprehension, the unilateral quest for Norwegian security nevertheless invokes a stronger incentive for being perceived as "a good ally". This logic can be operationalised into four indicators. Put into a Norwegian context, the practical expression of this would be a constant striving for (1) attention and (2) access to decision making bodies in the US and NATO, and incentives for (3) loyalty and (4) obedience inside these institutional bodies.

3. NATO's Effect on Norway

Since the early 1990s, NATO has been instrumental in America's efforts to reform European forces into more deployable and combat-ready units that can sustain and protect themselves in 'out-of-area' operations.²³ Of particular importance are expeditionary qualities such as strategic deployability, tactical mobility and high readiness. These qualities have been pursued through various NATO defence programmes, such as *Defence Capability Initiative* (1998), *Prague Capability Commitment* (2002), *Smart Defence* (2011), and *Connected Forces Initiative* (2012). They are a programmatic expression of US expectations set forth by the Pentagon towards NATO clients in Europe. Throughout the 1990s and well into the new millennium, Norway has pursued an active downscaling and force reduction at home in order to reallocate resources for new investments. The rationale is, according to the Norwegian Ministry of Defence, based upon expectations of US assistance against Russia: "International

operations in an allied framework is an investment which is meant to ensure that also Norway receives allied reinforcements if we need it".²⁴

3.1 Attention

By actively accommodating the defence programmes above, Norway has increased its ability to share risks and burdens abroad. However, shifting from quantity to quality has also accelerated the financial imbalance between operating costs and new investments at home.²⁵ Meeting US expectations in NATO is nevertheless regarded as more important than maintaining a larger, more sustainable but less sophisticated force for self-help and territorial border defence only, a post-Cold War logic in effect when Russia was still seen as a partner in Northern Europe, until 2006–2007.

Reducing military capacity, even at the lower end of the conflict spectrum, is a strong symbol of NATO adjustment. Norway's response can therefore be seen as an effort to keep US leadership and interests alive in Europe, which during the 1990s involved burden and risk sharing in the Balkans. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, this has spiralled into a global commitment of accommodating US security requirements in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Mali, Libya and Niger, as well as in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. US discontent with its European allies, uttered through statements such as those made by senior Congress members following 9/11, made a particular impression:

Some Americans have lost confidence in the Alliance. Years of cuts in defense spending and failure to meet pledge after pledge to improve European military capabilities has left some Americans with doubts as to what our allies could realistically contribute The US did have confidence in a selected group of allies [following NATO's response to 9/11]. But it did not have confidence in the institution that is NATO.²⁶

By constructively participating in US led efforts to pool European defence resources, Norway stands forth as an example of how to manage allied obligations. Since the inauguration of NATO's *Defence Capability Initiative*, the ambition to ensure US relevancy has been of paramount importance. According to former Defence Minister (2001–2005) Kristin Krohn Devold, "To reach this goal, it is important for Norway to be among 'the best in the NATO class'. That is crucial for being counted on".²⁷ Examples of this are found in Norwegian Special Forces' assignments to mentor local security forces and militias in Afghanistan, Iraq, Jordan and Syria, which gained positive attention in the United States. Even more attention was gained by the sophisticated signal intelligence provided to US and Coalition forces during counterterrorist operations in ISAF (2003–2014), and by the risky air raids carried out on Muammar Gadhafi's command centre in densely populated Tripoli during the 2011 Libyan war.²⁸ Receiving positive credentials from US Congress members, such as "Best-in-class" and Gold star", is crucial for a small state that needs to nurture ties to a larger patron.²⁹

3.2 Access

Norway's alliance management in NATO also makes it easier to access US decision-making processes. Working from within cooperative processes rather than from the outside, Norway's national security interests can be voiced more clearly. The logic is simple but effective: By adapting to US expeditionary requirements abroad, Norwegian defence officials have been elevated into processes dominated by its key security provider, which is also the world's sole military superpower. Because Norway can deliver relevant capabilities that the United States needs in Central Asia or in the Middle East, Norwegian politicians and civil servants are given access to key policymakers in the White House, Pentagon and State Department, or even to the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, as was the case when Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg's visited President Donald Trump in January 2018.³⁰ Such events enable clients to cultivate policymakers and decision makers from within, not least patrons who – through Norwegian surveillance of Russian strategic submarines – are directly related to US security interests in Northern Europe.

The quest for access is consistent with comments made by former US Ambassador to NATO (2001–2005), Nicholas Burns. His claim that “Norway is a country that ‘punches above its weight’ – meaning it is a country that has an influence beyond the size of the country itself”,³¹ was largely because Norway deployed Special Forces to Afghanistan at an early stage after 9/11.³² The same recognition was also reiterated in 2016 when Defence Secretary (2015–2017) Ashton Carter praised Norway for its military reforms, and its valuable contribution in the “war against the Islamic State in Syria”. Following the Secretary, the Norwegian Defence Minister

... was part of a core group of members that I convened last year from the counter-ISIL coalition... Norway is taking seriously the challenges of this area and adapting its armed forces. The United States appreciates this commitment and stands by [Norway] to assist in any way we can.³³

Using NATO to enhance Norway's access to key US decision makers is also confirmed by defence officials in the Pentagon. As Europe's military transformation gained momentum after 9/11, officials from the Pentagon's Office of the Secretary of Defence claimed that Norway, due to its positive attitude, enjoyed “tremendous access to decision-making processes, not only in the Pentagon, but also in the State Department. A major part of this is due to your excellent reputation, particularly as a proactive country that takes transformation seriously”.³⁴

Norwegian benevolence towards US preferences is not a new approach. As pointed out by the two historians Rolf Tamnes and Knut Einar Eriksen, during the Cold War “... an important guidance in the Norwegian alliance policy was to seek influence by demonstrating a deliberate intention to co-operate”.³⁵ Spectacular events, such as the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001, the effort to protect Libyan civilians in 2011, or counter the Islamic State's rapid expansion in 2014, are typical

“windows of opportunities” to display, confirm and consolidate long-standing ties with the preeminent security provider against Russia.

3.3 Loyalty

Fearing US abandonment in Northern Europe, Norway’s alliance management is also incentivised by loyalty. By firmly supporting US proposals concerning how NATO-Europe may improve its scarce defence resources more effectively, Norway is able to undertake a constructive role in any consultation with US defence officials. On this basis, a more effective approach towards joint, common and multinational defence planning – and acquisition of increasingly expensive capabilities – can proceed. The outcome is potentially far larger than Norway, which spends 1.6 per cent of its GDP on defence, can afford alone. Norway’s long-term security motive is to maintain and strengthen bilateral ties with the US, as this makes it easier to balance Russia in the High North. Issue linkages between US injunctions on NATO’s defence programmes, burden sharing abroad, and critique of Russia, thereby explain much of Norway’s loyalty. Given Norway’s dependency on US forces, efforts to refine a common set of security interests across the Atlantic gives more security than pursuing myopic interests alone. The alternative of forging a territorial force will only have grave repercussions; US reciprocity in Northern Europe will neither be institutionalised nor revitalised if Norway becomes irrelevant to US security concerns abroad.³⁶

Loyalty is even more important as NATO’s defence programmes are launched by Norway’s closest ally. Uncertainty as to where the Trump administration may go in international politics makes a committed posture even more important.³⁷ A constructive approach thereby signifies Norwegian commitment to keeping NATO relevant. A dispiriting “two-tier NATO”, or even a more “fragmented NATO”,³⁸ could involve a dysfunctional division of labour that ultimately makes the Alliance less credible in Northern Europe. As Krohn Devold pointed out to the Norwegian Chief of Defence in 2002, “NATO [...] is our primary point of reference. Any national capability that does not have a function abroad is to be given low priority”.³⁹ Norwegian investments that provide for this flexibility have been a key imperative ever since. Fearing prospects of political and military marginalisation, it is crucial that Norway and the rest of NATO-Europe, according to Defence Minister (2013–2017) Ine M. Eriksen Søreide, “[looks] beyond its own borders in order to take co-responsibility for global security” – as “credible US engagement and leadership is vital”.⁴⁰

3.4 Obedience

Obedience to US injunctions has also allowed Norway to give up keeping a balanced force without exposing national security to intolerable risks. From being able to mobilise more than 400,000 troops from the civil society during the Cold War,⁴¹ the

present force structure consists of approximately 12,000 uniformed and 5,300 civilian personnel. The dramatic downsizing incentivises Norway to harmonise and integrate its defence plans with the United States inside the NATO-framework. In order to cope with declining defence budgets and escalating costs on more deployable troops, Norway obediently renounces a more sustainable force that otherwise would have provided national authorities more resilience in Northern Europe. Hence, collective arrangements in NATO also make it easier to change procurement policies towards increased role specialisation, e.g. on Special Forces, signal intelligence, submarines and maritime patrol aircraft.

According to Norwegian defence officials, this was one of the key reasons why Norway gave up its balanced force structure in the 1990s: “Even though the American *Defence Capability Initiative* would make a balanced force structure hard to maintain, it would at least enhance mutual trust and confidence”.⁴² Obedience to allied injunctions is as such an important institutional mechanism that makes NATO a unique institution, and upon which small states like Norway are investing an increasingly large part of their security. By relating alliance management to issues of more far-reaching concern, such as the US drift from Europe, abstaining military capacities even in the lower end of the conflict spectrum is a necessary or even inevitable sacrifice.

4. Empirical findings from Norway

Based upon the four indicators from alliance theory, two conclusions can be deduced. First, NATO membership has made it both politically legitimate and militarily feasible to downsize, rationalise and abnegate territorial defence in order to finance expeditionary forces. This was particularly so up to 2006–2007, when Russia was still seen as a partner and friend. Even though prioritising quality over quantity has increased Norway’s military vulnerability *vis-à-vis* Russia, and even though US expectations of burden-sharing in Central Asia and the Middle East have accelerated the imbalance between operating costs and investments, being “a good ally” has exalted Norway’s status in the United States.⁴³ Norway’s inability to address even minor crises in the lower end of the conflict spectrum is therefore seen as a calculated risk, but with one serious implication: Even at an early stage in a potentially tense situation with Russia, rapid deployment of US forces is imperative.

Secondly, Norwegian alignment with NATO’s reforms has reduced Norway’s diplomatic room for manoeuvre. Whereas Norway’s territorial force from the 1980s was expected to pursue defensive delay operations for more than eight weeks, the present force is unlikely to operate efficiently for more than a few days. This means that Norwegian diplomats have little time to solve crises, tensions or address bilateral misperceptions before the military command structure and its subordinate air, land and sea units start to deteriorate. Delegating national defence tasks to an alliance that consists of 29 very different nations, and where NATO’s command

structure also suffers from serious inadequacies, thereby makes it riskier to underscore diplomatic efforts with national forces in the High North. If minor conflicts arise on NATO's northern flank, Norway will not be able to fortify diplomatic dialogue with an adequate military force, because the military will immediately start to disintegrate.

How does this weakness affect Norway's strategy towards Russia?

5. Implications of Norway's policy towards Russia

Norwegian willing compliance with allied injunctions has contributed to making Norway a "small middle power" in Europe.⁴⁴ This is because NATO guidance has helped Norway stir a military transformation that has channelled scarce resources from a large mobilisation force into a more agile professional force. Despite a lack of sustainability however, prospects for more permanent US reinforcements – seen since 2014 – have to some extent eased Norwegian apprehensions. This is particularly so as Russian "snap exercises" and cyberattacks towards critical infrastructure have increased over the past few years.⁴⁵ Burden sharing in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, as well as intensified intelligence gathering towards Russia's Northern Fleet have nevertheless cemented transatlantic ties. This logic has long roots in Norwegian strategic thinking. According to Defence Minister (1986–1989) Johan Jørgen Holst, a potential crisis with Russia should not end up as a war *with* Norway, but rather as a war *about* Norway.⁴⁶ Burden sharing abroad would make it easier to get US attention and support if a Norwegian *tripwire* needed to be triggered in the High North. This burden sharing takes place in part through military channels in the Norwegian Intelligence Service, as well as in various parts of the Navy, Air Force and Special Forces commands, which on a daily basis operate closely with US forces in the United States, Norway, Belgium, Germany, Jordan, Iraq and the United Arab Emirates. It also occurs through Norway's extensive diplomatic networks embodied in the Ministry of Defence and Foreign Affairs, which on a daily basis cultivates US ties in Washington D.C., Brussels and London.⁴⁷ Norway's fears of abandonment by NATO have been allayed, in accordance with Snyder's theoretical assumptions.

In addition, these networks can be interpreted as a sort of deterrence towards Russia. A more visible US presence in Norwegian airspace and territorial waters, as well as in the northern counties of Finnmark, Troms and Trøndelag underscores a more credible US deterrent component in Northern Europe. Combined with updated reinforcement and readiness plans, as well as more allied exercises, this enhanced NATO presence sends the signal to Russia that Norwegian and US security are inseparable, at least in theory. The credibility of this claim is further seen through a softening of previously self-imposed restraints, such as restrictions on allied bases and exercises closer to Russia's second strike capability on the Kola Peninsula. Other examples are found in the US Marine Corps' presence on a rotational basis in Mid-Norway,⁴⁸ high intensity combat exercises in Finnmark county

with extensive US participation,⁴⁹ new infrastructure for US Air Forces in southeast Norway, and new facilities for the US ground forces in Troms county.⁵⁰ These developments are consistent with Walt's expectation of a small state's balancing behaviour towards an assertive neighbour.

Coupled with more security arrangements between Sweden, Finland, the US and NATO, Norway's renewed "policy of invitation" has tied US commitments more explicitly to the Nordic states' national security concerns. Vulnerable states on Russia's border are assured, while the United States gets a firmer grip on the geopolitical challenge of providing Baltic NATO allies with credible reinforcements while preventing Russian submarines and aircraft access to the North Atlantic. Lifting the Cold War's self-imposed restraints can be interpreted as a way of compensating for the abnegation of a sustainable territorial force, which during the 1980s enabled Norway to solve national episodes, incidents and crises alone – and even sustain national operations for more than four weeks.⁵¹ The contemporary absence of trimmed and well-functioning command structure in NATO increases the validity of this perspective.⁵²

5.1 The Disadvantage of Allied Compliance

Relinquishing an adequate defence in the lower end of the conflict spectrum has long-term implications. The most serious but often neglected side effect is that Norwegian forces have become more inclined to pursue a more robust combat posture closer to Russia's border. This means that deterrence is favoured before restraint; the "stick" becomes more important than the "carrot". Minor bilateral events, episodes and crises are more likely to escalate than de-escalate, at least up to the point where Russian forces consider withdrawing out of fear of possible US involvement. How can this slide towards a more robust combat posture be explained?

Propensities to go on the offensive are closely linked to inadequate sustainability, which is a key characteristic for smaller allies that have undergone a cost-intensive transformation in NATO. Lack of volume and sustainability therefore makes it more rational to communicate resolve and combat agility. This is because a decisive outcome becomes critically important on short notice – preferably within a few days. The alternative, which would be a prolonged and indecisive situation, would instantly stir operative deterioration and a subsequent collapse before a clear political outcome has been reached. This is because troops that are put on a '24-7' alert status face grave problems in sustaining agility without the constant support of sufficient logistics, maintenance and extra troops.

Ambiguous incidents, episodes or crises that are neither proper war nor proper peace, but something in between, may thereby reduce prospects for rapid assistance, and may ultimately lead to a diplomatic *fait accompli* where Norway ends up in a bilateral crisis with Russia before a US *tripwire* has been activated. This would complicate the Norwegian Armed Forces' strategy, which – in the wording of former

Chief of Defence (2005–2009) General Sverre Diesen – is as follows: faced with “... a limited military provocation, Norwegian forces must [...] create a conflict which is so intense that our allies, due to reasons of national and collective credibility, are forced to get involved”.⁵³

By default, then, Norwegian forces might be forced to pursue an aggressive “deterrence by punishment”⁵⁴ strategy in situations where disputes could be solved diplomatically with more patience, and a more cautious *modus operandi*. Maintaining a more agile force closer to Russia’s border counteracts a defensive posture, which during the Cold War was accomplished by a strategy labelled “deterrence by denial” in Troms county, approximately 1000 kilometres from the Russian border.⁵⁵

Norway’s slide towards a more agile posture is underscored by empirical evidence from the Norwegian Defence Concept. Since 2012, the threshold defence concept has emphasised deterrence rather than assurance towards Russia.⁵⁶ By rapidly raising the costs of aggression, scaring Russia from assertive action has become more important than pursuing self-restraints as a means of building confidence. Moving more forces closer to the Northern Fleet thereby challenges Norway’s previous self-imposed restraints codified in limitations on US exercises in Finnmark, or US bases in Trøndelag and Troms in peacetime.⁵⁷ During the Cold War, keeping military forces further away from the border provided both Russia *and* Norway with longer strategic warning time.⁵⁸ As these restraints have been removed, Norway’s strategy towards Russia has also evolved. From following a logic of *absolute* security for both states during the Cold War, which according to Johan Jørgen Holst was called “a silent cooperation”,⁵⁹ the contemporary strategy seems to emphasise *relative* security for Norway at the expense of Russia. More emphasis on this kind of ‘zero-sum’ logic is also found in the political rhetoric of the Stoltenberg-II (2009–2013) and the Solberg Governments (2013–).⁶⁰ Empirical evidence is also found in the conceptual idea of *Threshold defence*,⁶¹ as well as in the pattern of contemporary joint exercises. According to Norwegian senior staff officers, NATO exercises, such as *Cold Response*, are more focused on rehearsing high intensity warfare after “deterrence failed”, than on mechanisms for de-escalation, mediation, and civil-military cooperation, which characterised most of the joint exercises between 2002 and 2010.⁶²

6. Conclusion

Based on the Norwegian case, how should Northern Europe respond to the Russian assertiveness? Is closer integration into Western security arrangements a viable approach, e.g. for smaller non-aligned states like Sweden and Finland? Three conclusions can be deduced.

First, as Northern Europe increasingly aligns with the US and other NATO forces, states like Sweden and Finland may more easily gain access to US decision makers. From this vantage point, national concerns can be voiced more clearly in tough competition with numerous other European allies striving for US attention

and reinforcements. Such access increases US awareness, and thus prospects for successful activation of US security guaranties if needed. This logic is anchored in the traditional tenets of alliance theory, where balancing is more commonly pursued by smaller states than bandwagoning.⁶³

But such a strategy may also increase the risk of more tension, instability and unpredictability. This is arguably so because Russia's strategic forces will need an extended zone of security to protect their forces from US or other NATO allies' precision guided missiles. As an extended part of Northern Europe opens up for US and NATO operations on their own territories, this reassuring effect could be nullified by Russian counter efforts aiming to protect its force. Balancing with the stronger part thereby creates a typical security dilemma because Russia, according to Snyder, will respond with more assertiveness.⁶⁴ In particular, Sweden and Finland's slide from "buffer" to "springboard" may increase the risk of geopolitical change in Northern Europe. This is because both states' territories play a more prominent role in US and Russian defence planning.

It can be argued that this is not likely to provide the population with more security because their national territories will be more exposed to unwanted Russian attention necessary for military planning and readiness. A question for further research could be to examine to what extent accelerated Nordic-Baltic defence cooperation could alleviate a situation where smaller states more vigorously can address a military vacuum currently filled by US and Russian forces.

Second, the slide from "buffer" to "springboard" also means that domestic policy in Sweden and Finland will be more exposed to US expectations and demands. Based on the Norwegian experience, this is particularly so with regard to US expectations of reciprocity abroad. As in the case of Norway and Denmark, more troops from Northern Europe will be expected to participate in open-ended engagements in Central Asia, the Middle East and possibly Africa. This logic is consistent with another alliance dilemma raised by Snyder, which is that clients may easily become entrapped into a patron's war elsewhere because clients are afraid of being abandoned at home.⁶⁵

Deployments abroad may on the one hand energise combat experience and critical competence among forces that will also operate at home. But they may also increase the risk of fragmentation and critical shortcomings within a national force structure that needs to be cohesively trained at home. Vulnerabilities deriving from this *over-stretch problématique* may accelerate US dependency because simultaneous engagements abroad and at home are detrimental to small states' military readiness and cohesiveness in the lower end of the conflict spectre. This trend, it may be argued, may hamper efforts undertaken by small states, such as Sweden and Finland, to exert influence on how the strategic balance between deterrence and restraint can be tailored *vis-a-vis* Russia.

A question for further research however, would be falsify this assumption, and explore alternative ways to cope with small states' endemic *over-stretch problématique*.

Could it be that “pooling and sharing” among small states would provide more security than outsourcing defence responsibilities to US forces even at the lower end of the conflict spectrum?

Third, increased US dependency may increase the risk of energising a “cult of the offensive” among smaller states in Northern Europe. While dependency may favour integration and interoperability among like-minded states in the West, it may also lead to a deterioration in diplomatic relations with Russia. This is because national vulnerabilities make smaller states more inclined to escalate rather than de-escalate tense situations; seeking to avoid a *fait accompli* with Russia, a decisive outcome on short notice will be required in order to trigger a US *tripwire*.

Such a strategy may – in a narrow sense – provide more security for Northern Europe because Russia will gain less security in *relative* terms. But in *absolute* terms, it will also, in accordance with the logic put forth by both Schelling and Holst, create less security for Northern Europe *and* Russia. This is because US forces will be increasingly important at a much earlier stage in a potentially tense situation, which forces Russia to take precautionary efforts.⁶⁶ It is important to note that Russia does not fear the smaller states in Northern Europe. Russia only fears that the region will become a ‘stepping stone’ for US operations towards Russia. A question for further research could therefore be to what extent self-imposed restraints put forth by smaller North European states are possible without displaying weakness and thus invoking more Russian assertiveness. Could stronger mutual dependency between Russia and Northern Europe, e.g. on energy and trade, alleviate some of the military tension currently fuelling the regional security situation?

NOTES

1. I am deeply indebted to all the constructive and helpful comments provided by the anonymous peer reviewers on earlier drafts of this article!
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