

# Alignment but not Alliance: Nordic Operational Military Cooperation

Håkon Lunde Saxi

*Command and Staff College/Norwegian Defence University College, Norway*

## Abstract

Since the start of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, the Nordic states have sought to advance their defence cooperation “beyond peacetime” to also encompass operational military cooperation in crisis and armed conflict. Relations between the two Nordic non-NATO members, Sweden and Finland, have formed a vanguard, encompassing bilateral operational planning beyond peacetime. While no formal security policy guarantees have been exchanged, Sweden and Finland have created strong expectations that they will lend each other support in a crisis. In short, while no formal alliance treaty exists, the two states have nevertheless become closely aligned. In 2020, Sweden and Finland joined NATO member Norway in signalling their intention to strengthen their trilateral defence relationship. The following year, NATO members Norway and Denmark signed a similar agreement with Sweden. The goal of these documents was to coordinate their national operational plans – their “war plans” – and perhaps develop some common operational plans. In this article, it is argued that these agreements fall short of a formal military alliance, but that they represent an alignment policy between the Nordic states.

**Keywords:** *Nordic Defence Cooperation, NORDEFECO, operational planning, Nordic security, alliance policy, alignment policy, defence policy, NATO*

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In September 2020, the ministers of defence from Norway, Sweden and Finland met at Porsangmoen, Norway, to sign a document on enhanced trilateral military cooperation. The venue was carefully selected. Located approximately 200km from the Russian border, the Garrison of Porsanger was the sight of the ongoing build-up of Norway’s Army and Home Guard’s combined land forces in Finnmark, the country’s

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Correspondence to: Håkon Lunde Saxi, e-mail: [hsaxi@mil.no](mailto:hsaxi@mil.no)

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northern most county. It was also at the heart of the geographical area known as the Cap of the North (*Nordkalotten* in Norwegian and Swedish), often used to describe the geographical area of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia located north of the Arctic Circle. While no representative from the Russian Federation was present, and no mention was made of Russia in the document itself nor in the accompanying trilateral opinion piece published by the ministers, Russia's presence nevertheless loomed over the ceremony. When asked why the document was important, Swedish Minister of Defence Peter Hultqvist replied that it sent "a clear signal to Russia".<sup>1</sup>

The document itself was entitled "Statement of Intent on Enhanced Operational Cooperation" and numbered only three short pages.<sup>2</sup> As a statement of intent, the document signalled only the intention of the three countries involved and did not contain any legally binding commitments. Moreover, it did not substitute for or invalidate any existing defence agreements.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it arguably had the potential to advance Norway's operational defence cooperation with Sweden and Finland considerably. The document instructed the countries' ministries of defence and armed forces to begin discussing their respective national operational plans with the aim of exploring the possibility of being able to "coordinate" these plans "in areas of common concern". The document also highlighted the possibility of developing "common" operational plans "in certain areas".<sup>4</sup>

In September 2021, almost exactly a year after the Porsangmoen-meeting, the ministers of defence from Norway, Sweden and Denmark signed an almost identical "Statement of Intent on Enhanced Operational Cooperation".<sup>5</sup> The document was almost word-for-word identical to the one signed the year before, except that it identified the "areas of common concern" as "the southern parts of Scandinavia (Kattegat, Skagerrak, the Baltic Sea, the North Sea, the Danish straits and other surrounding areas as required)".<sup>6</sup> In short, coordinated and common operational planning was extended to the southern shores of Scandinavia. Since Sweden and Finland had already signed an agreement to develop common operational plans in the Baltic Sea area several years previously,<sup>7</sup> the Nordic states had in effect agreed to attempt to coordinate their operational military plans dealing with the Scandinavian peninsula, Finland, and most of the adjacent maritime areas.

This article will explore the significance of these new agreements on operational military cooperation. The main argument is that these agreements have continued a process which began in 2014, to take Nordic military cooperation "beyond peacetime" and enable two or more Nordic states to undertake combined joint operations in wartime. The objective is enhancing deterrence vis-à-vis Russia, and, if deterrence should fail, enhanced Nordic defence. In order to do this, the article first explores the closely related concepts of *alliance* and *alignment*. I argue that the present movement towards enhanced Nordic operational military cooperation represents the latter rather than the former. Secondly, the article untangles what national military operational plans are and examines how the Nordic states have revitalised their national operational planning in the face of a deteriorating external

security environment. Thirdly, the article charts the path towards the 2020/21 statements on intent by examining how the Nordic states began to coordinate or develop operational plans jointly with their Nordic neighbours. The vanguard, Sweden and Finland, is first examined. Thereafter, the 2020/21 agreements are placed within broader developments in Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF), where the ambition for cooperation to also encompass “crisis and armed conflict” has grown steadily since 2014. The main argument is that while the Nordic states continue to have different alliance policies, they are increasingly militarily aligned.

### **Alliance versus alignment**

Both Sweden and Finland state clearly in their respective official defence policies that they are not “a member of any military alliance”,<sup>8</sup> but they have differed over the past 15 years on whether to use the term “non-alignment” to describe their foreign policy. Since 2007, Finland has ceased to do so, while Sweden has continued to utilize the term.<sup>9</sup>

The distinction between *alliance* and *alignment* is important, but it is a distinction which often becomes blurred and marked by conceptual confusion within both government policy and the fields of Political Science and International Relations. In both policy documents and academic books and articles, the terms are frequently conflated. By contrast, in this article the latter term will be used distinctly in the manner proposed by some political scientists, most notably Glen Snyder.

Snyder is commonly credited with being one of the few to have attempted to clarify and distinguish the terms *alliance* and *alignment* analytically.<sup>10</sup> He classified the former as a more formal and narrower subset of the latter. Snyder defined *alliances* as “formal associations of states for the use (or non-use) of military force” and argued that the mutual defence pact – such as NATO – were one class of peacetime alliances.<sup>11</sup> His definition of alliances is considerably more rigid and formalistic than that of many others, e.g., that of Stephen Walt, who defined it as “a formal or informal commitment for security cooperation between two or more states”.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, his definition of alignment was much looser. Snyder defined *alignment* as “a set of mutual *expectations* between two or more states that they will have each other’s support in disputes or wars”.<sup>13</sup> Alignment was considered a broader and more fluid term, which could be created, maintained, and strengthened in numerous ways. Being more fluid than formal alliances, alignment would presumably include less risk of becoming dragged into a conflict against one’s wishes (*entrapment*), but also increase the risk of not receiving support in situations where support was expected (*abandonment*).<sup>14</sup>

The advantage of Snyder’s distinct definitions is that it allows for greater nuance in describing national security and defence policies. It opens a space between the more rigid “alliance”, on the one hand, and the far looser and less binding “partnership” on the other. This greater degree of nuance is useful when analysing the

security policy orientation of the Nordic states, given how analysts often struggle to clearly define and categorise Sweden and Finland's contemporary security relationship with the Nordic, EU, and NATO countries.

For example, in 2015, the Experts Commission on Norwegian Security and Defence Policy wrote that Sweden and Finland's close affiliation to NATO and the US "has become so comprehensive that it could be called a semi-alliance – a functional defence community without the mutual defence guarantee".<sup>15</sup> More recently two Finnish scholars wrote that Finland – by working closely with its friends and partners in Europe and North America "to create the necessary preconditions for operational cooperation in times of crisis and war" – was pursuing "an alliance policy in all but name".<sup>16</sup> While the above examples utilise the terms "semi-alliance" and "alliance policy", I will argue that the relationship, which goes beyond partnership but draws short of formal alliance membership, is best characterised as alignment. The Nordic states are creating the expectation that they will support one another in times of crisis and armed conflict but have not gone so far as to issue formal and binding mutual security policy guarantees.

### **The return of operational planning in the Nordic states**

If the Nordic states can be said to be aligned with one another, according to Snyder's definition, their aspiration to draw up coordinated and common operational plans are at the heart of this security and defence policy alignment. But what exactly are operational plans? And how is operational military planning conducted in the Nordic states?

National operational (or defence) plans are the result of deliberate planning conducted in a non-crisis situation to deal with identified potential threats before they occur, using current military capabilities. The plans will normally have forces assigned and execution authority pre-delegated to the appropriate level of command. At their core, they provide details on the deployment and employment of a country's military forces in an envisaged crisis or armed conflict.<sup>17</sup>

The term "war plans" remains to this day a common colloquialism for operational or defence plans.<sup>18</sup> This is a holdover from the pre-World War 2 era, when countries commonly used the term *war plans* to describe their prepared military plans for the conduct of major wars.<sup>19</sup> After 1945, the term went semantically out of fashion, about the same time countries started renaming their cabinet-level *war* ministries into ministries of *defence*. Still, the term war plans is, in many ways, an apt colloquialism for national operational plans.

During the Cold War, all the Nordic countries had elaborate and meticulously prepared *total defence* plans. In Norway, at the height of the Cold War in the 1980s, these plans called for the mobilisation of around 400,000 military personnel in wartime – one-tenth of the country's population. An equal number of people were assigned civilian wartime roles within the civil administration, the police, the health

services, civil defence and in economic preparedness. Their role would be to support the wartime armed forces and provide for civil defence and the functioning of society in wartime. In total, 20–30 percent of the population had a role in the prepared total defence plans. The aim was to be able to mobilise the country's resources fully for a massive struggle of national survival against a Soviet attack.<sup>20</sup> Sweden and Finland, and to a lesser extent Denmark, had broadly similar total defence concepts during the Cold War.

After the end of the Cold War, in the absence of any obvious existential threat to national security, these total defence systems were gradually downscaled in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and, to a much lesser extent, Finland. In this more benign post-Cold War security environment, the focus of the armed forces was directed towards ongoing international operations abroad rather than national defence and contingency planning at home.<sup>21</sup> National operational plans consequentially became increasingly outdate and military exercises ceased to focus primarily on pre-planned national defence scenarios. Military exercises became generic and were often focused on peace enforcement scenarios in international operations. Nordic defence cooperation also reflected this preoccupation, focusing on combined participation in international operations abroad and saving money by doing more training, education, procurement, and logistics together at home.<sup>22</sup>

It was not until the late 2000s that the need for deliberate military planning to prepare for crisis and armed conflicts at home in the Nordic region was again given serious attention. The reason for this development was the deteriorating security environment in Northern Europe, with the Russian-Georgian War in 2008 as an important wakeup-call.<sup>23</sup> Norway's renewed emphasis on operational planning serves as an example.

In 2010, the Norwegian Chief of Defence was instructed to begin updating the operational plans for the defence of the country, which had become obsolete after lingering in relative obscurity for many years.<sup>24</sup> This work received a much greater sense of importance and urgency following Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine in 2014.<sup>25</sup> In the words of Lieutenant General Rune Jacobsen, who assumed command of the Norwegian Joint Headquarters shortly after the annexation, Norway at this time went "from believing in peace forever, to having to revitalize all planning".<sup>26</sup> Norway's efforts to revitalise, update and modernise its national operational plans preceded by a few years NATO's post-2014 renewed focus on planning and preparing for collective defence, a development Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg terms "the most significant reinforcement of NATO's collective defence since the end of the Cold War."<sup>27</sup>

As NATO's updated plans developed, Norway's revitalised national operational plans were in turn aligned closely with NATO's new plans for reinforcing the defence of Norway.<sup>28</sup> In 2018, the Norwegian Government approved the military strategy developed by the Chief of Defence for the defence of Norway – named "Arctic Guard" – with its associated operational and tactical plans. These plans were closely

tied to NATO's operational planning.<sup>29</sup> Thus, from having laid dormant and lingering in relative obscurity a decade before, a system of new and revitalised national operational plans had again been created in Norway. Similar developments could be observed in Sweden and Denmark, while Finland, which had preserved far more of its Cold War-era total defence system, had considerably less trouble adapting to the new security environment.

### The effect of different alliance policies on operational planning

Scholars have rightly argued that clustering the Nordic states into "NATO members" and "non-NATO members" does not sufficiently explain their defence policies and strategies.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the degree to which the revitalised operational plans in the Nordic states were coordinated with other countries *was* initially largely determined by their different (non-) membership in military alliances, with NATO states coordinating much earlier and more comprehensively, and non-NATO states initially keeping their planning far more insular.

In April 1949, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland each became one of the twelve original signatories of the North Atlantic Treaty. This had a profound and enduring impact on their defence policies. Returning to the example of Norway, NATO has since formed "the cornerstone" of Norwegian security and defence policy.<sup>31</sup> At the core of the North Atlantic Treaty is the Article 5 mutual defence clause, which states, "an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all".<sup>32</sup> Building on this treaty-based mutual security guarantee, the defence of Norway is to be carried out "within the framework of NATO's collective defence".<sup>33</sup> As such, it came as no surprise that Norway aligned its revitalised national operational plans closely with NATO's *advanced planning*<sup>34</sup> and with enhanced bilateral support and reinforcement arrangements made with key NATO allies, most importantly the US.<sup>35</sup> However, initially, there occurred no similar coordination with Sweden and Finland.

The reason for this was Sweden and Finland's non-membership in the transatlantic Alliance. While both countries had ceased to regard themselves as "neutrals" after the end of the Cold War, having joined the EU and having established very close partnerships with NATO and its key member states, they remained non-NATO states who forswore full-fledged membership in the Alliance. As previously mentioned, Sweden employs the term "military nonaligned" actively while Finland since 2007 has described its policy simply as seeking "no membership in military alliances". Both these positions seemingly ruled out exchanging mutual security guarantees and participating in planning for mutual military assistance and collective defence in wartime.<sup>36</sup>

Sweden and Finland *did*, however, draw closer to NATO and the key Western states after 2014, for example by finalising Host Nation Support agreements with NATO that would enable them to receive military support from the Alliance. They

also enhanced cooperation with NATO's leading member states, including the US.<sup>37</sup> Their extensive cooperation with NATO and other Western states was ultimately only limited by their refusal to accept any formal security and defence obligations, and therefore their nonparticipation in NATO Article 5 collective defence planning.<sup>38</sup> As two scholars put it: "with regard to the cooperation with NATO, everything else seems to be acceptable except the mutual security guarantees of Article 5".<sup>39</sup> However, while initially abstaining from coordinating their revitalised operational plans with NATO member states, Sweden and Finland did pursue enhanced bilateral coordination.

### **Towards Swedish-Finnish alignment**

In January 2015, the Swedish and Finnish armed forces presented a report recommending how bilateral defence cooperation could be enhanced.<sup>40</sup> Shortly thereafter, in a joint statement, the countries agreed to implement most of these military recommendations, including "developing operational planning to create options for joint action in a variety of scenarios".<sup>41</sup> A major novelty in agreement between the two countries was that it mentioned for the first time the possibility of bilateral military discussions moving beyond peacetime and dealing with "contingencies up to and including war".<sup>42</sup>

The phrase "beyond peacetime" quickly became a major fixture in Swedish-Finnish bilateral defence cooperation. For example, by 2017, Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven was publicly describing the cooperation's primary purpose to be "operative cooperation beyond peacetime".<sup>43</sup> By 2018, any ambiguity was removed when Sweden and Finland signed a bilateral memorandum of understanding making it clear that their "defence cooperation covers peace, crisis and war. No predetermined limits will be set on deepening the bilateral defence cooperation".<sup>44</sup> In its most recent total defence bill, presented to the Swedish Parliament in October 2020, the Swedish Government made it clear that it has now become official policy that "Sweden should *as far as possible* develop operational planning together with Finland".<sup>45</sup> In the run up to the defence bill, the Swedish Defence Commission had even proposed that Sweden should begin planning, preparing and practicing the sending of military reinforcements to Finland already in peacetime.<sup>46</sup>

Bilateral Swedish-Finnish defence cooperation have hence drawn very close to a *de facto* military alliance. They openly declare that their national operational plans now also cover bilateral operational planning beyond peacetime, and they have delegated authority to their executive governments and armed forces to put these plans into action. Most importantly in this respect, in September 2020, the Swedish Parliament passed legislation authorising the Swedish Government to deploy Swedish armed forces to assist Finland in preventing violations of Finnish territory and to receive military support from Finland.<sup>47</sup> Finland has passed similar legislation concerning Sweden.

The key caveat and qualification accompanying all these plans and arrangements are that they, as the memorandum of understanding puts it, “[do] not contain mutual defence *obligations*”.<sup>48</sup> No binding mutual security guarantees accompany these arrangements. Hence, any combined joint operational plans made remain subject to separate national decisions – they are *options* but do not impose *obligations*. Sweden and Finland have therefore so far dodged or sidestepped the crucial question if they would in fact assist one another in case of Russian aggression, opting instead to reserve their respective governments’ formal freedom of action.

There are nevertheless some treaties and declarations which might be considered to establish security guarantees between Sweden and Finland. As EU member states, both Sweden and Finland are covered by the mutual defence clause Article 42 (7) in the 2007 Lisbon Treaty. While Finland sees this as having at least some defence policy implications, Sweden’s policy is to reject the idea that this involves any form of defence obligations for non-aligned EU states.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, Sweden has come closest of the two to issuing a unilateral security guarantee. Since 2009, all Swedish defence bills have contained the so-called “unilateral declaration of solidarity” making it clear that “Sweden will not remain passive if another EU member state or a Nordic country suffers a disaster or an attack. We expect these countries to take similar action if Sweden is affected”.<sup>50</sup> However, the declaration leaves open *how* Sweden will respond or render assistance. The Swedish position is that no obligation exists which requires Sweden to deploy soldiers, for example in order to aid in the defence of Finland.<sup>51</sup>

The absence of any explicit legal or political obligation is not to say however that the enhanced Swedish-Finnish operational defence cooperation has not created a strong *de facto expectation* that the two countries would in fact aid one another in a crisis. In fact, as one scholar puts it, it seems quite reasonable to assume “that there exists in fact an expectation and even a strong expectation on both sides that both countries will fulfil their non-existing pledges”.<sup>52</sup>

The reason for this is obvious: the main rationale for these arrangements is to strengthen deterrence vis-à-vis Russia. If the bilateral arrangements were to be perceived as nothing but “hot air” – i.e. not sincere and without practical effect – their deterrent effect would be negated. As such, both parties have a strong interest in these measures being perceived as most sincere and taken very seriously. Furthermore, historically, such military-to-military staff talks has created a strong *moral* obligation to aid one another and created strong *expectations* of support that it would be politically costly to deny.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, Sweden and Finland may not have the option to decline joint action. At least one official government inquiry undertaken in Sweden concluded that Sweden would not in any case be *able* to stand aside from a conflict in the Baltic Sea area, but would “be drawn into a Russian-Baltic military conflict at an early stage”.<sup>54</sup> If Sweden and Finland were thus forced to take military action, at least some of the bilateral joint operational plans would probably be utilised.

For the above reasons, it seems reasonable to term contemporary Swedish-Finnish defence cooperation as constituting a military alignment, since their close defence affiliation has created expectations of mutual support in case of a crisis or armed conflict befalling either side. *De jure* no treaty obligations to aid one another exists, but *de facto* it seems very likely that they would end up undertaking some joint military actions if a major crisis or armed conflict was to engulf the Nordic-Baltic region.

### **NORDEFECO after Crimea: The prospects for Nordic alignment**

The documents on enhanced trilateral military cooperation signed in 2020 and 2021 effectively sought to bring cooperation between the Nordic NATO members Norway and Denmark and non-NATO members Sweden and Finland closer to the level which the two latter had already established between themselves. This was in keeping with long-running ambitions to extend Nordic military cooperation from peacetime into crisis and armed conflict.

One of the first times this ambition was publicly formulated was in an opinion piece published jointly by the Nordic ministers of defence in 2015, still in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Eastern Ukraine. The Nordic ministers pointed out Russia's behaviour as "the biggest challenge to European security" and the main reason why the security situation in the Nordic area had "deteriorated markedly the last year".<sup>55</sup> The ministers vowed to face this situation with more Nordic cooperation and solidarity, mentioning explicitly the ability "to be able to act together in a crisis situation".<sup>56</sup>

The ambition to take cooperation beyond peacetime became an important and recurring theme in NORDEFECO in the post-2014 years.<sup>57</sup> It stood at the centre of the revised "NORDEFECO Vision 2025" adopted by the Nordic ministers of defence in November 2018 during Norway's NORDEFECO chairmanship. The vision looked to improve "cooperation in peace, crisis and conflict" and sought to strengthen "interoperability, deterrence and territorial defence in the Nordic region".<sup>58</sup> As Peter Hultqvist put it in the foreword to the 2019 NORDEFECO annual report: "The serious changes in the security situation during the last few years has deepened our cooperation and we are now focusing our effort on the ability to act jointly [...] in peace, crisis and conflict".<sup>59</sup>

That it was with NATO member Norway, and not Denmark or Iceland, that Sweden and Finland first agreed to coordinate their national operational plans was no accident. During the early days of NORDEFECO, in the late 2000s, it was these three countries that had agreed to push ahead with cooperation while Denmark remained lukewarm, and Iceland stayed at the fringes of cooperation due to its lack of armed forces. While trilateral cooperation between Norway, Sweden and Finland largely failed with regards to joint material acquisitions, a thriving cooperation on exercises and cross-border training proved highly successful.<sup>60</sup>

Norway, Sweden, and Finland also have vital strategic interests and security concerns in common, since they all occupy parts of the Fenno-Scandinavian Peninsula close to or adjacent to the Russian Federation. The shared threat perception generated by this geopolitical similarity gave them strong incentives to cooperate. Denmark, on the other hand, was “not a frontline state” vis-à-vis Russia.<sup>61</sup> A continental European state located at the exit from the Baltic Sea, and since NATO enlargement in 1999 and 2004 effectively shielded on its eastern flank by Poland and the Baltic States, Denmark was the Nordic state that oriented its armed forces the most towards expeditionary operations after the Cold War.<sup>62</sup> More geopolitically secure, Denmark took longer after 2014 to reorient its defence efforts towards the challenge from a resurgent and revisionist Russia, and, when it did, Denmark’s bolstered NATO collective defence efforts were directed towards its own near abroad in the Baltic Sea area, Greenland and the Faroe Island (the Danish Realm), as well as reinforcing the vulnerable Baltic States.<sup>63</sup>

Norway, Sweden, and Finland’s – and to a certain extent Denmark’s – shared strategic interests and geopolitical threat perceptions were visibly on display in their major national military exercises after 2014. These exercises now once again focused on the defence of their home territories, and always involved participation from the other Nordic states. For example, in 2017 and 2018, Sweden and Norway respectively hosted the Aurora 17 and Trident Juncture exercises. The former was a national defence exercise involving about 20,000 troops, the latter a NATO high-visibility exercise involving about 50,000 troops. Both involved troops from Nordic and NATO countries practising the defence of the Nordic region. Finland planned a similar national defence exercise to Aurora 17 in 2021, but it was called off due to the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>64</sup>

In a joint op-ed in 2018, the Nordic ministers of defence described Trident Juncture as an exercise aimed at “Defending the Nordic neighbourhood”.<sup>65</sup> This sentiment was again visibly demonstrated in 2019, during the Swedish exercise Northern Wind, when 1,500 troops from Finland and 4,500 troops from Norway – more or less the entire Norwegian Army – was deployed to Northern Sweden.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, these major exercises were the most visible part of the regular cross border exercise regime that has been established between Norway, Sweden and Finland, particularly between the countries’ respective land and air forces.

Shared interests and threat perceptions were similarly on display in the short trilateral 2020 statement of intent. The document focused on the “areas of common concern”, specifically mentioning “the northern part of Finland, Norway and Sweden”. It was in these areas that national operations plans were to be “coordinated” if possible, and where the possible development of “common operations planning” would be explored.<sup>67</sup> However, while shared geopolitical positions and similar worries about Russia drove the trilateral cooperation forward, their different alliance policies slowed and at times hindered cooperation.

### **Cutting the Gordian knot: Solving the alliance conundrum**

The key problem in making national operational military planning more Nordic was the issue of how to square a security policy circle: Norway and Denmark developed their operational plans in close consultation with NATO and key NATO states, while as non-NATO members, Sweden and Finland did not take part in alliance collective defence planning.

In the run up to the 2020 statement of intent, both sides were clearly anxious to avoid creating any ambiguity about their security policy positions. Sweden and Finland did not want to compromise their respective non-membership in military alliances. From the Norwegian side, as in many NATO countries, it seems likely that there was concern about blurring the line between NATO and non-NATO member states. As a Swedish public inquiry put in in 2013: “Among certain NATO allies there is doubt and concern that the participation of non-allies in tasks belonging to the Alliance’s core activities may have the effect of blurring distinctions in the Alliance and hence undermining its cohesion”.<sup>68</sup> These concerns came to light for example in 2014, when Swedish and Finnish combat aircraft were scheduled to join Norwegian aircraft in carrying out NATO Air Policing over Iceland. After resistance from some NATO countries, the trilateral operational deployment was downgraded to an exercise.<sup>69</sup>

To avoid any possible ambiguity, at Norway’s insistence, the trilateral document therefore contained the phrase “noting that Norway plans to transfer command to NATO in crisis and war”.<sup>70</sup> The 2021 trilateral statement contained the phrase “noting that Denmark and Norway plans to transfer command to NATO in crisis and war as applicable”.<sup>71</sup> The inclusion of these references to NATO’s command structure in the trilateral documents was initially controversial in some quarters, especially in Sweden, and, reportedly, the wording had to be discussed and approved in the Swedish cabinet.<sup>72</sup>

That Sweden agreed suggests that the country has come a long way with regards to NATO collective defence. This became even clearer in October 2020, when the Swedish Government submitted its new Defence Bill to the Swedish Parliament, which approved it in December. In the Bill, the Government states that operational planning should not only be developed “together with Finland” and “coordinated” with Norway and Denmark, but it should also be “coordinated” with the UK, the US, and NATO.<sup>73</sup>

It should be noted that the above documents are all political statements of intent. There is no guarantee that the Nordic armed forces will in fact succeed in coordinating their operational plans. Past attempts at Nordic defence cooperation have experienced setbacks or outright failures despite high-level support and many common interests.<sup>74</sup> That the intentions have been reiterated frequently, by all the countries, and over several years, suggests however the seriousness of the efforts being put into these endeavours.

## Common strategic and operational challenges

That the alliance-challenge should be overcome was in large part due to powerful, shared strategic interests, as well as the realisation that the Nordic states face largely the same strategic and operational challenges. It is worthwhile to examine briefly the most important of these in order to understand the drivers for closer operational defence cooperation. One useful publicly available source in this respect is the Swedish Defence Commission, which in its 2017 and 2019 reports laid out some of these shared interests and concerns.

In its 2019 report the Commission wrote that by cooperating with other states, Sweden would strengthen its ability to deter an armed attack and prevent war.<sup>75</sup> Finland, Norway, and Denmark were singled out – alongside the UK and US – as being of special importance in this respect.<sup>76</sup> By combining their strength, their general ability to defend the region would increase and their ability to deter an adversary would be bolstered. Moreover, enhanced regional cooperation would yield other, very specific benefits. In particular, with regards to Norway, the Commission argued that “geographical and military strategic realities” necessitated “if possible, deepening cooperation”.<sup>77</sup>

The Commission considered Sweden’s so-called “western connection” to be essential. Sweden’s key lines of communications westwards are via Gothenburg, its main west coast harbour, as well as via the Oslo-area and the Norwegian harbours of Trondheim and Narvik. In a crisis, these ports would be crucial in order to bring in supplies and reinforcements to Sweden, and, in turn, to Finland and the Baltic States. “These connections are thus of *existential interests* in both Sweden and Finland”.<sup>78</sup> Military cooperation with Denmark, in the air and maritime domain, to protect the entrance to the Baltic Sea and the southern Baltic was also viewed as useful in situations “beyond peacetime”.<sup>79</sup> The connection across the Sound between Denmark and Sweden could also be useful as a “western connection”, but was regarded by the Commission as being very vulnerable in wartime.<sup>80</sup>

Norway has an equally strong interest in maintaining the sea-lines of communications open to and from Gothenburg, which is often described as Norway’s largest port, since it is the country’s “most important port for the export and import of containers from and to Norway”.<sup>81</sup> It should be added that NATO has an at least equal military strategic interest in Swedish territory, since it would be more or less impossible to defend the Baltic States without utilizing Swedish territory – especially Swedish airspace and airbases.<sup>82</sup>

In the Cap of the North area, the main shared challenge is Russia’s perceived need to defend its nuclear second-strike capability, located on strategic nuclear submarines operating from bases on the Kola Peninsula.<sup>83</sup> Air and naval forces based in the same region may possibly have the task of disrupting NATO sea-lines of communications across the Atlantic. In order to secure these assets, Russia could, in an armed conflict, chose to push westwards its sensors, long-range air-defence systems, and

anti-ship missiles in order to create strategic depth around the Kola Peninsula. The relatively small and dispersed Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish land forces, located in the vast and sparsely populated Arctic areas, would make a Nordic “deterrence by denial” strategy very challenging. This difficulty would be compounded by the fact that Sweden and Finland would concentrate the bulk of their most capable land forces in their more populated southern areas in times of crisis or armed conflict. The coordination and, if possible, cooperation of Norway, Sweden, and Finland’s land and air forces could make an important difference in such a scenario.<sup>84</sup>

However, even in a scenario where Russia chose not to occupy any Nordic territory directly, the fate of the three countries would still be closely intertwined. For example, should Russia only carry out limited air and sea operations against Northern Norway, while refraining from conducting land operations, this would still be greatly facilitated by making use of Swedish and Finnish airspace. Furthermore, if Russian air and maritime operations succeeded in denying western forces access to the North Sea, Norway, Sweden, and Finland would all become equally isolated and unable to receive support and reinforcements from the west.<sup>85</sup> In a sense, since its only land connection to the European continent is via Russia, the Fenno-Scandinavian Peninsula is an island in a strategic sense – reliant upon open sea lines of communication for supplies and support. In short, the fortunes of the three countries occupying this shared “island” are closely linked. Like it or not, due to geography and the increasing range of modern weapon systems, Norway, Sweden, and Finland form, in the words of one retired Swedish major general, “a common area of operation”.<sup>86</sup>

## **Conclusions**

The definition of an “alliance” is normally a formal agreement – such as a treaty – between two or more countries that require them to support one another in some form if one is the victim of an armed attack. By this definition, the non-NATO Nordic states are not “allies”, since no such formal agreement exists. Instead, they can be described as “strategic partners” who work closely together on security and defence with one another, with NATO as an organisation, and with key NATO countries.

However, the term “partnership” does not do justice to the close and intimate security and defence relationship that exists today between the Nordic states. Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland are examining the coordination of their national operational plans – their “war plans” if you will – and considering developing some common plans. Sweden and Finland have already carried out such common operational planning. For years now exercise patterns in the Nordic region have been influenced by national defence planning, with the Nordic countries participating visibly and significantly in each other’s major national exercises as well as NATO exercises in the region. This demonstrates military capability and political will.

While not exchanging formal security guarantees, the Nordic states now routinely stress that they are developing their military capability to “act together”. This

in order to strengthen deterrence, defence, and the stability of the Nordic-Baltic region. It does not seem apt to describe this relationship as a “partnership”, which it exceeds, or as an “alliance”, which its lack of mutual defence obligations precludes. It has been described by analysts and scholars both as a “semi-alliance” and an alliance “in all but name”, but these terms do not constitute clear analytical categories. Snyder’s original – and today largely forgotten – distinct definitions of *alignment* and *alliance* arguably provide superior typologies. He defined the latter as a narrower, more formal, and more unambiguous subtype of the former, which is much wider, looser, and more diffuse. *Alignment* implies that an expectation has been created, among the Nordic states and abroad, that they will support one another in crisis or armed conflicts.

At the heart of these very close defence relationships are shared identity, values, and first and foremost: common strategic interests. As the Nordic defence ministers and Icelandic minister of foreign affairs put it in 2018: “We may have different security affiliations, but we are neighbours in the North. A security crisis in our neighbourhood would affect us all”.<sup>87</sup> Faced with this reality, the Nordic countries have chosen to take the plunge into coordinating their national defence plans.

## NOTES

1. Erik Andreassen et al., “Her signerer forsvarsministerne en ny samarbeidsavtale [The Ministers of Defense sign a new co-operation agreement],” *Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK)*, 23 September 2020. Last modified 24 September 2020, [https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/norge\\_-finland-og-sverige-signerte-avtale-i-porsanger\\_-\\_vil-styrke-forsvarssamarbeidet-i-nord-1.15172511](https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/norge_-finland-og-sverige-signerte-avtale-i-porsanger_-_vil-styrke-forsvarssamarbeidet-i-nord-1.15172511).
2. Ministry of Defence of Finland, Sweden and Norway, *Statement of Intent on Enhanced Operational Cooperation* (Oslo: Norwegian MoD, 23 September 2020).
3. Ministry of Defence of Finland, Sweden and Norway, *Statement of Intent*, 3.
4. Ministry of Defence of Finland, Sweden and Norway, *Statement of Intent*, 2.
5. Ministry of Defence of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, *Statement of Intent on Enhanced Operational Cooperation* (Stockholm: Swedish MoD, 24 September 2021).
6. Ministry of Defence of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, *Statement of Intent*, 2.
7. Sweden and Finland, *Memorandum of understanding between the Government of the Republic of Finland and the Government of the Kingdom of Sweden on Defence Cooperation* (Stockholm and Helsinki: Swedish and Finnish MoD, 2018), Section 2.
8. Swedish Ministry of Defence, *Main elements of the Government bill Totalförsvaret 2021–2025 Total defence 2021–2025*, Government Bill 2020/21:30 (2020), 27; Finnish Government, *Government’s Defence Report* (Helsinki: Finnish Government, 2021), 44.
9. Mats Bergquist et al., *The Effects of Finland’s Possible NATO Membership: An Assessment* (Helsinki: Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2016), 45.
10. See e.g., Colleen Chidley, “Towards a Framework of Alignment in International Relations”, *South African Journal of Political Studies* 41, no. 1 (2014): 142–143; see also Thomas S. Wilkins, “‘Alignment’, not ‘alliance’ – the shifting paradigm of international security cooperation: toward a conceptual taxonomy of alignment”, *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 1 (2012): 53–76.

11. Glen H. Snyder, "Alliance Theory: A Neorealist first cut", *Journal of International Affairs* 44, no. 1 (1990): 104–105.
12. Stephen M. Walt, "Why alliances endure or collapse", *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 39, no. 1 (1997), 157.
13. Snyder, "Alliance Theory", 105. Emphasis original.
14. Glen H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics", *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (1984): 466–468.
15. This definition has been applied to describe Sweden and Finland's comprehensive relationship with NATO. See Expert Commission on Norwegian Security and Defence Policy, *Unified Effort* (Oslo: Norwegian Ministry of Defence, 2015), 46.
16. Tuomas Iso-Markku and Matti Pesu, "From neutrality to activism: Finland and EU defence," in *Ambiguous alliance: Neutrality, opt-outs, and European defence*, ed. Clara Sophie Cramer and Ulrike Franke, Essay Collection (London: European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 2021), 20.
17. This definition builds on NATO and US doctrinal documents. See NATO Standardization Office, *AJP-5 Allied Joint Doctrine for the Planning of Operations*, Edition A Version 2 ed. (Brussels: NATO, 2019), Chapter 1; US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 5-0: Joint Planning* (Washington D.C.: US JCS, 2020), xi–xiii; see also Robert A. Gleckler, "Why War Plans, Really?," *Joint Force Quarterly* 79, no. 4th Quarter (2015): 71–73.
18. Gleckler, "Why War Plans, Really?," 71–72.
19. For example, the US military produced a series of plans for major armed conflict with the other great powers, famously known as "colour plans" since they assigned each opponent a separate colour. Steven T. Ross, ed., *U.S. War Plans: 1938–1945* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 1–2.
20. More than 90% of these wartime forces were made up of reservists. The active peacetime forces numbered about 30–40.000 troops. Magnus Håkenstad, "Den væpnede dugnaden: Totalforsvaret i historisk perspektiv [Total Defense in Historical Perspective]," in *Det nye totalforsvaret*, ed. Per M. Norheim-Martinsen (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2018); Olav Bogen and Magnus Håkenstad, *Balansegang: Forsvarets omstilling etter den kalde krigen [Balancing act: the reforms of the Norwegian Armed Forces after the Cold War]* (Oslo: Dreyers forlag, 2015), 28–32.
21. Note that this was less the case in Finland than in the other Nordic countries.
22. See Håkon Lunde Saxi, *Nordic Defence Cooperation after the Cold War*, Oslo Files on Defence and Security no. 1 (Oslo: Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, 2011).
23. The 2008 Georgian War and the 2014 Ukrainian Crisis, seen in unison, were *external shocks* that eventually came to have a deep and consequential impact on Nordic defence policies and strategies. See Håkan Edström, Dennis Gyllensporre, Jacob Westberg, *Military Strategy of Small States: Responding to External Shocks of the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2019), 115–175.
24. Norwegian Ministry of Defence, *Support and Cooperation: A description of the total defence in Norway* (Oslo: Norwegian MoD, 2018), 11–12.
25. Interview with Lieutenant General Rune Jacobsen, commander of the Norwegian Joint Headquarters (2015–2021), in "Klar til å gi kommandoen videre [Ready to transfer command]," (Webpage), Norwegian Armed Forces, updated 29 January, 2021, accessed 14 July, 2021, <https://www.forsvaret.no/aktuelt-og-presse/aktuelt/sjef-foh-jakobsen>.
26. Interview with Lieutenant General Rune Jacobsen, commander of the Norwegian Joint Headquarters (2015–2021), in Hallingstorp, "Klar til å gi kommandoen videre [Ready to transfer command]."
27. NATO, *The Secretary General's Annual Report 2014* (Brussels: NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2015), 6.

28. Norwegian Ministry of Defence, *Support and Cooperation: A description of the total defence in Norway*, 11–12.
29. Norwegian Chief of Defence, *Et styrket forsvar: Forsvarsjefens fagmilitære råd 2019 [A stronger defence: The military advice of the Chief of Defence 2019]* (Oslo: Norwegian MoD, 2019), 8.
30. Håkan Edström and Jacob Westberg, “Between the eagle and the bear: Explaining the alignment strategies of the Nordic countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” *Comparative Strategy* 39, no. 2 (2020): 191–208.
31. See e.g. Norwegian Ministry of Defence, *Evne til forsvar – vilje til beredskap: Langtidsplan for forsvarssektoren [The defence of Norway – Capability and readiness: Long Term Defence Plan 2020]*, Proposition to the Storting no. 14 S (Oslo: Norwegian MoD, 2020), 23.
32. NATO, *NATO Handbook* (Brussels: NATO Office of Information and Press, 2001), 528.
33. Norwegian Ministry of Defence, *Evne til forsvar – vilje til beredskap: Langtidsplan for forsvarssektoren [The defence of Norway – Capability and readiness: Long Term Defence Plan 2020]*, 11.
34. The most important plans for the defence of Norway are the standing defence plans (SDPs), contingency plans (COPs) and graduate response plans (GRPs). The SPDs and GRPs are executable, with forces assigned and execution authority delegated. NATO Standardization Office, *AJP-5 Allied Joint Doctrine for the Planning of Operations*, Chapter 1.
35. Norwegian Ministry of Defence, *Evne til forsvar – vilje til beredskap: Langtidsplan for forsvarssektoren [The defence of Norway – Capability and readiness: Long Term Defence Plan 2020]*, 90–91.
36. Tuomas Forsberg and Tapani Vaahtoranta, “Inside the EU, Outside NATO: Paradoxes of Finland’s and Sweden’s Post-Neutrality,” *European Security* 10, no. 1 (2001): 68–93; Mats Bergquist et al., *The Effects of Finland’s Possible NATO Membership: An Assessment* (Helsinki: Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2016), 10.
37. Ann-Sofie Dahl, “Sweden and Finland: Partnership in Lieu of NATO Membership,” in *Strategic Challenges in the Baltic Sea Region: Russia, Deterrence, and Reassurance*, ed. Ann-Sofie Dahl (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 131–136.
38. Swedish Ministry of Defence, *Försvarspolitisk inriktning – Sveriges försvar 2016–2020 [The Swedish Defence Bill 2016–2020]*, Government Bill 2014/15:109 (2014), 38.
39. Forsberg and Vaahtoranta, “Inside the EU, Outside NATO: Paradoxes of Finland’s and Sweden’s Post-Neutrality,” 75.
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41. Swedish and Finnish Ministry of Defence, *Joint Statement Regarding Deepened Defence Cooperation Between Finland and Sweden* (Stockholm and Helsinki: Swedish and Finnish MoD, 2015).
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43. Quoted in Heather A. Conley, Jeffrey Rathke, and Matthew Melino, *Enhanced Deterrence in the North: A 21st Century European Engagement Strategy* (Washington D.C.: CSIS, 2018), 18.
44. Sweden and Finland, *Memorandum of understanding between the Government of the Republic of Finland and the Government of the Kingdom of Sweden on Defence Cooperation* (Stockholm and Helsinki: Swedish and Finnish MoD, 2018), Section 2.
45. Author’s emphasis. Swedish Ministry of Defence, *Main elements of the Government bill Totalförsvaret 2021–2025 Total defence 2021–2025*, Government Bill 2020/21:30 (2020), 8.
46. Swedish Defence Commission, *Värnkraft – Inriktningen av säkerhetspolitiken och utformningen av det militära försvaret 2021–2025 [The Swedish Defence Commission’s white book on Sweden’s Security Policy and the Development of the Military Defence 2021–2025]*, Ministry Publication Series 2019:8 (Stockholm: Swedish MoD, 2019), 296–299.

47. Parliament would still have a say in a case where the military assistance was intended “to respond to an armed attack against Finland”. “Riksdag adopts legislation that improves opportunities for operational military support between Sweden and Finland,” Swedish MoD, updated 8 September, 2020, accessed 17 July, 2021, <https://www.government.se/articles/2020/09/riksdag-adopts-legislation-that-improves-opportunities-for-operational-military-support-between-sweden-and-finland/>.
48. Author’s emphasis. Sweden and Finland, *Memorandum of understanding between the Government of the Republic of Finland and the Government of the Kingdom of Sweden on Defence Cooperation*, Section 2.
49. Inger Österdahl, “Sweden’s Collective Defence Obligations or this is Not a Collective Defence Pact (or Is It?): Considerations of International and Constitutional Law,” *Nordic Journal of International Law*, no. 90 (2021): 129–135.
50. It was also included in the 2020 defence bill. See Swedish Ministry of Defence, *Main elements of the Government bill Totalförsvaret 2021–2025 Total defence 2021–2025*, 7.
51. Österdahl, “Sweden’s Collective Defence Obligations or this is Not a Collective Defence Pact (or Is It?): Considerations of International and Constitutional Law,” 132–133.
52. Österdahl, “Sweden’s Collective Defence Obligations or this is Not a Collective Defence Pact (or Is It?): Considerations of International and Constitutional Law,” 155.
53. One case in point would be the Anglo-French *entente cordiale* and the Anglo-French military staff talks before World War I. See e.g. K. M. Wilson, “To the Western Front: British War Plans and the ‘Military Entente’ with France before the First World War,” *British Journal of International Studies* 3, no. 2 (July 1977): 152–154.
54. Krister Bringéus, *Säkerhet i ny tid: Betänkande av Utredningen om Sveriges försvars- och säkerhetspolitiska samarbeten [Security in a new era: Report by the Inquiry on Sweden’s International Defence and Security Cooperation]*, SOU 2016:57 (Stockholm: Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2016), 13.
55. Ine Eriksen Søreide et al., “Vi må forholde oss til Russlands handlemåte, ikke Kremles retorikk [We must deal with Russia’s actions, not the Kremlin’s rhetoric],” *Aftenposten Morgen*, 10 April 2015.
56. Søreide et al., “Vi må forholde oss til Russlands handlemåte, ikke Kremles retorikk [We must deal with Russia’s actions, not the Kremlin’s rhetoric].”
57. See e.g. Håkon Lunde Saxi and Karsten Friis, “After Crimea: The future of Nordic Defence Cooperation,” NUPI Policy Brief 6 (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs [NUPI], 2018).
58. The Nordic ministries of defence and Icelandic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Nordic Defence Cooperation Vision 2025,” (Oslo: Norwegian MoD, 2018).
59. Peter Hultqvist, “Foreword,” in *Annual Report 2019*, ed. NORDEFECO (Stockholm: Swedish Ministry of Defence, 2020), 4.
60. Håkon Lunde Saxi, “The rise, fall and resurgence of Nordic defence cooperation,” *International Affairs* 95, no. 3 (2019): 662–667; see also Saxi, *Nordic Defence Cooperation after the Cold War*, 23–39; Karsten Friis, “Analyzing Security Subregions: Forces of Push, Pull, and Resistance in Nordic Defense Cooperation,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (2021): 1–18.
61. Danish Ministry of Defence, *Et stærkt værn om Danmark: Forsvarsministeriet Udspil til nyt forsvarsforlig 2018–2023 [A strong defence of Denmark: Danish Ministry of Defence Proposal for new Defence Agreement 2018–2023]* (Copenhagen: Danish MoD, 2017), 8.
62. See e.g. Peter Viggo Jakobsen and Sten Rynning, “Denmark: happy to fight, will travel,” *International Affairs* 95, no. 4 (2019); see also Håkon Lunde Saxi, “Defending small states: Norwegian and Danish defence policies in the post-Cold War era,” *Defense & Security Analysis* 26, no. 4 (December 2010).

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66. American and British troops also participated in sizable numbers. Saxi, “The rise, fall and resurgence of Nordic defence cooperation,” 676–677.
67. Ministry of Defence of Finland, Sweden and Norway, *Statement of Intent on Enhanced Operational Cooperation*.
68. Tomas Bertelman, *International Defence Cooperation – Efficiency, Solidarity, Sovereignty: Report from the Inquiry on Sweden’s International Defence Cooperation*, Fö 2013:B (Stockholm: Swedish Ministry of Defence, 2013), 44.
69. The Norwegian F-16 combat aircraft sill carried out the air-policing mission over Iceland. Bertelman, *International Defence Cooperation – Efficiency, Solidarity, Sovereignty: Report from the Inquiry on Sweden’s International Defence Cooperation*, 30.
70. Ministry of Defence of Finland, Sweden and Norway, *Statement of Intent on Enhanced Operational Cooperation*.
71. Ministry of Defence of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, *Statement of Intent*, 2.
72. Author’s interview with senior level official in the Norwegian Ministry of Defence, Oslo, 22 October 2020.
73. Swedish Ministry of Defence, *Main elements of the Government bill Totalförsvaret 2021–2025 Total defence 2021–2025*, 8, 64.
74. See e.g., Saxi, “The rise, fall and resurgence of Nordic defence cooperation,” 662–671.
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76. Swedish Defence Commission, *Värnkraft*, 295.
77. Swedish Defence Commission, *Värnkraft*, 300.
78. Author’s emphasis. Swedish Defence Commission, *Värnkraft*, 119, 300; see also Swedish Defence Commission, *Motståndskraft: Inriktningen av totalförsvaret och utformningen av det civila försvaret 2021–2025 [The Swedish Defence Commission’s white book on resilience, the total defence concept and the development of civil defence 2021–2025]*, Ministry Publication Series 2017:66 (Stockholm: Swedish MoD, 2017), 73–75.
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83. On Russia’s so-called «Bastion Defence Concept», see Expert Commission on Norwegian Security and Defence Policy, *Unified Effort*, 20–23; see also Swedish Defence Commission, *Motståndskraft: Inriktningen av totalförsvaret och utformningen av det civila försvaret 2021–2025 [The Swedish Defence Commission’s white book on resilience, the total defence concept and the development of civil defence 2021–2025]*, 74–75.

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85. Major General (Ret.) Neretnieks, “Norden; ett gemensamt operationsområde [Norden; a common area of operation],” 16–17.
86. Major General (Ret.) Neretnieks, “Norden; ett gemensamt operationsområde [Norden; a common area of operation],” 16–17.
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