

# The Strategic Role of Land Power on NATO's Northern Flank

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## Abstract

The debate about how to defend NATO's northern flank is closely connected to geographic particularities, the demanding Arctic climate, as well as to ever-evolving technological developments. This research article aims at investigating the role land power plays in this region, with a special focus on northern Norway. Through investigating how structure and composition of land forces matter at the political-strategic level, as well as the role played by allied land forces in Northern Norway, this article seeks to better connect the ongoing debate about the structure of land forces in northern Norway to the political-strategic level. The article seeks to answer the research question by using historical sources and official military documents, as well as qualitative interviews.

**Keywords:** *Arctic, military power, strategy, land power*

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## Introduction

The debate about how to defend NATO's northern flank is closely connected to geographic particularities, the demanding arctic climate, as well as ever-evolving technological developments. This debate has primarily been a professional military debate, where the maritime dimension has taken centre stage, often focusing on questions about the challenges posed by Russia's evolving military force posture in the north and NATO's military preparedness to meet challenges from the east. In this discussion, technological innovation and new battle concepts have informed, and sometimes changed, operational and strategic planning in the West. In addition, one should note that parallel debate has taken place in both NATO and domestically in NATO's northern flank

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state, Norway, a debate which has centered around how to keep a balance between deterrence and the need to provide reassurance to their neighbour in the east.<sup>1,2</sup>

This research article aims to investigate the role land power plays on NATO's northern flank, with a special focus on Northern Norway. This is a dimension that has received less attention in the literature, as NATO's northern area of responsibility largely stands out as a maritime flank.<sup>3-5</sup> Against this backdrop, it is important to improve our knowledge on the strategic role the land power component represents in this region. Specifically, this article seeks to answer the following research question: **What is the strategic role of land power on NATO's northern flank, and to what degree or in what way does its structure and composition matter at the political-strategic level?**

In asking this question the article acknowledges the importance of discussing operational concepts and force structure, while also integrating this professional military debate into a more overall assessment of how land power capabilities and fighting ideas influence the political-strategic level. Finally, this research focus will also encompass an assessment of the role of Norwegian land forces as a part of the potential combined allied force posture in Norway in peace, crises and war.

## **Background**

Norway was one of the founding members of NATO in 1949. Hence, during the Cold War Norway was integrated, and involved in, the western bloc's collective defense, preparing for a massive, and potentially existential war with the Soviet Union.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, questions about security in the Norwegian/Russian border region changed, and soon started to include societal issues and environmental problems, including the mounting problem of radioactive waste from de-commissioned nuclear submarines on the Kola peninsula.<sup>6,7</sup> However, in the last 10–15 years, and particularly after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the traditional dimensions of security in the Arctic, including NATO's northern flank, have re-emerged.<sup>8</sup>

The renewed debate on how to defend NATO's northern flank has, as mentioned above, often focused on the strategic air and sea power component of operational and strategic planning.<sup>9-11</sup> With respect to discussions on the land-power dimension, this aspect has sometimes been actualized through the execution of high-profile NATO exercises in Norway. Another example would be the discussions related to the rotational presence of US troops in central and Northern Norway the last few years.<sup>12,13</sup> In addition, thorough studies of the planned territorial defence of Northern Norway during the Cold War have also been released in the last two decades.<sup>14</sup> These are studies of – perhaps – surprisingly high relevance today, as many of the same unique geographical and climatic challenges are just as relevant today as they were during the Cold War, despite technological innovations. This is perhaps especially true in the land domain, where long distances, rugged terrain, cold temperatures and winter darkness present the same friction and existential challenges for personnel on the ground as they did generations ago.

In addition, as time has passed since the end of the Cold War, and technology has evolved, many land battle platforms are approaching the end of their life cycle. In the same time span, dramatic events in international politics, such as Russia's annexation of Crimea 2014, have unfolded, fueling a new domestic land power debate in Norway. In this debate, the sometimes-called *traditionalists* – and the *modernists* – have dominated the debate columns.<sup>15,16</sup> Regarding these labels the first category refers to supporters of the maneuver-based concept of warfighting, centered on a belief in the continued relevance of a heavily mechanized brigade structure with main battle tanks, while the latter term is used for the supporters of a lighter, geographically distributed, sensor based, long distance precision fire concept. However, to reach a more comprehensive understanding of the political-strategic choices context, there is a need to approach these important questions from a broader perspective, utilizing conceptual frameworks and references familiar to strategic analysis, something this article sets out to do.

### Clarification of research questions and key concepts

The terms “strategic” as well as “political-strategic” used in this article need to be defined more closely. With respect to the term “strategic”, this notion is a crucial concept in military theory, closely related to the term “strategy”. The etymological roots of the term are Greek; “strategos” means “general”.<sup>17</sup> In military studies, “to act strategically” or “having a strategy” refers to certain principles and conditions as “a theory for action”, typically centered on the balance of ends, ways and means.<sup>18,19</sup> At the same time, the term strategic can also refer to a certain level of the military-political command ladder. In this respect the “strategic level” is often referred to as the level where political goals and considerations intersect with the highest command level for the use of military force.<sup>20,21</sup> The strategic level is in NATO defined as “the level at which a nation or group of nations determines national or multi-national security objectives and deploys national, including military resources to achieve them”.<sup>22</sup> In this context the “political-strategic” level would typically concern the highest command level, where decisions on national use of force intersect with overall security political assessments and considerations at the political level.<sup>23</sup> In this article my use of “strategy” and “strategic” will refer to the balance of ends, ways and means, using Arthur F. Lykke's understanding of the concept, alongside the reference to the highest level on the national military- command ladder, where military strategy intersects with national policy, as understood in the Norwegian Armed Forces Joint Doctrine and by the military theorist Edward Luttwak.<sup>24-26</sup>

“NATO's northern flank” is sometimes understood as Norway and its surrounding northern seas.<sup>27</sup> Other times, the expression might refer to the area that during the Cold War era fell under NATO's Northern command, consisting roughly of Denmark and Norway and their surrounding seas and Arctic islands.<sup>28,29</sup> Such a delimitation, essentially stretching from southern Denmark to the North Pole does not, however, serve us well as a basis for a focus on land-power analysis, by its failure to capture the specifics of the characteristics of NATO's northernmost landbound region and islands. A more fitting delimitation might rather be to focus on the European parts of the region

that is often understood as the Arctic, using the Arctic Circle in combination with the °C 10 isotherm<sup>30</sup> in July. This is a definition for example used by the Arctic Council's Arctic Monitoring Assessment Program, as well as in the literature on international relations in the Arctic.<sup>31</sup> Such a delimitation would leave out the Danish mainland and Southern Norway, delineating NATO's northern flank to primarily cover the parts of Norway located to the north of the Arctic Circle, the islands of Jan Mayen the Svalbard archipelago and the North Atlantic and Arctic Ocean with their adjacent seas. In this understanding, NATO's northern flank is a true flank to the Northern NATO region itself.<sup>32</sup> I will apply this latter delimitation to the concept "NATO's northern flank".

NATO's above-mentioned northern flank has an unusually harsh climate. It stands out as a predominant maritime and littoral region, even though the northern parts of Norway and Fennoscandia also consist of large terrestrial expanses with mountain plateaus and boreal forest harboring numerous lakes and rivers. When looking more carefully at the landbound side of this northern flank, most parts of Northern Norway appear mountainous (Troms and Nordland in particular), while the most eastern region – Finnmark – has a more undulating character, especially towards the Russian border close to longitude 30 degrees east.



## Theoretical approach and method

When seeking to understand the strategic role of land power on NATO's northern flank, defining strategy using Arthur Lykke's conceptual "ends", "ways" "means" approach provides a fruitful theoretical basis. This is a conceptual framework where the three basic elements of strategy all should be seen related to policy, and the state's comprehensive national security interests, in a Clausewitzian understanding. From this perspective the rationale for the use of military power is subordinate to, and for the fulfilment of, political goals.

In Lykke's conceptual framework, *ends* are described as the *military objective*, to be defined as "a specific mission or task to which military efforts and resources are applied".<sup>33</sup> To exemplify this, Lykke lists tasks such as "deter aggression, protect lines of communication, defend the homeland..."<sup>34</sup> *Ways* are furthermore understood as "a military strategic concept", defined as "the course of action accepted as the result of the estimate of the strategic situation".<sup>35</sup> Lykke put forward examples of what such strategic concepts might entail: forward defence, strategic reserves, reinforcements or pre-positioned stocks or security assistance. These are all military strategic concepts that could be executed unilaterally or in cooperation with allies.<sup>36</sup> Finally, *means* are pointed out as "the military resources that determines capabilities".<sup>37</sup> Examples of such include: conventional and unconventional forces, nuclear forces, active and reserve forces including war material, weapon systems and manpower.<sup>38</sup>

For Edward Luttwak, "theater strategy" is the highest military-strategic level, only surpassed by a state's "grand strategy".<sup>39</sup> At this strategic level "the relationship between military strength and territory" are governed by "the logic of strategy", a fact that is often ignored in the making of policy.<sup>40</sup> When discussing the characteristics of this elevated command level, Luttwak acknowledges that: "the different formats of theater defence are not in truth freely available options but instead largely preordained by fundamental political dispositions and cultural attitudes".<sup>41</sup> While this article does not use the concept "theater strategy" as a unique command-level, Luttwak's reflection fits the context of NATO's northern flank. In other words, this is a part of the alliance's area of responsibility where political considerations, historical background and cultural factors matter significantly. In the following part of the article, I will utilize the conceptual understanding discussed above as a basis for the empirical investigation in a later analysis.

This article will combine multiple sources of data. Relevant national security and military strategies, along with military doctrines will be scrutinized and used in the analysis. As a part of the data collection, fourteen interviews were conducted. The interviewees represent a selected group of key politicians from the Norwegian MFA and MoD, military commanders and deputy commanders from the Norwegian Armed Forces, along with a current commander from the US Marine Corps. The interviewees also include the Defence Minister of Norway, a secretary of state in the Norwegian MFA (from the centre right government 2013–2021), a former

Norwegian Chief of Defence, and representatives from NATO's center of excellence on cold weather operations. In addition, the serving commanding three-star general of the joint operational level in Norway was interviewed, as were the commanding two-star generals in the Norwegian army and the Home Guard, the commander of the Norwegian Brigade in Northern Norway, and the deputy commander of the Special Operations Command. The interviewees also include a former political advisor to the former Secretary of Foreign Affairs in Norway. The interviews were conducted May–August 2021 primarily face-to face, but some of the interviews were held digitally using Teams (digital video link) and e-mail. Finally, this article builds on insights from military exercises and capability assessment reports, including unclassified results from table-top exercises.

## **Empirical investigation**

### **Security political goals and the Norwegian army from 1945 – today**

After the end of the Second World War, it was clear to the Norwegian political leadership that a return to neutrality was not a viable political option since Norway would not be able to defend itself from a great power like the Soviet Union, now looming on the horizon. Hence, Norway needed to seek alliance partners and prepare for allied reinforcements in case of a new military attack. In this situation a potential Nordic defence cooperation was viewed as insufficient, leading Norway to opt for NATO membership in 1949.

Throughout the different stages of the Cold War, at least three major land-conflict scenarios were viewed as realistic in Norway in case of a military conflict between east and west: the first, a limited preemptive strike on Finnmark, the second, a limited attack on one part of Norway – e.g. northern, central or eastern Norway – and third, an attack on the entire country.<sup>42,43</sup> In addition, limited and isolated strikes by Spetznatz units were also viewed as a realistic scenario.<sup>44</sup> Following this, from 1949 and until 1991, the key defence plans remained remarkably stable, where the key “defence idea” was to prepare for delaying and upholding an aggressive advancing enemy by air, sea, and land, until allied reinforcements could arrive.<sup>45</sup> The resistance was supposed to be conducted with large mobilization-forces, through a division structure, supported by local reservist units (home guard) throughout the entire country.<sup>46</sup> Using Lykke's idea of “ends” understood as the military objective, as well as “ways” understood as a military strategic fighting concept, one can identify a high degree of stability in the strategic planning throughout this period.

The Norwegian army was designed purposely, to fight independently for a few weeks, until allied forces, primarily from the USA - but also the UK and other allied states, arrived.<sup>47</sup> In the 1950s and 60s it was imagined that such scenarios potentially would occur in a situation where major fights would play out in Germany, in what would make up the central European front in a broad global conflict.<sup>48-50</sup> Later from the 1960s and onwards, more limited geographical scenarios, not necessarily

involving the entire NATO alliance were also planned for, demanding a more flexible response.<sup>51,52</sup>

In this strategic setting, the defensive military concept for NATO's northern flank was to prepare for maximum resistance from day one of an attack on Norway, resisting considerable pressure in the short term before the arrival of allied forces that would combine with the Norwegians to execute war on a longer more sustained level. In such a situation, Finnmark was not regarded as defendable, and plans were made to withdraw further south and west in case of an overwhelming invading force. A strong defensive line, often called the Lyngen Line or the Frøy Line, physically constructed with bunkers, was constructed across the mountains south of Lyngen, Northern Troms. On the ground, the planned fighting mode was defensive, but when required it could also switch over to being tactically offensive, exploiting opportunities that might arise using greater local knowledge.<sup>53</sup> With respect to Finnmark – without doubt the most vulnerable part of mainland Norway – the battle concept was to avoid a 'fait accompli' – defeat without fighting – where the Soviet army would take control of the region before resistance was shown and allied forces arrived. Hence, establishing and upholding a clear combat situation of a certain volume and intensity, that would politically force the western powers to respond and support Norway, was a key task for the armed forces.<sup>54</sup>



With the buildup of the strategically important Russian Northern Fleet on the Kola peninsula from the late 1950s and early 1960s onwards, an Soviet attack on larger parts of Northern Norway in order to shelter these key naval bases was gradually viewed as a more likely scenario in a potential major war between east and west.<sup>55</sup> In this context it was particularly the Norwegian airfields from which allied air power could be projected towards the Soviet Union that were perceived to represent a threat to the Soviet Union.

While the guiding concept of the armed forces from the early 1950s to the late 1980s was centered around so-called “defence plans” for certain regions, operational thinking from the 1980s and onwards introduced the “maneuver” based war-fighting idea, or military strategic concept. Originally developed for the imagined central front in Germany, the idea was to utilize superior speed and the coherent movement of large forces to exploit the topography and move in an integrated manner to enhance the likelihood of allied success against a numerically larger enemy.<sup>56,57</sup>

With the demise of the Cold War, the prioritized tasks of the Norwegian armed forces gradually shifted from training and preparing for the mobilization of large reservist units, to a concept where smaller, deployable units of higher quality were given priority with respect to training and equipment.<sup>58,59</sup> However, from the time of Russia’s military conflict with Georgia in 2008, and certainly after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, territorial defence of Norway was brought back as the major military strategic priority for the Norwegian armed forces.<sup>60,61</sup>

After Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Norwegian MoD appointed an “Expert Commission on Norwegian Security and Defence Policy” that was asked to analyze the Norwegian Armed Forces’ ability to solve “the most demanding tasks in crisis and war”.<sup>62</sup> In the report’s “Part 1, Basis”, the Commission states the following: “Armed forces have the fundamental and timeless responsibility of protecting the country and its people”.<sup>63</sup> With respect to Finnmark, this principle is important. Among the interviewees, it was particularly the politicians and top military commanders who without any hesitation expressed the commitment and readiness to defend Finnmark through military means. Using Lykke’s terms, this understanding corresponds well to “ends” – that military objectives should be governed by political objectives. This current strategic thinking represents a shift from the military objectives of the land forces during large parts of the Cold War, when there was greater reluctance about defending Finnmark. Previous Minister of Defence, Frank Bakke Jensen, revealed the political objective to defend Finnmark in the event of a NATO article 5 scenario arising, when he stated that the government’s intent “to defend Norway from the Russian border and southwards, including all ocean areas”.<sup>64</sup> The minister also added that while operational planning in the 1960s, 70s and 80s essentially planned for the defence of Norway from the Lyngen line and southwards, more or less relinquishing Finnmark in the case of an overwhelming surprise attack, such a strategy is no longer viable nor acceptable.<sup>65</sup> This same sentiment was also expressed by Major General Lervik when he made clear that there would be resistance on the ground from the point in time of any military intrusion on the border. However, Lervik also considered it a strategic option to “trade space for time” – an example of “ways” in Lykke’s terms: “the course of action accepted as the result of the estimate of the strategic situation” – by utilizing the vast territory of Finnmark.<sup>66</sup> Finally, Lervik, Norway’s supreme Army commander, also underscored that military resistance in Finnmark would be coordinated in all domains simultaneously, another crucial dimension of “ways” to fulfill the overall strategy.<sup>67</sup>

As mentioned in the introduction, the sometimes overly simplified stereotypes connoted by the terms “traditionalists” and “modernists”, argue for two very different manifestations for the future Norwegian army, even though the terms are not clearly defined.<sup>68</sup> The means are “the military resources that determine capabilities”.<sup>69</sup> As military resources are directly related to military objects and strategic concepts, investments in military resources also matter on the military strategic level.<sup>70</sup>

For traditionalists, the ambition is ultimately to be able to control an area through the demonstration of sheer physical presence. This is an operational concept where maneuver-based warfighting, structured around the brigade, with main battle tanks, mechanized infantry and support systems such as artillery, are considered to be optimal solutions for defensive operations for a relatively small state like Norway.<sup>71</sup> Following this reasoning, the argument has been made that by possessing tanks, an enemy will be forced to use its own heavy equipment, including main battle tanks, to be able to match the defending force. Such weaponry will furthermore require that the enemy spread its forces over a larger area in case of an attack, creating a situation of undisputed war, triggering article 5 of NATO’s treaty.<sup>72</sup>

In addition, the interviewees also pointed out how the optics of a traditional heavily mechanized brigade structure has a mission in itself related to national policy. Hence, to be present and visible over time, before war breaks out, is a key element of the brigade.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, the brigade-structures’ ability to seamlessly escalate, sending political signals e.g. through movement of heavy equipment into Finnmark, was pointed out as an advantage of such a structure, compared to lighter, target acquisition and reconnaissance units.<sup>74</sup>

For modernists, reaction times, mobility and denial capacity, based on information from remote sensors covering vast areas, are at the core of the desired military strategic concept. Here elevated sensors and ISTAR units, together with long-distance mobile and light precision weapons, are thought to be the main warfare platforms.<sup>75</sup> Smaller, dispersed reconnaissance units, for example, transported by snow-scooters and other light vehicles with high maneuverability, will seek to acquire high situational awareness over large areas through multiple sensor systems, such as drones. In the Norwegian context, a variation of this concept has been labelled a “swarm-based approach”, referring to a large swarm of light mobile fighting units able to overwhelm an enemy, while avoiding detection due to their low signature.<sup>76,77</sup> In such a “modernist” military strategic concept, combat units would attempt to deny hostile activity through long distance precision fires, rather than control specific extended regions through the presence of troops.<sup>78</sup> These are the means and ways that strongly influence overall military strategy.

Among the professional military experts interviewed for this article, it was also pointed out that while lighter mobile alternatives, such as units on snowmobiles, provide high local mobility and flexibility, the same cannot be said about long-distance movement. Hence, the argument was made that the strategic concept of lighter reconnaissance unit does not have the “strategic mobility” that traditional

mechanized structures might have.<sup>79</sup> In addition, if the brigade possesses a modern, yet traditional, brigade structure, with heavy battle tanks, it would have the means necessary to engage and defeat for example lighter Russian VDV airborne units dropped in the rear of a flank, putting restrictions on the enemy's space for maneuver.<sup>80</sup>

As identified earlier through Lykke's formula, military power capabilities, "means", also matter at the strategic and political levels.<sup>81</sup> Hence, with respect to the much-debated question about investing in new state of the art main battle tanks or alternative lighter platforms, the decision not only has operational relevance, but also carries strategic and political implications.

A reoccurring key element in the modernists' critique of the maneuver-based strategic concept, has been the vulnerability of the key transport axes from Troms – where the main part of the Army is located – into Finnmark. As Sweden and Finland are non-allied countries, it has been problematic to assume any given access through those countries by Norwegian or allied combat forces during crises and war. Hence the Norwegian Army is left with only one open maneuver option from Troms to Finnmark along the main coastal road (European route E6). This is partly an enclosed road, defined by fjords and steep mountains on each side, which can quite easily be taken out or destroyed through the use of precision weapons.<sup>82</sup> Using Lykke's understanding, this problem pertains to the relationship between ways and means, while it does not trump military strategy as such, as there might be several other concepts involved supporting the strategic, political level.

With the Russian development of capable and precise anti-aircraft, anti-ship, and land target missiles, a discussion on Russian anti access and area denial systems (A2/AD) has been widespread in the west in recent years.<sup>83,84</sup> These systems are often presented with graphic illustrations of "denial bubbles" on maps, describing some of NATO's challenges with respect to an article 5 scenario involving Russia.<sup>85</sup> While such bubbles are far from perfect, they represent a crucial dimension of the dilemmas facing allied land forces on NATO's northern flank, resulting in allied troops ending up as "inside forces" in an area where the airspace is controlled by Russia, denying allied activity in the air, sea, and land domains.<sup>86-88</sup> From a planning perspective one must assume that such denial capacities might significantly hamper the allied capacity to form a bridgehead to land their forces in large volumes into Finnmark, forcing them instead to land them either in southern Norway, or in less exposed areas in Northern Norway, such as the Bjerkvik and Ofotfjord region around Narvik. However, while hostile denial capacities might force allied forces to potentially enter Norway further south and west, the fact that the Norwegian Army might embody an "inside force" in case of an armed conflict with Russia, also provides significant opportunities and presents the Norwegian land power with an opportunity to develop new "ways" or new "strategic concepts" as a result of new technology and changes in the strategic environment in the High North.<sup>89</sup>

### The Norwegian armed forces in the context of allied reinforcements

The defence of Norway, including its arctic islands, must be seen in the context of the NATO alliance. Experiencing the failed policy of neutrality in 1940, followed by five years of German occupation, Norway has, since the foundation of NATO in 1949, looked westward for her security. After deciding to join NATO, Norway sought to improve the likelihood of receiving support in crises and war through several means, including the active policy of inviting foreign troops to exercises in Norway, and increased military coordination and integration with other western powers, especially the USA.<sup>90-92</sup> To adapt the Norwegian force structure, including its operational concepts, to conform with her key NATO partners, particularly the USA, and to some degree the UK, has, since 1949, been given high priority, influencing both ways and means. In this perspective, working to ensure both American willingness as well as ability, to assist Norway on NATO's northern flank has been crucial in Norway's effort to deter potential Soviet aggression.<sup>93-95</sup> From this perspective, the massive nuclear capabilities of the Northern Fleet represent not only a Norwegian problem, but also a challenge for the USA and its NATO allies. Norway has both overlapping interests with NATO, as well as its own unique national interests. As a state directly bordering Russia, Norway has a particular need to combine the deterrence policy of invitation and integration of allied forces, with certain screening measures and self-imposed restrictions.<sup>96,97</sup> These restrictions are most notably, disallowing the siting of foreign bases with regular combat units during peacetime, restrictions forbidding nuclear weapons in Norway, and restrictions on how far east allied exercises and training in Norway can take place.<sup>98,99</sup> Norway's policy-line, influencing both ideas about military objectives, concepts and resources, captures the country's dual approach, and can be summed up in the phrase "integration and screening".<sup>100</sup>

Norway has been of particular interest to the US given the country's proximity to the Kola Peninsula and the Russian Northern military district. This location was, and remains, an unusually well-placed location for the collection of military intelligence in addition to potential force projection.<sup>101,102</sup> In addition, Norway's closeness to the North Atlantic and the crucial transit route for Russian submarines seeking to enter central areas of the Atlantic Ocean and posing a threat to trans-Atlantic communication, has been another vital aspect of US military interest in Norway.<sup>103</sup>

In the post-Crimea (2014-) international environment, familiar dilemmas from the Cold War can be seen. In welcoming a larger number of US Marines to cold weather training in central and Northern Norway, the government continues to emphasize military integration with the USA, while still avoiding the construction of any permanent bases. The move to invite more US Marines has spurred external complaints from Russia as well as opposition from certain sections of the political spectrum in Norway today.<sup>104,105</sup> The "Supplementary Defense Cooperation

Agreement”, signed 16 April 2021 between Norway and the USA, represents the latest development in this area.<sup>106</sup>

Of crucial importance to the military strategy of defending NATO's northern flank is also the US Marine Corps' ongoing transformation based on “Force Design 2030”.<sup>107</sup> With this proposed future force structure, the Marine Corps will work closer with the US Navy, develop its military operational concepts towards ISTAR (intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance) missions and transform its force towards lighter, truly littoral expeditionary force elements. Following this, the US marines should be expected to give priority to forces with a lower signature, designed to attack and operate in areas where air control is not assured through what has been labelled Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO).<sup>108,109</sup> In this transformation the Marine Corps' main battle tanks will be replaced with lighter platforms delivering long range precision fires, with the focus moving from counter insurgency operations to competition against peer or near-peer adversaries.

### **Assessing land power on NATO's northern flank**

In the Norwegian Armed Forces' current “Joint Doctrine”, land power's critical role for the outcome of a conflict is pointed out as a key characteristic of land forces, as it is normally only land power – usually together with sea and air power – that is able to defeat an enemy's land forces.<sup>110</sup> With the introduction of the cyber and space domains, this observation continues to be valid, even though the character of war and armed conflict is always in flux.<sup>111</sup>

There is no consensus on what the future of land warfare will look like, nor how technology will change operations and the character of war in the future.<sup>112-114</sup> Different views exist on the importance of firepower versus maneuver, the role of new technology such as drones, unmanned area vehicles and artificial intelligence, versus the continued relevance of low-tech techniques such as camouflage, decoy installations or the ability to fight analogue. Other disputes surround whether to give priority to the concentration of force and the use of heavy mechanized equipment organized through traditional division and brigade structures or through a more expanded distribution of platforms and lighter units. Similarly, one could point out diverging views on the merits of the different organizing principles of centralized leadership versus greater decentralization and autonomy.<sup>115-118</sup>

Similar differences of opinion are also found in the debate on what force structure, and operational concept, should be given priority in the Norwegian Army of the future, including the question of how Finnmark should be defended. These differences of opinion relate in particular to ways (military strategic concepts) and means (military resources).

As Norway continues to develop her security policies, questions about ways and means will be closely related to the force structure and capacities of NATO's expeditionary forces, particularly the US Marine Corps, or on a smaller scale the British

Royal Marines, who are likely to be deployed to Northern Norway in cases of crises and war.<sup>119–121</sup>

The respondents interviewed for the article underscore that a key objective of land power on NATO's northern flank is the ability to take and hold territory, and that this should be seen as a part of joint operations. This objective is closely related to the continued relevance of main battle tanks. Even though this heavy system is vulnerable, it is still seen, by the majority of the interviewees, as the most robust platform to carry out this task in the foreseeable future. Second, based on assessments from representatives from both the Marine Corps and Norwegian defence forces, the Marine Corps "Force Design 2030" is likely to increase the importance of Norway having such heavy platforms in its toolbox. Following this, with respect to the tricky question of how such heavy platforms potentially should be moved over land from Troms to Finnmark in case of an attack, there might be other viable options than using European route E6. Former Minister of Defence Jensen quite openly states that the Nordic states are in the process of developing their defence cooperation, including planning to allow troop-movement on each other's territory.<sup>122</sup> Such operations now occur during training and exercises. The clear ambition is to further develop this cooperation to work the same way in peace, crises and war. This ambition has been given greater credibility by Sweden and Finland's cooperation in NATO's "Partnership for Peace" program.<sup>123</sup> However, regarding the issue of battle tanks and their crucial influence on operational thinking on land, the military objectives in Finnmark might differ from those further south and west, hence the strategic role of the different resource components of Lykke's ends, ways and means formula might not be uniform throughout NATO's northern flank.

With respect to the restructuring of the US Marine Corps, the changes towards a lighter littoral fighting concept are important. A large number of the interviewees in this article pointed out how the Marine Corps Force Design 2030 matters profoundly to Norway. The changes will not necessarily affect ends (the military objectives), as much as they may affect ways and means.

The argument has been put forward that Norway should follow the lead of the US Marines with respect to the army's future force structure, as "the old way of warfighting is no longer relevant, in particular not to the Norwegian defence problem as regards the ratio of time and space to available forces in North Norway".<sup>124</sup> However, several interviewees argued that this transformation might give greater added value and increased relevance to the Norwegian army's heaviest platforms, such as battle tanks. Such new complementarity in means between the Marine Corps and Norwegian Army was also stressed by one of the Marine Corps interviewees, who pointed out how "our adaptations are mutually supporting".<sup>125</sup>

In the current Norwegian Armed Forces' "Concept Document for the Future Army", basic elements of both positions can be observed, both with respect to preferred means as well as ways. On the one hand, the traditional maneuver approach is recognized as a crucial and fundamental concept of warfighting.<sup>126</sup> On the other

hand, the demand for long-range precision fires from distributed platforms is also recognized as essential in the development of the future Army.<sup>127</sup> Yet, the document's overall position is the argument that the mechanized maneuver approach should continue to be upheld, as several studies and simulations have suggested this structure is optimal.<sup>128</sup> This position is, according to the concept document, also supported by NATO's authoritative capability targets for its member states.<sup>129,130</sup> The document also addresses developments in the force structures of Norway's allies, pointing out that allied reinforcements in case of crises and war in the future, are more likely to consist of lighter equipment, rather than heavy platforms such as battle tanks, supporting the argument for the relevance of the heavy, maneuver approach as a national priority.<sup>131</sup>

The division between traditionalists and modernists with respect to the ways and means they recommend as a part of a military strategy, might sometimes be seen as incommensurable. In fact, however, current developments in the Norwegian Army include substantial elements from both approaches. According to one of the interviewees, Major General Lars Lervik, the contemporary defence structure increasingly encapsulates both. This is especially the case if one assumes that the ongoing long-term plan being followed, which includes both land-based long distance precision fires, main battle tanks, and air defence systems along with new ISTAR units in Finnmark.<sup>132</sup> In short, substantial elements of the Finnmark Land Command (Finnmark Landforsvar) reflect "Diesen's lighter concept", involving a large number of different types of remote sensors and highly mobile reconnaissance units capable of directing precision fire over long distances.<sup>133</sup> In Troms, a mechanized brigade with old Leopard 2 battle tanks will also be upgraded with newer tank models within a decade. Finally, as pointed out by Lervik; while there are significant advantages to operating remote reconnaissance units, sensors and drones, which deliver heavy precision firepower using few personnel, heavier platforms organized in a brigade structure are unmatched with respect to the ability to advance in and hold land. In other ways the heavier units cannot only deliver effects on an enemy but can also hold and deny an enemy access to part of the territory.<sup>134</sup>

With the slimmed down army of today, several of the respondents also underscored the growing importance of the countrywide distribution of Norway's Home Guard, with their local knowledge of the areas of operation they serve and protect. The former battalion task force commander for the US Marine Corps Rotational Force-Europe 2021, Lt. Col. Ryan Gordinier stated:

I have observed the development of the forces over the last several years from Trident Juncture 2018, where I was a 2d Marine Division staff planner, to our most recent deployment as a battalion task force commander for Marine Rotational Force-Europe 21. During that time, I have been impressed with how well our forces complement each other. Namely, the use of the total force of the Norwegian Armed Forces, specifically the Norwegian Army and the Norwegian Home Guard. The knowledge of the Home Guard about their districts is the difference between failure and success.

Finally, as was underscored by several of the interviewees for this article, it is of crucial importance to continue to build up stronger relations between US and Norwegian personnel on all levels, from junior officers to the top positions. As stated by a former political advisor to the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs:

Most people entering into important positions in the military/political sphere in the USA have little or no relationship to Norway and the High North. – There are new people and new leaders all the time. These people must be taught about this region and learn about the defence cooperation [...] we never know when we will need the armed forces, so we have to work continuously with relation building across the Atlantic.<sup>135</sup>

This also applies to opening up for greater involvement and cooperation between academia and military research facilities, and actively involving politicians both local and national in matters aimed at building strong defence cooperation and confidence at all levels of society.<sup>136</sup>

### **Concluding remarks**

The Norwegian Armed Forces' primary task is "to enforce Norwegian sovereignty and sovereign rights and to defend the country when national security is threatened".<sup>137</sup> This primary task creates the basis for Norway's military strategies, which seek to fulfill these over-arching political goals.

Political goals create the basis for military strategies, which are situated in the larger geo-strategic situation. While the strategic setting during the Cold War was characterized by the threat of existential war, confronting all of Western Europe, this is not the situation today. Nevertheless, while the current strategic environment is less characterized by the threat of a massive invasion across Europe, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 has brought back uncertainty, particularly in regions bordering Russia. It is in this context that we find the current debate on how to defend NATO's northern flank.

When seeking to understand the strategic role of land power in this context, the Norwegian Armed Forces' "Joint Doctrine", constitutes a pertinent point of reference. In this doctrine, land power is understood to play a critical role for the outcome of an armed conflict on land. This observation is portrayed as a "key characteristic" of land forces, as it is normally only land power – usually together with sea and air power – that is able to defeat an enemy's land forces and hold territory including critical objects.<sup>138</sup> Using Lykke's understanding of military strategy, when scrutinizing the specific role land power plays on NATO's northern flank, at least three dimensions stand out. First, the land bound component contributes crucially to the means represented by the joint forces, providing the capability to hold and take territory. Second, land power has certain unique properties

related to political goals, and a state's exercise and display of sovereignty. These are properties uniquely related to physical presence over time in a region. Third, land power matters crucially as a component to potentially trigger NATO's article 5, while it also embodies a key part of the combined alliance's force posture, including a combined set of means. In this setting, land forces present on the ground in NATO's northern flank, are in essence an "inside force", relevant to new military strategic concepts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hence, the way land forces are related to overarching political objectives and security political goals should be noted. Illustrating the crucial connection between land forces and allied support, is the following statement from one of the interviewees: "The role of the Norwegian land forces – or indeed the Norwegian armed forces in general – is to respond to a Russian attack in a way which creates an undisputable Article 5 situation, ultimately making assistance from the USA a question of the global credibility of American security guarantees".<sup>139</sup>

Finally, the political objectives and suitability of the different specific land power resources on NATO's northern flank differs from Finnmark to Troms, and further south, and the military strategic concepts change. Specifically, land forces in Finnmark should be present in peace, crises and war, and able to resist land intrusion and survive – all over time – rather than capable of ensuring decisive victory. Further south and west on this northern flank, however, the role of land power changes, embodying a role in which delivering decisive losses on an opponent is more critical. In this region, the land force component should probably to an even greater extent seek to complement allied forces' expeditionary forces.

With that said, facilitating allied involvement in winter training and exercises in Northern-Norway, and ensuring the compatibility of forces is not only of utmost importance to Norway but also NATO. By promoting and ensuring foreign troops' ability to operate effectively alongside Norwegian forces in Troms and Finnmark, particularly in the winter, the vulnerability of NATO's northern flank, given the disproportionality in standing forces between Russia and Norway, becomes less critical.

Finally, international politics can be described as taking place within an international anarchy. While different views exist with respect to the degree to which this anarchy is modified or constrained by international law, norms and rules, there is little dispute over the fact that the mere existence of power capabilities, and their uneven distribution among states, has consequences. Power capabilities influence relationships between states, their room for maneuver and not least, the degree to which a government might be forced to accept, or able to enforce, their will in a potential dispute. These general, universal, concepts also relate to NATO's northern flank, including the land area of Northern Norway and Finnmark.

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