

Smart defence Nordic style

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The Nordic Transition Support Unit (NTSU), in which military contingents from Sweden, Finland and Norway will co-operate, is to commence operation in northern Afghanistan from 2013 as part of the NATO-led ISAF operation. Latvia is also expected to join. The future unit is an example of projects of Nordic military co-operation which gained institutional framework in 2009 in the form of NORDEFCO (Nordic Defence Cooperation). In the context of discussions on closer military co-operation (smart defence and pooling&sharing) taking place in NATO and the EU, Nordic military co-operation appears to be the most comprehensive in Europe, and the way it is functioning provides grounds for conclusions to be drawn as to the conditions necessary for such co-operation to take place on a broader scale and the ways it would develop. The establishment of the NTSU also shows how the Nordic countries perceive the possibilities of including the Baltic states in this co-operation.

The backgrounds of the Nordic co-operation

The foundations of Nordic military co-operation – between Finland, Norway, Sweden and also partly Denmark – are formed primarily of the strategic proximity in the regional and global dimension, which is strongly set in an economic and cultural context.

Norway, Sweden, Finland and partly Denmark, following a period of intensified military engagement abroad, since 2007 have again become focused on regional security issues in Northern Europe, where the potential for crises and conflicts is growing. On the one hand, prospects are opening up for the production of oil and gas, the development of fishing and intensified maritime transport of oil and gas and other goods in the Arctic and in the Barents Sea, and also in the Baltic Sea sub-region (transportation of raw materials). On the other hand, apprehension is growing in connection with the unpredictability and aggressiveness of Russian foreign policy and increasing Russian defence spending. There is also ever stronger uncertainty about the further development of NATO, the political unity and real ability to defend NATO member countries or the degree of the US engagement in European security issues. The Nordic states are not only concerned by actions which could adversely affect their interests in the region but also by crises and conflicts in the Baltic Sea sub-region (Russia vs. the Baltic states) or in the Arctic (between the great powers). These would automatically cause them to become politically and militarily engaged due to their

geographical location, the fact that they are NATO members (in the case of Norway and Denmark), and because they closely co-operate with NATO and are members of the EU (Sweden and Finland).

The Nordic states also have similar interests in international politics, linked to their desire to strengthen their position in NATO, the EU and the UN. They maintain traditionally strong (considering their potential) engagement abroad. Financial constraints and refocusing their attention and investments in the region is however strengthening the desire to develop co-operation with their neighbours, who see the role and character of military and civil engagement abroad in a similar way.

Furthermore, the Nordic co-operation is strongly set in a financial context. The Nordic states find it increasingly difficult to handle the growing costs of maintaining and developing their technologically advanced armed forces by themselves. It will only be possible to preserve some niche capabilities in collaboration with their partners, while military co-operation in other areas (common procurement, transport and logistics) may improve their effectiveness and offer savings which could be allocated to other investments. The development of the Nordic military co-operation is also aided by the fact that the parties involved share cultural similarities, including language, the work culture, identity, the transparency or procedures, and the fact that they have experience of co-operation in other areas.

Nordic smart defence in practice

The announcement that a Nordic Transition Support Unit (NTSU) will be created in northern Afghanistan based on previous, smaller bilateral co-operation projects, is a good illustration of the philosophy of how Nordic military co-operation is developing. This co-operation is implemented in bilateral and multilateral formats, which do not necessarily extend to all the Nordic states. The main criterion of success of potential projects is not their size or political visibility but the likelihood of gaining tangible military and economic benefits. The development of co-operation is a gradual process. Small projects are expected to build confidence in the partners and to open up the way to further co-operation, to help the officers and lower-ranking soldiers become accustomed to this co-operation, to show the tangible benefits of co-operation to politicians and the public and to cause a change in the mindset of the armed forces from 'national' into 'Nordic'. Such projects also allow sovereignty in the area of defence policy to be maintained. For Norway, Sweden and Finland, Nordic co-operation means combining their capabilities ('pooling') and not giving up some of them as a consequence of the distribution of roles and tasks ('sharing').

So far, work has been organised around five areas: strategic planning; capabilities; human resources and education; training and exercises; and operations. This has resulted in projects covering: development of co-operation in foreign operations (Afghanistan and

Libya); common exercises (Combined Joint Nordic Exercise Plan 2012–2017) and training events (mine countermeasures); the common purchase of weapons and military equipment, which resulted in co-operation in the training of personnel, exercises, maintenance and modernisation (the Swedish-Norwegian purchase of Archer self-propelled howitzers; Finland's purchase of the medium range air-defence system NASAMS II, which Norway also has; and possible co-operation in the use of the transport aircraft C-130J). In the longer term, the Nordic states are likely to search for possibilities to greater synchronise and harmonise their military equipment procurement plans, and will co-operate increasingly closely in foreign missions.

Although the Nordic approach facilitates military co-operation, it also reveals the limitations of such co-operation resulting from cautiousness in issues related to sovereignty in the area of defence policy. Other impediments to co-operation include: the fact that Sweden and Finland do not belong to NATO, the differences in priorities of individual defence policies and – as a consequence of this – the varied development of the armed forces in the Nordic states. The top priority for Norway is the development of its Navy to ensure it is capable of operating in the Arctic and of its Air Forces furnished with modern equipment (the F-35 purchase). Sweden attaches great significance to its Navy and Air Forces adjusted to operate in the Baltic Sea. Top priority for Finland is seen as being its Army and Air Forces prepared to defend its land areas. Denmark, which has participated in the Nordic military co-operation projects to the least extent – is developing its Army prepared to act in foreign operations and its Navy adjusted to operate in the Arctic.

Nordic-Baltic co-operation in selected areas

Nordic co-operation is increasingly being seen as attractive by the Baltic states, for which stronger military links with the Nordic states (without undermining the role of NATO) would indirectly provide an additional guarantee of security and expand their room for manoeuvre in foreign and security policy. Estonia has already for years defined itself as a Nordic state. Latvia has been co-operating with the Nordic states and Central Europe alike. Lithuania until recently defined itself as both a Baltic and a Central European state and has since the 1990s declared that Poland is one of its most important partners in military co-operation. It is now emphasising its links with the Nordic region and treats the Northern vector of its policy as an alternative to co-operation with Poland. This has been manifested in Lithuania's activity in the informal Nordic-Baltic format of co-operation, Nordic-Baltic 8 (NB8), and its desire to participate in the EU's Nordic Battlegroup (NBG) led by Sweden.

The Nordic states see the benefits of such co-operation with the Baltic states in selected areas outside the region, seeing this as strengthening their regional 'brand' in the international politics (including Latvia joining the Nordic co-operation in Afghanistan and Sweden's invitation for Lithuania to participate in the NBG in August this year). They are,

however, cautious about including the Baltic states in the Nordic co-operation in the region. The reasons for this include not only the small military potential of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia but also the reluctance of the Nordic NATO member states to accept a greater responsibility for the security of the Baltic states and to make Sweden and Finland, which are not NATO members, obliged to offer them military assistance. The very fact that Sweden and Finland are not NATO member states impedes the enhancement of military co-operation in the region, which, for example, will give rise to problems of a legal and military nature if these countries choose to participate in the Baltic Air Policing.

The implications of co-operation

In the regional context, Nordic co-operation strengthens the defence potential of this region. This is so not only because the Nordic states acting together 'can afford more' and because savings generated this way are allocated to investments in other military capabilities. The constant co-operation of Sweden and Finland, which are not in NATO, with Denmark and Norway enables the former two to more effectively assume NATO standards and improves their capability of joint action not only with the Nordic states but also with NATO in and outside the region. However, none of the Nordic states, including Sweden and Finland, wants closer co-operation of this kind to undermine the dominant role of NATO as the guarantor of regional security. Thus Nordic co-operation is seen as complementary to NATO and the EU. It also is the 'core' of military co-operation between the Nordic states. Given their relatively modest military potential as compared to other regional players, they do not wish to restrict their co-operation only to their neighbours, and they are maintaining military relations first of all with the USA and also with the United Kingdom, Germany and Holland.

In the global context, Nordic and Nordic-Baltic co-operation is aimed at building the region's 'brand' abroad as part of UN, NATO and EU operations and is to serve as proof of the strong international position of the Nordic states. The Nordic region has ambitions to present itself as a small (in terms of potential) but effective partner for the USA in the global context, and it thus wishes to maintain strong relations with the United States and to uphold US interest in the issues of this region.