

US Marines in northern Norway

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On 12 June, Norway's ministers of defence and foreign affairs announced that the Norwegian government and parliament had granted approval for the rotational stationing of the US Marines to continue in Norway for the next five years and for an increase of the US contingent from 330 to 700 soldiers. Soldiers from the US Marine Corps (USMC) have been stationed on a rotational basis in central Norway (Vaernes near Trondheim) participating in training and exercises across the country since January 2017. At present, the US-Norwegian deal envisages a rotational presence of the second US contingent in Setermoen in Troms county in northern Norway.

Commentary

- Norway treats the USA as a guarantor of its security and as a priority ally inside NATO. The components of Norwegian-US defence relations include: (1) intelligence co-operation in the High North, (2) armament co-operation (including the purchase of 52 F-35 aircraft and five Boeing P-8 Poseidon maritime surveillance and patrol aircraft), (3) the storage of US military equipment in Norway, and (4) the use of Norwegian air bases by the US. The rotational presence of USMC forces in Norway has been an important element of co-operation since 2017.
- The rotational contingent of the USMC was deployed in Norway in 2017 and will be increased in 2018 for a few reasons. The presence of US soldiers strengthens the deterrence policy in the Norwegian High North. Norway is concerned about the development of Russia's military potential in the Arctic. Oslo fears, for example, that Norway's northern regions might become involved in a military operation should there be a conflict between NATO and Russia, given the strategic significance of the Barents Sea area for the Northern Fleet's submarines armed with ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads. Thus the US Marines take part above all in training and exercises in Arctic conditions. The additional rotational presence of US soldiers in Troms county in the north of the country highlights this dimension of the deterrence policy. The presence of the US forces in Norway is also essential in the context of the policy of deterrence in the Baltic Sea region. This proves that US forces may have access to the Baltic theatre of operation from the side of northern Scandinavia. The deployment (with the option of strengthening during conflict) of a US contingent in central Norway (where US military equipment is stored) also offers the possibility of a rapid shifting of US troops from Norway to Sweden in case of crisis or conflict in the Baltic Sea region. Such a scenario was demonstrated,

for example, during the Swedish Aurora 17 defence exercises in September 2017 in which US forces (around 1,300 soldiers) participated for the first time.

- The US forces are stationed in Norway not within NATO framework but under bilateral US-Norwegian agreements and they are an element of strengthening US forces in Europe as part of the European Deterrence Initiative. According to the Norwegian government, the legal base for the rotational presence of the USMC contingent is the bilateral memorandum of understanding signed in 2005 governing prestockage and reinforcement of Norway and establishing the Marine Corps Prepositioning Program-Norway (MCPN). MCPN is based on the Cold War programme of ammunition and military equipment storage initiated in 1981, which in 2005 was once again adjusted to the needs of the US Marine Corps. According to information available, the stored military equipment is designated for the Marine Air-Ground Task Force; since 2014 it has been partly replenished and replaced. The stored ammunition is, in turn, expected to be sufficient to sustain a Marine Expeditionary Brigade in combat for 30 days. The equipment and ammunition are stored near Trondheim in six rock caves and two air bases. Norway pays half of the programme costs.
- The rotational US military presence has provoked political controversies in Norway. The radical left section of the political scene and some commentators view it as contrary to Norway's traditional policy of self-imposed restrictions in NATO which, since 1949, has ruled out the stationing of nuclear weapons on Norwegian territory, the holding of national and allied military exercises in the northern regions of the country bordering on the USSR and the permanent deployment of allied troops on Norwegian territory. The goal of this policy at the time of the Cold War was to reduce tension in Northern Europe. The Norwegian government has in fact been withdrawing from this policy of self-imposed restrictions in defence policy over the past few years by holding national and multilateral military exercises in the northern regions of the country (Troms, Finnmark) and by granting consent to the rotational presence of US troops. However, on the level of rhetoric, it claims that these moves are in compliance with the traditional line of Norwegian policy, also maintaining a moderate stance on the threats posed by Russia (Russia is not explicitly presented as a threat in the Norwegian public discourse). The government does not want an open public discussion on the rotational presence of US troops because it might provoke escalating tension with Moscow. However, the absence of offensive rhetoric towards Russia does not prevent Norway from taking consistent and regular actions as part of deterrence policy.
- Norway is trying to maintain a balance between close bilateral defence co-operation with the USA and objection to the Donald Trump administration's stance on climate and trade issues, the nuclear deal with Iran, and the establishment of a US embassy in Jerusalem. However, Oslo has been trying to avoid highlighting the controversies and instead is focusing on emphasising joint US-European interests. Despite close defence co-operation with the US, during the upcoming NATO summit in Brussels, Norway may find a problem with the insufficient level of Norwegian military expenses. Trans-Atlantic burden sharing will be one of the topics discussed there and in focus of President Trump's attention. According to NATO's data, in 2017, Norway allocated 1.62% of its GDP on defence (around US\$6.7 billion), 25% of which on investments. Pursuant to the

present plans, the Norwegian defence budget will remain on a level of 1.5–1.6% of GDP in the coming six years.