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Norway steps up cooperation with the United Kingdom

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On 31 August, the Norwegian government announced the selection of the United Kingdom as its strategic partner in the construction of at least five new anti-submarine warfare frigates. The chosen platform is the Type 26 – a large, cutting-edge vessel optimised for anti-submarine operations. The Norwegian ships are expected to closely mirror their British counterparts in terms of specifications. They will be equipped with three eight-cell Mk 41 Vertical Launch Systems (VLS) and 24 single launchers for CAMM-family air defence missiles.

Germany, France, and the United States also took part in the tender. The total value of the future contract is estimated at up to £10 billion, making it the most expensive armaments programme in Norway's history. Delivery of the first frigate is scheduled for 2030. Oslo and London are expected to sign a new defence cooperation agreement shortly (under negotiation since February 2025), after which talks will begin on the main contract with BAE Systems, along with a series of industrial agreements between the defence sectors of both countries.

Focused on strengthening operational capabilities in the High North (the Barents Sea) and protecting maritime lines of communication and critical infrastructure (the Norwegian Sea, the North Sea, and the North Atlantic), the Norwegian Navy modernisation programme is the central element of the long-term defence development plan adopted in June 2024 for 2025–2036 (see: '*Norway: more investment in national defence and support for Ukraine*'). The choice of the UK as a partner in the frigate programme forms part of broader military cooperation between the two countries, primarily focused on the maritime domain and countering Russia's Northern Fleet. This latest major order for the British shipbuilding industry is gradually restoring its competitiveness with France and Italy, which has declined over the past two decades.

Commentary

- **The United Kingdom is one of Norway's key military cooperation partners, alongside the United States, Sweden, Finland, and Germany.** In December 2024, Prime Ministers Jonas Gahr Støre and Keir Starmer signed a declaration on strategic partnership focused on security cooperation. Both countries intend to deepen collaboration within NATO and the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force, which also includes the other Nordic and Baltic states, as well as the Netherlands. Particular emphasis is placed on the northern flank, countering hybrid threats, and protecting critical subsea infrastructure in the North Sea. Until now, Norway and the UK have mainly focused on regular military exercises in

Norwegian territory (involving the United Kingdom Commando Force that includes the Royal Marines, the Royal Navy, and the Royal Air Force) and on countering Russian submarines through P-8 aircraft patrols. Norway also deploys its frigates to British carrier strike groups (currently operating in the Indo-Pacific), which have likewise been trained for operations on the northern flank.

- **The swift selection of a strategic partner for the new frigate procurement programme reflects Oslo's efforts to increase investments in defence and deterrence.** Between 2022 and 2025, Norway's defence spending doubled. The country has adopted an ambitious and comprehensive plan to modernise its navy and replace its entire fleet. Naval transformation is a priority in the current defence capability development planning cycle, alongside the expansion of the land forces. At present, Norway operates four Fridtjof Nansen-class frigates (a fifth sank after a collision with a civilian vessel in 2018). Instead of 23 corvettes, patrol vessels, mine countermeasure ships, and coastguard cutters, the plan is to acquire a total of 28 new ships, all based on a common hull but fitted with different equipment tailored to specific roles. On top of that, Norway intends to order two more German U212CD submarines, in addition to the four already contracted (see: '*Niemcy–Norwegia: nowa jakość współpracy marynarek wojennych?*') allowing the full replacement of the six ageing Ula-class submarines currently in service.

- **From the middle of the next decade, Type 26 frigates will become the most numerous type of frigate in NATO, after the Franco-Italian FREMM vessels.** Canada is set to acquire as many as 15 ships; in addition to Norway, users will include the United Kingdom (eight vessels) and Australia (six). Furthermore, Denmark is expected to announce its choice of strategic partner this autumn for the construction of at least three new frigates. Following Oslo's decision, the UK's chances in this tender have increased. By participating in this programme, Norway will also likely join the CAMM-family missile users, which already includes Poland, as well as the UK, Italy, and Sweden. The plan to deliver the first frigate in 2030 means that the UK will have to transfer one of the vessels currently under construction for its own navy. As a result, the process of replacing the Royal Navy's ageing and now obsolete Type 23 frigates will be delayed.