

NATO's northern flank: allied forces and structures in the Nordic countries

Piotr Szymański, Jacek Tarociński

On 3 October, NATO's Multi-Corps Land Component Command – North (MCLCC-N) was inaugurated in Mikkeli, in east-central Finland. This de facto army-level command is tasked with planning and conducting land operations on NATO's northern flank. It is a new element of NATO's Force Structure under the Joint Force Command (JFC) in Norfolk, USA, which oversees one of NATO's three regional defence plans – the north-west plan, covering northern sweeps of the Atlantic Ocean, the United Kingdom, and the Scandinavian Peninsula. MCLCC-N has been established on the basis of Finland's national Army Command. It currently comprises 10 NATO staff officers, with plans to expand this number to 50.

At the same time, allied Forward Land Forces (FLF) are set to be deployed by the end of the year in northern Finland (Lapland), specifically in Rovaniemi and Sodankylä. These forces are modelled on the FLF already stationed on NATO's eastern flank. Sweden will serve as the framework nation, with the core of the battlegroup provided by the 19th Arctic Mechanised Brigade (Norrbotten). Smaller detachments are expected from Norway and Denmark, while Iceland, France, and the United Kingdom are likely to contribute staff officers only. The FLF in Finland will have the capacity to expand to brigade strength (4,000–5,000 troops), although in peacetime the majority of Swedish troops assigned to the unit will remain stationed at their home garrison in Boden. In the event of war, the FLF brigade will form part of a Finnish division responsible for defending the country's Arctic north.

Allied forces and structures assigned to NATO's north-west area of operations are also being established outside Finland. In August, the Swedish Armed Forces were tasked with establishing a Joint Logistics Support Group Headquarters in Enköping by 2027. In peacetime, it will comprise 70 officers, increasing to 160 in times of crisis or war. By 2029, a new signal battalion assigned to the northern flank is expected to reach full operational capability. Its headquarters will be based in Denmark, with companies set up across the Nordic countries. This will be NATO's fourth unit of this type.

Meanwhile, to facilitate allied air operations on the northern flank, a Nordic Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) will be established in Bodø, Norway, by the end of 2025. This will be the Alliance's third such centre. Its responsibilities will include the planning, control, coordination, oversight, and support of air operations in Northern Europe, as well as exercising direct command over them. In addition, during June and July, NATO tested the

operation of large unmanned long-endurance intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance aircraft (RQ-4D Global Hawk) from the Pirkkala air base in Finland.

NATO and the Nordic countries are establishing new military units and structures on the northern flank in support of the regional defence plan for the north-west. This process is shaping an integrated Nordic operational space, particularly in the air and land domains, building in part on earlier Nordic defence cooperation under NORDEFCO.

Commentary

- **NATO is currently in the process of transferring responsibility for the defence of the northern flank to Joint Force Command (JFC) Norfolk in the United States.** Following their accession to NATO, Finland, and Sweden were placed under the command of JFC Brunssum – joining countries such as Germany, Poland, and the Baltic states – and incorporated into the regional defence plan for Central Europe. However, both successfully lobbied to be reassigned to JFC Norfolk, which oversees Allied operations in the other Nordic countries: Iceland, Denmark, and Norway. The Nordic states are pursuing the ambition of forming an integrated military northern pillar within the Alliance (see '[Nordic countries: a common vision for the development of defence cooperation](#)'). However, other countries in the Baltic region are concerned that this process may reinforce inward-looking tendencies within Nordic defence cooperation.
- **The air forces of the Nordic countries are the most integrated of their military branches.** This enhanced cooperation builds on years of joint work between the air forces within NORDEFCO. The long-term objective is to achieve maximum interoperability and readiness to operate as a single force in full-scale joint air operations on the northern flank under the Nordic Airpower Concept. This involves closer cooperation in areas such as planning, command and control, the mutual use of bases, shared situational awareness, and joint training and exercises. This process is facilitated by the decision of Norway, Denmark, and Finland to adopt the F-35A as their sole combat aircraft. The establishment of the Nordic Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) is intended to alleviate the burden on the Germany-based CAOC in Uedem, which is currently responsible for NATO airspace north of the Alps. These centres are not tied to specific regional defence plans or JFCs; instead, they report directly to Allied Air Command (AIRCOM), which oversees all NATO air operations. In addition, NATO is reportedly considering the creation of a second base for its ground surveillance unit – the NATO Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Force – on the northern flank, complementing the existing air station in Sicily.
- **In the land domain, Allied activity is concentrated in the High North** – at the Arctic tripoint where the borders of Sweden, Norway and Finland meet. This focus arises from the relative weakness of Nordic land forces in this peripheral theatre of operations, which borders the heavily militarised Russian Kola Peninsula. Finland initially stated that it would not seek the deployment of NATO forces on its territory, but in light of Russia's increasingly aggressive policy, it has since reversed this position.
- **Under the north-west regional defence plan, the lowest level of integration is expected in the maritime domain,** as the Nordic countries will be divided between two principal areas. The navies of Denmark and Norway focus on the North Sea – with Denmark also

active in the Arctic, and Norway on the Norwegian and Barents Seas – while Sweden and Finland concentrate on the Baltic Sea. The Baltic will be divided between the areas of responsibility of JFC Brunssum and JFC Norfolk (with the exact delineation yet to be defined). Allied naval operations in the Baltic are led by the multinational headquarters, Commander Task Force Baltic (CTF Baltic), established in October 2024 on the basis of Germany's naval command in Rostock. Officers from several NATO members, including Poland and Sweden, have been seconded to the headquarters. CTF Baltic operates on a rotational basis. In 2028, it is scheduled to relocate to Gdynia and become embedded within the emerging POLMARFOR headquarters under the Polish Maritime Operations Centre – Maritime Component Command. Four years later, it is scheduled to relocate once more, this time to Sweden. CTF Baltic is currently responsible for NATO's ongoing Baltic Sentry maritime enhanced vigilance activity, which began in January. Baltic Sentry focuses on protecting critical undersea infrastructure and monitoring the so-called shadow fleet.