



Deep Cuts Commission Issue Brief

# DETERRENCE, REASSURANCE AND MILITARY SELF-RESTRAINT

## THE NORDICS IN THEIR SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

by Barbara Kunz

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In the current geopolitical context, Northern Europe is of particular relevance. This is true both from a Russian and a Western perspective. For Russia, it is a key interest to protect its nuclear second-strike capabilities on the Kola peninsula. It is also with conventional naval and air force capabilities based up North that Russia can threaten NATO's lines of communication across the Atlantic and project its power. These lines of communication are a core interest to NATO as they are crucial for the Alliance's ability to secure reinforcements – in essence, bring American troops into Europe in case of open military conflict. What is more, for the United States, Northern Europe and the Arctic is not solely about collective defense of its European allies, but about its ability to counter Russian naval and strategic forces in a global context. Nothing in Northern Europe is consequently truly “only regional.” Rather, political choices on e.g. military postures, infrastructure and deployments directly matter for big picture strategic stability.

The Arctic in particular has long been viewed as a paragon of peace, stability, and cooperation. Regional forums such as the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council provided the institutional framework, albeit explicitly excluding the military dimension. Similarly, in the Baltic Sea Region, the Council of the Baltic Sea States was intended to provide a platform for cooperation among bordering countries. But as tensions between Russia and the West mounted, Northern Europe and the High North are changing. Countries in the region have been investing in their militaries for years – even before 2022 – and will continue to do so in the future.<sup>1</sup> Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 altered threat perceptions so fundamentally that first Finland and then Sweden decided to apply for NATO membership, putting in simultaneous applications on May 18, 2022. Finland became a NATO ally on April 4, 2023. Sweden joined the Alliance almost a year later on March 7, 2024, after

ratification by Turkey and Hungary eventually removed the last remaining obstacles. In parallel to being NATO allies, all four countries\* covered in this paper pursue policies of strengthening ties with the United States and other key partners such as the United Kingdom. Over the past years, the US has increased its bilateral engagement with Norway, Denmark, Finland and Sweden respectively, notably through the conclusion of Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCAs). As of 2024, these agreements provide it with access to dozens of military bases, training areas and other military infrastructure across the four countries (as well as the Baltic States). These DCAs mark a departure from Cold War stances and change the military picture in the North. The result of all these developments is a significantly altered contact zone between the Alliance and Russia in the North.

The strategic environment in which stability instruments could be implemented or arms control agreements be concluded consequently evolved as well – and continues to evolve. Against this backdrop, this paper sets out to discuss existing takes on deterrence, reassurance and military self-restraint in the Nordic region and their origins. It particularly focuses on unilateral policies of restraint that have traditionally characterized approaches in founding NATO members Norway and Denmark. The paper also seeks to highlight ongoing debates and developments such as the conclusion of bilateral DCAs with the United States, providing some background for a broader reflection on the future of arms control, risk reduction and stabilizing instruments in the Nordics and in Europe.

## No regional arms control regimes in the North

Historically, there has never been a specifically Nordic arms control regime, be it in the nuclear or in the conventional realm. During the Cold War, the Nordic countries nevertheless came to be united in their skepticism of nuclear weapons. Discussions of a nuclear-free zone to be created in the region yet led nowhere – notably because they were met with great resistance in the United States. On the conventional side, Cold War prerequisites could not have differed more between founding NATO members Norway and Denmark on

the one hand and non-aligned Finland and Sweden on the other. These differences were also reflected in the 1990 CFE Treaty: Finland and Sweden remained outside the now suspended regime (but were signatories of the Vienna Document and Open Skies). Denmark and Norway are both parties to the CFE treaty, the latter considered a flank zone country. Non-aligned Finland and Sweden had armed forces designed to withstand a Soviet attack and defend their respective national territories on their own. In light of the massive asymmetries between these countries' militaries and the Soviet armed forces, limitations of any kind were the last thing Helsinki or Stockholm were interested in. Convinced that the Soviet Union would never agree to any kind of arms control deal that would effectively level the playing field, they feared that limitations would first and foremost limit their own room for maneuver. Norway and Denmark, in turn, adopted unilateral policies of self-restraint that effectively amounted – and continue to do so – to arms control and risk reduction measures, at least in a wider sense.

## Balancing deterrence and reassurance (of Russia): Norway and Denmark

Since the early days of the Cold War, founding NATO members Norway and Denmark adopted national policies intended to balance deterring the Soviet Union with measures meant to provide reassurances to Moscow that their respective national territories would not be used to launch any offensive action against it. Designed to keep tensions in the region low, restrictions were and continue to be both geographic and qualitative in nature, limiting nuclear weapons, allied presence or activities in certain areas. Applying a small-state logic that aimed at creating room for maneuver, governments in Oslo and Copenhagen also knew that they would only be secure if part of a strong alliance. Yet, self-imposed restrictions at times led to strained relations with other NATO members and accusations of hampering the Alliance's ability to defend itself and, more broadly, being insufficiently committed allies.

**Norway:** Firmly anchored in NATO and without illusions about Russia, Norway's policies were and are intended to control and limit allied activities in the region and avoid any actions that Moscow could reason-

\* The Nordic countries officially include Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark. This paper, however, only focuses on Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark.

ably interpret as threatening.” All details of Norway’s approach are not known in the public domain.<sup>2</sup> In Cold War times, the policy – then called “self-imposed restrictions in peace time” – rested on three pillars that were unilaterally adopted over the years.<sup>3</sup> First, the so-called Norwegian basing policy limited where military infrastructure could be located, with a special view to the country’s North and its land border with the Soviet Union. The initial declaration was outlined in a legally non-binding note to the Soviet Union on February 1st, 1949.<sup>4</sup> Second, since 1957, Norway excludes nuclear weapons from its territory in times of peace. Third, Norway also defined restrictions on allied military activities on its territory, notably exercises and training. Particular focus was again on Norway’s Northern parts and the Finnmark region bordering the Soviet Union. Restrictions also concerned ship calls in Norwegian ports, allied aircraft overflight and use of Norwegian bases. Norway moreover used to apply restrictions to itself, for instance keeping the bulk of its standing forces several hundred kilometers away from its border with Russia or limiting offensive capabilities.

Historical restrictions on allied activity were interpreted with a certain flexibility by respective Norwegian governments and adaptations were made as threat perceptions evolved. For example, as the Soviet Northern Fleet became more capable in the 1970s, Norway sought tighter links with the United States and other allies, taking measures intended to prepare for bringing in reinforcements if necessary. Since 1981, there has e.g. been a bilateral agreement on prepositioned US materiel under the Marine Corps Prepositioning Program Norway close to Trondheim, at considerable distance from the Russian border. The country also opened up for allied forces training on its territory, e.g. in cold weather conditions.

Norway’s approach of balancing deterrence with reassurance remains in place, as Prime Minister Gahr Støre explained in his June 2024 foreign policy declaration.<sup>5</sup> Its exact content was nevertheless constantly adapted to new realities.” After the Cold War ended, more widely allowing for allied training and exercises in the North became a priority. This notably resulted in general guidelines for foreign military activity in Norway in peacetime (last updated 2020) and an update on rules

for allied flights and sailings in the Barents Sea (2019). Norway also considered that US forces present in Norway on a rotational basis from 2017 to 2020 were compatible with its overall approach and its basing policy. In the current geopolitical context and reminiscent of older debates during the Cold War, Norwegian approaches have been questioned on numerous occasions in a domestic context. In the face of an increased Russian threat, opposition party of Venstre for instance calls for US troops to be permanently stationed in Norway.<sup>6</sup> Against the backdrop of Finland’s and Sweden’s NATO accession, it is also argued that current restrictions – especially regarding allied overflight – now make limited military sense.<sup>7</sup> The evolution of military technology – notably long-range precision strike capabilities – are yet another factor.

Though not an element of Norway’s basing policy strictly speaking, it is worth mentioning that Norway continues to be engaged in risk reduction and confidence-building activities with Russia. The two countries cooperate in five safety-related areas. Norway is one of the twelve NATO allies (and the only among the Nordics) with a bilateral Incidents at Sea Agreement (INCSEA) with Russia, initially concluded in 1990 and updated in December 2021 to e.g. include drones or the dangerous use of lasers.<sup>8</sup> A meeting at the level of generals takes place yearly. Norway and Russia also sustain coast and border guard cooperation and work together on regulating fishery in the Barents Sea. The hotline between Russia’s Northern fleet and Norway’s Joint Headquarters is tested weekly. Search and rescue remains yet another area of bilateral cooperation.

Norway has always been a special partner to the United States within NATO, notably because Norway serves as NATO’s “eyes and ears” in the North. The two countries have for decades cooperated closely on defense-related matters, based on a variety of agreements. In 2021, they concluded a Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement (SDCA)<sup>9</sup> intended to complement and deepen existing formats and legal frameworks, which has since entered into force. The agreement initially gives the United States access to four sites across the country. Article 1.2 states that “Nothing in this Agreement alters Norwegian policies with regard to the stationing of foreign forces on Norwegian territory, and

\*\* During the Cold War, Norway was the only NATO member with a land border with the Soviet Union.

\*\*\* For a summary of current approaches, see Per-Erik Solli, “Nordic Security Policies and Strategies,” *The Barents Observer*, 4 February 2024, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/opinions/nordic-security-policies-and-strategies/118700>

the stockpiling or deployment of nuclear weapons on Norwegian territory.” In February 2024 and against the backdrop of a massively deteriorated security environment, Norway and the US signed an amendment to the SDCA, which provides the United States with access to eight more designated areas.<sup>10</sup>

**Denmark:** Danish policies are not as explicitly about balancing deterrence with reassurance as Norway’s. Yet, ideas underlying Norway’s traditional approaches can also be found in Denmark. During the Cold War, keeping tensions with the Soviet Union low was a Danish objective. In 1953, in response to American requests, the Danish government thus decided against foreign bases on its territory in peacetime – excluding Greenland from this policy. In the 1980s, and mostly for domestic politics reasons, Denmark was known for what came to be dubbed its “footnote policy,” opting out of several NATO decisions, including on the so-called Double Track.<sup>11</sup> Like Norway, Denmark adopted its policy with respect to nuclear weapons in 1957: no nuclear weapons would be permitted on Danish territory “under current circumstances.” Nuclear issues were in fact a source of conflict between Denmark and the United States throughout the Cold War, notably related to nuclear capable US vessels visiting Danish ports. In practice, Denmark accommodated the United States based on Washington’s “Neither Confirm nor Deny” policy, allowing Danish governments to argue they assumed foreign governments would respect Danish restrictions.<sup>12</sup>

In the Danish context, Greenland is a special case that, at the same time, is of high strategic relevance to the United States. Even after the 2008 referendum on self-government and the ensuing agreement on autonomy, Copenhagen remains responsible for foreign and security policy. Contrary to official discourse, Danish Cold War restrictions did not apply to Greenland, and Denmark de facto had a different approach to nuclear weapons there.<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> The United States has maintained military infrastructure in Greenland on the basis of a first

wartime agreement from 1941, most famously so an airbase (Pituffik Space Base, formerly known as Thule Air Base)<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup>. A second agreement between the United States and Denmark on the defense of Greenland dates from 1951 and provides the US with “the right of free access to and movement between the defense areas through Greenland, including territorial waters, by land, air and sea.”<sup>13</sup> With US forces in Greenland, Denmark remains the only of the four countries covered here with a permanent American military presence.

After the end of the Cold War, Denmark went through a period in which its immediate strategic environment no longer constituted a high priority. Close ties with the US nevertheless remained important, which for instance translated into Denmark’s engagement in Iraq or Afghanistan during the country’s “activist” foreign policy era. More recently, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen qualified the 2023 bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement with the United States as a “breakthrough.”<sup>14</sup> This agreement does not cover Greenland or the Faroe Islands. Once in force, it will provide the US with access to three airbases, allowing it to station personnel and materiel.<sup>15</sup>

In reaction to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Denmark also abandoned its opt-out from the European Union’s Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). Though without direct implications for arms control and risk reduction, this move marks an evolution in Danish approaches.

## New NATO members Finland and Sweden

Both Finland and Sweden joined NATO without any restrictions. Even prior to joining NATO, both countries opened their territories to a multitude of exercises or allowed overflight, with Finland – which, contrary to Sweden, directly borders Russia – having a slightly more restrictive stance.<sup>16</sup> Whether any Norwegian-type guidelines are in place at a classified level is not publicly known. Officially introducing guidelines comparable to

\*\*\*\* These distinct approaches to nuclear weapons on the Danish mainland and in Greenland became known to the public in 1968 when a US military jet armed with nuclear weapons crashed. See e.g. Timothy J. Jorgensen, “50 years ago, a B52 crashed in Greenland – with 4 nuclear bombs on board,” PBS Newshour, 21 January 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/50-years-ago-a-us-military-jet-crashed-in-greenland-with-4-nuclear-bombs-on-board>. See also the official study on Greenland policies during the Cold War: Grønland under den kolde krig. Dansk og amerikansk sikkerhedspolitik 1945-68, DUPI, Copenhagen 1997.

\*\*\*\*\* Denmark allowed the United States to keep and expand this base in the US-Danish Greenland Defense Agreement of 1951. It came to play an important role in defending the United States, as a base for US bombers and as an early-warning radar station intended to detect Soviet missiles launched against the US.

Norway's is not currently discussed. Yet, as the historical examples of Norway and Denmark illustrate, approaches to nuclear weapons or allies' activities on national territory can be defined even after joining the Alliance. There consequently are debates in Finland and Sweden on what NATO membership implies for matters related to nuclear weapons policies, foreign troops and bases on national territory. Joining NATO marks an important shift for these two countries in many ways, including in the nuclear realm: after for decades approaching nuclear issues from a global disarmament and humanitarian perspective, they have now become members in a nuclear alliance and need to position themselves in NATO's Nuclear Planning Group. Although formats such as the Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament (a NPT grouping launched in 2019 by a previous Swedish government) continue to exist, the focus has now clearly shifted to deterrence rather than disarmament, while both countries continue to express principled support for nuclear and risk reduction in an NPT context. Likewise, conventional arms control is currently not high on the agenda in Finland and Sweden.

Debates in Finland and Sweden also pertain to the United States' role in the region. Tightening bilateral ties with the US is indeed a long-standing policy objective that has not lost its salience with NATO membership – in particular against the backdrop of domestic policy evolutions in the country. The recent conclusions of Finnish- respectively Swedish-US Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCA), which provide the US with wide-ranging options on national territories, are part of this approach. National debates revolve around the potential limitations on national sovereignty that arise from these agreements,<sup>17</sup> with the issue being more controversial in Sweden than in Finland. Moreover, although the DCAs are unrelated to Finland's and Sweden's NATO accessions, a strong focus lies on the – very hypothetical – presence of US nuclear weapons on their respective national territories.

**Finland:** During Finland's latest presidential campaign, attitudes toward nuclear weapons were among the distinguishing features of the two candidates who made it into the second round. The eventual winner and now Finnish president, Alexander Stubb, argued that nuclear weapons could be transported across Finnish territory, but not stored there. When taking office in March 2024, he declared that NATO's nuclear deterrent “must be real for Finland.”<sup>18</sup>

Finland's Nuclear Energy Act (4 §) currently stipulates that it is illegal to import nuclear explosives or to manufacture, possess or detonate them in Finland.<sup>19</sup> Under these rules, even transporting nuclear weapons through Finland would appear to be prohibited. While there is no big debate surrounding this issue, discussions in a Finnish parliamentary context consequently revolve around whether this legal framework should be maintained or whether the regulations ought to be changed. The left in the opposition has been the most vocal about preserving the rules, while proponents of an adjustment – parliamentarians from the Centre, True Finns and Coalition parties – argue that they run counter to Finland's joining the Alliance without restrictions and could potentially be in the way of NATO's nuclear policies.<sup>20</sup>

Finland concluded a bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement<sup>21</sup> with the US in December 2023, intended to “complement” the country's NATO membership according to Finnish foreign minister Elina Valtonen.<sup>22</sup> The agreement provides the United States access to the 15 military facilities and areas listed in the Annex, and allows it to store equipment and ammunition. It does not contain provisions that ban nuclear weapons from Finnish territory. Yet, article 1(1) of the agreement stipulates that “All activities under this agreement shall be conducted with full respect of the sovereignty, laws and international legal obligations of Finland, including with regard to the stockpiling of certain types of weapons on the territory of Finland.”

**Sweden:** Since the late 1960s, Sweden has been very critical of nuclear weapons. The former Swedish government initially considered joining the Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) but decided against it, allegedly under pressure from NATO countries. Joining NATO did not come with plans to deploy nuclear weapons in Sweden. Yet, at present, no legal obstacles would stand in the way of such a move. There are consequently calls<sup>23</sup> for legislation banning nuclear weapons from Swedish territory and criticism is waged against the government for not including such restrictions in the DCA with the United States, notably by the Left Party and the Greens.<sup>24</sup> Such a law does nevertheless not seem to be on the government's agenda, based on the argument that there is no necessity for it absent any plans to deploy nuclear weapons.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the government argues that Sweden's traditional stance is well-known and respected, making legislation unnecessary. Then foreign minister Tobias Billström,

in the government's foreign policy declaration on the occasion of Sweden's accession to NATO, thus declared that "Sweden has for decades had a clear position not to allow visiting armed forces to carry nuclear weapons with them."<sup>26</sup>

Much of the post-NATO-accession debate in Sweden is centered around the bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement in the United States. The agreement, signed in December 2023 and in force since August 2024, inter alia grants the US access to the 17 Swedish bases and exercise areas listed in the annex.<sup>27</sup> The DCA with the United States notwithstanding, permanently deployed foreign troops on national territory are nevertheless not on the agenda. After Russia's accusations of planning a permanent NATO base on Gotland – a Swedish island strategically located in the Baltic Sea – then Swedish foreign minister Tobias Billström also declared that "there are no plans for permanent NATO bases on Gotland. Sweden applied for NATO membership without restrictions based on wide support in the Riksdag [Swedish parliament]. This approach remains, but just like in the other Nordic countries, there is no reason for permanent bases on Swedish territory in times of peace."<sup>28</sup>

## What prospects for arms control, risk reduction and stability instruments?

Like elsewhere in Europe, and for the foreseeable future, the Nordic countries' security environment will likely be shaped by concerns about an aggressive Russia and antagonistic NATO-Russia relations. Change is currently not in sight, and deterrence will realistically remain the primary focus. Under these circumstances, the main purpose of risk reduction and stability mechanisms is to provide safety valves: as instruments in the daily management of such an antagonistic relationship and the risk of escalation that invariably arises when states attempt to deter each other. The appetite for such safety valves nevertheless seems limited. Russia currently displays no interest in discussing (nuclear) arms control and risk reduction. Among NATO allies, there is no consensus either that engaging in risk reduction and implementing stability measures should constitute a priority. In the current context, and in strategic communities where many tend to equate "arms control" with "disarmament," arms control in its widest meaning is indeed often – wrongly – seen as the "opposite" of deterrence. How (if at all) deterrence should be balanced

with reassurance will likely be among the key questions underlying the European defense debate in the coming years. Policy preferences in answering this question vary widely across Europe and the Atlantic, including among the Nordics.

Against this backdrop, finding a common Nordic understanding when it comes to risk reduction and stability instruments would be an important step in the overall European context. This could notably be a task for the various cooperation formats involving the Nordics, such as NORDEFECO. Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO provides new impetus for these formats, which in the past suffered from the NATO/non-alignment divide and different views on defense industrial matters. As a "Nordic caucus" emerges within NATO, a shared Nordic take on risk reduction and stability mechanisms for the Northern flank would certainly carry political weight.

Establishing risk reduction mechanisms on NATO's Northern flank, with all the specificities the region presents, would be a crucial step toward a more stable security environment. It would, however, only be a first step. Solving the broader stability equation in Northern Europe through arms control – as in mutually agreed numerical, qualitative or geographic limitations – is increasingly difficult. This is of course due to the geopolitical situation and drastic deterioration of US-Russia and NATO-Russia relations following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and its continuously threatening rhetoric and behavior. It is also due to the fact that a mere return to Cold War solutions will not be sufficient in the current military and technological context. The multilayered nature of the West's (future) deterrence posture, involving advanced national capabilities, NATO's deterrence posture, and the United States engaged in bilateral defense cooperation with individual states, further complicates the picture: any solution would need to take all these layers into account, in addition to big picture US-Russia strategic stability. Whether this complexity is at all manageable is an open question. This, in turn, only underlines the importance of risk reduction and stability mechanisms in order to prevent even further deterioration of an already volatile and highly dangerous security environment.

Cover page: SS Connecticut surfaces through the ice as it participates in ICEX 2018. - licensed under cc-by-2.0; Original Source: <https://flickr.com/photos/56594044@N06/40210331094>

## Endnotes

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## About Deep Cuts

For years, more and more arms control treaties have been eroding and nuclear disarmament is in a deep crisis. The goal of this research and transfer project is to analyze obstacles to U.S.-Russian nuclear and conventional disarmament, to strengthen European security and to develop concrete risk-reduction measures that limit the potential for military escalation in the short term and aim to cut nuclear stockpiles in the long term. The Deep Cuts Commission was established in 2013 and is coordinated by IFSH. The project partner is the independent Arms Control Association in Washington, D.C.

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## Impress

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