

### Potential for Nordic-Baltic security cooperation: shared threat perception strengthens regional collaboration

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Stellungnahme / comment

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Opitz, C. (2015). *Potential for Nordic-Baltic security cooperation: shared threat perception strengthens regional collaboration*. (SWP Comment, 40/2015). Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-442563>

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# Potential for Nordic-Baltic Security Cooperation

Shared Threat Perception Strengthens Regional Collaboration

Christian Opitz

All the Nordic and Baltic states are concerned about the deteriorating security situation in northern Europe. Most of all, military tensions in the Baltic region engender a collective threat perception vis-à-vis Russia. The pressure to respond is boosting a historically rooted security cooperation between the Nordic and Baltic states. A shifting of priorities is becoming apparent within the institutional cooperation, which is moving from a forum of exchange towards a shared framework of action. The countries involved are responding to traditional military threats and new security challenges with intensified and innovative cooperation. This problem-driven Nordic-Baltic security cooperation could also serve as a model for other regional formats, such as the Visegrád Group.

In April 2015 the five Nordic defence ministers created waves with a joint piece in the leading Norwegian newspaper, *Aftenposten*. The group, representing Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, called Russia's actions in Ukraine "the greatest challenge to the European security architecture", and announced their intention to step up joint Nordic military exercises and intensify their cooperation with the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The Nordic and Baltic states point to numerous examples of increasingly aggressive Russian behaviour in the region, including economic counter-sanctions in sensitive trade sectors, intimidatory politi-

cal rhetoric, and military violations of national airspace and territorial waters. Shared negative experiences have led to a strong convergence in formerly diverging assessments of Russia, which the Nordic and Baltic states have come to regard as a major instability factor in the region.

This interpretation is increasingly reflected in joint actions. Yet while the *Nordic Defence Cooperation* (NORDEFECO) would like to integrate the Baltic partners more closely, the fact that some of the countries involved are not NATO members remains a crucial impediment to regional military integration.

## Drivers and Obstacles

Nordic-Baltic defence cooperation began immediately after the Baltic states gained independence in 1991, with the Nordic support playing a decisive role in building national military capacities in the Baltic states. This applied not only to military equipment, but above all to the transfer of knowledge and experience. Nordic trainers helped to establish military infrastructure and standards, for example in the guise of the Baltic Defence College. In fact, without Nordic assistance the Baltic states would have found it almost impossible to be ready to join NATO by 2004.

But once Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were established as NATO members, inter-regional cooperation ebbed and cooperation shifted to the international level. Nordic-Baltic initiatives were now restricted primarily to foreign missions, such as security sector reform projects in the Western Balkans or joint ISAF units in Afghanistan. Henceforth, the Baltic states prioritised security cooperation with the United States.

In 2009, the Nordic states institutionalised decades of informal defence cooperation by founding NORDEFECO to bolster national defence capacities, explore common synergies and promote efficient collective solutions. However, NORDEFECO is more framework than organisation, pursuing cooperation through regular meetings of defence ministers and military leaderships. Agreements are reached by consensus, and any member may withdraw from a project at any time without hindering ongoing cooperation between the others. In fact, few of its projects encompass all five partners; frequently they are bilateral or trilateral in nature. The spectrum of cooperation is broad and relates above all to military exercises, training and equipment.

The NORDEFECO agreement explicitly provides for cooperation with third parties based upon a pragmatic approach. In this regard, the Baltic states have been increasingly drawn in over recent years. Cooperation began in 2011, initially restricted to

selected areas. One year later Baltic officials were for the first time invited to attend the high-level Military Coordination Committee, which manages and facilitates military cooperation. Since 2014 they have been invited to, in principle, participate in all NORDEFECO projects.

The Baltic states fundamentally welcome closer ties to NORDEFECO, which are progressively raising their military capacities to match high Nordic standards. Cooperation also opens up a broader arena of foreign policy action and grants them supplementary security options. However, the emphasis is on “supplementary”. The Baltic states regard NATO as their absolutely central pillar of national defence and are vigilant to avoid any steps that might water down the mutual defence clause (Article 5). Their relationships with NORDEFECO are therefore ambivalent, given that the format includes non-NATO Finland and Sweden. This places very narrow limits on any collective defence aspect in Nordic-Baltic military integration.

## Possibilities of Cooperation

Nonetheless, the shared threat perception concerning Russia has increased the incentives for Nordic-Baltic cooperation. The flexible NORDEFECO format does in fact enable differentiated practical cooperation capable of addressing the perceived challenges.

The development potentials are conditioned by the perspective from which the “Russian threat” in the region is viewed. The narrow defence perspective perceives Russia primarily as the traditional military aggressor. The security angle, on the other side, comprehends Russia more broadly as latent uncertainty factor with hybrid threat potential. While outlined here as ideal types, the lines between the two naturally become blurred in reality. Both perceptions can propel Nordic-Baltic cooperation – but in different spheres and with different added value for regional security.

*Russia as military aggressor:* This perception favours military cooperation, first and foremost to enhance regional and thus also national defence capacities. The NORDEFECO framework offers various starting points, for example more joint military exercises, expanded Nordic support for control of Baltic airspace and closer cooperation in maritime surveillance in the Baltic Sea. Additionally, there are options for combined military training, exchange possibilities for top officials, and improved coordination of defence procurement.

However, two factors in the Nordic-Baltic context impede a significant expansion of regional “hard” defence capabilities. Firstly, the Baltic states’ aforementioned prioritisation of NATO leaves certain sensitive military areas excluded. Fundamentally, they wish to avoid entering into ill-defined defence commitments. Secondly, the trajectory of NORDEFECO to date offers little grounds for high-flying expectations. While the format is often discussed positively, it is as yet hard to demonstrate that Nordic cooperation has really enhanced national defence capacities: there is a lack of concrete examples of successes in important fields such as integration of operational decision-making or a joint arms policy. As long as certain areas of sovereignty remain taboo even among the Nordic states, broader and deeper cooperation is unlikely to lead to greater military integration in the region as a whole.

On the other hand, Nordic-Baltic cooperation in the international sphere appears less problematic. The Nordic and Baltic states are currently intensifying joint projects to expand military and security capacities in third countries. In addition, Sweden has asked NORDEFECO to investigate the possibility of a modular-style Nordic-Baltic Battlegroup that could offer international organisations a rapidly and easily integratable unit. Extra-regional initiatives of this kind are politically less sensitive, but still capable of harmonising standards and building trust among the Nordic and Baltic states. These are necessary preconditions

for military cooperation in their own neighbourhood too.

*Russia as latent uncertainty factor:* This interpretation adheres less to a classical military logic, but emphasises novel areas of threat: in the Baltic context above all cyber-attack and Russian-language political propaganda. The Baltic states have long been aware of forms of “hybrid threat”, which they currently complain are appearing with increasing frequency. The latest joint initiatives are designed to meet these challenges.

In spring 2015 NORDEFECO declared training in cyber-defence a new field of cooperation. The NORDEFECO Cyber Warfare Collaboration Project (CWCP) shall cooperate closely with the Estonia-based NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence. Although the Centre primarily serves NATO members, Finland and Sweden are currently seeking the status of contributing participants. Moreover, the Baltic countries are participating in the hitherto purely Nordic CWCP, concentrating on joint analyses of cyber-threats to government and business. The objective is to establish a regional ability to neutralise threats in real time.

Nordic-Baltic cooperation is also unfolding a new dynamism in the field of strategic communication. Especially the Baltic states fear that their Russian-speaking minorities – with which they have ambivalent relationships – could be politically instrumentalised. At a meeting in May 2015, all eight foreign ministers stressed their intention to undertake joint efforts to counter propaganda and deliberate disinformation from Russian-language media by offering alternative sources of information for Russian-speaking populations and supporting independent media. These plans are to be backed up by cooperation between representatives of the regional parliamentary bodies – the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly – and between Nordic and Baltic members of the European Parliament.

Nordic-Baltic cooperation in these non-military, yet security-sensitive, areas possesses particularly large potential. Beyond the red lines of “hard” defence sovereignty, diverse possibilities exist for enhancing regional resilience. The traditional flexibility of the Nordic cooperation framework could thus be expanded with a Baltic dimension, perceived challenges tackled in a problem-led approach, and joint efforts better embedded.

the cooperation around the Black Sea. So NORDEFECO possesses a model function. And this could be further reinforced through the various potentials of an expanded Nordic-Baltic security cooperation.

### **An International Model**

Given their similar threat perceptions concerning Russia, the Nordic and Baltic states increasingly find themselves in a situation of security interdependency. This shared perception encourages regional cooperation, both in the traditional area of defence within narrowly defined NATO bounds and also in the scope of a broader security cooperation beyond these institutional constraints. This does not mean that all contemporary initiatives and ambitions automatically become reality: any thought of a Nordic-Baltic defence union remains illusory. It is, however, becoming apparent that regional cooperation is increasingly and decisively important. Security dependencies are not only being addressed at the level of discourse, but are actually generating closer real cooperation in a growing number of fields. Here Nordic-Baltic security cooperation would appear to be undergoing a fundamental shift from dialogue forum to framework for joint action.

The significance of Nordic-Baltic security cooperation extends out beyond the northern European context. NATO and especially the United States are looking with great interest at forms of European regional cooperation capable of bridging the capacity deficits and budget constraint of individual states and allowing them to shoulder greater security responsibility. In this respect the NORDEFECO format has already made greater progress than other cooperation clusters such as the Visegrád Group or

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ISSN 1861-1761

*Translation by Meredith Dale*

(English version of  
SWP-Aktuell 69/2015)