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VIEWS FROM THE NORTH (AND ON THE NORTH)

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THE current year has witnessed an unprecedented level of interest in a Northern

Hemisphere region where the first challenge is definitions and agreeing names. There is some confusion between Scandinavia (a geographic core of Norway, Sweden and Denmark) and Nordic (in which Finland, Iceland and the autonomous areas of the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland are added) and it seems commonly accepted that they can be interchangeable.¹ However they are termed, these northern European states have confirmed themselves through recent collective diplomatic and defence activities as representing a key obstacle to any possible future Russian military adventuring. With a 1,340 kilometre land border and littorals that border the

Baltic, Norway and Barents Seas into the waters of 'High North' (a geographic link between North America and Europe and "a strategic nexus" for one leading Icelandic politician), they provide NATO with a newly expanded and much strengthened north-eastern flank and offer an active first line of defence containing any further aspirations in Moscow for redrawing maps. While there has been some scrutiny of the 'Total Defence' concept, practised with greater and lesser effectiveness across the region, and its focus on civil-military co-operation and resilience, this is a region also offering more overt indicators of military preparation.

Following on from the 2023 *Integrated Review Refresh* – which made specific reference to the importance to Britain

of northern Europe – and with long historical links and continuing close relationships at the political and military levels, this is a region which is of the utmost importance and will need prominent reference in discussions connected with any future defence review. It was a lengthy joining process but Sweden's confirmation as the 32nd Member State in March, following Finland's entry in April 2023, completed the latest stage in the Alliance's evolution and represented not just another expansion but a geostrategic reorientation. With the 75th anniversary of its establishment only weeks away, this is a momentous period for NATO and a potential inflection point

¹ *The UN offers little help, they sit in the 'Western European and Other States', a regional grouping of 29 countries which also includes New Zealand and the United States as an observer.*

for how it responds to a European security architecture dominated by conflict and anxiety about the immediate future. Steadfast Defender 24 is NATO's largest military exercise since the Cold War and one of its chapters has been Nordic Response, which involved 14 countries, more than 20,000 troops, 110 aircraft and 50 ships and concluded the same month as Sweden's entry. This level of activity reiterated the significance attached to guaranteeing the region's security and, while much focus inevitably remains on events in Ukraine, the dynamic nature of recent defence and security activities across the Nordic region was highlighted during a series of CHACR visits conducted during February and March 2024. Indeed, there is an almost surfeit of information with valuable details provided in recent international conferences and briefings and a much increased level of media interest and academic writing.²

In this expansive discussion, perhaps the most interesting but least known of Britain's new defence partners is Finland. Acknowledging two local comments is essential in any discussion about Finnish defence.³ When asked about the country's impressively comprehensive approach to safeguarding its security, Lieutenant General Mikko Heiskanen, deputy chief of staff for armaments and logistics in the Finnish defence forces, was

²In addition to events at RUSI and Chatham House, this has included attendance at the International Armoured Fighting Vehicles Conference (London, January 2024) and the Russia Seminar 2024 (Helsinki, February 2024).

³Richard Milne, 'Finland boosts war readiness in face of Russian aggression', *Financial Times*, 6 May 2024.

⁴Andrea Prada Bianchi, 'A Temperature Check on NATO's "Arctic Sparta"', *Foreign Policy*, 9 February 2024; Euan Graham, 'Lessons from Finland for the Indo-Pacific', *The Strategist*, 23 October 2023.

⁵Bianchi, 'A Temperature Check ...'.



Picture: NATO

“[NEW PRESIDENT] ALEXANDER STUBB WAS QUOTED AS SAYING OTHER EUROPEAN STATES SHOULD BECOME MORE FINNISH: ‘IN OTHER WORDS, MORE PREPARED. YOU HAVE TO PREPARE FOR THE WORST IN ORDER TO AVOID IT.’”

quoted recently as saying: “It’s in our DNA. Russia respects power. Power consists both of the will and capacity. The will is in place. The people’s will to defend the country is probably the highest in the world. The capacity – the material – is at a credible level. It takes years to build up this capacity. You cannot do it in a year or two.” Add to this an April interview with the new president Alexander Stubb, who was quoted as saying other European states should become more Finnish: “In other words, more prepared. You have to prepare for the worst in order to avoid it.” Described as “a sort of Arctic Sparta, [with] a highly trained force that will move the [NATO] alliance’s centre of gravity to the north”, for one security analyst visitor, it “combines a Scandinavian aura of self-assurance with the edginess of a frontline state”.⁴



Then – Finland, 1942 (inset) – and now, 2024 (above), an instructor from the Finnish Defence Forces’ Jaeger Brigade introduces a NATO colleague to the ice of Lapland.



Picture: SA-Kuva

Although no longer immediately visible, damage can still be seen in Helsinki from Soviet air raids during the Second World War and it is difficult to forget that more than one-tenth of Finland’s territory was annexed, including the second-largest city, Vyborg. It should also be remembered that Helsinki is closer to Saint Petersburg than it is to Stockholm.

Finland is in the global top 40 spenders on defence, 2.4 per cent GDP which represents a 54 per cent increase over the previous 12 months and a similar level of spending as Greece and Kuwait. At £5.9 billion, this is actually the least amount spent of any of the four Nordic countries but the statistics fail abjectly to tell the full story. Amongst its permanent standing forces is one of the most skilled Arctic

formations in the world, the Finnish Jaeger Brigade – located in Sodankyla, 100 miles south of Ivalo, where they deliver their winter combat course which was established ten years ago. According to one of the course instructors: “One of the strengths of the Finnish Army is that there is a lot of initiative even at low levels. Squads and platoons can make decisions themselves and do things independently. That’s the culture.”⁵ The Army’s eight brigade-level units annually train around 20,000 conscripts in addition to running refresher exercises; approximately 900,000 of a total population of 5.5 million can be mobilised and in the past 12 months about 40 per cent of them have completed some form of training. With initial equipment available for 285,000 infantry and a locally-

made RK 62 rifle, designed on the Soviet Kalashnikov, for everyone, rapid mobilisation plans should deliver a minimum of one division within three to five days.

There are other notable strengths such as the 1,500 artillery pieces, reportedly the highest total of any country in Western Europe, while there has been a doubling of ammunition production both to build up domestic reserves and also provide supplies to Ukraine. Although producing more ammunition – ten times the amount of shells made five years ago – its factories are not working around the clock and the country only stands at the third step out of nine on its escalation ladder. Testing strategic plans and readiness for if the need should arise to activate a war economy, recent checks have been completed on the more than 100 private companies with which agreements exist to produce military equipment or provide services in times of war. Stockpiles of at least six months of fuels and grains are held and moves have begun dispersing military equipment in Norway

with Sweden to follow and the potential for other countries. There are few details on the pre-positioned material – it is described as ammunition, spare parts and equipment – but this suggests contingency planning for possible counter-attacks following any initial Russian offensive.

As two regional analysts have explained, geography is a significant consideration as not only does Finland have a 1,340 kilometre long border with Russia from the Gulf of Finland in the south to the tripoint border marker in Pasvik, the country is only 100-500 kilometres wide, a lack of strategic depth which precludes the potential for buffer or demilitarised border areas.⁶ In this context, key strategic locations emerge which are not necessarily that widely known. This includes Ivalo, well above the Arctic Circle in Lapland and separated by only 20 miles of forest from Russia.⁷ Following a December 2023 agreement, this is the closest base to mainland Russia at which the US can now station troops and equipment and one of two US Defence Cooperation Agreement sites

less than 30 miles from the border. Lieutenant-General Pasi Valimäki, Commander Finnish Army, who, speaking in London in January 2024, highlighted the importance of the operating environment. Explaining that fighting ‘up north’ would be a battle for 30 key roads, five within the Article Circle, where tracked vehicles fare better than wheeled, heavy trucks, he said geometry, signatures and camouflage and the challenges presented by geography, terrain, climate and even light are all vital considerations. The autumn/fall is the most challenging period as “it is not easy to hide any more” and forests and masking no longer offer sufficient protection.

His final comments noted that whilst traditionally Finland has been good at close battle, with NATO membership there has been an adoption of thinking familiar to ‘Future Soldier’ and its shift from close to deep battle. Britain has reportedly been assisting, with further evidence of close relations demonstrated by Nordic Response – during which British troops formed part of a joint division with Swedish

and Finnish counterparts. Significantly, Finland will also reportedly act as the sub headquarters for regional NATO ground forces. In spite of this activity, General Janne Jaakkola, the newly appointed Commander of the Finnish Defence Forces, was quoted as saying in April that there was no particular threat to the country from Russia.⁸ This is based on a well-placed confidence about the measures taken for many years, and it is difficult to disagree with one media assessment that it is not just about “the martial mythology of the plucky Finns” but “a highly sophisticated view of the military-industrial production that is essential to deterring aggression”.⁹ Or as one anonymous senior diplomat from

⁶Per Erik Solli and Oystein Solvang, ‘Deterrence and (Re)assurance in the High North: Finland and Norway Compared’, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Policy Brief 4/2024, 4.

⁷Bianchi, ‘A Temperature Check ...?’

⁸New Defence Forces commander: Finland under no special threat’, Yle News, 4 April 2024, <https://yle.fi/a/74-20082067>.

⁹Iain Martin, ‘Europe must emulate the Finns – and fast’, The Times, 15 February 2024.

Finnish firepower: An artillery unit is put through its paces at Rovajärvi exercise area in northern Finland. Picture: NATO



another NATO state has put it: “Finland is the gold standard. They didn’t let their guard down in the 1990s and 2000s and now most of us can only stand and admire what they have.”¹⁰

As a founding NATO member, albeit with some restrictions as to what it could and could not do militarily, the most-established regional member is Norway, a reality reflected by the leading role it has taken in academic discussions about Nordic defence.¹¹ The Arctic has long been an area of intense Russian interest but up until 2014 it held an annual bilateral POMOR military exercise with Norway and the biannual Northern Eagle, which also included the United States. The border in eastern Finnmark had opened, residents within a 30-kilometre area could cross without visas (there were 350,000 border crossings at Storskog in 2012) but the illegal annexation of Crimea put an end to this – although it was only the February 2022 attack which put an end to any remaining

political and economic links.¹² Particularly as at the same time as the widening attack on Ukraine, Russian maritime doctrine specifically identified the Arctic as a strategic priority with increased activity around the Norwegian Svalbard archipelago.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute report placed Norway just behind Sweden in terms of spending, 29th highest in the world with £7 billion last year, a small increase on the previous year, but still only 1.6 per cent of GDP. This all changed with the announcement in April 2024 of the *Long-Term Defence Plan*, described officially as a ‘pledge’ and summarised in one report as an end of the country’s “holiday from history”.¹³ With an additional £44 billion, covering the period to 2036 total spending on defence over 12 years will be approximately £110 billion. With a new medium range air defence platform and a

recommendation for the country’s first long-range system, the maritime domain has been given priority with the purchase of five or six new frigates, with onboard anti-submarine helicopters, and a minimum five new German built Type 212CD submarines operated by both navies. The Army will expand from one to three brigades including the development of a heavy infantry brigade with four mechanised manoeuvre battalions and the consolidation and addition of units to create the Finnmark Brigade based in the country’s north. The Home Guard will also increase from about 40,000 to 45,000 combat-ready soldiers acting as a rapid mobilisation force and the number of conscripts (including women) will rise by 4,500 and an additional 13,700 reservists.

Starting in January 2024, Princess Ingrid Alexandra was one of nearly 10,000 Norwegian 18- and 19-year-olds selected for national service.¹⁴ In a heavily over-subscribed process, the best candidates are chosen, first through online assessments and then through physical tests, and “being accepted to military service... is far harder than getting into most universities” with a reported 17 per cent acceptance rate and about one-quarter of the conscripts choosing to remain in the armed forces.

Compared to Finland, and with only a 198 kilometre land border with Russia in the eastern part of one county state, Norway has “a vast geostrategic rear area and depth”.¹⁵ This makes it both “a frontline state and a transit area for reinforcements and logistics to support military operations throughout the northern part of the Nordic Region”. Reiterating this point, Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store, in announcing the most “ambitious and far reaching” defence budget, said that the aim is to transform from being not just a receiving country of Allied

reinforcements but also a transit and contributing ally to Nordic and Baltic defence. The available depth is further demonstrated by the location of the northernmost US Defence Cooperation Agreement facility approximately 450 kilometres away from Russia. Norway’s position as the regional security fulcrum seems assured.

Although such a description would be vehemently rejected, the role of future regional leader might yet fall to Sweden. Its formal entry into NATO in March 2024 marked the end of 200 years of armed neutrality and an official policy characterised as ‘non-alignment in peace, so as to maintain neutrality in war’. In reality, and much the same as was the case in Finland, after joining NATO’s Partnership for Peace in 1994, it started actively participating in NATO operations, EU-led rapid-response forces and multinational defence initiatives. The 1981 ‘Whiskey on the Rocks’ incident, when two Swedish fishermen came across a beached Soviet submarine within Swedish territorial waters, had provided an obvious indicator of Russian intent. By 2012, however, the then Chief of Defence shared publicly his view that the country could only defend itself for about a week. Following the Crimean invasion two years later, progressive



A US Marine guards a defensive position near Alta, Norway during Exercise Nordic Response 24. Picture: NATO

¹⁰Milne, ‘Finland boosts ...’.

¹¹See for example, Ed Arnold, ‘The UK Contribution to Security in Northern Europe’, *RUSI Policy Brief*, 17 October 2023.

¹²Jonny Didreksen, ‘High North: From Cooperation to Competition’, *The Three Swords/Joint Warfare Centre*, 39/2023, 109.

¹³Gonzalo Vazquez, ‘Norway Ends Its Holiday From History’, *CEP*, 3 May 2024.

¹⁴Elisabeth Brate, ‘In Norway, young people compete to serve in the military’, *Defense One*, 25 January 2024, defensetone.com/ideas/2024/01/norway-young-people-compete-serve-military/393599.

¹⁵Solli and Solvang, ‘Deterrence and (Re) assurance ...’.

improvement followed such that in the 2023 Global Firepower Review, Sweden ranked 37 out of the 145 countries evaluated. And while in 2019 only 30 per cent of the country supported NATO membership, just three years later only the Greens and the Communists were openly opposed. Despite some controversy in January 2024 after both the Civil Defence Minister and Commander-in-Chief warned about the potential for war and the Swedish Defence Commission reporting the month before that “a sense of urgency must permeate all parts of the Swedish society”, recent polling show more than two-thirds of Swedes are positive about the enhanced defence commitment. There are clear popular signs of support for defence. With annual selective conscription of about 6,000 men and women who complete 11-15 months of training, as with Norway applications for Home Guard and other auxiliary defence organisations (such as the Swedish Federation for Voluntary Defence Education and Training) are hugely over-subscribed.

A new defence budget is due but a parliamentary committee, reporting its conclusions in late

¹⁶“Sweden should hike military budget to 2.6% of GDP, defence committee says”, Reuters, 26 April 2024, [reuters.com/world/europe/sweden-should-hike-military-budget-26-gdp-defence-committee-says-2024-04-26/](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/sweden-should-hike-military-budget-26-gdp-defence-committee-says-2024-04-26/).

¹⁷In Swedish Lapland the British Army has been testing equipment and training troops, specifically from the Household Cavalry Regiment (testing Ajax in wintry conditions), 3rd Battalion, The Ranger Regiment (conducting extreme cold weather training in Arvidsjaur hosted by the 193. Jägerbataljonen) and training provided to the Royal School of Artillery (to support the recent acquisition of the Archer Mobile Howitzer); ‘Britain and Sweden’s close military relationship strengthened’, British Army, 19 February 2024.

¹⁸Lucia Mackenzie, ‘What Sweden brings to NATO’, Politico, 7 March 2024.

¹⁹Henry Foy/Richard Milne, ‘Sweden prepared to fortify key Baltic island’, Financial Times, 13 March 2024.



Graphic: Norwegian Ministry of Defence/The Norwegian Defence Pledge

April, said the country should raise its military spending to around 2.6 per cent of GDP by 2030.¹⁶ The committee proposed speeding up an expansion of the army, investment in defence against air attack and an expansion of the navy. It also said conscription should be increased to 12,000 recruits from 2032 and there should also be more money for civil defence. Although there was no agreement on how to finance the spending, the committee is made up of representatives of all the country’s political parties and its key recommendations are very likely to be adopted. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Sweden sits in the top 30 global defence spenders with just over £7 billion spent in 2023, only 1.1 per cent of GDP but a 12 per cent increase on the previous year and a similar level of spending as Iran and Mexico. Defence spending has roughly

doubled since 2020 to around £8.8 billion and the government says it will meet NATO’s threshold this year. The country brings a strong defence industrial base including a number of excellent locally manufactured platforms such as the Gripen C/D variants and continuing work on newer E/F versions. Sweden will also reportedly send a battalion to Latvia to support the now well-established NATO regional security mission. Relations with the British Army also appear particularly strong.¹⁷

Geography is vitally important across the region and there are Swedish locations which have assumed enormous significance with the expansion of NATO. There was repeated reference in reports following Swedish entry that, with the exception of the narrow entry to St Petersburg on the Gulf of Finland and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad,

NATO members now encircle the Baltic Sea.¹⁸ Critical to this is Gotland, ‘the giant aircraft carrier’ described as the Baltic Sea’s most crucial island and already a key NATO outpost. The Gotland regiment was reintroduced in 2018 but its 370 soldiers is a fraction of the 25,000 strong force that was based there in the 1990s. With Russian media having made repeated references to its strategic significance, its defence is clearly key.¹⁹ The importance of Östersund also cannot be overlooked. A garrison town on Lake Storsjön, it has become a key NATO bastion and logistical hub separated by a mountain range from the equally critical Norwegian port of Trondheim. One of four identified regional ice-free seaports of debarkation – the others being Narvik, Gothenburg and Esbjerg – and with its strong US Navy connection, Norwegian Airforce headquarters

and warehouses storing pre-positioned American military equipment, this will be a key route for NATO reinforcements.²⁰

During the CHACR visit there was an acceptance that this is “just in the beginning of working out the process” of what it means to be a NATO member and questions remain open for discussion. For example, Carla Norrlof, professor of political science and non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, has urged that the country’s politicians should continue to emphasise that its membership is a defensive precautionary measure, and that access to the Baltic Sea remains open.²¹ The level of local American presence and what weapons are stored on Swedish soil – an agreement has already been signed giving US military forces access to 17 bases – and how plans to double annual conscription by 2030 to 10,000 personnel a year will be implemented will also need further domestic debate.

With about 20,000 current active personnel, including 9,000 permanent troops, the Danish military has earned a positive reputation for its warfighting abilities from previous contributions to international missions. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute figures suggest it sits just outside the top 30 of countries with £6.5 billion spent, a 39 per cent increase over the previous year. Last year a public holiday was scrapped to boost military spending and an announcement in March 2024 confirmed additional spending over the next five years breaching the two per cent GDP NATO threshold (and when aid to Ukraine is included the figure for the next two years exceeds 2.4 per cent GDP). In early May there was an additional announcement with a commitment to a further £4 billion for defence over the next four years.²² The additional funds will go to reinforcing the Army’s heavy brigade – the only such

unit and assigned to the NATO Response Force – with new tanks and infantry fighting vehicles, acquiring more land-based air defence systems and boosting the Navy’s anti-submarine warfare capabilities with some discussion even about potentially buying or leasing submarines 20 years after Denmark decided to do away with this capability.

This latest announcement went some way to addressing uncertainty about procurement plans and concerns over involvement of consultants in future force design. There have certainly been recent signs of frustration about the country’s defence capabilities and its contribution to regional security. The region is known for its openness and this extends to social media comments made by serving officers. One current Danish naval officer has written recently that the country has “never had less combat power than it has today” whilst also complaining bitterly about scandals and chaos affecting procurement decisions and the organisation of current and future units which make it “impossible” to transform the military. When compared to Norway, Sweden and Finland it has been argued that the country has “almost no clout”, and variations on such comments have been encountered widely leading to questions about morale within the armed forces.

This was not improved by the dismissal of the Chief of Defence Flemming Lentfer in April 2024 after he failed to report flaws in a Danish frigate’s air defence and weapons systems which emerged during an attack in the Red Sea.²³ Defence Minister Troels Lund Poulsen referred to a resulting ‘lack of confidence’ in replacing him as the issue had reportedly been known for some years but not shared with the Defence ministry. Added to this are concerns about the extent of gifting equipment to Ukraine



Picture: NATO

(including all the country’s F16 aircraft and artillery) and the ability of Danish troops deployed to Latvia to operate effectively. While there appears a good deal of confidence in the other three countries, something seems a little rotten in Denmark.

As Steadfast Defender 24 continues with Northern Forest, a Finnish-led army exercise in Rovajärvi, Northern Finland involving Norwegian and American forces, there will be some potentially challenging questions to consider, notably about how nuclear backed deterrence will work in countries which have long-standing political opposition to such weapons. Another question will be security apparatus such as the Joint Expeditionary Force, which many regional briefings referred to positively. Started as a way of organising for a future which looked less clear but is increasingly taking form and shape, a regional London-based defence attaché described it as “a thing, all ‘High North’ nations are in it and its standing command and control provides a beating heart”. For this senior officer, the next steps are obvious, to “sweat [the Joint Expeditionary Force], stretch it and use it to the maximum”. Representing a country where a recent chief of defence viewed the organisation as a distraction from NATO, instead actively promoting the Nordic Defence Collaboration albeit with an active role for Britain, there is not universal agreement about its value.

With Sweden and Finland’s entry into NATO, the challenge will be to preserve the Joint Expeditionary Force as a

military organisation with a distinct military character in which Response Options – the planned military activities that are central to its existence and as demonstrated in November 2023 with the activation of a maritime security force in northern European waters to protect undersea critical infrastructures – sit alongside potentially expanded NATO actions.²⁴ With discussions also continuing about reforming the NATO command structure to accommodate the recent changes, there will therefore be a focus on the evolving security framework.²⁵ This will take place, however, in the knowledge that the region is creating a template for what needs to be done to discourage Russia from launching further, and potentially ever more dangerous, tests of international resolve.

²⁰ ‘The picturesque town being turned into a strategic military hub as Sweden joins NATO’, RFI, 1 March 2024, [rfi.fr/en/international/20240301-osterund-the-picturesque-swedish-town-being-turned-into-a-strategic-military-hub-nato](https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20240301-osterund-the-picturesque-swedish-town-being-turned-into-a-strategic-military-hub-nato)

²¹ Carla Norrlof, ‘The meaning of Sweden’s NATO accession’, 25 March 2024.

²² Elisabeth Gosselin-Malo, ‘Denmark increases defense spending in view of Russian long-term war’, Defense News, 3 May 2024, [defensenews.com/global/europe/2024/05/03/denmark-increases-defense-spending-in-view-of-russian-long-term-war](https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2024/05/03/denmark-increases-defense-spending-in-view-of-russian-long-term-war)

²³ Seb Starcevic, ‘Denmark fires defense chief after warship malfunctions in Red Sea Houthi battle’, Politico, 4 April 2024.

²⁴ Jack Black, Charlotte Kleberg, Erik Silfersten, ‘NATO enlargement amidst Russia’s war in Ukraine’, RAND Europe Perspective, March 2024, 14-16; Analysis: Royal Navy deploys seven ships on underwater infrastructure patrols’, Navy Lookout, 3 December 2023, [navylookout.com/analysis-royal-navy-deploys-seven-ships-on-underwater-infrastructure-patrols](https://www.navylookout.com/analysis-royal-navy-deploys-seven-ships-on-underwater-infrastructure-patrols)

²⁵ ‘Finland joins Nato’s Brunssum HQ in the Netherlands’, Yle News, 24 May 2023, <https://yle.fi/a/74-20033236>