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Trilateral Security Model

a Cooperation Framework for Regional Security based on NATO, the EU and NORDEFECO

About the Article

How can European states improve regional security co-operation against emerging threats? A trilateral model combining NATO, the EU, and NORDEFECO offers more agile and localized defense capabilities. Institutionalizing this model would enhance Europe's resilience through interoperable and complementary security strengths.

About the Author

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Introduction

In a time of growing geopolitical uncertainty, new military threats, and hybrid warfare tactics, being able to respond quickly and effectively to regional security challenges has become more important than ever for European states. While alliances and international organizations offer a broad framework for defense, many threats first appear, and hit hardest, at the regional level. European states must seek more agile and coordinated frameworks to ensure collective defense and resilience. Over the past decades, both North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) have played central roles in shaping Europe's security architecture. Amid these well-established frameworks, the Nordic Defense Cooperation (NORDEF) stands out as a flexible, regionally focused initiative that facilitates defense collaboration among Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. While NORDEF is often less prominent in broader European security discussions, its unique approach offers valuable insights into pragmatic defense cooperation, particularly among small and medium-sized states with shared regional interests. This article examines how NORDEF's role in regional security complements the efforts of NATO and the EU, focusing on the ways its cooperative framework enhances collective defense in Northern Europe. Using an institutional perspective, the analysis compares the organizational structures, objectives, and strategic priorities of these three frameworks, as well as the nature of their interaction. By exploring these institutional dynamics, the study underscores the strategic importance of regional cooperation initiatives like NORDEF in strengthening European security and considers the potential for applying similar models in other regions facing comparable challenges.

NORDEF: background information

NORDEF is a collaborative security and defense framework involving Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. It was established in 2009 with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in Helsinki

(NORDEF, 2009), consolidating three earlier Nordic security cooperation frameworks into a more unified and cohesive structure (NORDEF, n.d.-a). The first of these, the Nordic Coordinated Arrangement for Military Peace Support (NORDCAPS), was created to coordinate joint Nordic efforts in military peace support. The second, the Nordic Armament Cooperation (NORDAC), has supported collaboration in defense materiel acquisition since the 1990s, including joint development, procurement, and maintenance. The third, the Nordic Support Structure (NORDSUP), was launched in 2008 to investigate 140 specific areas across the full military spectrum for potential collaboration (NORDEF, n.d.-a). NORDEF's official purpose, according to the MoU is to "strengthen the participating nations' national defense, explore common synergies and facilitate efficient common solutions." The consolidation of the three earlier frameworks helped create a more robust and efficient cooperation structure, "based on a political ambition of a comprehensive, enhanced and long-term approach to defense related issues" (NORDEF, 2009). The MoU outlines nine objectives. These are intentionally broad and vague, and the MoU explicitly states that they are not limited to these objectives (NORDEF, 2009). NORDEF considers this flexibility a strength, as it allows the organization to act efficiently while adapting to evolving needs. This is also why NORDEF is structured as a cooperation framework without headquarters or command structure rather than as an international organization with an independent legal personality. It is a cooperation structure working on an ad hoc basis, notable for its flexible and informal modus operandi (Wilson & Kárason, 2020).

At the highest policy level, the cooperation is led by the Defense Ministers of the participating countries, who meet twice a year. Beneath them is the Policy Steering Committee (PSC), where each nation is represented by national departmental officers (NORDEF, n.d.-a).

On the military level, the Military Coordination Committee operates under the PSC. This committee is responsible for coordinating military activities within NORDEF bet-

ween the Chiefs of Defense meetings (NORDEFCO, n.d.). It also oversees concrete projects and initiatives, which are developed and staffed by the Cooperation Areas (COPAs). These areas focus on capabilities, armaments, human resources and education, training and exercises, and operations. Each COPA is staffed by senior military representatives from the member countries. They have the authority to establish working groups for specific activities, which then provide recommendations (NORDEFCO, n.d.-b). This ensures effective cooperation without being tied up by bureaucracy and international contracts.

Comparing the Security Role

It is important to understand that while NATO, the EU, and NORDEFCO are all involved in security and defense cooperation in Northern Europe, they differ significantly from one another. The most notable difference is that, as previously discussed, NORDEFCO is not an international organization with its own independent legal personality or command structure (Wilson & Káráson, 2020). Additionally, NORDEFCO has a specific focus on strengthening the participating nations' national defense, exploring common synergies and facilitating efficient common solutions (NORDEFCO, 2009). Its efforts are logically centered on improving security in Northern Europe. Structure, objectives and regional scope are what sets NORDEFCO apart from both NATO and the EU. NATO is an intergovernmental military alliance consisting of 32 member states. It is governed by the North Atlantic Council (NAC), where decisions are made by consensus. The alliance operates under a rigid command structure in which the Supreme Allied Commander Europe leads the Allied Command Operations, responsible for planning and executing all NATO military missions, though always under the direction of the NAC (North Atlantic Treaty Organization,

2018). NATO's primary objective is to secure lasting peace in Europe and North America, a goal enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (NATO, n.d.-b). The alliance focuses on hard security, including deterrence, defense, and military interoperability. This is most clearly reflected in Article 5, which states that an attack against one ally is considered an attack against all (NATO, n.d.-a). Historically, NATO was a point of contention among the Nordic countries. While it has long been a cornerstone of security and defense policy for Norway and Denmark, Finland and Sweden traditionally preferred neutrality and only joined recently. Today, however, NATO represents another way in which Northern European security is further strengthened (Friis & Tamnes, 2024). The EU is an economic and political union of 27 European countries. While it has traditionally focused on economic and political cooperation, the EU has increasingly developed a security and defense dimension through the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). This policy is overseen

by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and politically managed by the Foreign Affairs Council (Rehrl, 2021). Member states contribute security capabilities on a

voluntary basis, which has led to mixed results in terms of effectiveness. The EU's true strength lies not in hard security, but in its economic and political tools. It can impose sanctions and fund or coordinate defense-related projects using mechanisms such as the European Defense Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) (European Defense Agency, n.d.). The EU aims to strengthen the security and defense capabilities of its member states, enhance strategic autonomy, and contribute to peace and stability both in its neighbourhood and globally (EEAS, 2022). Historically, Denmark and Norway had limited involvement in the CSDP. Norway because it is not an EU member, and Denmark due to an opt-out following a referendum in 1992 (Danish Parlia-

Resilience:
the ability of forces, systems, or societies
to withstand, adapt to, and recover quickly
from disruptions, attacks, or crises
while continuing to operate effectively

	NORDEFCO	NATO	EU
Legal Structure	Informal Cooperation Framework	Intergovernmental Military Alliance	Political and Economic Union
Command Structure	No Permanent HQ or Command Structure	Rigid Military Command Structure	No Standing Military Command & Voluntary Contributions
Region	Regional (Northern Europe)	Transatlantic	European
Primary Focus	National Defence, Synergies, Efficiency	Collective Defence, Deterrence	Economy, Politics

Figure 1: Table (Own Work)

ment, n.d.). However, this has changed: Norway deepened its engagement through the EU-Norway Security & Defense Partnership signed in May 2024 (EEAS, 2024), and Denmark abolished its opt-out in July 2022 (Danish Ministry of Defense, 2023). As a result, the Northern European countries have become even more closely aligned in the domain of defense and security.

Trilateral Interaction

There is already a wealth of research on the interaction between the EU and NATO. The two international organizations maintain a close relationship, built on „shared values, the determination to tackle common challenges, and the unequivocal commitment to promote and safeguard peace, freedom, and prosperity in the Euro-Atlantic area“ (Council of the European Union, 2024). Twenty-three states are members of both organizations, meaning they both face similar challenges and pursue similar objectives, making interorganizational cooperation the most efficient way to address issues and achieve goals (Council of the European Union, 2024). The two organizations are also complementary: NATO is primarily focused on military defense, while the EU addresses a broader spectrum of political, economic, and security issues. They coordinate particularly in areas such as countering hybrid threats, defense capabilities, capacity building, operational cooperation, defense industry and research, political dia-

logue, cybersecurity, and joint exercises (Council of the European Union, 2024). Many of these areas align with the priorities of NORDEFCO. This is why NORDEFCO, as a framework for Nordic defense cooperation, plays a crucial role in complementing broader NATO and EU efforts. NORDEFCO emphasizes enhanced operational cooperation, capability development, and improved interoperability among its member states, all of which are either NATO or EU members, or closely aligned with both. NORDEFCO helps bridge national initiatives with larger transatlantic and European strategies, reinforcing resilience against shared threats while promoting a more integrated and effective defense across the region. This situation could easily have resulted in a „too many cooks in the kitchen“ scenario, with multiple international cooperation frameworks responsible for the same objectives. However, this is avoided because of the way NORDEFCO is structured. Cooperation with NATO and the EU is central to its existence. NATO, in particular, plays a vital role in NORDEFCO’s Vision 2030: “Aligning Nordic defense cooperation with NATO supports and contributes to the collective defense of the Alliance. As NATO members, the Nordic countries are committed to assist each other and other allies. Furthermore, the Nordic countries will align defense capabilities in accordance with national interests and defense responsibilities in NATO. Nordic defense cooperation will enhance NATO’s posture in Northern Europe and contribute to the security of the Alliance as

a whole. Nordic defense cooperation is aligned with NATO planning and concepts. Furthermore, Nordic defense cooperation complements and adds value to the EU, bilateral defense arrangements, and regional cooperation formats such as the Joint” (NORDEFECO, 2024) NORDEFECO is a cooperation structure built around the existing framework of the EU and NATO. It is specifically created to align with the processes of NATO and the tools of the EU. This ensures that NORDEFECO does not have to unnecessarily redo security and defense initiatives, but also that they will not be competing with each other or become a hindrance to security cooperation. NORDEFECO operates within the strategic frameworks of larger organizations, thereby avoiding duplication of efforts. It also ensures that a regional perspective remains a priority and is not overshadowed by global threats and challenges. NORDEFECO’s flexible, non-binding structure allows the Northern European countries to adapt quickly to new challenges, particularly regional ones, while remaining aligned with evolving NATO and EU priorities. This flexibility is especially important given the structures of NATO and the EU. Both organizations have rigid decision-making processes, requiring consensus among all members on security and defense issues. Combined with the large number of participants, this often makes them slower and less responsive than necessary. Regional challenges, which are not a priority for all member states, can therefore be addressed too slowly or inefficiently. NORDEFECO ensures that Northern European states can respond to these regional challenges both quickly and effectively. The rigid structures of NATO and the EU also present obstacles to further integration. Decisions on deeper security cooperation are made by consensus, meaning that individual member states can block collective efforts. While this is a simplified view of a complex issue, NORDEFECO does provide the Northern European states with a way to strengthen their cooperation without being constrained by broader membership. In conclusion, NORDEFECO is an effective structure for security coope-

ration. It synergizes with NATO’s processes and the EU’s tools. By operating within the strategic frameworks of larger organizations, NORDEFECO is able to complement rather than compete, bringing flexibility, a regional perspective, and the ability to strengthen cooperation efforts without the constraints of broader memberships.

Applicability of the NORDEFECO Model to Other Regions

Due to its strengths, NORDEFECO is interesting as a model to be replicated for other regions in Europe. NATO and the EU have cooperated more and more closely and international cooperation has become a larger part of the security and defense domain. But these organizations are constrained by their large and consensus-driven structures. A regional framework on an ad hoc basis with flexible and informal modus operandi may be needed for efficient and responsive international cooperation on re-

gional security and defense. Other European regions, facing their own unique security challenges, might benefit from a comparable

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approach. By creating flexible, non-binding structures that complement broader NATO and EU initiatives, regional groups could address localized threats more effectively, enhance interoperability, and contribute to overall European security without duplicating existing efforts. However, the effectiveness of using a NORDEFECO model depends heavily on political will within the region. The challenges that it aims to address are based on the fact that there is greater political will for cooperation inside the region than inside the international organizations. If a region is sceptical about deepening security cooperation, then even a flexible and voluntary structure like NORDEFECO would prove futile. It is also inefficient if the objective is simply to address a specific regional challenge. NORDEFECO’s goal is to improve security cooperation over the long term, and if the sole purpose is to tackle an immediate issue, it is often more effective to cooperate directly with

the countries facing the same challenge and issue a joint declaration. An example of this is the six North Sea countries that have joined forces to secure critical infrastructure on the seabed (Van Tigchelt et al., 2024). These countries are cooperating to address a specific regional challenge but are not required to deepen their cooperation beyond that. In short, while NORDEFCO offers a valuable model for regional cooperation, its success depends on strong political will and a long-term commitment. Where these conditions exist, such frameworks can enhance security alongside NATO and the EU. Where they do not, targeted, issue-specific cooperation may be a more effective alternative.

Conclusion

In an increasingly complex and dynamic security environment, regional cooperation frameworks like NORDEFCO provide essential flexibility and resilience. By aligning closely with NATO's processes and the EU's tools, NORDEFCO strengthens Northern European defense without duplicating efforts or competing with existing structures. Its informal, non-binding character allows for rapid, pragmatic responses to regional challenges that larger international organizations may be too slow or inefficient to address. The NORDEFCO model demonstrates that, where strong political will and shared regional interests exist, flexible cooperation structures can significantly enhance both national and collective security. While not universally applicable, this approach offers valuable lessons for other European regions seeking to bolster their security architecture: regional resilience is best achieved not by replacing larger alliances, but by complementing and reinforcing them through agile and responsive cooperation.

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