

Interview – Karsten Friis

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr. Karsten Friis is a Research Professor at The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. His research area is security and defence policy in Europe, with an emphasis on NATO, the Nordic region, the Arctic, and transatlantic relations. He is a political scientist with a PhD from the University of Groningen, a Cand.polit. from the University of Oslo and an MSc from the London School of Economics. Friis has been associated with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) since 2007. Before that, he was a political adviser to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) mission to Serbia (2004 to 2007), the OSCE in Montenegro (2001) and in Kosovo (1999). In addition, Friis has worked for several years in the Norwegian Armed Forces and served at NATO/The Kosovo Force (KFOR) in Kosovo. He also frequently comments on public discourse — not least in relation to Russia's war against Ukraine. His latest publications include: *'The defence of northern Europe: new opportunities, significant challenges'*, *'Reviving Nordic Security and Defense Cooperation'*, *'Even as war continues, NATO should open the door to defense integration with Ukraine'* and *'Rethink territory: How Ukraine can redefine victory'*.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

The debates related to the dramatic changes in the world, in terms of security and powershifts, i.e. the empirical debates are by far the most interesting. The theoretical debates struggle to keep pace, which is not strange given the dynamics in the world. So, questions related to global governance, new alternative structures (from the “shadow fleet” to BRICS), war and security (DPRK soldiers in Europe), new threats and technology, – all these topics challenge our traditional perspectives on world politics.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

When the world changes, so does our attention. I worked for many years on international operations, COIN, comprehensive approach, peacekeeping etc., but when a full-scale war breaks out in Europe, my focus shifted too. Nobody talks about R2P anymore, but actually Russian aggression is an attack also on the liberal values that R2P represented, i.e., universal human rights. The defence of Ukraine is the defence of people's freedom to choose their way, their foreign policy and international orientation.

What is the significance of the recent commitment by the Nordic Defence Cooperation to a joint security concept, and how might this effect NATO strategy in Northern Europe?

With Finland and Sweden in NATO many new opportunities for defence cooperation among the Nordics opened. Air forces and land forces are in daily contact to develop closer integration. But all this happens under the NATO umbrella, under NATO plans, force structure and command and control. There is no Nordic strategy or concept independent of this, but rather attempts at linking regional forces into a unified force within NATO. That said, new initiatives on e.g. a Combined Air Operations Centre, a new Army Multi Corps Headquarters, and other new structures, clearly signal a renewed interest in defence collaboration.

Sweden and Finland joining strengthens NATO significantly and enhances the defence of northern Norway, but also of course of Sweden and Finland (that is after all why they joined). NATO has a plan for the northwest, one of NATOs

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three strategic defence plans. It requires new thinking not least in terms of logistics, and supply to these countries, through Norway and through the Baltic Sea. NATO must plan for all of this.

To what extent is Norwegian defence policy influenced by Norwegian identity and values?

I think every state's defence policy is influenced by its identity and values – including Norway. In our case it is partly built on the painful experience of occupation during World War Two (hence we are a founding member of NATO), but also a country with a small state-identity, meaning a history of bridge building, dialogue, and trade rather than conquest and power play. Norwegian deterrence towards the Soviet Union and now Russia is for instance restrained, with reduced military presence close to Russia to avoid “provocations” or increased tension. This is directly linked to our identity and a narrative of “1000 years of peaceful relations” with Russia. You can deconstruct and question this axiom, but it nonetheless continues to play a role in Norwegian security policy circles.

What improvements could bolster integration surrounding Nordic defence? What key changes would be necessary to make this possible?

Nordic defence integration is a function of NATO membership. Depending on the details in NATO defence plans, command structure and force structure, opportunities for closer Nordic cooperation and integration arise. When for instance, Finland establishes a Forward Land Force unit on its territory, with Sweden as a framework nation lead, others, including Denmark and Norway, could contribute as well. Similarly, when NATO agrees to establish a Combined Air Operations Centre in Norway, this offers opportunities for the air forces to work even closer together. Some of these initiatives emerge from the branches themselves, some are a result of processes in NATO or on the political-strategic level.

I think we will end up with a de-facto single air force, albeit still under national or NATO control. On land the forces will be national, but Area of Responsibility (AOR) may cross national borders, and it will all be under a joint Division and Corps HQ. However, it is important not to only think Nordic, but also integrate with the bigger powers who are engaged in the region, most notably the United States and the United Kingdom. All the mentioned structures – as well as other initiatives – should involve important allies.

Do you feel the Nordic response to the Ukraine war has been sufficient?

The Nordics and the Baltics have given significant support to Ukraine. But I am afraid more is needed, particularly in the short term. I think 2025 will be a decisive year, and Ukraine can prevail if we beef up their defence – not reduce it, as we (the West) have done between 2023 and 24. In particular my own country, with its vast petroleum revenues, could invest much, much more in Ukraine than today. Among the Nordics we give the least, both in real numbers and per GDP. It is really urgent that the government invest, not least in the Ukrainian defence industry. Success there will be decisive.

How do you assess the Nordic countries' relations with major powers like the US, Russia, and China?

All Nordics have strong bilateral agreements with the US in addition to NATO. This is crucial, as no other ally has the resources to assist in case of major conflict. They will seek to maintain these irrespective of who is in the White House. Russia is a country no Nordic state can have any meaningful dialogue with. This will remain so as long as Putin is in power. China is a bit more mixed. The Nordics follow the EU and NATO language on China and try to de-risk, but not de-couple. Trade on non-securitized items will continue. But Sweden for instance, has some significant Chinese investments (like Volvo) which cannot be shaken off just like that.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Read the classics! Not just in IR, but also in sociology. Read also up on theory and philosophy of science. But remain relevant to the world around you. Nobody cares about introvert quasi-philosophical IR theory debates. Use the theories and classics as you see fit to better analyse empirical phenomena. But do not over-complicate. Have fun!

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