

Norway-US Defence Relations in Historical Naval Perspective

Written by Timothy Choi

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TIMOTHY CHOI, MAR 8 2018

In the second week of 2018, Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ine Marie Eriksen Søreide visited Washington, D.C., to meet with U.S. President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. In an era where the U.S. president has been reluctant to endorse NATO's Article 5 commitment, the visit by Norway's top civilian leadership in foreign affairs and national security (Søreide had also served as Minister of Defence before her current posting) demonstrates Norway's top priority vis-à-vis the United States: alliance maintenance. By all accounts, the meetings went smoothly, without any of the gaffs that some observers had feared in the lead-up to the trip. Given the two governments' drastically different attitudes towards domestic and international politics, this may seem unexpected. However, the Norwegian delegation chose their topics of discussion carefully: by keeping the focus predominantly on issues of defence and security, it appears they were able to align their views with the Trump Administration's myopic obsession with NATO members' defence spending.

This alignment should not come as a surprise. Within the long span of Norwegian defence and security policy, what occurred in January 2018 is entirely consistent with the country's relationship with the United States – one with a distinctly naval character. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Norway realized neutrality no longer sufficed as a defence policy. Fueled by the belief that it could have held off the German invasion if only it had more time to prepare and receive reinforcements, Norway became convinced that its territory could be defended against a major power so long as it was in an alliance.[1] In early post-war years, it proposed a Scandinavian defence union, which was also supported by Sweden. However, whereas Sweden wanted this union to be completely neutral, Norway was convinced it had to be aligned in some manner with the Western powers – for arms and materiel, if nothing else.[2] This difference perhaps stemmed from the two countries' differing experiences in the war, through which Sweden managed to navigate without invasion and emerge as the Baltic Sea's greatest naval power.[3] When the United States extended an invitation to Norway to become a founding member of NATO in 1949, Oslo abandoned the Scandinavian solution, seeing a trans-Atlantic bond with the “arsenal of democracy” as a more reliable guarantor of its national security.

For the next several decades, Norwegian national security policy therefore hinged upon maintaining positive relations with NATO's leading member. From the perspective of the United States, Norway provided NATO with a unique presence on the frontlines as the only member state bordering the Soviet Union in the High North. The strategic significance of Norway to NATO's “northern flank” would only increase with time: first with the growing strength of the Soviet Northern Fleet based out of Murmansk through the 1950s and 1960s, then with the introduction of Soviet intercontinental-range submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

It is this latter development that most cements Norway's role in NATO. Although the USSR had submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) by the mid-1960s, these, like their American counterparts, were relatively short-ranged. In order to strike targets on the American homeland, early Soviet missile submarines—both nuclear-powered (SSBN) and conventional (SSB) ballistic missile submarines—would have to run a gauntlet of NATO anti-submarine forces spanning the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap on their way from Murmansk to the North Atlantic. In this setting, Norway's main value to NATO was mainly limited to that of a forward base for alliance intelligence-gathering assets, such as American U-2 spy planes.[4] But with the advent of longer-ranged SLBMs in the 1970s,

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Soviet missile submarines no longer had to make the risky run to the North Atlantic: they merely had to stay in the Arctic Ocean, where the ice-covered waters created a 'bastion' that prevented NATO surface ships and aircraft from detecting them. NATO nuclear-powered attack submarines would ideally follow Soviet SSBNs as they entered the bastion and, if necessary, sink them before they could unleash their deadly cargo.

This post-Vietnam period, however, also saw a relative increase in the number and quality of Soviet warships versus the West. Faced with the task of tracking and attacking Soviet SSBNs and the increased threat of Soviet warships interdicting the vital North Atlantic supply routes, NATO and the US simultaneously developed a new, more aggressive, strategy. NATO believed their best chance of reducing, if not eliminating, the SSBN threat would be to attack them as soon as possible before they could reach the relative safety of the ice cap. At the same time, this effort would also preoccupy the Soviet Northern Fleet, forcing it to focus on defending its SSBNs rather than attacking NATO forces elsewhere. This became embodied in NATO's *Forward Maritime Strategy* and the US *Maritime Strategy*, the latter publicly unveiled in 1986.[5]

Knowing full well the enormous quantitative advantage the Soviets possessed on the Kola Peninsula—"one of the most heavily militarized regions of the world"[6]—the Americans and British proposed the counter-intuitive tactic of moving their aircraft carriers even closer to the Soviet bases: right into the Norwegian fjords themselves. The rationale for this was the expectation that the mountains and cliffs of the fjords would provide significant concealment for the carriers from the radars and sensors of Soviet aircraft and missiles. At the same time, the confined waterways would create natural chokepoints, making it easier for the carriers' defence screen to detect any Soviet submarines trying to attack the carriers. Unexpectedly, this idea was put into combat use during the Falklands War, which saw Royal Navy vessels take refuge amongst the Falklands themselves.[7] In a way, this approach was NATO's version of the 'bastion' concept.

From a naval perspective, a secure Norwegian coast was essential to NATO's plan for reducing the Soviet military installations on the Kola Peninsula, and for countering the new Soviet bastion strategy. Thankfully, this bold tactic of placing enormous aircraft carriers (which need to be constantly moving in order to launch and recover their strike fighters) in relatively narrow fjords never had to be put to the test against a real enemy. Still, illustrating the seriousness of the concept, it became the centrepiece of the 1986 NATO exercise Northern Wedding and the 1987 Ocean Safari; the nuclear-powered carrier USS *Nimitz* operated in Vestfjord in northern Norway in the former, and the conventionally-powered carrier USS *Forrestal* went as far north as Andfjord during the latter, well within the Arctic Circle.[8]

And so, the final decade of the Cold War saw Norway fully and comfortably ensconced within NATO and American doctrine. The security guarantee it sought at the end of the Second World War had been achieved, embodied in the sight of massive grey carrier hulls sailing between the snow-capped mountains within Norwegian territorial waters, all the while flying the American flag.

But as the Berlin Wall came down a few short years later, American and NATO attention shifted away from Norway and the North. Unlike some other NATO members such as Denmark, Norway was reluctant to transform its defence policy and military forces to fit NATO's post-Cold War focus on expeditionary operations in areas outside its borders.[9] A number of factors – including continual concern over potential Russian resurgence and domestic political parties' disagreement over the role of the armed forces – saw Norway maintain a defence posture that became increasingly viewed as an anachronistic relic from a bygone age.[10]

But recent calls for reviewing NATO's adequacy for countering potential Russian aggression along the 'northern flank' have put Norway's strategic concerns into sharp relief. The Royal Norwegian Navy's decision to procure the fast and stealthy *Skjold* class missile boats in the 1990s-2000s appears, in hindsight, a wise decision. Although only six in number, their ability to rapidly reposition and fight amongst the islands and fjords plays a unique role in denying attackers access to the Norwegian coast – hopefully, long enough to allow NATO and American reinforcements to arrive in classic Cold War style. According to one Norwegian officer with whom I spoke, two of these were able to disable a NATO naval task force using only their 76mm guns (despite the *Skjolds*' primary armament being eight anti-ship missiles), illustrating just how tactically powerful these vessels are.

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But the advanced warfighting capabilities of the *Skjolds* come at a high cost. Their speed puts high maintenance demands on their powerplants, drastically driving up their operational costs. At the same time, Norway's decision to procure the F-35 stealth fighter—closely tied with their American-centric defence policy—has strained its military budget. As a result, 2016 saw the announcement that the *Skjolds* will be phased out in 2025 well before the end of their 40-year lifespan, with a rationale that the F-35s can perform the same anti-ship mission as the *Skjolds*.

Having invested so much treasure into an American-dependent force structure in the understanding that the US would come to its aid in a worst-case scenario, it is understandable why President Trump's position regarding Article 5 would cause so much concern on the part of the Norwegians. Over a half-century's diplomatic and military effort had been focused on securing and ensuring American assistance in the event of a major crisis. Having this cast into doubt in the face of a resurgent Russia meant Norway had to emphasize the single most important aspect of its trans-Atlantic relationship, even at the cost of sacrificing a chance to promote the liberal internationalist values for which Norway is known.

[1] Håkon Lunde Saxi, *Norwegian and Danish defence policy: A comparative study in the post-Cold War era* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, 2010), 20.

[2] Eric S. Einhorn, "The Reluctant Ally: Danish Security Policy 1945-49," *Journal of Contemporary History* 10, no. 3 (1975): 503.

[3] Eric J. Grove, "The Superpowers and Secondary navies in Northern Waters during the Cold War," in *Navies in Northern Waters: 1721-2000*, ed. Rolf Hobson and Tom Kristiansen (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 212-213.

[4] Magnus Petersson (2006) The Scandinavian Triangle: Danish-Norwegian-Swedish military intelligence cooperation and Swedish security policy during the first part of the Cold War, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 29:4, 619; Central Intelligence Agency, "VIII. US Interests", in *Norway Handbook*, No. 0625, May 1972.

[5] Eric Grove, *Battle for the Fjords: NATO's Forward Maritime Strategy in Action* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 21-24.

[6] Geir Hønneland, "Cross-Border Cooperation in the North: The Case of Northwest Russia," in *Russia and the North*, ed. Elana Wilson Rowe (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010), 35.

[7] Grove, *Battle for the Fjords*, 25.

[8] *Ibid.*, 26.

[9] Saxi, *Norwegian and Danish defence policy*.

[10] Magnus Petersson and Håkon Lunde Saxi, "Shifted Roles: Explaining Danish and Norwegian Strategy 1949-2009," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 6 (2013): 777-781.

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His dissertation examines the influence of international law on the maritime strategies of smaller navies – specifically, Norway, Denmark, and Canada. He can also be reached on Twitter at @TimmyC62.