



Norway's Foreign and Security Policy: A Challenging Mix of Realism and Idealism

Ann-Marie Ekengren





Ann-Marie Ekengren
Professor in Political Science at the University of Gothenburg



Introduction

Increasing tensions between major powers and even war in Europe are setting the tone for the 2020s. A stable European security order based on respect for rule of law and state sovereignty seems increasingly elusive in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Because of this, the Norwegian government foresees increasing unpredictability and tension. Democracies and international law are under pressure from autocracies' disrespect for the international order (regjeringen.no, 22/03/22). Small states such as Norway must react to such changes. The question discussed in this policy brief concerns what foreign policy role conflicts Norway may face in coming years because of increasing tension between major powers such as the USA, Russia, and China, or between any of the major powers and other parties. Potential role conflicts might occur in relation to different security challenges given Norway's position as a small liberal state, eager to support a liberal world order and be seen as a role model in relation to peacemaking. The potential conflicts are discussed in relation to Norway's NATO membership, integration in EU defence and security policies, Nordic cooperation, and security policy towards the High North. According to the Norwegian government, today's security challenges are more complex, multifaceted, and global than earlier ones. Security cooperation within NATO and the EU is described as essential for keeping Norway safe. At the same time, Norway is interested in working towards multilateral solutions and a rule-based order. Norway also wants to contribute to peacekeeping and mediation in conflicts. According to Foreign Minister Anniken

Huitfeldt, Norway believes it has an advantage over other parties, as it is believed to be trustworthy and impartial (regjeringen.no, 22/03/22). The question is whether all these ambitions go hand in hand, or whether there are times when different foreign policy roles might contradict one another.

The Norwegian government persistently describes Norway's work on international disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation as important and systematic. Norway is even described by the government as a leader in the international non-proliferation movement, as it continues to take initiatives to drive the work forward (regjeringen.no, 22/03/22). In addition, in other parts of its foreign policy, Norway is described as an idealist with high ambitions. In that way, Norway is supporting internationalist values that it shares with other Nordic governments. Since Norway facilitated the signing of the so-called Oslo Agreement in 1993 between Israel and Palestine, Norway has had a high profile in facilitating peacemaking. For example, since then Norwegian diplomats have been involved in peace negotiations in Guatemala, Haiti, and Sri Lanka. In 2022, Oslo was the site for meetings with the Taliban regime. Norway frames these discussions as important for protecting human rights and preventing humanitarian crises, and not as recognition of the Taliban regime. However, if Russia continues to frame the 'collective West' (i.e., NATO) as an offensive actor and Norway as a facilitator of NATO's expansion in the High North, Norway's reputation as a neutral peacemaker or internationalist might be damaged. Given the deteriorating security situation, Norway might have to



focus more on security issues and less on internationalist missions. If that is the case, it might be more difficult for Norway to have the time, resources, and diplomatic capacity to carry out peacemaking missions and to facilitate mediations and peace negotiations.

NATO membership: A hindrance or help for Norway's leadership in peacemaking, human rights, and gender equality?

Let us start with the cornerstone of Norway's security policy, its NATO membership. Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt's statement to the Norwegian parliament on 22 March 2022 described the NATO membership as part of the Norwegian identity. According to Huitfeldt, the war in Ukraine in 2022 has reinforced the importance of NATO membership. In 1949, Norway decided to join NATO and abandon its neutrality. As a small country, just freed from Nazi occupation, it was seen as necessary to join the strongest force and alliance for future protection. Since then, Norway's NATO membership has been a defining structure for Norway's foreign and security policy. Norway has maintained close relations with the US, bilaterally and through its NATO membership. Several important statements confirm that the USA is Norway's most important ally, and that Norway is an Atlantic state (Haugevik et al., 2022).

Over the years, there have been some signs of ambivalence towards NATO's requirements. For example, Norway had no NATO forces based on Norwegian soil and abstained from most nuclear weapons

cooperation. After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, however, Norway changed its approach. The USA has also demanded more from its European partners in NATO. With a more explicit military threat from Russia, the USA has increased its defence spending in Europe and NATO has deployed more forces in the Baltics and Poland. All countries are supposed to contribute equally by allocating two per cent of GDP to defence. Given Norway's economic resources, it will have no trouble in achieving the budget aim and be seen as a loyal ally. In the present security situation, Norway does not hesitate to see NATO as its primary security partner. Norway has shown increasing sensitivity to the need to take on new tasks within the NATO membership frame, despite some concerns over where NATO was heading during Donald Trump's presidency. Since 2017, 300 American NATO soldiers have been deployed to northern Norway; in 2019, another 400 American NATO soldiers were sent to Norwegian areas of the Arctic (The Barents Observer), and in May 2021 Tromsø opened a port for US nuclear submarines. There are clear signs that Russia views these as instances of a general build-up of NATO presence in the High North (Roth Hjermann & Wilhelmsen, 2021). There are also signs of a domestic debate in Norway on the extent to which this can be seen as though Norway, as a loyal NATO member is focusing too much on deterrence and not enough on reassurance. Norway has become more open to greater NATO involvement.

NATO has gone beyond reinforcing its activity in Europe and its traditional task of being a counterweight to Russia and the



East. Given NATO's widened, global focus, it has also been important for Norway to gain competence in taking on military tasks in widely different parts of the world to fight terrorism, keep the peace, or support local, democratic powers. Norway has had a rather positive view of NATO's global commitments. Given its more global approach, it has been important for NATO to cooperate more intensely with the UN, EU, and the African Union, given the nature of the discussed conflict. Norway takes a positive view of NATO cooperating more straightforwardly with various stakeholders; for example, Norway has been a proponent of closer cooperation between NATO and the African Union regarding the conflict in Darfur, Sudan.

Depending on future developments and the tasks NATO will focus on, Norway's opportunities to be perceived as a state facilitating peace and development might be challenged. NATO's more global approach can be easily combined with Norway's peacemaking ambitions. A more regional NATO security approach in the Arctic or Europe might hinder Norway's ambition to emphasize its internationalist approach.

European cooperation: A way to reinforce Norway's moral impact?

In 1994 the Norwegian people voted 'no' to EU membership in a national referendum, confirming the vote from 1972. Instead, Norway has been linked to the EU through the EEA agreement, according to which Norway enjoys many of the economic benefits of the internal market. Norway also

has close ties with the EU through Schengen cooperation and additional bilateral agreements. Research shows that Norway has become more Europeanized than expected, given its status as a non-member. As a non-member, Norway has supported almost all EU foreign policy resolutions over the years (Sjursen, 2008). When it comes to security issues, Norway has been part of the EU's Nordic Battlegroup since 2005 and an associated member of the European Defence Agency (EDA) since 2006. Norway has declared that it will take part in the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) on a case-by-case basis. Altogether, Norway has shown commitment to the EU's military build-up, but sees it more as a supplement to its NATO membership than as an alternative. Perhaps more importantly, with this approach towards the EU, Norway's formal national sovereignty has been preserved. Since Brexit, Norway still sees the UK as its main European ally. The UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) is therefore an important part of Norway's security policy. Norway has also joined other bilateral European security initiatives.

Norway acknowledges that the EU has gained renewed relevance with the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Depending on how European defence and security cooperation evolves and/or intensifies, Norway might end up as an outsider to the European defence mosaic. So far, Norway's action space has been described as becoming limited as European cooperation has deepened (Græger, 2018; Hillion, 2019). Despite being a non-member of the EU, Norway has tried to be an active European partner. Norway's 'no' to membership has



not been a 'no' to cooperation, not even in security-related issues. Norway's participation in European cooperation might reinforce the image of Norway as a Europeanist.

Depending on the context, it might be beneficial if Norway is interpreted as defending European values such as human rights and rule of law. But Norway can also be perceived as just 'one of many European states', making it less of an internationalist in line with the Nordic or Norwegian 'brand'. That is probably one reason for Norway's efforts to frame its contribution to the European battlegroups as a contribution to global peace and as a possible contribution to the UN (Sjursen, 2012).

Norway's European critics might say that Norway is interested in cooperation only if it can benefit its own security, but not interested in contributing to the larger European community. As a non-member, Norway always risks being of limited relevance to its European partners. Therefore, Norway has used the Nordic arena as a back-channel to the EU and the Nordics share information with Norway (and Norway has shared NATO information with Finland and Sweden) (Haugevik, 2017; Græger, 2018). When it comes to Russia's war in Ukraine, according to Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre, Norway has been keen on coordinating its response and sanctions towards Russia with the EU. If European defence cooperation evolves even further, to some extent in response to Russian aggression, and Norway is unable to participate, this might challenge Norway's role as a Europeanist. If Norway can integrate even more with the EU from its

position as a non-member, however, its Europeanist role might be reinforced. One might conclude that it is uncertain to what extent Norway's European cooperation will lead to future role conflicts. There are some signs of a reemerging EU debate in Norway, at least among some of the parties (Aftenposten.no), but if this will lead to any movement in the public opinion in favour of an EU membership is too early to tell.

Nordic security: Too inefficient?

The war in Ukraine and Finland's and Sweden's decision to apply for NATO membership has made certain parts of the Nordic bilateral cooperation less relevant. Before the Finnish and Swedish NATO applications the importance of the Nordic military cooperation increased over time. In 2020, Norway, Finland, and Sweden decided to reinforce their defence cooperation within the Nordic Defence Cooperation – NORDEFECO. According to the discussions held and the document signed at the time between the three ministers of defence, the aim was to coordinate military operations should crises or conflicts occur in the Nordic neighbourhood. Still, we do not know what effects would follow in case of a 'real' crisis, since the statement of intent does not contain any legally binding commitments (Lunde Saxi, 2022). Some suggestions have been to establish a joint early warning system, conduct mutual air surveillance operations, and carry out joint military exercises. For this to happen, more political will was necessary. It was much easier to establish Nordic cooperation on societal security issues, such as coordinating joint



responses in case of various civilian crises (e.g., fires and ships in distress).

Sweden's and Finland's earlier non-alignment policy and Norway's, Denmark's, and Iceland's NATO membership have long been obstacles to deeper Nordic military cooperation. In Norway, Nordic security cooperation has been seen as a supplement rather than an alternative to NATO. Since Norway and Sweden historically have had such different approaches, Norway has not chosen the 'Nordic' (i.e., Swedish) solution when procuring new military materiel: Norway declined to buy Swedish fighter jets in 2008, withdrew from the joint Archer artillery project in 2013, and declined to buy Swedish submarines in 2016. This has damaged the trust between the two countries (Friis & Garberg Bredesen, 2017). Finland reached the same decision as Norway regarding fighter jets in 2021, despite Finland's and Sweden's closer cooperation. Over past years, Sweden has been disappointed in a perceived lack of joint Nordic solutions and has been reluctant to acknowledge the close ties between Norway and NATO and Norway and the USA, respectively.

Given Finland's and Sweden's applications for a NATO membership in May 2022 the future focus, if the applications are ratified, will be on how the Nordic cooperation will evolve within the NATO frame. To some extent, all Nordic countries have profiled themselves along the same values; peacemaking, human rights defence, and gender equality (Græger, 2018). The Nordic brand is associated not only with welfare systems but also with a high degree of gender equality, high trust in government, support of human rights, and peace. The

question is if and how a Nordic bloc will emphasize these values within NATO.

The Nordic brand still has its advantages, seen in relation to the Nordic countries and the UN. That the Nordic countries take turns when campaigning for a seat in the highest office, i.e., the UN Security Council, and that the Nordic countries help one another during these campaigns testify to the strength of the Nordic brand in this setting. Norway has been one of the ten elected members of the UN Security Council for the 2021–2022 period. Its successful campaign for a seat in the Council shows that Norway has a strong tradition of prioritizing multilateral work within the UN. This priority is something Norway shares with, for example, Finland and Sweden. In 2021, Norway, together with Estonia, was the penholder for the Afghanistan file, putting that country at the center of attention. Norway's priorities in the Council have been described as reflecting its reputation as a 'constructive contributor to multilateral cooperation and peace diplomacy' (Haugevik, Raik, & Nagelhus Schia 2021. To what extent Norway has been able to advance the multilateral international order during its first year in the Council is difficult to evaluate now but will probably be discussed in retrospect.

All in all, increased Nordic cooperation within the NATO frame is probably helping Norway keep its high profile in peacekeeping, gender equality, and a rules-based world order. Until now, Nordic cooperation has at best had a complementary place in Norway's security policy. However, emphasizing Nordic cooperation might help Norway build its



reputation as an internationalist, emphasizing a rules-based order in other arenas, such as the UN. Depending on what foreign policy roles Norway would like to reinforce in coming years, the Nordic brand might be useful.

Norway and the Arctic

Bordering on Russia gives the geographical High North a special place in Norway's security policies. Since the second Stoltenberg administration took office in 2005, Norway has had a clear focus on the High North. The Arctic Strategy states that the Arctic is Norway's most important foreign policy priority. Accordingly, the largest unit of Norway's Army and half of its navy are located in northern Norway. In times of increasing hostilities with Russia, proximity to Russia has reinforced the importance of the Arctic. Norway's efforts to de-securitize the High North, prevalent during the Cold War, no longer constitute the main strategy. Still, a balance needs to be found between deterrence and reassurance of Russia.

Norway's interest in the Arctic has also been framed as an interest in climate change and sustainability. Increasing awareness of the effects of climate change, in terms of increasing temperatures and melting snow and ice in the Arctic, adds another dimension to Norway's activity in the Arctic. Norway, like the other Nordic countries, wants to be perceived as a forerunner in terms of climate change and active measures to achieve sustainability. Norway's petroleum industry has so far limited what the country can do but adds to Norway's strategic interest in the North

Sea. If NATO's interest in the Arctic increases even further, Norway's focus in the region will come to be on security, not sustainability (Bye 2020).

Conclusions

Over the past decade, Norway's foreign and security leadership has, as in most other Western European countries, acknowledged increasing threats to the European security order and the multilateral rules-based order. As shown in this brief, Norway's security policy is heavily anchored in NATO membership and the bilateral relationship with the USA. Norway leans clearly towards the West and, according to Minister of Defence Odd Roger Enoksen, sees post-Brexit Great Britain as its 'most important European ally'. Norway's more active approach to NATO's requests, in terms of NATO deployments in northern Norway, indicates that Norway's strategic role has become more important over time. Norway has sought to find a balance between deterrence and reassurance in the High North, but increasing Russian aggression and now war in Ukraine have pushed the balance towards deterrence even in the High North. Nordic security cooperation has become more important over time but has been more of a supplement to Norway's security policy. When it comes to EU security and defence policies, Norway tries to be as active as possible, but its non-membership limits its opportunities to be the engaged Europeanist in decision-making processes.

Securing Norway's interests is explicitly mentioned as the main task by the Foreign Minister, even when discussing more



internationalist positions, such as mediating or contributing to peace missions. Norway shares interests with the other Nordic countries when it comes to providing support to effective peacekeeping missions, peace mediations, and negotiations as well as to promoting disarmament. Norway's role as a neutral peace promoter might

become somewhat more difficult if its future security policy becomes even more closely linked to NATO's security issues in the High North. If the Nordic brand can be emphasized more, however, it might remain easier to play this role with commitment.



References

Aftenposten.no, Landsmøtet vedtok EU-debatten Erna Solberg ikke ville ha, 3 of April 2022.

Bye, Hilde Gunn (2020) Leaving its Arctic reluctance behind: the re-emergence of US security policy focus towards the European High North and its implications for Norway. *The Polar Journal*, 10(1), 82-101.

Friis, Karsten (2018) Norway: NATO in the North? In *Deterring Russia in Europe* (pp. 128-145). Routledge.

Friis, Karsten & Maren Garberg Bredesen (2017) Swedish-Norwegian Defence Cooperation: New opportunities? *NUPI Policy Brief 7/2017*.

Græger, Nina (2018) Need to have or nice to have? Nordic cooperation, NATO and the EU in Norwegian foreign, security and defence policy. *Global Affairs, Vol 4 No 4-5*, 363-376.

Haugevik, Kristin (2017) Diplomacy through the back door: Norway and the bilateral route to EU decision-making. *Global affairs, Vol 3 No 3*, 277-291.

Haugevik, Kristin et al (2022) Security debates and partnership choices in the Nordic states: From differentiation to alignment. *NUPI Report 1/2022*.

Haugevik, Kristin M., et al (2021) Small States, Different Approaches Estonia and Norway on the UN Security Council.

Hillion, Christophe (2019) Norway and the changing Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union. *NUPI Report 1/2019*.

Lunde Saxi, Håkon (2022) Alignment but not Alliance: Nordic Operational Military Cooperation. *Arctic Review on Law and Politics, Vol 13*, 53-71.

Regjeringen.no https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/stortinget_utgreiing/id2904996/

Regjeringen.no.
<https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/utenrikssaker/sikkerhetspolitikk/sikkerhetspolitikk/id86753/>

Roth Hjermann, Anni & Julie Wilhelmsen (2021) Russian reframing: Norway as an outpost for NATO offensives. *NUPI Policy Brief 5/2021*.

Sjursen, Helene (2008) Fra bremsekloss til medløper: Norge i EUs utenriks-og sikkerhetspolitikk. *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift*, 25(4), 323-332.

Sjursen Helene (2012) From Fly in the Ointment to Accomplice: Norway in EU Foreign and Security Policy. *ARENA Working Papers p0323*, ARENA.

The Barents Observer. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2019/01/russia-our-biggest-concern>



Thorheim, Bård Ludvig (2019) Tre trender som utfordrer norsk utenrikspolitikk. *NUPI report 9/2019*.



brief



About UI

Established in 1938, the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) is an independent research institute on foreign affairs and international relations. Any views expressed in this publication are those of the author. They should not be interpreted as reflecting the views of the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. All manuscripts are reviewed by at least two other experts in the field. Copyright of this publication is held by UI. You may not copy, reproduce, republish or circulate in any way the content from this publication except for your own personal and non-commercial use. Any other use requires the prior written permission of UI.