

Differentiated Integration in a Nordic Perspective

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Chapter 6

Differentiated alignment and Nordic cooperation in security and defence

The case of Swedish and Norwegian air forces

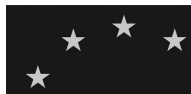
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Introduction

The revival of inter-state conflicts and full-scale war in Europe has attracted attention to horizontally and vertically strengthening European defence and security using national, regional, European and Allied frameworks. Although member states of the European Union (EU) have membership in different security organisations and varying attitudes towards neutrality and the structuring of the national Armed Forces, the commonality of threats and security interests suggests the necessity of cooperation through new initiatives and already well-established formal frameworks. The case of Norwegian and Swedish defence and security cooperation was chosen for this chapter for a few reasons: the two countries are part of the Nordic regional cooperation initiative, and the status of their membership in the EU and NATO are different;¹ hence, they provide an opportunity to explore the extent of differentiation processes and dynamics within the sphere of defence and security under the conditions of deteriorating strategic environment. The chapter aims to analyse the spectrum of cooperation that already exists between the two countries and the members of the Nordic cooperation initiative with further opportunities for diversification of cooperation and deepening of the scope in the air domain. It illustrates the potential for the regional cooperation even in the more challenging sphere of security and defence. Furthermore, the factors contributing to the success of this collaboration (similar cultural specifics, previous collaborative experiences, flexibility of commitments) are discussed in terms of the overall trends of differentiation and relevant lessons for regional collaborative initiatives in the EU and NATO.

The theoretical framework: Differentiation

The theory of differentiation has recently become one of the most prominent approaches to the analysis of the integration processes within the EU (Leruth and Lord 2015; Meissner and Tekin 2021; Rabinovych and Pintsch 2022). Works by notable scholars in the field have identified distinctive features of the collective term of differentiation related to the different speeds and approaches of

member states to integration processes. The field of common defence and security has always been the most complex area of EU integration to explore, since the security and military spheres are the core of the national sovereignty. The search for a suitable theory for this purpose is ongoing. In recent years, various works (Groenendijk 2019; Törö 2014) on the topic of security have illustrated the suitability of this concept to explain the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and its adoption by member states based on their own national situations, military capabilities, the status of neutrality and perceptions of threats. The chapter takes a further step in terms of the utility of this theory by exploring the compelling case of defence cooperation in the Nordic region, some participating members of which are EU members and NATO members, while others are not. The case of the Norwegian and Swedish Air Forces was chosen to illustrate two sides of the spectrum. The choice of the air domain was conditioned by a few considerations. The air domain is essential for the national and regional security of the Nordic countries due to their military geography. In addition, there has been extensive cooperation among the regional air forces in the last few decades and even within the last year, which provides more data for in-depth analysis.

In this research, Dyson and Sepos's (2010) definition of differentiation is used for the purposes of facilitation of interdisciplinarity and its flexibility in encompassing wider forms of joint effort inside or outside the EU. This definition and approach to differentiation also allows it to be extended to NATO within the military spheres of partnerships. Hence, the regional joint activities between the Nordic countries can be explored in terms of their objectives, methods and place in both the EU and NATO since membership in the two organisations differs among the cooperating countries. In this regard, attention is paid to both vertical and horizontal differentiation in Nordic regional cooperation. According to Schimmelfennig, Leuffen and Rittberger (2015), vertical differentiation entails that policies are adopted/integrated at different speeds and relates to the extent of centralisation within a certain timeframe. From the perspective of the regional collaboration that will be explored, the focus is on the extent to which certain initiatives that have been agreed upon are being accepted by the participating parties. From the civil–military perspective, this can also refer to the extent the political decisions and commitments are then being transferred into actual military practice – training, exercise or military education initiatives. In the traditional sense, horizontal differentiation covers the territorial dimension, meaning that various policies might cover different countries across and outside the EU. Internal horizontal differentiation means that various EU member states do not participate in all of the EU policies and initiatives, while external horizontal differentiation means that some non–member states are taking part in the European policies (Schimmelfennig, Leuffen, and Rittberger 2015; Bengtsson 2020). In the Nordic case, the focus is more on horizontal differentiation between the member states of the regional cooperation. In this regard, the important aspect is the flexibility of the member states of the Nordic cooperation in terms of the extent of their involvement in various

initiatives within this umbrella term. The national characteristics of the air forces, the military geography of the countries, and the perception of threats and capabilities will result in different extents of participation by the countries in cross-border initiatives. Similarly, in their recent work, Martill and Gebhard (2023) explore the case of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) as a laboratory of combined differentiation stressing the significance of flexibility for the member states' participation and diversification of commitments within various defence initiatives.

Other important principles of the theory of differentiation, and, consequently, relevant tools for the analysis, are the phenomena of interdependence and politicisation. The first is used as a stimulating factor for integration and, in our case, cooperation, while the process of politicisation is often viewed as a hindering factor (Schimmelfennig, Leuffen and Rittberger 2015). Politicisation is 'an increase in polarisation of opinions, interests or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards policy formulation within the EU' (de Wilde 2011, 566–7).

The analysis of the chosen case also focuses on an important distinction between alignment and alliance. The core of the difference is in the extent of binding commitments between the participating parties: an alliance is more binding in terms of commitments and potential regulations, while an alignment is more about mutual expectations in terms of support for each other (Snyder 1984). Consequently,

Alignment was considered a broader and more fluid term, which could be created, maintained, and strengthened in numerous ways. Being more fluid than formal alliances, alignment would presumably include less risk of becoming dragged into a conflict against one's wishes (*entrapment*), but also increase the risk of not receiving support in situations where support was expected (*abandonment*).

(Saxi 2022, 55)

The overarching context of the Nordic cooperation

The phenomenon of Nordic cooperation across various spheres is not new, nor is the sphere of defence and security partnership per se. Like in many regions of the world and regional group-states within the EU, countries with common cultural features, close ties and common interests tend to develop their own ways of working together within the existing frameworks for supranational or international collaborations. The important feature of such initiatives is that they tend to focus on the complementarity of already existing frameworks and strengthen them through bilateral or group arrangements. The key for those arrangements to function is much greater freedom to manoeuvre and more opportunities for individual states to commit to the framework on the basis that is the most suitable for them.

Despite the intensified Nordic collaboration across various spheres throughout the Cold War, defence and security were not prioritised. The primary framework for cooperation at that time was within the UN peacekeeping forum – the NORDSAMFN forum (1963), which was substituted in 1997 by the Nordic Coordinated Arrangement for Military Peace Support (NORDCAPS). The important feature of this UN framework is that in addition to the obvious alignment in joint efforts in Peace Support Operations (PSO), the practice illustrated the phenomenon of ‘the Nordic balance’, meaning the ability of countries with different NATO membership and neutrality status to find focal points of commonality in strengthening their standards and ways to collaborate at least within the UN operations (Bengtsson 2020).

The significant changes in the strategic and geopolitical environments after the end of the Cold War required adjustment of the existing joint arrangements and, hence, provided new opportunities to refocus partnership in a more pragmatic manner. Sweden and Finland joined the EU and strengthened their cooperation with NATO. In its turn, this boosted regional initiatives among the Nordic countries aimed at launching joint projects in armament development and procurement, participation in NATO-led counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and contribution to the Nordic Battlegroup established in the EU.

Although traditionally, the intensification of military joint initiatives in a region is often conditioned by a common threat, the case of initiation of closer cooperation between the Nordic countries in the mid-2000s was conditioned by a more pragmatic financial rationale. At that time, the intensity and continuity of the counterinsurgency operations and employment of cutting-edge technologies across domains of warfare illustrated the increasing costs of military equipment, especially on the more advanced end of the spectrum. At the same time, with various indications of shrinking military budgets, a new framework of cost-effective collaboration in the military sphere was to be developed. This initiative was on a bilateral Swedish–Norwegian level in 2006–2007, focusing on training, education, equipment maintenance and upgrade (Bengtsson 2020). In 2008, a working group of three countries Finland, Norway and Sweden identified various areas for partnership, which eventually led to the signing of the memorandum by the five Nordic states to establish Nordic Supportive Defense Structures (NORDSUP). One year later, NORDSUP was combined with two other frameworks: Armament Cooperation (NORDAC) and NORDCAPS, to form the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO). Despite being signed by all five countries, the bulk of the initiatives and intensified collaboration occurred across the three initial partners Norway, Sweden and Finland primarily because of their focus on sustaining their conventional armed forces, while the situation in Denmark and Iceland was different. From the first days, the focus was on participation of the three national air forces in each other’s regular exercises and training (Bengtsson 2020; Saxi 2019; Solvang and Solli 2021).

While various initiatives within this framework were explored and tested during the next five years, the further strengthening of joint effort was conditioned not by economic and cost-effectiveness considerations but by the revival of the conventional threat in the region – the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas. This wake-up call boosted regional cooperation and strengthened Swedish and Finnish joint activities with NATO, which, in turn, stimulated regional initiatives. From 2014, within the framework of the Partnership Interoperability Initiative, Sweden took part in the Interoperability Platform aimed at strengthening joint activities with partners for NATO-led operations. Furthermore, Sweden has actively participated in the two NATO strategic airlift initiatives, namely the Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC) programme and the Strategic Airlift International Solution (SALIS) (NATO 2023).

In the timeframe of 2014–2021, NORDEFECO served as a platform for dialogue between the member countries and as a framework to strengthen their partnership, reduce red tape and improve interoperability. Various activities were conducted in opening up national air spaces for use by partner nations under the condition of emergency or crisis, improvement of air surveillance collection and data sharing. As the Russian threat became more evident with the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the strategic and geopolitical environment shifted once again. The application of Sweden and Finland for NATO membership, and Finland's accession in April 2023, created new opportunities for strengthening Nordic joint effort within the existing arrangements (Solvang and Solli 2021). On 15 August 2022, the five Nordic Prime Ministers met in Oslo and agreed upon a joint statement on Nordic cooperation in security and defence. One of the identified objectives was to make 'the Nordic region the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030' (Regjeringen 2022). With the changing architecture of European security due to the Russian aggression in Ukraine, Nordic countries aim to sustain stability and enhance security in the region:

Finland's and Sweden's accessions to NATO will make NATO stronger and Europe safer. With regard to security and defence, the Nordic countries already cooperate closely within the NORDEFECO framework as well as through other bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. With Finland and Sweden in NATO, all of the Nordic countries will be committed to assist each other under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. This represents a significant deepening of our defence cooperation and a strengthened defence of the Nordic region, the Baltic Sea Region, NATO's northern flank and the Alliance as a whole. Finland and Sweden are EU member states and their accession to NATO combined with the recent Danish vote to abolish the opt-out on EU's security and defence cooperation, will constitute a possibility for enhancing cooperation between NATO and the EU.

(Regjeringen 2022, 1)

In essence, the Swedish and Finnish NATO membership applications allowed expansion of the existing collaborations in the region, especially between the Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish Armed Forces beyond the previous arrangements limited by the non-NATO status of Sweden and Finland. For instance, there were concerns of both NATO member states and Sweden and Finland regarding blurring the lines between membership and non-membership in the alliance and consequent commitments of various military assets to the tasks within NATO. While strategic airlift and training activities were well identified, other tasks would cause concern and would require reconceptualisation in terms of both political description and consequent military performance. For instance, when Swedish and Finnish air forces were to join Norwegian ones on their NATO air policing mission in Iceland, the mission was downgraded to exercise status in order to placate concerns of some member states (Bengtsson 2020; Saxi 2022).

In the context of the categorisation of the framework of this Nordic regional collaboration, it is essential to emphasise the distinction between alignment and alliance, freedom of manoeuvre and binding commitments. The aforementioned framework for regional collaboration and even greater integration between the three founding countries of Sweden, Norway and Finland functioned within the basis of alignment (Solli and Solvang 2022). The commonality of the cultural specifics, geographical position and neighbouring nature of the relationships conditioned the commonality of objectives and similar interests (Saxi 2022). According to Leruth (2023, 129),

experimental differentiation could prove more effective by relying on pre-existing clusters of countries that cooperate, for instance, in overlapping regional institutions, or that share politico-cultural characteristics that would facilitate small-scale cooperation. This, in turn, implies that heterogeneities of preference and dependence are low between the demanders of experimental differentiation.

However, this did not mean that all five countries would be bound to act in a specific manner because of some commitments. On the contrary, the primary advantage of this format is that it allowed freedom of manoeuvre for each country to decide on the extent of involvement and provided the platform for a constructive dialogue regarding the changes in the regional and international strategic environment. Hence, unlike an alliance with various binding commitments, this framework in itself was an illustration of regional joint effort on the basis of differentiation since each participating member could decide its extent of involvement and the ways it could contribute. In essence, this flexibility and freedom were essential in facilitating the very existence of such a framework for the cooperation of countries with very different membership in the military alliances, the status of neutrality, non-alignment and distinct approaches to structuring their Armed Forces.

The attentive reader would have noticed that one of the primary domains of the regional collaboration was the air domain and joint effort of the air forces. This does not mean that initiatives and arrangements in other domains were absent; rather, it indicates the inherent agility of air power and its importance in regional security. Regarding agility:

Air power is inherently agile, a characteristic amplified by the multi-role capability of many platforms. Agility permits aircraft to move quickly and decisively between the strategic, operational and tactical levels of operations, and to move across and between operational theatres, sometimes during the same mission, and to act as a manoeuvre force in its own right.

(DCDC 2022, 4–5)

From the political perspective, air power provided an opportunity to roll up or down the extent of its employment in a chosen mission, task or exercise. Hence, it allowed for much needed flexibility in a volatile strategic environment and complexity between different member states of the Nordic collaboration and views of the NATO member states on various activities, like with the case of air policing over Iceland rolling back to the format of exercises.

Regarding the role of air power in the security of each nation's defence within their national air spaces and, as a result, regional security, a few points should be emphasised. The distinctive mountainous landscape of the Scandinavian Peninsula and the northern situation resulted in uneven distribution of inhabitants across the territories of both Sweden and Norway, with the majority of people living in the southern and central parts of the countries. Thus, one of the primary means of transportation and travel is civil aviation, which means the presence of various airport infrastructure across the countries for the benefit of effective connections. From the military perspective, under the conditions of limited ground access to various areas and the remaining necessity of defending the entire country across its territory, sufficient air assets are the primary solution to providing the required level of defence of the national air space and contribution to the national total comprehensive defence widely conceptualised and implemented by both Sweden and Norway.

For Sweden, air power is at the heart of its defence and industry since the Swedish Saab company develops and produces the national Gripen fighter aircraft. Sweden is a significant player on the global arena of military R&D and procurement programmes due to its strong industrial base in support of its military requirements in the air and other domains. Its collaboration with the regional partners and improvement of interoperability are important for reducing the problem of 'system similarity' when regional partner nations are operating together while using different aircraft and national systems in their support (Solvang and Solli 2021).

Air cooperation

Sporadic events of Nordic air cooperation took place from World War II until the end of the Cold War and ranged from Swedish volunteers joining the Norwegian Air Force to the initiatives between Norway, Sweden and Denmark regarding air safety, allowing fighter aircraft to use airfields of the three countries as divert fields in cases of bad weather. Such instances resulted in rudimentary cross-border familiarity, but it was not systematic and did not include interaction between the air force units of the three countries.

As with the political context of joint effort, the end of the Cold War and the involvement of Swedish and Finnish forces in various initiatives with NATO and their out-of-area operations from the Balkans to counterinsurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq resulted in the Partnership for Peace (PfP) air force exercises, which were aimed to familiarise non-member state air forces with NATO procedures and standards. The Nordic Air Meet (NAM) exercise strived to strengthen collaboration and tactical capabilities of the member states and partners. The first exercise took place in Norway in 2001 and the last in 2012 in Northern Sweden and Finland. The last exercise included representatives from Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, the UK and the USA (Solvang and Solli 2021).

Regional cross-border collaboration was stimulated by the changes in Russian posture and its war in Georgia. Soon trilateral Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish cross-border training (CBT) began. This was due to tightening the bilateral agreement between Sweden and Finland on training their air forces and another bilateral initiative between Norway and Sweden. According to the latter, weekly exercises between Swedish and Norwegian air units took place in Northern Scandinavia beginning in 2009, with the Finnish units joining on a monthly basis (Solvang and Solli 2021). The important aspect in this context was that the three air forces operated different aircraft (Norway – F-16s, Sweden – JAS Gripen and Finland F-18s) but in the same environment of the severe Northern skies, allowing each national unit to test and improve interoperability with partner air forces in the distinctive environment of the High North. The CBT is a very significant phenomenon since it not only became the emblem of Nordic cooperation but also an example of training excellence and neighbourhood alignment:

The trilateral Cross Border Training (CBT) arrangement soon became a flagship in Nordic military cooperation, its success caused by the operational units being allowed to design a concept with high operational effect and low costs. The aircraft flew from their home bases, thus avoiding any deployment costs, and the pilots themselves designed their optimal training scenarios.

(Solvang and Solli 2021, 2)

The success of the initial NAM and CBT resulted in an intensification (up to 50 per year) and widening of the scale (from 4 to 20 aircraft) of the CBT and

consequent international exercises under the title of the Arctic Challenge Exercises (ACE) starting in 2013 and conducted every two years (Solvang and Solli 2021). In 2019, more than 100 aircraft from nine countries took part in the exercise (Forsvaret 2022). Another ACE 2023 took place in June across Sweden, Finland and Norway. The importance of these exercises is that in addition to the interoperability of the different aircraft in the air domain across various tasks, interoperability on the level of logistics and maintenance can also be assessed and improved for future readiness taking into account different logistical challenges of diverse aircraft employing not their home bases and airfields.

An interim exercise initiative between the regular CBT and the international ACE is the Arctic Fighter Meet (AFM), which takes place every year and is hosted by one of the three countries in turns. Finland, for example, hosted it in 2021. The primary focus of this exercise was to train dogfighting skills (close-range combat) (Solvang and Solli 2021) and to prepare younger pilots for international exercises.

The revival of the Russian threat in the region and the long experience of cross-border collaboration identified certain shortfalls and areas for improvement of the Nordic air power cooperation. Despite continuous investment in cutting-edge technologies and sustainment of the air forces according to modern standards, various capabilities are becoming more expensive for a single country/air force to procure and sustain sufficient numbers on its own. Some areas for joint actions and common solutions for the regional air forces might be Aerial Early Warning (AEW), airlift, air-to-air refuelling, electronic warfare and joint effects across various missions (Keränen, 2022). Another area previously identified for joint effort and consequent reforms was the command and control (C2) of the regional air forces. One of the standing arguments is that the membership of Sweden and Finland in NATO and the revision of the NATO Air C2 concept would allow for the reconsideration of the Nordic Air C2 concept. Besides the preservation of the national air C2 for integration with the national military services for joint operations, regional C2 can be developed for the distinctive requirements of the High North. According to the Commander of the Finnish Air Force, Major General Juha-Pekka Keränen:

we have to develop tactics, techniques and procedures suitable for the Great North in crisis and war. Hence, it could be prudent to gather all critical functions under a single C2 entity we should also seek for flexibility and redundancy.

(2022, 25)

While the Nordic countries can improve their effectiveness by revising C2 and joint use of capabilities, there is another segment of differentiation that needs to be addressed. In addition to the actual flying and varied power projection capabilities, there is also the question of basing, which should be flexible and resilient. In fact, the effective systematic development of the Nordic cross-border

basing concept becomes possible due to the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO and the work on the common C2 and joint capabilities. For the Nordic Air Forces to be resilient against posed threats, active and passive defence measures can be taken. Various Nordic countries have different ground-based air defences (GBAD). Although Norway had diverse GBAD systems during the Cold War, today both air force and army operate NASAMS systems. The Norwegian Army is also ordering short-range air defence systems operating IRIS-T missiles and MANPADS for the Finnmark region bordering Russia. In contrast, the Swedish Army has GBADS aimed to protect their brigades and the island of Gotland, an anti-aircraft gun system, MANPADS and a short-range system with IRIS-T missiles. One of its recent additions to the air defences was the US Patriot system (Solli, Häggblom and Persson 2022).

The importance of ground-based air defences directly depends on the extent of their coverage, meaning how great the infrastructure is and the number of personnel they need to protect, the extent of flexibility and the abilities of the ground units and supporting infrastructure of the air bases and airfields. As the experience of Ukraine illustrates, dispersion and mobility are defensive measures in themselves if the adversary uses a mass approach to the offensive (Fedorchak 2023). Nordic countries have a tradition of the dispersed concept of basing, which was widely practised during the Cold War and preserved by some air forces more than others. Swedish and Norwegian Air Forces are on opposing sides of the spectrum in terms of the presence of dispersal in their basing concepts.

In the case of the Swedish Air Force, the primary purpose of the dispersed basing concept is to create more effective sorties than the enemy, and to do so, the aircraft has to be constantly on the move. The operational advantage is achieved by being as mobile as possible by utilising secondary airfields and roads and moving from one base to another. While during the Cold War, Sweden had more than 100 runways suitable for this purpose, the number was reduced in the post-Cold War era. The primary advantage of this concept is to

always operate inside the enemy's decision-making loop, challenge their tactical intelligence and degrade the opponent's situational awareness. Sweden has a few mountain hangars to protect the aircraft before they disperse to the bases in wartime. The current Swedish Air Force lacks a GBAD system to complement dispersal.

(Solli, Häggblom and Persson 2022, 34)

During the Cold War, Norway had its own take on the dispersal base concept and implemented a robust network of air bases combined with hardened shelters. Dispersal of various air bases, and airfields, their structure and servicing aligned with the greater focus on the hardened aircraft shelters. Despite having such a unique concept and its effective implementation during the Cold War, the peace dividend argument of the 1990s defined various security and military budget considerations, resulting in the closure of different military bases and a

focus on cost-efficiency through concentration of forces and base functionality. Nevertheless, the revival of the Russian threat, the significance of the High North and more opportunities for Nordic cooperation and cross-border spreading of the base concept affected the Norwegian approach. According to the Commander of the Royal Norwegian Air Force, Major General Rolf Folland, the current priority for the air force is the operational requirements of the bases and infrastructure, with the principle of dispersal as one of these (Solli, Hågblom and Persson 2022; Folland 2022).

The dispersed basing concept is important not just in the context of the national military and organisational cultures and ways of opposing certain adversaries and enemies. This concept is a significant aspect of the next step of cross-border collaboration and the achievement of the desired joint effects and security in the region. In this case, while Sweden and Finland have similar approaches to the dispersal, and Norway has its different conceptualisation and implementation, the purpose of the cross-border joint effort is not to have the countries and their respective air forces change their concepts per se; instead, the objective is to achieve Nordic balance in this matter as well. In other words, decades of cross-border training have identified various opportunities for joint activities and gaps, addressed through the joint regional effort. Thus, the core of the Nordic approach is not to make all the national air forces look alike (that is not possible nor militarily desirable) but to take advantage of differences and consequent opportunities due to the distinctive national features of air power, its technological side and basing that allows the achievement of complementarity in various tasks and capabilities. Furthermore, in order to take full advantage of closer partnership and cross-border jointness, a further step is a Nordic Air Operations Centre, which could be used not only for the purposes of cross-border collaboration but also for strengthening NATO's Northern Flank (Solli, Hågblom and Persson 2022; Eriksen 2022).

Recent events have made the prioritising of this framework of collaboration evident. On 16 March 2023, the four commanders of the Nordic Air Forces (Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark) signed the first Nordic Air Commanders' Intent aimed to 'develop the Nordic air forces to operate seamlessly together as one force in the Nordic region' (FAF 2023). To achieve this objective, a functional framework was to be developed. The development of a Nordic Warfighting Concept for Joint Air Operations is to focus on four areas (FAF 2023):

- 1 'Integrated Air C2, Air Operations Planning and Execution
- 2 Flexible and Resilient Air Basing
- 3 Shared Air Situational Awareness
- 4 Common Air Education, Training & Exercises'.

It was pointed out in the statement of intent that the political and military alignment has been gaining momentum in strengthening ongoing military integration in the Nordic region. The primary means to reinforce the four areas of

cooperation are through the allied concepts and strengthening transatlantic ties. In terms of exact stages and objectives, the immediate focus is on continuing the existing collaboration in the air domain, while the medium-term objective is preparation for Nordic Response 24 and further steps in establishing the air operations centre (FAF 2023).

This initiative illustrates a few considerations regarding joint activities in the air domain. First, it shows the strengthening of the civil–military support for greater military collaboration in the region, which to a greater extent is conditioned by the current political and strategic environment of the reinforced Russian threat. Second, it shows the natural progression of the joint effort from ordinary cross-border training aimed at the improvement of interoperability to the more profound aspects of military cooperation and defence integration. Third, the intent remains an excellent example of flexibility and freedom of manoeuvre for the signatory air forces and respective countries. As was previously indicated, joint effort and commitments vary between countries. Nevertheless, the document shows even greater alignment on the posed objectives and agreement on the common ways to achieve them. Finally, the framework for collaboration remains within the NATO conceptual framework and methodology, which is aimed once again at smooth interoperability across regional partners and members of the Alliance. This feature became even more significant on 4 April 2023 when Finland became a new member of NATO, which extended the Alliance’s border with Russia and provided new realities for regional initiatives and further support for Swedish membership in the Alliance.

Discussion

Vertical and horizontal differentiation

From the perspective of differentiation, there are various points for discussion related to Nordic defence cooperation in the air domain with a focus on Norwegian and Swedish Air Forces. The overall context of the regional collaboration illustrates features of both vertical and horizontal differentiation. Vertical differentiation was illustrated in a more agile and flexible attitude to the common grounds and responsibilities within the framework; that is, the agreed-upon policy areas were adopted differently with varying degrees of centralisation. In essence, the common initiatives and consequent policies were flexible enough to prevent overcommitting the respective countries to policies and actions that would not be supported nationally and internationally. At every step of the way in the development of this regional collaboration, the participating parties emphasised that none of the initiatives were aimed to duplicate or substitute any efforts within the EU or NATO frameworks. On the contrary, the purpose was to complement individual and regional efforts as a stepping stone to strengthening the European and Allied security efforts of participating countries. The flexibility and decentralisation of the vertical

differentiation was also conditioned by the different membership statuses of the countries of the region. This flexibility was essential for Norway as a NATO member but not a full member of the EU; similarly, for Sweden as a member of the EU but not yet a NATO member.

In addition to different memberships in the EU and the Alliance, these two countries and the rest of the Nordic countries also had divergent historical, cultural and structural features of their Armed Forces and approaches to defending their air spaces. Although Nordic countries in general would have a lot in common across historical and cultural lines, distinct approaches were determined by national specifics and distinctive organisational cultures of the Armed Forces in conjunction with the varying national political environments. In this regard, horizontal differentiation was a given feature for the Nordic countries. For Norway, the extent of its cooperation was to be permissive within the framework of its NATO membership. Hence, bilateral cross-border training with Sweden or Finland would provide much flexibility. On the other hand, for Sweden as a previously militarily non-aligned country, close bilateral defence relations with Finland had to be extended to further regional collaboration with the regional partner nation – Norway (Solvang and Solli 2021). This was conditioned by the revival of the Russian threat and the need for improvement of interoperability according to NATO standards. While the three countries occupying the Scandinavian Peninsula would have similar geopolitical concerns, Denmark would need to refocus from complementarity to a more systematic approach to its Armed Forces and consequent capabilities. Iceland would not have any military at all (Bengtsson 2020). This great diversification of the members of the Nordic initiative dictated the flexibility of the differentiation and greater freedom of manoeuvre.

The very reason Nordic cooperation became possible and was gradually evolving and strengthening through various stages in the last few decades is not just the revival of the Russian threat. It had much to do with the fact that the Nordic approach to differentiation focused on the commonalities and mutual benefits. There were two keys to progress and consequent success: focusing on common objectives and common methods of achieving those objectives. It may seem that these two would entail the classic uniformed way of everyone doing the same thing in the same way, but the opposite is true. Initially, the Nordic defence initiative focused on cost-effectiveness dictated by economic challenges, then it was stimulated by the commonality of a threat, a threat that today has become even more obvious than in 2014. Thus, the objective of strong regional air forces capable of conducting joint operations and achieving joint effects is in the interests of all of the participating countries. However, the extent of commitments and contributions would depend on one's available resources and the opportunity to commit to various initiatives within this overall framework. For Norway, Sweden and Finland, these commitments are more multifaceted due to their geopolitical location and the increasing significance of the High North in the current strategic environment. Regarding methods, the focus on distinctive ways of achieving the posed objectives was

conditioned by the modern standards of excellence and skills – NATO concepts and standards as the precondition for strengthening interoperability between different regional air forces. This focus on method was beneficial for all participants, whether they were NATO members or not. In addition to reinforcing the regional interoperability of the Nordic air forces, these were important exercises and training to improve the skills of the national air forces in joint work with each other and international partners that took part in the international Nordic exercises.

Nordic balance and a focus on the common objective and common method appear to have been very holistic in allowing different countries to gain as much from the initiative as was possible in their distinctive cases. From the perspectives of Norway, Sweden and Finland, after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the security environment and the importance of strengthening regional security became an imminent necessity not only because of the long Finnish border with Russia but because of the threat Russia posed to the High North with its militarisation of the Arctic (Kjellén 2022). Arguably, this flexible differentiation framework was the most functional option for the participating countries to get the most out of this partnership and facilitate various regional, bilateral and trilateral initiatives that would have taken more time or effort (or would not have been possible) if they were executed within other frameworks.

Interdependence and politicisation

From the perspective of the driving forces and potential obstacles of differentiation, the elements of interdependence and politicisation should be discussed. Regarding interdependence as a driving force for integration, the case of the Nordic countries illustrates that the nature of their relationship is more of common interests than interdependence. Norway is a self-sufficient NATO member with its own Armed Forces and choice of various capabilities suitable for its national defence and contribution to the Alliance's defence. Sweden has a long history of neutrality and military non-alignment, and it developed self-sufficiency through the national military industry, which provided the national air force with various generations of capable, technologically advanced fighter aircraft. The argument for the collaboration of these two countries and the rest of the Nordic countries is not the traditional interdependence in a certain sphere that would drive cooperation. Nordic countries have strong national military defence capabilities against potential adversaries, and they are even stronger when they work together. The argument in the case of Nordic cooperation and the examples of Norway and Sweden is that their very partnership is not based on interdependence per se but on mutual interests dictated by the deteriorating strategic environment in the region and world.

One factor that does trigger the need for greater joint effort with some Nordic countries and air forces as opposed to others is the actual geographical position of the countries. From the perspective of the military geography and

the known location of the adversary, there is mutual interdependence in defending the Scandinavian Peninsula, which brings the discussion more into the purely military sphere that is not the scope of this book chapter. Nevertheless, this existential and permanent type of incentive most certainly was present in stimulating regional cooperation among the Nordic countries and its greater depth among Norway, Sweden and Finland.

Regarding the process of politicisation, this case also follows dynamics other than those in the traditional differentiation cases within the EU framework. The flexibility and the very differentiated nature of this regional initiative allowed countries to do as much or as little within this framework as they wanted. Similar flexibility and project-based participation of the parties was evident in PESCO: ‘the decision to adopt a modular framework was intended both to make PESCO more politically acceptable to wavering member states’ (Martill and Gebhard 2023, 110). Furthermore, in the Nordic cooperation, a differentiated alignment rather than an alliance with exact binding commitments and implications resulted in lesser politicisation of these matters. From the very first days, the focus was on the tactical level of training and improvement of interoperability, and these military necessities were far from attracting much politicisation in everyday life like, for instance, more major matters such as Swedish membership in NATO. When the scope of some activities like air policing over Iceland began to challenge the boundaries of NATO membership and non-membership, such matters would be more politicised. Another factor that allowed for this initiative to avoid some of the other downsides of politicisation was that this cooperation was conducted for a few decades with different spins of intensification and consequent activities.

The recent deepening of collaboration and integration across four main areas took place in a very different political and strategic environment. As has been discussed, there is alignment between political and military spheres in support of this cooperation and many other activities of the participating countries. Second, the strategic environment of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine after eight years of the ongoing war resulted in groundbreaking changes in the region with Sweden and Finland applying for NATO membership and Finland becoming a new member first. This meant a shift in public opinion not only about the military but also membership in the Alliance (Sullivan, Larson, and Grassel 2022). In essence, there were so many groundbreaking changes and shifts taking place in the Nordic societies that the continuation or intensification of the regional cooperation in the air domain simply was not the flashiest of the topics for politicisation. Furthermore, Bengtsson (2020, 116) makes a good point in emphasising that Nordic societies in general are characterised by ‘*the low level of public political contestation*’. This is often conditioned by the greater extent of common cultural traits and effective partnership in other spheres of life. Thus, the traditional obstacle politicisation poses to greater cooperation was not that strong in the given case.

Concluding remarks

One important aspect to be considered in this case is that the functionality and success of the cooperation was in its primary purpose and very nature – complementing other existing arrangements within the EU and NATO and flexibility for member countries to participate as much as they considered feasible or as the strategic environment required. In this regard, the umbrella term of regional collaboration allowed for the development of more specific bilateral and trilateral initiatives. This flexibility was most certainly conditioned by the very nature of the cooperation – differentiated alignment, meaning that the commonality of objectives guided collaboration, but countries acted based on their distinctive national situations and capabilities at a given time. In other words, this cooperation and the participating parties were not aiming to create an alliance of its own or an alternative to the EU or NATO (Solvang and Solli 2021).

This distinction can be considered one of the factors contributing to the effectiveness and success of the cooperation. Starting with the more pragmatic ideas of cost-effectiveness and tactical demands of interoperability, the regional cooperation evolved into a more profound differentiated alignment of the four Nordic Air Forces across the four areas identified in the statement of intent. Although there is still a long way for these arrangements to be fully implemented, once again its flexibility allows enough freedom for the contributing countries to focus on the chosen areas as much as they can.

Relevant lessons can be learned from this case for other types of differentiation and regional cooperation. First, the Nordic case illustrates that even countries with very different memberships in alliances and unions can find plenty of opportunities for joint effort in strengthening their national and regional capabilities. The key to success is the flexibility that alignment provided and the step-by-step approach that the Nordic countries took. Hence, this case illustrated effective building differentiation through ‘experiments’ with what works and extended cooperation where it proved successful (see the introductory chapter by Pintsch 2025). Second, although the military sphere is often considered more complex for cooperation, the revival of the Russian threat and various other deteriorations in the current strategic environment illustrate that, on the contrary, there are more stimuli for reinforcing military collaboration on all possible levels: bilateral, regional and allied. Swedish and Finnish applications for NATO membership are the best illustrations of the changes in the European security patterns triggered by the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The fact that the two countries took part in various regional training initiatives involving NATO partners resulted in a much higher level of interoperability of the national air forces of the two countries and NATO partners. Third, from the perspective of support and reduction of the phenomenon of politicisation of partnership initiatives, the focus should be on preserving flexibility at the heart of such initiatives. In its turn, this will provide enough freedom for manoeuvre for various national governments to sustain the long-term

development of the collaboration, and regional initiatives will not be perceived as alternatives to the already existing alliances and multilateral commitments. The Nordic balance provides numerous opportunities for strengthening regional resilience and partnerships across various spheres. Finally, the case of the air forces illustrates the most flexible type of military force; however, it is not limited to it, nor are the overall cooperation initiatives within the Nordic region. The significance of air power in the security of the region has already been mentioned, but this framework also illustrates the extent of flexibility for collaboration in the air domain, which most certainly can be further explored by other regions with their own distinctive air forces and air capabilities within the Alliance and EU.

Overall, it can be concluded that the case of Nordic cooperation with a focus on the air domain illustrates opportunities for regional collaboration in strengthening defence and security in different areas of the EU and NATO. The explored case provides a convincing example of the Nordic alignment with greater cooperation across various military areas under the conditions of the revived Russian threat. However, the success of this initiative is that it remains a differentiated alignment rather than an alliance.

Note

- 1 This chapter was written prior to Sweden's NATO membership.

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