

The prospects for an Arctic pillar of the Alliance

Canada, the Nordic countries and a common strategy for the defence of NATO's northern front?¹

by Håkan Edström and Jacob Westberg

Resumé

Nato har beskrivits som en organisation som vilar på två pelare; en amerikansk och en europeisk. Medan den förra ofta förstås som bestående enbart av USA så är den senare i regel diffust definierad om ens överhuvudtaget. Ett tillkortakommande med denna metafor är att Kanada tenderar att förbises. Ett annat problem är det faktum att en byggnad som endast vilar på två pelare riskerar att raseras om den ena faller bort. Den risken har blivit uppenbar allt sedan President Donald Trump återvände till Vita Huset. Alliansen behöver således sannolikt rekonstrueras och den enda europeiska pelaren härvid inte enbart ersättas med flera pelare utan även involvera Kanada. Denna artikel utgår från detta antagande och undersöker förutsättningarna för såväl skapandet av en arktisk pelare bestående av de fem nordiska staterna och Kanada som framtagandet av en gemensam kanadensisk-nordisk strategi för försvaret av Natos norra front. Vår slutsats är att de många säkerhetspolitiska ställningstaganden som förenar de sex allierade också utgör ett fundament att bygga vidare på. Det återstår dock att klarlägga flera militärstrategiska och operativa samt taktiska frågor och utmaningar innan det samarbetet kan fördjupas och skapa avsedda effekter.

NATO HAS BEEN described as an organization built on two pillars, one American and one European. While the former often is interpreted as consisting solely of the United States of America (USA), hence excluding Canada from the metaphor, the latter has been accused of being poorly defined.² Arguably, in times when one of the pillars, i.e. the USA under both Trump-administrations, explicitly is questioning the relevance of the Alliance, the whole building risks collapsing.³ Consequently, the building needs to undergo some kind of makeover. When reconstructing the Alliance, the new revitalized Transatlantic organization not only has to be built on more than two pillars

but the importance of involving Canada in the foundation must also be clarified and implemented.

In this article we elaborate on creating a new North-Atlantic building by replacing the single, poorly defined, European pillar with several new regional pillars. Hence, the exploration focuses on the potential establishing a Canadian-Nordic defence cooperation to serve as the northernmost of these new pillars. How the other pillars may be constructed is outside the scope of this initial investigation. However, we consider it likely that the ongoing military integration among the European allies such as the multinational corps and divisions of the land forces, and

the operational integration orchestrated by NATO's Joint Forces Commands (JFCs), could serve as framework in this regard.⁴

Is there enough unity to build on?

"The Arctic region is peaceful, stable, and free of conflict" President Barrack Obama stated in the foreword to the United States (US) national security strategy for the region in 2013.⁵ In less than a decade, the strategic setting has dramatically changed. "Russia is taking an increasingly militarised approach to the region; and China is supporting its proposed Polar Silk Road with a range of infrastructure and capabilities that have dual-use potential" the British Government warned in its white paper on the defence of the High-North of 2022.⁶ The Biden-administration also emphasized the Arctic region's importance regarding not only military defence and potential resource development but when it comes to areas such as new shipping patterns and altered fisheries as well. The administration declared its intentions to "deepen our cooperation with Arctic Allies and partners: Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark (including Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden".⁷ Two years later, the US Department of Defense (USDoD) issued its 2024 Arctic Strategy. "This increasingly accessible region is becoming a venue for strategic competition, and the United States must stand ready to meet the challenge alongside Allies and partners" Secretary Lloyd Austin declared in his foreword.⁸ Consequently, when President Donald Trump in early 2025 argued that Canada and Greenland are crucial for US security and economy, he was perfectly right. However, contrary to the previous Obama- and Biden-administrations, Trump applied a unilateral expansionist approach towards

two of America's Arctic allies. Moreover, the Trump-administration has announced a shift in America's NATO-policy including a potential withdrawal from the Alliance.⁹ Hence, Canada and the five Nordic countries, that is Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, nowadays must increase their own capabilities to defend NATO's northern flank. Facing such a common challenge, one could assume that there is a unity of effort among the six Allies. But is this really the case?

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Clearly, we do know quite a lot about each of these six states' defence and foreign policies as well as military strategies.¹⁰ We also have rather good insights and information regarding the military cooperation among the Nordic countries.¹¹ Not least can our own research provide insights regarding the developments during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. However, we do not know much about strategic and military cooperation between Canada and the Nordics, and we do not know much about the preferences since 2022 either. Naturally, such cooperation increased in relevance after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Consequently, in June 2023, Justin Trudeau was the first Canadian Prime Minister ever to attend a Nordic Prime Ministers' Meeting.¹² The following year, in September 2024, the very first strategic dialogue between Canada and the Nordics took place.¹³ Hence, the foreign ministers confirmed their commitment to work

together to advance defence and security cooperation between themselves. They also “agreed to continue the dialogue on shared policy priorities and to further strengthen the transatlantic cooperation between Canada and the Nordic countries”, the Canadian government announced after the meeting.¹⁴ Hence, cooperation regarding defence policy is now on the agenda.

This article explores the military dimension of this newly initiated cooperation between Canada and the Nordics. The aim is to discuss and evaluate the potential for a common defence strategy for NATO’s northern flank. Since Iceland lacks armed forces, it is excluded from the investigation. In this first study we focus on the political-strategic level. In future research we intend to complement our findings on this level by focusing on the main objectives for each states’ armed forces, perceived military capacity gaps and possible synergies when it comes to deepened defence cooperation in matters related to force generation as well as to the use of military force.

The article unfolds as follows. In the next section, the theoretical and methodological considerations related to the analytical framework are elaborated. Hence, the concept of defence strategy is presented and operationalized. Thereafter, each of the five elements of the analytical framework is identified and perceptions regarding the *strategic environment*, *strategic ends*, *external efforts* (alignment strategy), *internal efforts* (military means), and *ways* are explored by analysing the developments of each of the five Allies’ defence strategies since February 2022. In each of these sections, we initially summarize the result of our previous research in this regard. In the following section, the results of the comparison are summarized and the overarching question regarding a potential common strategy addressed. In

the final section, we shed light on some issues that remain to be addressed before a potential Canadian-Nordic strategy can be formulated and implemented. We intend to come back to some of these issues in our upcoming research.

The analytical framework

This section introduces the comparative analytical framework of the subsequent empirical sections of the article. In a previous study on strategic adjustments during the twenty-first century among 21 states belonging to different categories of states we classified Canada as a major middle power and the four Nordic states as middle powers. Middle powers have military strategic options which in most cases are not available to small states. However, compared to great powers and superpowers, middle powers are more dependent on cooperation with other states within or outside multilateral institutions.¹⁵ In analysing military strategic priorities of middle powers, it is therefore important to include both *internal efforts*, i.e. strategic priorities related to present and future nationally controlled military capacities, and *external efforts*, or “alignment strategies”, defined as prioritised ways of interacting on the political level with other states and organisations in matters related to use of force and force generation. The distinction between external and internal efforts was introduced by Kenneth Waltz. Internal efforts include, according to Waltz, moves to increase a specific state’s military strength and resilience, while external efforts, “the game of alignment and realignment”, include efforts “to strengthen and enlarge one’s own military alliance or to weaken and shrink an opposing one”.¹⁶ Additional important motives for external efforts are ambitions to increase influence and status and ensuring

support from like-minded and friendly states. These internal and external aspects of military strategy is collectively referred to as defence strategy which is defined as inter-connected ideas on how politically defined strategic ends should be achieved through a combination of alignment strategies and suitable strategic ways of developing and employing military means.¹⁷

Strategic environment

Before presenting our conceptualisation of the constitutive element, we must briefly introduce an additional element in the analytical framework: perceptions related to the strategic environment. In this article we focus on assessments related to the major powers, i.e. the US, China and Russia respectively and the level of tension in the Arctic region the rivalry between them may cause.

In our previous studies we analysed empirical evidence related to a trend in the early post-Cold War era among advanced Western oriented states to decrease defence expenditures and dismantle military capabilities primarily used for national defence against a qualified state opponent in order to free economic resources needed for the development of military capacities that would enable them to contribute to international peace support operations (PSO).¹⁸ This trend was, unexpectedly, particularly common among states situated in regions characterised by low war expectations and among states generally supportive towards the (then) US-led liberal international order. Status quo oriented and economically advanced states located in regions with high war expectations, “conflict formations” were, on the other hand, more reluctant to dismantle their national defence and develop capacities for expeditionary warfare.¹⁹ In the 1990s and during the first decade of the twenty-first century, EU-Europe and North America

were generally assumed to be the two most prominent examples of “security communities”, i.e. regional security complexes (RSC) characterised by patterns of interaction in which states view each other as friends and do not expect or prepare for the use of force in their relations with each other.²⁰ However, Russia’s annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014 and its continued military aggression against Ukraine have led to increased war expectations of many European states. These states are now increasing their efforts to rebuild capacities for national defence. Notably, responses among NATO’s European members are far from uniform and the sense of urgency differs depending on the differences in perceived strategic exposure. Perceived strategic exposure is a condition in which the political leadership of a state believe that they lack necessary national means, or support from allies, to deter aggression and that more powerful states have strategic interests in gaining access to, or possessing, parts of its territory.²¹

In this article, we complement our previous research by focusing on the five Arctic allies and to which extent they identify similar challenges, threats and opportunities related to the security environment in the Arctic region.

Ends

Regarding ends, we have identified three basic interests: survival, influence and status. These ends can be achieved by both external efforts and internal efforts or a combination of both. Consequently, they are common to states’ alignment and military strategies. The first two ends, survival and influence, are related to the competing views on states’ interest among defensive and offensive realists. For Waltz, a proponent of defensive realism, survival, was ultimately aimed at protecting states’ continued existence and independence.²² In our operationalisation,

survival includes general concerns related to political independence, security and territorial integrity. States located in RSCs that are characterised by low war expectations are likely to give lower priority to survival, while states located in RSCs with high war expectations are assumed to give survival higher priority. Notably, states within the same RSC may give different priorities to survival depending on differences in perceived strategic exposure.²³

In contrast to defensive realists, offensive realists argue that states should pursue power-maximising strategies to improve their relative position in the international system and increase their ability to enforce their will on other states. If successful, offensive strategies will also guarantee the survival of the power-maximising state. According to Mearsheimer, the ultimate interest of great powers is the ambition to establish themselves as the only dominating power in the international system.²⁴ However, few states, and certainly none of the middle powers, can realistically aim for this position. In our operationalisation of the interest of offensive realism, we therefore use the term *influence* to signify a broader range of goals related to efforts to increase capabilities to exercise unilateral or collective influence on other actors. In these cases, increases in influence concerns aims and measures that are not primarily directed towards protecting territorial integrity and survival. Instead increases in influence are related to efforts to enhance a state's ability to exercise power on its external environment.

Our third end, *status*, is based on research on states' interest in gaining recognition for having a certain rank, such as great power or middle power, or confirmation of a certain identity or role, e.g. presenting the own state as a capable and trust-worthy partner or member of an international organisa-

tion. Status is a relational variable based on mutually recognised differences among members of a particular system or organisation. Recognition by other states as having a special status may increase a particular state's political capital, giving it a louder voice on certain issues, and access to exclusive decision-making forums such as the G20.²⁵

Finally, it is important to note that the three basic interests are not mutually exclusive, and states often present ambitions related to more than one of these ends. However, states may still give greater priority to one or two of these ends.

Alignment strategies – The external efforts

In the project on comparative strategy, we have identified four basic alignment strategies: (i) balance of power, (ii) bandwagoning, (iii) isolation and (iv) hedging. These strategies can be pursued both within and outside military alliances, and members of a specific alliance may pursue different alignment strategies.

Balance of power strategies are essentially defensive strategies, aiming at avoiding losses and protecting a state's relative position by preventing expansionist powers to increase their strength by gaining control over less resourceful states. Ultimately, balance of power strategies aim to prevent expansionist states from establishing themselves as a global hegemon.²⁶ Such counterbalancing strategies may be pursued both unilaterally and collectively. *Collective counterbalancing* occurs when two or more states coordinate the use of their capacities to balance against a third party without entering a formal military alliance. States that are members of an alliance and increase their commitments to collective efforts by offering larger contributions to allied contingency planning or war efforts are pursuing a strategy of *chain-*

ganging. Non-aligned states can instead pursue a strategy of *courting* towards an alliance and its members. Such strategy includes measures to increase the possibility of receiving support from a particular state or an alliance as well as measures to enhance the ability to give and receive military assistance.²⁷ An additional alignment strategy related to collective balance of power strategies in unipolar systems is *regional balancing*.²⁸ This strategy aims to establish closer ties with the unipolar power specifically to increase the likelihood of gaining military assistance and deter a threatening regional power. It is important to note that balance of power strategies in a unipolar system may include external efforts to balance against the unipolar or a regional great power as well as efforts to balance with the unipolar power or an alliance in which the unipole has a leading position.

Bandwagoning strategies can also be pursued with different motives. Bandwagoning applied for offensive purposes, “bandwagoning for profit”, involves alignment with the dominant side in a conflict “in order to share the spoils of victory”.²⁹ *Offensive bandwagoning* is hence a strategy primarily motivated by perceived opportunities for gains and includes support to a non-threatening state or alliance. *Defensive bandwagoning*, on the other hand, is a strategy of appeasement, characterised by unilateral concessions to a threatening state or alliance to promote the security of the threatened state.³⁰ A third possible bandwagon strategy is *passive bandwagoning*. This occurs when a member of an alliance passes the buck to some of their allies and free rides on the security provided by other members of the alliance.³¹

Isolationistic strategies, the third category, may differ in intensity. Active efforts to promote the own state’s autonomy in relation to other states are termed *distancing*.

The opposite of this strategy, *hiding*, consists of a passive approach characterised by the ambition to avoid involvement in conflicts.³²

The fourth category, *hedging* strategies, may also be pursued in different ways. One is *multiple-courting*, a strategy that involves the use of different complementary strategies directed towards different states and organisations to increase the likelihood of receiving help from any of them. *Leash-slipping* is a strategy identified by Stephen Walt to analyse states alignment strategies in a unipolar system. In applying this strategy, states form an alliance or establish common institutions to reduce their dependency on the unipole by pooling capabilities.³³

Military means – The internal efforts

Based on Barry Posen’s distinction between military means deployed for national purposes and military means deployed on foreign soil “based in the theatres in which they would fight”,³⁴ we made a distinction between military capabilities primarily developed for *national defence* and capabilities primarily related to *expeditionary warfare* and power projection outside the own territory.³⁵ Regarding expeditionary warfare, we observe a spectrum ranging from global power projection via regional power projection to contribution warfare.³⁶ Middle powers’ efforts relating to expeditionary warfare are generally directed towards contributions to multilateral operations. Hence, interoperability with armed forces from other states is crucial. In our previous studies we observed that some states resisted the trend transforming the armed forces towards expeditionary capacities. In some cases, states with a less exposed geographically location continued to rely on existing military capacities from the Cold War era. Other states resisted this trend due

to opposite reason. Previous experiences of armed conflicts with Russia and bordering Russia made these states less inclined to believe that they no longer had to fear a renewed threat from their eastern neighbour. Yet other states followed the trend of radical reductions in military capacities related to national defence against a qualified state opponent.³⁷

States that prioritise national defence are generally expected to focus their force generation on capacities related to defence against a qualified state opponent. Depending on national traditions, these states are more likely to continue to use conscription as a method to mobilise their own citizens and give priority to capabilities needed for the defence of their own territory and the territory of their allies. If possible, these states will invest in technologically advanced military systems such as air defence and stealth capacities. As members of an alliance, they are expected to develop capacities to both give and receive help from other members. Interoperability with allied armed forces is therefore crucial for these states as well. Notably, keeping a full catalogue is becoming more economic challenging for both small states and middle powers.

A central question is whether the five states present similar assessments the major powers and threats and challenges to the security of the Arctic region.

European states that followed the trend of transforming their military towards expeditionary warfare, and currently perceive themselves as being strategically exposed, face a common challenge as the perceived threat is already present while rebuilding capacities for national defence is likely to take decades. Arguably, this leaves these

states with only two options: either to rely on other states' continued interest in providing external deterrence and defence capabilities against military aggression or find new ways of making more efficient and collective use of existing military capacities among like-minded states sharing a common strategic interest in a specific region.

Ways

Regarding ways we identified two basic options: *unilateral* and *multilateral* approaches. These approaches include both the use of force and various aspects relating to force generation. The choice between these approaches is in most cases not an either-or decision. What we were trying to establish was if a specific state prioritised one of these two approaches. Moreover, some states combined the two approaches. For instance, some states preferred multilateral approaches when it comes to expeditionary warfare and unilateral approaches in questions related to national defence. We have also observed a covariation between states' different position in the international system and their choice of unilateral and multilateral strategies. Unilateral approaches to expeditionary warfare were not an available option for small states and middle powers. The choice of unilateral or multilateral approaches to national defence was also affected by power asymmetries between the state making this choice and the state(s) that are perceived as a threat. A middle power that perceives a threat from a great power will obviously see a greater need for collective multilateral approaches to national defence as well. For the purposes of this study, we have identified a need to complement the distinction between unilateral and multilateral approaches. In identifying potential areas for cooperation between Canada and the Nordic countries it is necessary to distinguish between four

different formats: (i) bilateral cooperation between Canada and one of Nordic countries included in this study, (ii) minilateral cooperation between Canada and two or more Nordic countries (iii) extended minilateral cooperation between Canada, one or more of the Nordic countries, and one or more “third party” and (iv) multilateral cooperation between Canada and one or more of the Nordic countries in the context of collective NATO efforts.

Strategic Environment

In our previous research, we explored the preferences regarding the international system and the international order of some 30 countries 2000–2021. Hence, all five Allies included in this study were categorized as *Status Quo* oriented.³⁸ A central question is whether the five states present similar assessments the major powers and threats and challenges to the security of the Arctic region. Hence, the focus of the elaborations below will be on the perceptions of China, Russia and the US respectively.

Notably, when the *Canadian* Department of National Defence (CDoND) presented a new strategic vision in 2024, both “north” and “renewed” were in the title. “We are seeing greater Russian activity in our air approaches, and a growing number of Chinese vessels and surveillance platforms are mapping and collecting data about the [Arctic] region”, the Minister of National Defence, William Sterling Blair observed.³⁹ While Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was described as an attack on the system of international rules and institutions, China was perceived as being increasingly assertive and a challenge to the international order. “Russia and China are aligned in their desire to undermine the liberal-rules-based international system” the government claimed.⁴⁰

The government pledged to be active in a renewed defence partnership with the US, Canada’s closest ally, focusing on the detection of threats against North America and restoring continental defence and deterrence in all domains.⁴¹

“The growing global great power competition is also increasingly being felt in the Arctic and North Atlantic. The region is subject to new security policy dynamics and an increased military presence, especially from Russia” the *Danish* governmental security policy analysis group concluded in September 2022. The group also observed China’s ability to project military power outside of China’s immediate neighbourhood and declared that the “USA will continue to be Denmark’s most important security ally”. The following year, the Danish Ministry of Defence (DMoD) also described the USA as Denmark’s most important security policy ally. The DMoD pledged to strengthen the transatlantic bond. “Together with the USA and our other partners, Denmark must stand by the fundamental principles of a rules-based international order” the DMoD declared.⁴² Nevertheless, in April 2025, the DMoD concluded that US involvement in the defence of Europe could not be guaranteed.⁴³

“Russia’s aggressive and unlawful military actions have undermined the international rules-based order and endangered peace and stability throughout the Euro-Atlantic area” the *Finnish* Ministry of Defence (FMoD) observed in 2024. While the USA and China were said to be competing for political, military, economic and technological dominance in the world, Russia was accused of seeking confrontation with not only the USA but also with the wider Western community. To some extent, Russia’s provocative behaviour was claimed to be undertaken in cooperation with China. The Sino-Russian collaboration was considered to partly being based on the two

countries converging strategic interests and partly on their deteriorated relations with the West. The USA was expected to retain a strong military role in Northern Europe but the development in the Indo-Pacific region could, the government argued, alter the distribution of US military power. “The United States not only expects European countries to share the burden of European security, but they are also expected to collaborate with the United States in the strategic competition” the FMoD concluded.⁴⁴

“We find ourselves at a pivotal moment. Canada’s sovereignty, security, and prosperity are no longer guaranteed by the same conditions that have protected us until now” the Canadian government concluded in 2024.

In April 2024, the Norwegian Ministry of Defence (NMoD) presented the cabinet’s bill for the long-term development of the armed forces. The point of departure for the elaborations was the increased threat perceived following Russia’s aggressiveness and willingness to use military power in its foreign relations. Russia was accused of endorsing China’s efforts to change the international order by challenging American and Western influence, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. In return, China was supporting Russia’s war-machine. The increased Chinese presence in the Arctic was considered worrisome. The NMoD notified that China had become the strategic focus of Norway’s most important ally, the USA. The Norwegian parliament, *Stortinget*, shared the conclusions presented in the bill.⁴⁵ The following year, the cabinet observed that binding “international cooperation has been weakened. Relations between the US and Europe are strained”.⁴⁶

In June 2023, the *Swedish* Defence Commission (SDC) admitted that it had misinterpreted Russia’s international intentions and that it should have realised that Russia, like all authoritarian regimes, is unpredictable in its international relations. China was accused of challenging global security as well as the international order.⁴⁷ The following year, the SDC observed Russia’s enhanced confronting behaviour vis-à-vis NATO and the EU as well as individual members of these organisations. China’s geopolitical ambition was, the SDC argued, threatening international peace. The close cooperation between Russia and China was considered worrisome.⁴⁸ The cabinet predicted that the dynamic competition between the USA and China would influence the global security environment for years to come.⁴⁹

Ends

In our previous research, we also explored the developments of the defence strategies 2000–2021. While Canada prioritized *Influence* and Denmark *Status*, all other countries had *Survival* as their key strategic end.⁵⁰ Arguably, the geographical proximity to Russia explains Finland’s, Norway’s and Sweden’s preferences. A central question is if the developments of the relations among the great powers have changed the preference of Canada and Denmark respectively towards survival as well.

“We find ourselves at a pivotal moment. Canada’s sovereignty, security, and prosperity are no longer guaranteed by the same conditions that have protected us until now” the *Canadian* government concluded in 2024.⁵¹ Protecting the country and its people in the rapidly changing world was acknowledged as the government’s essential responsibility. “Ultimately, our closest values of democracy, freedom, peace, and fairness—

which Canadians have fought and died to defend—are being challenged” the Minister of National Defence observed.⁵²

“The new geopolitical reality demands that Denmark’s foreign and security policy adapts in order to be able to continue to defend and promote Danish values and interests” the *Danish* cabinet concluded in May 2023.⁵³ The following month, an agreement on Danish defence policy was reached between most parties represented in the Danish parliament, *Folketinget*. Hence, the signatories decided to shift focus from contributing to Allied efforts in out-of-area operations to defending Denmark, including Greenland and the Faroe Island, as well as the Danish neighbourhood.⁵⁴

Ensuring the continued safety, security and functioning of the Finnish society was, the FMoD argued in 2024, not only key strategic objectives of Finland but also heavily dependent of the safeguarding of uninterrupted trade and incident-free undersea infrastructure in the Baltic Sea. “In the High North, Finland’s objectives as part of NATO are to secure critical infrastructure and to protect the sea lines of communication in the North Atlantic” the FMoD announced.⁵⁵

Due to the economic and military significance, the High-North and the Arctic were the most strategically important interest areas of *Norway*, the NMoD declared in 2024.⁵⁶ The following year, the cabinet presented the first Norwegian national security strategy ever. Hence, Norway’s fundamental security interests formed the basis of the strategy; (i) A free and independent Norway; (ii) A robust democracy; (iii) A safe society with a high level of trust; (iv) An open and adaptable economy; (v) Allied solidarity and unity in Europe; and (vi) A world that seeks solutions based on international law. “At a time of great global upheaval, these interests must be our fixed points of reference” the cabinet

declared. “We must set clear priorities in order to safeguard, defend and promote them” the cabinet made clear.⁵⁷

In 2023, the SDC argued that the vital national interests of *Sweden* were protect the country’s independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Hence, the role of the armed forces was to defend Sweden, its citizens, its democracy, its freedom and Sweden’s way of life.⁵⁸ The following year, the cabinet presented a new national security strategy. Hence, Sweden’s vital security interest were declared to be: (i) protecting Sweden’s security, democracy, freedom, independence, sovereignty and freedom of action; (ii) protecting Sweden’s citizens; (iii) defending Sweden and its allies against armed aggression as well as Sweden’s territorial integrity; and (iv) maintaining the functionality of the Swedish society as well as Sweden’s fundamental values such as democracy, the rule of law and human rights.⁵⁹

Alignment strategies

In Table 1 below, the conclusions from our previous research regarding the development of the alignment strategies 2000–2021 of the five Allies are summarized.⁶⁰

Canada	Leash-slipping
Denmark	Offensive Bandwagoning > Chain-ganging
Finland	Unilateral Counterbalancing > Multiple-courting > Chain-ganging
Norway	Multiple-courting > Chain-ganging
Sweden	Offensive Bandwagoning > Multiple-courting > Chain-ganging

Table 1: *The preferences regarding Alignment strategy 2000–2021.*

Notably, while Canada’s preferences remained stable, that is *Leash-slipping*, over the two decades, all four Nordic countries

changed their preferences at least once leading to all preferring *Chain-ganging* by the end of 2021. A crucial question is if the rhetoric of the Trump-administration has changed Canada's preferences as well and, if so, in which direction.

"Together with the United States we will defend NATO's western flank, and with our Arctic allies we will defend NATO's northern regions" the *Canadian* government declared in 2024.⁶¹ The government even expected the defence cooperation with the US "in the Arctic to continue to grow, as it is fundamental to both countries' national security interests".⁶² However, not only NATO and the US were mentioned in this regard, The United Nations (UN) as well as coalitions and multilateral partners were also described as fundamental when supporting global stability. Moreover, in June 2025, the government announced that the EU and Canada "have decided to establish and implement a tailor-made, mutually beneficial partnership that will frame bilateral dialogue and cooperation across the full security and defence spectrum".⁶³

"As a supplement to cooperation in NATO and the EU, Denmark and several of our close European allies are increasingly entering into bilateral defence cooperation agreements and various forms of ad hoc cooperation" the *Danish* governmental security policy analysis group observed in 2022. The group stressed the importance of the close military and security policy cooperation among the Nordic countries.⁶⁴ "The times call for a wholehearted Danish commitment to the EU" the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Lars Løkke Rasmussen, declared in May 2023. The cabinet argued that Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO not only strengthens the Alliance but also provided "new opportunities for a stronger Nordic security policy and military cooperation,

including exercise activities and coordination of defence plans".⁶⁵

"Finland will continue to strengthen its international defence cooperation. Different kinds of defence cooperation arrangements will complement each other" the *Finnish* government explained. "The bilateral and multilateral cooperation will focus on countries that are the most relevant for the defence of Finland and its neighbouring regions" the government continued. Hence, the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO), the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), led by the United Kingdom (UK), the Framework Nation Concept, led by Germany, and the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), led by France were emphasized. "The cooperation with Finland and the US will be deepened within the framework of the bilateral statement of intent, signed in 2016 [...] and the Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA), signed in 2024" the government informed. "Finland will invest in deepening its relations with the NATO Ally Canada" the FMoD pledged.⁶⁶

The importance of NATO, and especially with all five Nordic countries as members, was emphasized by the *Norwegian* cabinet in early 2024. The cooperation on security and defence among the Nordics was also highlighted. Among the other allies, the bilateral relation with the USA and the UK respectively were considered special. In the former case, the Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement (SDCA), the predisposition of equipment for US armed forces on Norwegian soil as well as the concept of Colocated Operating Bases (COB) for the air forces were stressed. While both the EU and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) were acknowledged as important actors within European security architecture, the UN was considered a key actor globally. In the

former case, the cabinet appreciated the burden sharing between the Union and the Alliance. The SDC has continuously argued that *Sweden* should use international organizations, primarily the EU and NATO, as a platform to foster bi- and multilateral security cooperation. With the Alliance as a framework, the bilateral relation with the USA was, the SDC argued, advanced through the Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA).⁶⁷ The cabinet agreed and emphasized the bilateral relations with the USA, the UK, Germany, France and Poland as well as with each of the Nordic countries and the Baltic states.⁶⁸

Military means

Regarding the military means, the conclusions from our previous research indicated that all five Allies except Finland designed their armed forces for *Contribution warfare* 2000–2021. Instead, Finland favoured *National defence*.⁶⁹ By the end of 2021, the bulk of the armed forces, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), consisted of the resources summarized in Table 2 below.

Notably, all five Allies contributed to international military operations led by different organizations or coalitions.⁷⁰ However, while all five deployed ground forces abroad, only at the time three NATO-members did, that is Canada, Denmark and Norway, in addition contributed with both naval and air forces. An important question is whether the preferences regarding *Contribution warfare* have remained or if all five nowadays are focusing on *National defence*.

“The current gap between the Canadian Armed Forces’ actual force size and our authorized force size is unsustainable and needs to be filled rapidly” the *Canadian* government stressed in 2024. Hence, the ambition was to build back the Canadian Armed Forces to its authorized force size of 71,500 regular and 30,000 reserve force members by 2032. Regarding the investments in capabilities for the military’s current and future needs, focus was “first and foremost on ensuring that Canada has the ability to protect its Arctic and North and assert our sovereignty”.⁷¹ Hence, renewing and expanding the submarine fleet, extending the life of the Halifax-class frigates, and

	Canada	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden
Army Division	0	1 HQ	No information	0	0
Brigade	3	2	14	1	2 HQ
Main Battle Tank (MBT)	82 Leopard 2	44 Leopard 2	100 Leopard 2	36 Leopard 2	120 Leopard 2
MBT in store	52 Leopard 1	0	100 Leopard 2	16 Leopard 2	0
Submarine	4	0	0	6	5
Destroyer	0	3	0	0	0
Frigate	12	2	0	4	0
Corvette	0	0	0	0	5
Fighter/Ground Attack (FGA)	96 F-18	48 F-16, 4 F-35	62 F-18	35 F-16, 31 F-35	96 JAS39
FGA Squadron	4	2	2	2	6

Table 2: The main military resources of the five Allies in 2021.

acquiring maritime sensors for the offshore patrol vessels (OPVs) were prioritized for the navy. Acquiring tactical helicopters as well as vehicles adapted to ice, snow and tundra were to increase the mobility of the army. Upgrading or replacing the tank and armoured fighting vehicle fleets was another investment for the ground forces. Acquiring surveillance and strike drones, counter-drone capability, airborne early warning aircraft and ground-based air defence were on the investment list for the Canadian air power. In addition, long-range missile capability for all three services, building a new satellite ground station in the Arctic, and establishing northern operational support hubs as well as a cyber command were other prioritized areas of investments.

In the agreement reached in June 2023 on strengthening the *Danish* armed forces, infantry fighting vehicles for the army, helicopters for the navy and transport aircraft for the air force were given priority. Moreover, increasing the capacity for surveillance and for upholding the Danish sovereignty over Greenland and the Faroe Islands was also a prioritized area. Notably, these initial ambitions were rather vague formulated.⁷² However, a more detailed additional agreement was reached in January 2024. Hence, ground-based air defence for the army, long-range drones for surveillance of the Arctic and North Atlantic regions, torpedoes, air defence missiles and improved anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capacity for the frigates, and an air-defence radar on the Faroe Islands were decided.⁷³ An additional agreement was reached in April 2024. Hence, annual training of 6,500 conscripts and developing a heavy brigade for the army were in focus.⁷⁴ A year later, the focus was instead of the development of the navy. Four new minelayers were to be procured as well as an unspecified number of additional frigates

and OPVs.⁷⁵ Moreover, in October 2025, the Danish government announced its decision to procure 16 additional F-35 combat aircraft to the 27 already acquired.⁷⁶

“The materiel development of the Finnish Defence Forces will shift its focus to land defence” the *Finnish* government announced in 2024. The developments included mobility, long-range firepower, force protection, intelligence gathering and situation awareness, target acquisition capabilities, force structure as well as command and control systems. The ambition was having a personnel strength of 185,000 troops equipped with, amongst other, 200 main battle tanks (MBTs), 210 infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), 850 armoured personnel carriers (APCs) and 800 artillery pieces. The development of the maritime forces focused on mobility, surveillance, survivability and firepower. The Pohjanmaa-class vessels were considered fit for these ambitions. Altogether, the navy was to sail 16 major combatant vessels. “The Finnish Defence Forces will [shortly] take into operational use the F-35 fighters and the David’s Sling air and missile defense system” the FMoD informed. The intention was having 62 multi-role combat aircraft operational.⁷⁷

The long-term plan presented by the *Norwegian* cabinet in 2024 was indeed very ambitious and included several major investments for the armed forces. Drones for the surveillance of the High-North and the Arctic, at least five new frigates, ASW-helicopters for these as well as the old frigates of Nansen-class, new OPVs, at least five new submarines while concurrently maintaining the old of Ula-class operational, four additional NASAMS ground-based air defence batteries, a new anti-missile defence system, increased number of army brigades from just one to three, long-range artillery and advanced air defence for the army, new helicopters for both the army and the special

forces were among the key investments.⁷⁸ “Norway must take steps to rapidly enhance the operational capability of the Norwegian Armed Forces to ensure national and Allied freedom of action. We must strengthen our military capabilities on land, at sea, in the air, in cyberspace and in space” the cabinet declared.⁷⁹

In October 2024, the *Swedish* cabinet presented its bill on the development of the total defence, including the military defence, for 2025–2030. The army was to organize, amongst other, a division headquarters, three mechanized brigades, an infantry brigade, a battlegroup for Gotland and three independent ranger battalions. The bulk of the navy was to consist of two corvette squadrons and one submarine squadron. In addition, two marine infantry battalions were to be organized. The air force was to organize six combat aircraft squadrons equipped with JAS39, one transport squadron and four helicopter squadrons. The Swedish parliament, *Riksdagen*, consented to the bill.⁸⁰

Ways

In our previous research we concluded that Canada, Denmark and Norway over time during the two first decades of the twenty-first century preferred a *Multilateral approach* while Finland and Sweden initially strived for a *Unilateral approach*. Gradually, the preferences of these two at the time military non-aligned countries shifted, favouring military cooperation between themselves.⁸¹ An interesting question is whether the NATO-membership can foster increased multi- and minilateral defence cooperation among the five Allies in a regional context.

In 2024, the *Canadian* government acknowledged its responsibility to “our like-minded partners and allies to play an integral role in maintaining global stability”.

The CDoND pledged to maintain Canada’s ability to assist its allies and partners militarily and to “continue to make valuable contributions to global efforts to deter major power conflict, confront terrorism and insurgency, and address instability [...] as part of coalition-based or multilateral initiatives”.⁸² However, the CDoND not only mentioned contributions to multilateral efforts but also declared its willingness to assume the responsibility to lead NATO and coalition forces to deter and defeat adversaries as well as international peace operations and stabilization missions.

Throughout 2023–2025, several agreements were reached among most of the *Danish* political parties represented in *Folketinget*. Hence, a multilateral approach with allies and partners within the frames of NATO, the EU as well as the UN was declared the preferred context when using military power.⁸³

“Finland bears its share of responsibility as part of the international community by contributing to the peace and stability efforts of the UN, NATO, the EU, the OSCE and country groups” the *Finnish* government made clear in 2024.⁸⁴ “Finland promotes its foreign and security policy objectives through active bilateral and multilateral cooperation” the government explained the following year. “Active bilateral and multilateral defence cooperation strengthens the capacity of Finland and our allies to execute collective defence” the government argued.⁸⁵

The *Norwegian* cabinet stressed the importance of allied cooperation on bi- and multilateral levels within the frames of NATO. With Finland and Sweden entering the Alliance, the NMoD also emphasized the new opportunities for Nordic multilateralism not only regarding the previous areas of cooperation such as procurement, training and exercises but also the actual use of force.

The multilateral approach was also preferred outside the Alliance in UN-led operations or within a coalition of the willing.⁸⁶

“Canada and the Nordics
perceive the situation in a
similar manner.

In 2023, the SDC stressed the importance for Sweden applying a multilateral approach. The argument was supported with several good examples including the cooperation among the Nordic countries within the frames of the NORDEFCO, the British led JEF, the French led European Intervention Initiative (E2I) and the German led Framework Nation Concept (FNC).⁸⁷

Conclusions – Potential for both pillar and common strategy

So, after the empirical exploration, what conclusions can be presented? Regarding the *strategic environment*, we conclude that Canada and the Nordics perceive the situation in a similar manner. Russia is an imminent military threat in the Arctic and the High-North, i.e. along NATO's northern front. China's interest and activities in the region are increasing, and the Sino-Russian partnership is worrisome. The USA is still considered a strong ally but since the focus of the current as well as previous US-administrations has shifted from European security to counter Chinese expansionism in the Indo-Pacific region, Canada and the Nordics as well as other European allies must assume greater responsibility along NATO's northern and eastern fronts. Since all five Allies stressed the importance of maintaining a rule-based international order, we conclude that they have continued to be *Status Quo*-oriented.

When it comes to the *strategic ends*, we do observe a tendency in both Canada and Denmark to put more emphasis on *Survival*. However, we conclude that a de facto shift in priority has occurred only in Denmark. Contrary to the other Nordic countries, we believe that Denmark's focus on survival can be explained not only due to increased Russian aggressiveness but also because of enhanced Chinese presence in the Arctic and not least the rhetoric of the Trump-administration regarding the status of Greenland. Despite similar rhetoric regarding Canada as the US' 51st state, we believe Canada's position in the international system as a major middle-power as well as Canada's self-confidence not least due to its economic strength have permitted the Canadian government to continue focusing on influence. Consequently, we observe a difference between Canada and the Nordic countries in this regard, a difference we believe can be explained due to the different positions within the international system.

Regarding the *external efforts*, i.e. the alignment strategy, we concluded that while all Nordic countries by the end of 2021 preferred *Chain-ganging*, Canada instead favoured *Leash-slipping*, primarily in its relation to the USA. We find that Canada has continued its distancing vis-à-vis the USA but due to other reasons than previously. Currently, it is rather the Trump-administration's behaviour that motivates Canada's preferences. Concurrently, both Russian and Chinese actions have made all five allies to put more emphasis on NATO. Hence, we argue that all five also apply a chain-ganging strategy.

When it comes to the *internal efforts*, i.e. the military means, we observe that nowadays not only Finland, but all five allies, put more efforts on *National defence*. We nevertheless conclude that Canada, Denmark and Sweden still strive for at least some

capacity for *Contribution warfare*. Notably, all three hence focus on supporting the defence of Latvia by directing their contributions to NATO's Forward Land Forces (FLF) to this specific Baltic state. Moreover, we also observe an additional difference. While Canada and Denmark seem to prioritize the blue-water capacity of their navies, Sweden focuses on rebuilding the capacity of all three services. Notably, while Norway put emphasis on strengthening both the navy and the army, Finland continued its balanced approach regarding the priority between the services. Hence, the design of the armed forces still tends to be built on national preferences.

“We also see the potential for Canada and the Nordics to provide an Arctic pillar of a reconstructed Alliance.

Finally, regarding the *ways*, we conclude that all five allies continue to favour the *Multilateral approach*. Notably, only Canada expressed a willingness to assume the responsibility leading NATO and coalition forces. We find it likely that this can be explained by Canada's position as a major middle power within the international system as well as Canada's remaining ambition of gaining influence within the system.

Taking all these aspects in consideration, we argue that there clearly are enough similarities regarding the strategic preferences among the five allies to conclude that there also is potential for them to formulate a common strategy for the defence of NATO's northern front. We also see the potential for Canada and the Nordics to provide an Arctic pillar of a reconstructed Alliance. A joint statement from the Prime Ministers of the Nordic countries and Canada from March 2026 clearly indicates that these simi-

larities in strategic priorities are matched with political ambitions. The joint statement emphasised the increased number of NATO exercises in the Arctic and declared the six countries' commitments to “Arctic security” and their willingness to “deepen cooperation to ensure the safety, security and sovereignty of our people”.⁸⁸

Issues remaining to be addressed (and researched)

Naturally, there are still several issues and questions that remain to be addressed before such a strategy can be formulated and eventually become operational, for example:

- How can Canada and the Nordics cooperate to compensate for a potential decrease in US's nuclear and conventional security guarantees respectively? Should, for example, the UK be included in the pillar as well as in the cooperation?
- How can Joint Forces Command (JFC) Norfolk be replaced as the responsible headquarters for NATO's defence plan North-West, covering the North Atlantic, the UK and the five Nordics, if the US decreases its contributions to European and Arctic security?
- What are the preconditions for the Allies with sub-Arctic and Arctic capabilities, i.e. Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, to refocus their FLF-efforts from NATO's eastern front and the Baltic States to NATO's northern front and the High-North?
- What is the potential for the Scandinavian countries, i.e. Denmark, Norway and Sweden, to integrate their ground forces in a similar manner as other Allies already have done on the continent? What could be Canada's role if merging the Scandinavian armies into multinational divisions and potentially also an

army corps? What could be the role of the Multi Corps Land Component Command, hosted by Finland, in this regard?

- Can a strengthened naval cooperation between Finland and Sweden in the Baltic Sea, potentially also including Poland and the Baltic States, allow Denmark to focus on the North Atlantic? If so, how can the potential for Canada, Denmark and Norway to establish a common naval presence in North Atlantic and Arctic waters be further developed? And what about the UK as well as NATO's standing maritime groups in this regard?
- How can the differences regarding combat aircraft, with all but Sweden operating the F-35 system, be managed and turned into positive synergy effects? Should, for example, Canada and the Nordics launch an air policing mission in Iceland, a mission that also could serve as a platform when developing air tactics in this regard?

- Considering the capacity gaps, identified by each of the five Allies in their long-term plans to regain the capabilities needed for national defence, what is the potential for a more efficient use of already existing resources during the built-up?

Naturally, there are several more questions, not least related to cyber defence and hybrid warfare, to be addressed as well. In our upcoming research, we intend to return to some of them.

Håkan Edström is Lieutenant Colonel (ret.) and Professor (II) in Military Strategy at the Norwegian Air Force Academy in Trondheim, Norway and Associate Professor in Security Politics & Strategy at the Swedish Defence University in Stockholm, Sweden.

Jacob Westberg is Senior Lecturer and Associate Professor in War Studies at the Swedish Defence University in Stockholm, Sweden.

Notes

1. We would like to express our gratitude to the Swedish Ambassador to Canada, Mrs Signe Burgstaller, for hosting and to the Swedish Defence Attaché to Canada, Major General Rikard Askstedt, for organizing the strategic roundtable discussion at the Swedish residence in Ottawa in November 2025 during which a draft version of this article was presented. Thank you also to all participants from NORAD, Canadian Department of National Defence, Canadian Strategic Joint Staff and Global Affairs Canada as well as to the Assistant Swedish Defence Attaché to Canada, Colonel Adam Nelson.
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81. Edström and Westberg (2025).
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83. Danish Government (2023). *Vilje og evne til at tage ansvar – Dansk forsvar og sikkerhed 2024–2033*; DMoD (2024a). *Første delaftale under forsvarsforliget 2024–2033*; DMoD (2024b). *Anden delaftale under forsvarsforliget 2024–2033*; DMoD (2025a). *First agreement on the Arctic and North Atlantic Under the 2024–2033 Defence Agreement*; DMoD (2025b). *Delaftale om en flådeplan under forsvarsforliget 2024–2033*.
84. FMoD (2024). *Government Defence Report*, p. 32.
85. Finnish Government (2025). *Security Strategy for Society*, p. 18 & 64.
86. NMoD (2024). *Forsvarsløftet – for Norges trygghet*.
87. SDC (2023). *Allvarstid* (Ds 2023:19).
88. Government Offices of Sweden (2026). “Joint statement by the Prime Ministers of the Nordic Countries and Canada”, <https://www.government.se/statements/2026/03/joint-statement-by-the-prime-ministers-of-the-nordic-countries-and-canada/>.

Rättelse

I nummer 4 2025 av akademiens tidskrift finns en felskrivning i kallade ledamoten René Nybergs artikel *Ukraina bör undvika den finska hösten 1944*. I den engelska resumén ska det stå att det var president Biden, inte president Trump som stödde Finlands Natoansökan.

Redaktören beklagar felet.