

The circles of security: The role of the NB8 in (Northern) European security

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Russia's war against Ukraine has profoundly worsened Europe's security environment, but it has also spurred deeper regional cooperation. The challenge now is to ensure that this growing number of initiatives remains purposeful, adds concrete value, and strengthens both the EU and NATO.

The circles of security as a symptom of, and a solution to, the growing security dysfunction in Europe?

The last four years have been a veritable trial by fire for European security. The full extent of the negative consequences of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 became apparent for European security and stability more broadly in February 2022. Arguably, apart from Ukraine, Northern Europe has been one of the regions most negatively affected by these developments. Both the Arctic and Baltic Sea regions have witnessed a noticeable erosion of security and stability.

Yet the countries in the region have not stood idly by. On the contrary, they have taken a series of steps to counter the negative trends and enhance their security, both individually and through determined, concerted action. First and foremost, the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has integrated the Northern European security space. Equally importantly, the deteriorating security situation has spurred renewed interest in sub-regional security cooperation. Indeed, it can be argued that one of the very few silver linings of the past few years has been the way in which the Northern Europeans have increasingly come together.

However, it must be acknowledged that the turn towards regional cooperation also reflects wider shortcomings and even growing dysfunction in the European security system. The issue goes beyond the turbulence generated by US President Donald Trump, as the cohesion of the EU is also increasingly found wanting. The proliferation of different coalitions of the willing is a direct consequence of the deepening malaise in common institutions, above all NATO and the European Union. Thus, the key question is how to pursue regional cooperation in ways that alleviate the

shortcomings of NATO and the EU without competing with or undermining these major pillars of (Northern) European security.

Glass half full: Benefits and shortcomings of enhanced regional cooperation

It can be argued that this renaissance in regional cooperation has had two beneficial effects. Firstly, it has generated overlapping circles of security that can act as buffers of sorts for the participating countries. While no one wants to contemplate worst-case scenarios in which NATO or the EU might fall short of ensuring their members' security, the proliferation of regional security arrangements puts additional tools at these countries' disposal. The UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) is noteworthy in this respect, but the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) and the growing role of the NB8 are also important. Taken together, this multitude of overlapping regional formations and initiatives complicates Russian decision-making by creating uncertainty about the responses that aggression might trigger. The variable geometry of these cooperation arrangements can, in fact, dissuade Russian risk-taking, as it might create too many variables that are hard to assess with sufficient certainty in Moscow.

Secondly, the regional formations may enable the Northern Europeans to make a wider contribution to European security and stability. This is because if Northern Europe were to become a potential hot spot in the future, strengthening regional security would also serve a wider European and even transatlantic public good. Moreover, the growing tendency to come together at the regional level should augur well for making a positive contribution even beyond the remit of security. At a time when the very future of Europe is increasingly at stake, such positive contributions are few and far between, and such impetus is rare. It is to be hoped that the ongoing military integration will also spur renewal in Northern European economic geography with a view to making a positive contribution at the European level as well.

All in all, when it comes to regional cooperation in the North, the glass is clearly half full. Yet one can also have too much of a good thing. The proliferation of regional cooperation schemes is not an end in itself, but is only meaningful to the extent that it adds value to regional security. A problematic side effect is that the multitude of formats consumes considerable bandwidth in the participating countries, as it entails a great deal of coordination across the relevant ministries and even among key politicians. Coupled with the hectic pace of world politics, this results in a deeper problem: a situation in which Europeans spend most of their energy coordinating responses to external stimuli and events rather than proactively setting the agenda and pursuing their goals.

In addition, although variable geometry increasingly seems to be the order of the day in the EU, one must ask whether it is already too variable. Do the different mechanisms add up to a coherent whole? And how can we ensure that, in terms of policy responses, the whole formed by these parts is more, not less, than the sum of its parts?

Ways to increase the added value of the NB8

Ideally, the European and transatlantic security structures should undergo a major recalibration to make them fit for purpose in the changed geopolitical environment. The ongoing period of disorder and turbulence is not, however, conducive to institutional reconstruction, which would require time and unity of purpose, both of which are currently lacking.

Instead, one can envisage two kinds of solutions that are feasible in the short term: institutional streamlining and a division of labour based on clearly defined goals. In the first respect, NATO integration has successfully taken care of matters in the field of hard military security. NATO's defence and deterrence are at the heart of security in the North, including the Arctic and Baltic Sea regions. The Alliance provides the framework for strengthening European defence in the spirit of burden-

shifting, with the northern member states making a serious contribution to a more European(ised) NATO. Even in the event of a further souring of transatlantic relations, it would be preferable to use the institutional framework of NATO for European defence rather than building ad hoc coalitions or new European structures from scratch, which would require more time and resources than are currently available.

Turning to the EU, the situation is less optimal, with two of the Nordic countries remaining outside the Union, which limits Nordic-Baltic coordination within the EU to the NB6. While Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a major shock that prompted Finland and Sweden to join NATO, it remains to be seen whether the tensions around Greenland will lead to a comparable shift with regard to the accession of Iceland and Norway to the EU. Interestingly, Iceland's recent push for a swift return to the accession process has created renewed impetus for revisiting the question of whether all the Nordic countries might eventually join the EU. Although the Icelandic and potentially Norwegian decisions are obviously theirs to take, it is easy to see how the membership of all the Nordics in the EU would clarify the institutional set-up in the North. Politically, the clout of the NB8 within the EU would grow if all its countries were members.

When it comes to the second solution – division of labour based on clearly defined goals – we argue that all regional formats and projects need to have a clear niche and goals that provide concrete added value. Broadly speaking, NB8 cooperation can serve a dual purpose: first, formulating and pursuing shared positions in NATO and EU decision-making; and second, complementing NATO and the EU in areas where regional cooperation can achieve more than is currently feasible within these two organisations. The policy recommendations below include two priorities for advancing shared NB8 security interests within NATO and the EU, and two areas where NB8 security and defence cooperation could provide the region with concrete added value by addressing acute concerns related to the changing nature of warfare and heightened tensions in the Baltic Sea region. All of the recommended priorities enhance sub-regional cooperation while also aiming to strengthen European and transatlantic security more broadly.

Policy recommendations

- The EU membership of Iceland and Norway would bring added clarity to the institutional set-up in the North and would allow for a more streamlined and joined-up approach by the NB8, especially in the field of security, where this group has strong shared interests.
- The NB8 should jointly advance the deepening of the partnership between NATO and Ukraine and the full integration of Ukraine into EU defence cooperation. As leading supporters of Ukraine, the NB8 can contribute to a shared understanding within both organisations that Ukraine is not merely a recipient of military assistance, but also makes an essential contribution to European and transatlantic defence thanks to its unique drone capability, vibrant defence industry, and combat-experienced defence forces.
- The NB8 are frontrunners in defence innovation but should do more to coordinate their national activities and pursue defence industrial cooperation with the aim of achieving a coherent approach to drone warfare. Joint capability development, involving cooperation between defence forces and industries, could include concept development as well as the testing and evaluation of drone defence systems. Regional cooperation can benefit from EU mechanisms and contribute to better coordination and integration of new technologies under NATO defence plans.
- The NB8 could further enhance cooperation in the field of maritime security by taking greater shared responsibility for the Baltic Sea through measures such as coordinated patrols and surveillance, and joint naval exercises, also involving Germany and Poland. Such cooperation could contribute to the protection of critical undersea infrastructure and the enforcement of sanctions against the Russian shadow fleet.



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