



Image: Larissa Stunkel (Regionalprogramm Nordische Länder)

Nordic Unity in Arctic Security

Navigating Tensions and Alliances

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At a glance

- › In recent decades, the Arctic region has increasingly attracted global interest due to its climatic, economic, and political transformations. The Arctic's strategic relevance has been particularly accentuated amidst rising tensions with Russia, especially post-2022 following its attack on Ukraine. This attention has, in turn, amplified the roles of Nordic countries in regional security dynamics.
- › The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO in 2023 and 2024, respectively, exemplifies the momentum towards deeper Nordic integration in security domains. This trajectory was further highlighted by U.S. President Trump's comments in January 2025 regarding the control of Greenland, drawing international scrutiny to Greenland's strategic importance and the internal dynamics within the Kingdom of Denmark.¹

Diverse Nordic Perspectives on Security

The Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden – are often perceived as homogenous entities due to shared historical narratives, advanced democratic institutions, and relatively small populations. Nevertheless, their approaches to security and the Arctic landscape reveal significant divergences. A critical fault line in these differences is their respective affiliations with NATO and the EU.

Traditionally, Iceland and Norway have abstained from EU membership, instead affirming NATO's role concerning Arctic affairs. In contrast, Finland and, to some extent, Sweden have proactively engaged with EU Arctic initiatives while maintaining a close-but-not-too-close relationship with NATO. The Kingdom of Denmark have straddled both entities, albeit its Arctic component, Greenland, exited the EU's antecedent, the European Economic Community, in 1985.

During the Cold War, this dynamic led to the concept of a 'Nordic balance', wherein the Nordic countries maintained varied security stances vis-à-vis the USSR and NATO, striving for a so-called regional equilibrium.²

The discourse around Arctic security notably underscores the disparities among the Nordic states. Although collectively turning focus towards the Arctic over the past twenty years, the vigor and scope of engagement have been uneven. Norway, in particular, has been at the forefront of the Arctic focus, pioneering Arctic-related agendas on both domestic and international stages, also within a NATO-framework.³

¹ Østhagen, Andreas. 2025. "Trump Has Misunderstood the Importance of Greenland." *The Arctic Institute - Center for Circumpolar Security Studies* (blog). May 10, 2025. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/trump-misunderstood-importance-greenland/>.

² Farbøl, Rosanna, and Niels Wium Olesen. 2024. "The Nordic Countries During the Cold War: Further attempts at greater Scandinavian unity on defence fail and the Nordic countries turn towards other European and international partners." *Nordics.Info* (blog). February 28, 2024. Accessed November 12, 2025. <https://nordics.info/show/artikel/the-nordic-countries-during-the-cold-war>.

³ The Norwegian Government. n.d. "The High North." Government.No. <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/topics/high-north/id1154/>.

However, other Nordic countries have also capitalized on opportunities to advance specific interests, spanning economic and foreign policy domains. Iceland has distinguished itself through initiatives like the Arctic Circle Assembly and positioning as a prime Arctic tourist hub.⁴ Finland has spearheaded economic ventures tied to Arctic knowledge and infrastructure, having also initiated the EU's Northern Dimension initiative in the 1990s. Meanwhile, Greenland, as part of the Kingdom of Denmark, has increasingly been asserting its autonomy and developing cooperation with Canada and the United States.

Conversely, Sweden, within the Nordic-Arctic context, has demonstrated relatively subdued Arctic engagement and prioritization at the national level, at least in terms of security affairs and high-level politics.⁵

NATO and the Nordics

NATO attention to the Arctic, or more accurately the High North (the European Arctic), only truly manifested after 2014 and the change in relations with Russia after its annexation of Crimea and initiation of conflict in Ukraine. This change was driven primarily by an eventual realization of the need to reinstate Cold War-style capacities and activity monitoring in the North Atlantic and Barents Sea by the United States, the United Kingdom, and other northern European NATO members like Germany and France.⁶

With Finland and Sweden having joined the alliance by 2024, it is apparent that the defense alliance's focus and attention on northern European and Arctic security issues has increased, and will likely continue to do so in the coming years.⁷ President Trump's remarks about gaining control of Greenland have further pushed Arctic issues to the forefront in the Kingdom of Denmark, and amongst European and NATO allies.

Traditionally, facilitating Nordic cooperation, notwithstanding shared cultural and historical trajectories, has encountered challenges due to divergent perspectives on Arctic and High North issues.⁸ Geopolitical orientations differ across the region; while Copenhagen (specifically Nuuk and Tórshavn) and Reykjavik tend to look westwards, Oslo's attention is drawn towards the north and the Barents Sea, and Stockholm and Helsinki focus more on southeast and the Baltic region.

Today, however, there is a realization that security relations and military considerations vis-à-vis Russia in Northern Europe is a continuous domain, stretching from the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard and the Barents Sea in the European Arctic, down along the 1540 km NATO(Norway/Finland)–Russia border, and into the Baltic Sea/Gulf of Finland, the Baltic countries, Poland and Ukraine.

⁴ "Arctic Circle." 2025. Arctic Circle. November 11, 2025. <https://www.arcticcircle.org/>.

⁵ Sörlin, Sverker. 2014. "The Reluctant Arctic Citizen: Sweden and the North." In *Polar Geopolitics? Knowledge, Resources and Legal Regimes*, edited by Richard C. Powell and Klaus Dodds, 149–65. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781781009413.00017>.

⁶ Bykova, Alina, and Olivia Wynne Houck. 2024. "NATO in the Arctic: The Arctic Institute's NATO Series 2024-2025." *The Arctic Institute - Center for Circumpolar Security Studies* (blog). October 29, 2024. Accessed November 12, 2025. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/nato-arctic-the-arctic-institutes-nato-series-2024-2025/>.

⁷ Østhagen, Andreas. 2023. "The Arctic and the North Atlantic: From Cooperation to Conflict?" In *Great Power Competition in the Atlantic*, edited by Atlantic Centre, 83–100. DPS- Digital Printing Services, Lda. https://www.defesa.gov.pt/pt/pdefesa/ac/pub/acpubs/Documents/Atlantic-Centre_Report_03.pdf#page=84.

⁸ Saxi, Håkon Lunde. 2011. "Nordic Defence Cooperation After the Cold War." 2011. <https://fhs.brage.unit.no/fhs-xmlui/handle/11250/99335>.

In turn, further integration amongst the Nordic countries is bound to come with this realization, in conjunction with all of them joining the same NATO military command structure under JFC Norfolk in the USA.⁹ That decision in turn also underscores not only the north-south axis in countering Russia in Europe, but also the east-west connections and transatlantic sea lines of communications from Norfolk, Virginia, across the Greenland-Iceland-UK-gap, and to the Nordic countries.

A New Nordic Balance?

The trends outlined above have led to heightened anticipation surrounding the potential outcomes of Nordic collaboration, also extending beyond defense strategies and into realms such as regional infrastructure, transnational economic cooperation, and research across the five countries.

Given that all five Nordic countries are now NATO members, and with strengthened EU-NATO institutional collaboration (*see article by Andreas Raspotnik*), a coherent Nordic-led approach in the Arctic seems likely in years to come. Establishing both political and operational Nordic Arctic unity could in turn foster a more cohesive European stance on Arctic security issues, from countering hybrid threats to bolstering joint research and investment initiatives.

The precepts of the Cold War era 'Nordic balance' are thus less pertinent. The Nordics are no longer seen as balancing between global power blocs like Russia and the USA or China. Instead, they align firmly with a Western and North Atlantic strategic doctrine in Arctic security. Despite these alignments, the distinct Arctic territories and security strategies of each Nordic state – shaped by NATO and EU dynamics – mean varied interests and priorities persist amongst the Nordics.

Navigating this duality of a shared threat perception and relatively cohesive operating space, with historically entrenched diverging security orientations, is crucial to the emergence of a new Nordic balance; one that sees the Nordics playing a pivotal role in shaping the security trajectory of Northern Europe and the European Arctic.

⁹ "Nordic Nations Visit Joint Force Command Norfolk." 2024. Joint Force Command Norfolk NATO. June 25, 2024. Accessed November 12, 2025. <https://jfcnorfolk.nato.int/activity/nordic-nations-visit-joint-force-command-norfolk>.

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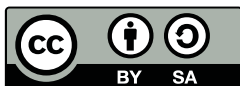
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