

The Nordic NATO pivot: a stronghold for regional and global peace or a fragile region with turbulent seas and crowded skies?

By Tone Bleie

Why shifts in the Nordic region matter

Imagine Nepal as a small state left an alliance-free foreign policy on short notice, seeking membership in a regional military alliance. Imagine your defense minister few weeks back said s/he was against membership and your prime minister expressed serious reservations. Imagine a historical decision is nevertheless taken in what is characterized as an unprecedented threatening context. Another neighbor launches a full-scale military attack on a third country in your region. After hasty deliberations and consultations, the government, following parliamentary voting, decides to apply for membership. Presumably, it would be felt like a seismic jolt. The political earthquake would occupy political leaders, historians and military and security analysts catapulted to rethink military integration and cooperation involving land, seas, and skies domains. Fear-struck citizens hope the military alliance's protective embrace will secure peace in an atomic era of mounting great power rivalry in a melting and warming world.

In simple terms, this is roughly about to happen in the Nordic region. On May 18th Finland's President Sauli Niinistö and the Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson met with President Joe Biden in Washington, a day after both countries applied for NATO-membership. The historical decisions came after rushed policy assessments and expert consultations, deliberations and voting in the unicameral *Rigsdagen* in both countries.

I shall outline key issues of Scandinavia's geopolitics and wired geography that may interest readers viewing the region from both a South Asian and a global security and peace perspective. In an op-ed published in *Telegraph Nepal* on April 28th I noted striking differences between "Western" responses (with notable caveats) and Chinese and Indian responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the sanctions regime. This op-ed departs from this recognition. Differences are noticeable in official posturing, legitimate national interests, and recent voting at the Security Council where Norway and India are currently non-permanent members, at the General Assembly and The Human Rights Council. There are arguably compelling arguments why non-alarmist open-ended debates on scenarios for the emerging extended Nordic NATO-pivot should interest *Telegraph Nepal's* readers. A key argument is the emerging regional and global importance of a Nordic wired geography integrating lands, seas, skies, and low-Earth orbit.

The emergence of an extended Scandinavia geography

The Nordics include the sovereign states of Denmark, Iceland, and Norway, all are already NATO-members. Sweden and Finland are now leaving their long-held non-aligned policy. The Nordic region also includes the autonomous territories of the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and the autonomous region of Åland. The latter is a demilitarized territory akin to Svalbard. The Nordic pivot includes geographically the Scandinavian peninsula comprising Norway and

Sweden and Northwestern Finland, an area greater than the Balkan, Iberian, and Italian peninsula. North lies the Barents Sea, the Norwegian Sea to the west and the North Sea to the southwest. The Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Bothnia border Russia to the east. Denmark lies further to the south. With the expected approval of Sweden's and Finland's application (Turkey's and Croatia's current posturing are likely intermezzos), the Nordic region will constitute an extended political and military wired geography of increasingly integrated land, oceans, and skies domains.

Consider for a moment the Barents Sea of 1.4 million km² and Russia and Norway as basin countries. The Norwegian Sea has nearly the same size, merely separated from the Atlantic Ocean by submarine ridge that runs from Iceland to the Faroe Island. One cannot rule out greater military and civilian activity because of great power rivalry. The Americans and Russians have announced a stronger Arctic military presence. All near-Arctic states except Russia, will soon be alliance members. An increasingly asymmetrical Russia-China relationship may lead the Russian to invite Chinese investments in energy and infrastructure as part of the Polar Silk Route. China sustains a civilian presence largely as observer at the Arctic Council and a Polar research nation. Presently, one should not "cry wolf" about China. In fact, America has not ratified the UN's Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), disposes the shortest coastline of any Arctic coastal state and cries wolf, creating an elusive impression that military securitization is warranted. So far, no Chinese war vessel traveled into our northern waters. With increased military posturing, risks of accidents with nuclear submarines and aircrafts cannot be ruled out. Currently, Russian submarines conduct exercises in the Barents Sea, following President Putin's order of high nuclear alert. American nuclear-powered submarines armed with cruise missiles patrol waters where Russian submarines sail. Crew change and supply arrangements on NATO-vessels were previously in the outer fjords of our country Troms. Since last year, a civilian municipal harbor close to my city Tromsø has served as a port of call for submarines.

Crowding and risks of encounters and accidents due to denser civil and military traffic, may increasingly occur along sea routes and around Norwegian-ruled Svalbard. The Baltic Sea is only 377,000 km². Surrounded by nine countries, the sea and its skies are getting rather crowded. One should remember the Baltic Sea Fleet of the Russian Navy is headquartered in the enclave of Kaliningrad close to the city of Saint Petersburg. The enclave shares borders with Poland to the south and Lithuania to the east and north. Recent increased NATO-presence is concerning for the Russians. They have responded by modernizing the far-reaching missile batteries at Kaliningrad and increasing patrolling. Saint Peterburg and Kaliningrad are situated at one of Russia's maritime choke points of access to the great oceans for maritime trade and military activity. The others are in the Black Sea (through Bosphorus) and the Arctic Ocean Sea Route. This might seem as a luxury problem from a Nepalese perspective as fully landlocked, but it is not so. Russia's grand strategy in recent years pivots to quite an extent around maritime interests.

Our visible skies and colonization of the lower-Earth domain

Skies over oceans and lands have demarcated borders. Airspace is the portion of the atmosphere controlled by a country above its territory and its territorial waters. Often overlooked are the complexities of called low-Earth. This international space is normally at

an altitude of less than 1000 km. Most commercial airplanes fly at altitudes around approximately 14 km, so objects in the lowest Earth-orbit circulate more than ten times higher than airplanes. Low-Earth orbit is about to be rapidly colonized by satellites apart from space stations. One main reason is the proximity to Earth. Therefore, satellites in orbit travel near enough the earth's surface to take stunning high-resolution images. Particularly the last decade has seen an exponential growth of private and public-private companies sending smaller and cheaper satellites in low-Earth orbit. Many nations have satellites in orbit, including South Asian nations. Nepal's first low-orbit research satellite (with Nepal's flag and the logo of Nepal Academy of Science and Technology), and first ever satellite, was launched in spring of 2019. Nepal Telecommunication Authority (NTA) is preparing to put up its own satellite using a long held geostationary orbital slot. Geostationary satellites orbit above the equator. Since their velocity corresponds to the earth's rotation, they remain above the same spot on the earth's surface.

A combination of democratization and privatization of space is underway. This democratization is not bad news. But crowding in low-Earth orbit, and in skies and seas pose serious concerns. Space debris increases risks for collisions in our global common. Does the Nordic pivot in the High-North matters in any important way? It does. Satellites in low-Earth over the polar areas send images to Svalbard Satellite Station, located at 78°N, 1200 km south of the North Pole on Spitsbergen. This commercial ground station is the most optimally located ground station in the world for satellite control. The station provides all-orbit support to a host of owners and operators of polar orbiting satellites. Many are so-called dual-use satellites producing high-resolution imagery that is sold to civilian and military customers. For example, a customer engaged in a civilian rescue operation or an armed conflict somewhere in the Middle East get extremely valuable imagery in so to say real time. This strategic asset can change outcomes in disaster areas or battlefields. For this reason, wired high-tech infrastructure connecting land, oceans, skies, and low-Earth in the Arctic holds regional and global strategic importance.

Crowded skies and seas – striking escalations

We need useful risks assessments and useful data to be able to debate likelihood of stable peace or fragile militarized security in a new era with an integrated Nordic-pivot operating in Arctic seas and The Baltic. Instructive are recent trends in incidents involving Russian and NATO forces after recently the invasion of Crimea in 2014. Readers may recall the Baltic countries joined the alliance in 2003.

NATO, US, and Russian reports of incidents reveal where they occurred and likely causes. Reportedly around 2,900 incidents occurred between 2013 and end of 2020. 2013 was a year before Russia seized Crimea and the war began in Donbas. The number of annual incidents increased from about 220 in 2013 till 520 in 2019, before dipping to in 2020 to 380. As much as 85 per cent of all incidents were air-to-air intercepts. The air intercepts were mostly during surveillance and reconnaissance missions. Some involved considerable risks for mid-air collision. The Russian Ministry of Defense reported nearly 500 incidents involving their fighters. A lesser proportion of the total of 2,900 incidents involved bomber deployments and naval freedom of navigation operations. Geolocated data shows *The Baltic* and *Norwegian Seas* were concentration areas, besides of the Black Sea and the Northeast Pacific.

Geolocated data are relevant for a concrete debate on security and risks of scrambles that may lead to dangerous military engagements. A fourth of all incidents occurred in the North Sea, Norwegian Sea, and Barents Sea – while NATO and Russian activity increased. The reported events were mainly air intercepts between Norwegian, British, and Russian forces.

The causes of incidents are mainly three; show of force, freedom of navigation and unprofessional risky maneuvers. The first two causes are defense of sovereign space and territory, made complicated with alliance-wide missions. The third is of a different nature and no less worrisome. Nearly twenty national air forces undertake Baltic missions, making the Russians show increased vigilance. Given an expansion of NATO membership and likelihood of increasingly crowded skies and seas, should one simply project a continued rise, based on the 2013-2021 trends? This abode for a geopolitical drama that renders potentially dangerous encounters more common, calling for risk reduction measures and deconfliction protocols. Such preventive measures should be of high priority for national policy makers, alliance ambassadors and diplomats in Geneva. Timely responsive actions that effectively curb recent years rapid rise of incidents may not happen if not a broad compact of civil society, citizens and political parties chose to demand a comprehensive international security regime, including a deconfliction agenda addressing the strategic hubs of Scandinavia's NATO-pivot.

Nuclear deterrence risks amidst fading memory

Leaders of today's nuclear powers, except President Biden, all were born after America detonated bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6th and 9th of August 1945. Recent and current leaders, Donald Trump, Kim Jong-un, Narendra Modi, and Vladimir Putin included, have spoken brazenly of firing such weapons. Analysts keep debating how to assess statistical and actual risks of nuclear war by intent or accident. Swedish government's rapid policy assessment, before its recent decision to apply for NATO-membership, concludes Sweden shall continue to be a major force for disarmament. The Treaty on the Prohibition of nuclear weapons (TPNW) entered into force on 22 January 2021. The alliance's intense focus on opposing the TPNW appears to undermine NATO's broader long-standing commitment to global nuclear disarmament. Here it remains to be seen if the Swedes disarmament ambition remains wishful thinking or succeeds to sway NATO into advancing nuclear disarmament as a common goal, backed by other Nordic members, and outside supporters of the TPNW.

Meanwhile peoples of the High-North live under nuclear deterrence and reassurance risks. What alarms our neighbor Russia is that the American missile defense system, which the Vardø radar most likely serve, would severely undermine Moscow's indisputable claim to great power status. This is based on its nuclear arsenal and the ability to launch a retaliatory second strike from its submarine fleet in the Arctic near the Norwegian-Russian border. In 2019 the first ballistic missile submarine, USS Tennessee, was scheduled for deployment with new warhead. First announced in the Trump administration's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) in February 2018, the W76-2 warhead was described as a capability to "help counter any mistaken perception of an exploitable 'gap' in U.S. regional deterrence capabilities." Deployed from a submarine base in Georgia, the submarine began deterrent patrolling in the Atlantic Ocean. An increased presence of USS Tennessee and other vessels and planes carrying nuclear weaponry does not make the public at large and our politicians visibly concerned.

What is there to learn from the dangers with nuclear war during the Cold War? Access to declassified documents makes war historians understand how dangerously close we came several times to seeing missiles fired. In heart-stopping moments, officials on duty showed a visceral understanding of what nuclear war entailed. They prevented launch keys from being turned. That understanding seems sorely missing today. We are entering an age with nuclear weapons (smaller tactical weapons included) and with weakening nuclear memory and security regimes. Governments do little to dismantle arsenals, strengthen treaties, and reinforce antinuclear norms. Right now, our leaders are doing the opposite at a time when those survivors who most effectively testified to the horrors of nuclear war are entering their 90s or are no longer with us. The cost of the shredded norms and torn-up treaties may be paid in Ukraine. The worse the war in Ukraine becomes, the more Russia might be tempted to employ a tactical nuclear weapon to signal resolve.

The recent threat of using nuclear arms has hit news headlines. A cacophonous commentary about the threat as merely posturing, propaganda or actual warning is disorienting for the public. Calls for public action to renewed classical disarmament initiatives meet limited public responses. Everything is not bleak. Amnesia Atómica goes on in New York City this week. Artist Pedro Reyes' inflatable mushroom cloud sculpture *ZERO NUKES* is an exposition calling to reduce the dangers of nuclear weapons. Amnesia Atómica is arranged in collaboration with the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists and Times Square Arts. Some 12,075 rocket shaped balloons, the equivalent to the total estimated number of global nuclear weapons, will be handed out to the public throughout the event. *The ZERO NUKES* event serves as the centerpiece for a series of public programs and events aiming to showcase works of activists, artists, scientists, and non-proliferation and disarmament organizations. But the way from hyped events like *ZERO NUKES* to the negotiating tables in Brussels and Geneva is bound to be long and difficult.

Scandinavia's NATO pivot tight-roping leadership amidst Great Power dominance

The transition from officially non-aligned states and NATO partner to applicants for membership has begun. The Swedish and Finnish official stances claim alliance memberships are compatible with continued leading roles for international law, justice and peace, including nuclear disarmament. Many politicians and analysts hail an expanded Nordic NATO-pivot as necessary to solidify and integrate the region as a credible entity of military assurance and deterrence, matched by scaled-up civilian defense. But this is going to be a tight-roping ordeal between self-avowed normative leadership amidst self-interested Great Power dominance. Even an expanded aligned Nordic NATO pivot will face massive challenges and early crucifying normative, military and security dilemmas. An unavoidable armament as a stronghold of high-tech dual-purpose stations, weaponry and solidified total-defense, risk becoming borderlands that again (as during the Cold War) are visceral demarcations of military blocks. As I have sought to highlight, strategic oceanic and aerial hubs in the Baltic Sea, the Northern Sea and the Barents Sea are about to get crowded, posing heightened risks for incidents and military encounters that may escalate further.

The earlier shining credibility the Nordics as promoters and defenders of international law and successful facilitators and promoters of peace and stability has not faded suddenly. This has been an erosive process tainted by some blatant accord failures and largely failed military

operations led by NATO and America. The euphemism “a good ally” is a soothing diplomatic expression for subservient small state behaviors sought politically justified. The process was accompanied for more than a decade by a shift from aid to trade, rather welcomed in South Asian capitals and the private sector, less enthusiastically so by sections of civil society. The Nordics earlier impeccable credibility will increasingly hang in the balance, until and unless the Nordics balance military and civilian build-up and internal integration with a new political and economic robustness.

Unlike in the Nordic region (Finland quite an exception) politicians, analysts, and the public in Nepal and the neighboring countries appear more cynical and reality oriented. They already navigate volatile multipolar realities and turmoil of supply and production chains. Smaller states like Nepal seek to maintain a level of equidistance between regional and global powers. Others have rather recklessly opted for a few major international patrons and face a painful debt recovery journey. Viewed from South Asian capitals the new-found “Western” unity triggered by the 24th. of February invasion, may be of questionable durability and sincerity. But regardless of such judgements, stances on the war in Ukraine and the sanctions regime, the short and longer-term consequences are likely to be partnership diversification and strengthened homegrown capabilities in a range of areas.

Can one realistically imagine the Nordics as a NATO-pivot that succeed sustaining state and peoples’ sovereignty and live up to international leadership ambitions for disarmament and justice in a multipolar world? Certainly, withstanding massive superpower pressure and corporate cooptation are tall orders even for wealthy democratic Nordic nations. They might have to opt for greater political Nordic integration, granted Norwegian voters’ resistance to EU-membership prevails. A new political and economic robustness is difficult to imagine without massive joint investments in public education, research and innovation, management of the commons, protection of homegrown industries defense included, total defense, multilateralism, and Nordic soft power diplomacy. Otherwise, a renaissance of a “Nordic brand” of trust-based democratic government, instrumental to a peaceful inclusive regional and global governance architecture might remain a chimera.

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