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PRACTICE-ORIENTED ARTICLE

# Back to the Future: Nordefco's First Decade and Prospects for the Next

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This article discusses the evolution of the Nordic defense cooperation, NORDEFECO, during its first decade, i.e. since 2009, and its prospects for the next. A special focus is on the 2019 (Sweden) and 2020 (Denmark) chairs, who in many ways represent two opposite approaches to defense cooperation in the Nordic region. While NORDEFECO's first period was devoted to various types of smart defense, the Russian aggression in Ukraine in early 2014 represents a real game changer with a new and upgraded operational role for the Nordic cooperation. The nonalignment of two of the Nordic countries, however, puts a severe limit to how far defense integration and cooperation can go in the Nordic-Baltic region. Nevertheless, NORDEFECO is still of considerable value in terms of regional security as a tool for circumventing the restrictions posed by the differing security doctrines and, thus, for integrating all the Nordic countries in the defense cooperation in the Baltic Sea region.

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**Keywords:** NORDEFECO; Baltic Sea region; smart defense; nonalignment; Russian aggression

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## Introduction

In 2019, NORDEFECO celebrated its 10-year anniversary, appropriately during the presidency of Sweden, the perhaps most committed and enthusiastic supporter of the Nordic defense cooperation over the years. And equally symbolic and logical was the fact that NORDEFECO steered into the next decade with Denmark at the head of the table. Although initially reluctant to embrace the format, Denmark is now an active and proactive participant in the joint Nordic venture. The turning point came in 2014, when Russian aggression forced Denmark, and NATO, to make a sharp U-turn back to the Baltic Sea region, where the country had in the 1990s and early 2000s been a major force behind the enlargement of NATO with the three small Baltic countries (Dahl, 2021).

The evolution of national priorities and the level of engagement in NORDEFECO during its first decade could not be any clearer than in the Danish case. But how has NORDEFECO arrived at this point? What impact do national priorities and the security doctrines have on the individual countries' approach to defense cooperation at the Nordic level, and how have they affected the outcome of their efforts? What challenges await the Nordic defense cooperation in the next decade and further into the future?

As we analyze these questions, there will be a special focus on the countries that held the chairmanship in 2019 and 2020, respectively – Sweden and Denmark – who in many ways represent two sides of the NORDEFECO coin and reflect the evolution of Nordic cooperation in defense over the past decade. The comparative perspective will also provide a basis for a more forward-looking discussion.

The first two sections of this article trace the evolution of Nordic military cooperation from its early stages in the 1990s and during much of the first decade, as NORDEFECO was primarily viewed in terms of money-saving and "smart defense". The next part analyzes the dramatic game change in 2014, when Russian aggression in Ukraine altered the agenda of the Nordic defense cooperation and abruptly shifted the focus to joint efforts in order to enhance security in the Baltic Sea region. The article concludes with a forward-looking discussion of the priorities and future challenges that await NORDEFECO now that it has entered its second decade with Denmark as the chair in 2020.

In addition to various NORDEFECO documents, the article draws on the academic literature on the subject as well as on several rounds of (mostly confidential) interviews at the Nordic MODs (physical meetings as well as virtual interviews due to the covid-19 pandemic).

### ***Cooperation among the Nordic countries***

Cooperation on military matters among the Nordic countries has of course existed far more than a decade. In 2019, three of the Nordic countries – Denmark, Iceland, and Norway – celebrated not 10, but 70 years of military and political cooperation in the transatlantic Alliance. Added to that, Sweden was a top-secret “17th member” during the Cold War, at a time when NATO counted only 16 (Dahl, 2019a, p. 3). In other words, defense cooperation is not a novel phenomenon in the Nordic family.

With such an extensive recent history of working together – following a more violent past with centuries of intra-Nordic wars and rivalries – embarking on yet another form of cooperation in what would become NORDEFECO initially did not strike all the Nordic countries as particularly urgent. Especially not to Denmark, which long maintained a rather skeptical and distant attitude toward the format. Initially, Copenhagen considered NORDEFECO a somewhat superfluous entity, not a priority for Denmark, and – since it was seen as a project run by the two nonaligned Nordics of little or no practical relevance for Danish defense. That is, until the Russian aggression in Ukraine in early 2014 turned things upside down and made security in the Nordic neighborhood a number-one priority throughout the region.

Though much progress was made during the first years of NORDEFECO’s existence as regards to gradually establishing a framework for cooperation, the last seven or so years have undoubtedly been the most significant. It thus makes perfect sense to speak of “before and after” 2014 for the Nordic defense cooperation. While the Russian aggression was indeed a “wake-up call” for the entire Western world, in the words of the then-Secretary General of NATO, this was particularly the case for the small Nordic countries located in the Baltic Sea region (*Washington Post*). The cocktail of severe military cuts in all these countries, except for Finland – whose 1,300-kilometer border to Russia has always imposed a healthy dose of realism on the country’s military planning – and decades of focusing on international operations and expeditionary forces rather than national defense, again with Finland as the exception to the rule, had placed the Nordic region in a highly vulnerable position vis-à-vis its giant neighbor to the east.

Events in Ukraine catapulted the Nordic region, and in particular the subregion surrounding the Baltic Sea, back to a position as a strategic hotspot which resembled that during the Cold War, and which, it was believed, had ended along with the bipolar world (Dahl 2008, p. 19 ff. On “subregions”: Dahl, 2008; Friis, 2021). However, the region had been exposed to Russian military activities prior to 2014, with a number of spectacular military actions aimed at the Nordic countries. One such occasion which received particular attention consisted of two simulated attacks by Russian nuclear bombers over Swedish territory, one supposedly targeting a military base in southern Sweden and the other the National Defence Radio Establishment, located a stone’s throw from the residence of the royal family (“Ryssland övade kärnvapenanfall mot Sverige”, *Dagens Nyheter*, February 2, 2016). The list of Russian provocations is long and keeps increasing for every passing week, month, and year.

Military and political cooperation within NORDEFECO took a major leap forward after the initial shock over Russian aggression in Ukraine. As the foreign ministers of all five Nordic countries concluded in a joint op-ed, the Nordic countries now faced “a new normal” with Moscow blatantly neglecting fundamental rules and norms of international law as when it annexed and occupied the territory of a sovereign neighboring state (*Jyllands-Posten*). These new challenges led to an intensified and upgraded form of cooperation at military and political levels among the five Nordic countries, and were the main reason for the brand-new chapter of NORDEFECO, which moved from a practical, economically-driven form of cooperation to one having to tackle the new geopolitical realities in the Baltic Sea region (Pettersson, 2021, p. 3). The dramatic changes in the security environment “pushed the Nordics closer together” (Forsberg, 2013).

### ***Money-saving, smart defense***

NORDEFECO was basically in the money-saving business prior to 2014. It is no coincidence that this new form of defense cooperation arrived on the Nordic scene in 2009, at the heels of the financial crisis that had erupted the previous year with devastating effects on national economies worldwide. European military budgets which had for years been exposed to heavy cuts, due to a perceived low level of threat, were now further downsized as a result of the severe financial problems tormenting the countries (For Nordic national capabilities, see Frisell & Pallin 2021).

“Smart defense” soon became the buzz word of the day, a perfect solution to the problem (Dahl 2014). Asset sharing, joint procurement and training would allow the small and pragmatic Nordics to save money.

Today, this line of thinking remains a major feature of NORDEFECO, whose very *raison d'être*, according to one inside expert, is still “to produce national military capabilities in a more cost-efficient way by means of multinational cooperation” (Järvenpää, 2017, p. 3).

“Pooling and sharing” resources – to use EU parlance – through military cooperation, joint projects and procurement thus seemed to be the perfect solution in a day and age of downsizing and, in particular, without any apparent security threats on the horizon that would require a military response. The warning signal of the Russian military intervention in Georgia in August 2008 and subsequent occupation of parts of the Georgian territory was quite quickly ignored – at least until “little green men” started to show up on Ukrainian territory six years later and Nordic cooperation thus entered a new phase.

The concept of “smart defense” quickly made its way into official formulations as NORDEFECO took form. “The main aim and purpose of the Nordic Defence Cooperation is to strengthen the participating nations’ national defence, explore common synergies and facilitate efficient common solutions,” as is declared on the official website with a quote from the *Memorandum of Cooperation* signed by all five Nordic governments at a meeting in Helsinki in early November 2009, the date that marked the formal start of the cooperation (NORDEFECO, 2020).

The quiet, but determined effort to enhance military cost-effectiveness through joint Nordic activities did not go unnoticed in the outside world. Praise was repeatedly heard from NATO HQ, where two subsequent Secretary Generals – Japp de Hoop Scheffer and Anders Fogh Rasmussen – referred to NORDEFECO as a model for others to study and emulate (Dahl 2014, p. 3). As a matter of fact, a similar ambition had existed already pre-NORDEFECO since the 1990s. Already in 1994, the *Nordic Armaments Cooperation* (NORDAC) was set up to identify and coordinate potential forms of cooperation in the area of military materiel, such as procurement, armaments development, and maintenance. A major activity in the 1990s and onwards was peacekeeping, with Nordic contributions not only to UN, but also, as a novelty after the Cold War, NATO operations. As a consequence, NORDCAPS (the *Nordic Coordinated Arrangement for Peace Support*) was established in 1997 to coordinate Nordic efforts for security sector reform and capacity building in the recipient countries. A joint Nordic Brigade was formed in the Balkans, there was a Nordic build-up of defense capabilities in the neighboring Baltic countries, followed by extensive military and political cooperation in ISAF, and a Nordic Battle Group was inaugurated in 2004, to mention just a few prominent examples (Forsberg, 2013, p. 1167).

In November 2008, the five Nordic countries moved on to form NORDSUP, which is short for *Nordic Defense Support* and something of a prelude to NORDEFECO, which saw the light of day the following year when the three formats merged into one (Saxi, 2019, p. 663). Inspiration for the project had at that point come from both the military and the political area. Reports by the Norwegian and Swedish CHODs, soon thereafter joined by their Finnish colleague, had pointed to the obvious advantages of further and increased Nordic military cooperation (Friis, 2021, p. 9). On the three generals’ long list of activities to be initiated or enhanced, 40 out of 140 were considered “low-hanging fruit” which could be launched immediately and quickly implemented (Järvenpää, 2014, p. 139; 2017, p. 2).

The 13 proposals outlined in the *Stoltenberg Report* issued in 2009 by the former Norwegian Defense Minister, Thorvald Stoltenberg, provided the political stimulus for the new format. Some of the proposals were clearly more visionary than realistic, most notably the last item: a Nordic declaration of solidarity with a mutual defense component reminiscent of the security guarantee which already existed among the three NATO allies. Other proposals have since become reality, in particular the joint Nordic surveillance of the Icelandic airspace which in a slightly altered form was implemented with the Iceland Air Meet in 2014 (Dahl, 2014, pp. 9–10). During three weeks in February that year, fighter jets from NATO allies and the Nordic partners met at the Icelandic Keflavik Airbase for this historic first. Since nonaligned partner countries – in this case Sweden and Finland – could not gain access to a NATO deployment mission, the Air Meet (IAM) was, after lengthy deliberations, defined as a training event in a PfP and NORDEFECO context (Dahl, 2014, pp. 9–10).

To some observers – especially, it seems, those critical of the format – the essence of both “smart defense” and NORDEFECO lies in the area of procurement. However, if NORDEFECO is defined solely – or mainly – in terms of the success rate of big procurement projects, the inevitable conclusion is that the Nordic cooperation is a failure. To everyone who has closely followed the work done within NORDEFECO, though, it is clear that such a definition is highly misleading.

No doubt, the area of procurement, and the development and maintenance of armaments, has diplomatically speaking, proven quite challenging over the years, with one disappointment after another, as one or several of the participating countries have withdrawn from projects (Pettersson 2021:3). Clearly, this is a field where national priorities and interests – including national industrial concerns – have dominated the process at the expense of joint Nordic activities and solidarity. A number of high-profiled cases prove the

point, some of which predate NORDEFECO. First, the Nordic Standard Helicopter Project (NH90) in 1998–2001, when Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Norway joined forces to buy one type of transport helicopter, but ended up buying different models. Second, the Viking Project, when first Norway and then Denmark abandoned the submarine project under way. And third, the equally unsuccessful Swedish-Finnish AMOS (Advanced Mortar System).

A year which proved particularly harsh for the Nordic ambitions of joint procurement was 2013. Two major projects collapsed during the course of a few days, both of them as a result of Norwegian withdrawal. First, Norway pulled out of ARCHER, the joint Swedish-Norwegian artillery project, in early December. This was quite unexpected since the then-Defense Minister, Espen Barth Eide, had recently praised the project and called it “a good and concrete example of smart defense” (Saxi, 2019, p. 669). Only a few days later, the mood at the Swedish MOD further deteriorated, as Oslo announced its withdrawal from the joint Swedish-Norwegian procurement of a large fleet of military trucks from the German manufacturer MAN Rheinmetall. Following these setbacks, all joint procurement plans were put on indefinite hold (Friis, 2021, p. 15; Dahl, 2014, p. 7). However, the most spectacular failure has been the procurement of fighter jets, with massive Swedish investments to sell its national pride, the JAS Gripen, to its fellow Nordics, but with substantial setbacks. The Finnish purchase of American F18s in 1992 was the first blow to the Swedish ambitions. Then Norway opted for the F35 in 2008, whereby neighborly relations dropped to a level perhaps not seen since the dissolution of the Swedish-Norwegian Union in 1905. Finally, Denmark announced its much-awaited decision (to everyone but the Swedes, it seemed) to buy F35s in 2016.

The Swedes and the manufacturer, SAAB, in particular had invested heavily in the pitch of the JAS Gripen toward Denmark, in spite of many indications that the Danes had already at an early stage set their mind on the F35. Swedish enthusiasm for NORDEFECO waned significantly after the announcement from Copenhagen, which in turn seemed to confirm to critics that for the Swedes, the Nordic country with the largest defense industry, NORDEFECO was first and foremost an opportunity to sell fighter jets (Interview). Meanwhile, it became increasingly clear that Norway, after having initially been one of the main advocates of NORDEFECO, had replaced Denmark – which would soon warm to the idea of Nordic military cooperation – as the most hesitant participant.

As disillusionment grew in the wake of several collapsed procurement projects, skeptics began to question whether NORDEFECO was really such a smart, money-saving instrument after all. High-level representatives in the Nordic capitals began to openly question multinational defense cooperation as a way of saving money on the military. In Helsinki, the commander-in-chief voiced the view that while NORDEFECO had indeed led to some impressive achievements, a reduction in military spending was not among them (Forsberg, 2013, p. 1178).

In reality, others concluded, some of the projects listed in the Stoltenberg report, such as the Iceland air patrol or Nordic satellite system, added to rather than reduced the costs for the parties involved (Forsberg, 2015, p. 1178). In Stockholm, Ambassador Tomas Bertelman, author of an official study on Sweden’s international defense cooperation, concluded that the geographic and otherwise proximity of the participating countries was likely to produce a climate of competition which reduced the chances of establishing a successful Nordic cooperation (Bertelman, 2014, p. 30).

Procurement has, in other words, not been an area of great success – or, more precisely, the big industrial projects have not met the expectations. However, what some of the critics have failed to take into consideration is the fact that procurement is far from limited to those top-level projects which have made headline news in the past decade, as the Nordic countries have unsuccessfully tried to find common ground.

While one big, multinational industrial project after another have quite spectacularly collapsed, the effort of finding joint projects at lower levels of the military systems has quietly proceeded and produced concrete results. In this regard, the combat uniform project is of particular interest. In 2019, the project of procuring a common Nordic combat uniform system advanced all the way to the testing level, with 480 soldiers in four Nordic countries involved in the testing. It was welcomed as a major breakthrough and considered likely to shape future procurement processes (NORDEFECO, 2019). The Nordic Combat Uniform (NCU) took another step forward during the Danish chairmanship in 2020, when four different uniform systems were tested in the participating countries and a contract was expected to be signed during the first half of 2021 (NORDEFECO, 2020).

### ***Training, exercises, and operations***

“Smart defense” is also so much more than the procurement of military equipment. While much attention has been paid to grand – but failed – industrial procurement projects this past decade, a wide range of activities, from joint military education to large-scale military operations, have proceeded at a steady pace. The

projects and programs that are registered under a NORDEFECO heading amount to hundreds, perhaps even thousands, at all imaginable levels and covering a myriad of activities (Dahl, 2014; nordefco.org).

As always with NORDEFECO, flexibility is key, with all formats and programs open to all the Nordic countries who can pick and choose projects that are to their liking, and initiate them as well. The other Nordics are not required to participate, just as the initiating party has no right to exclude others or to stop them from embarking on specific projects. Most, if not all, projects seem to have a Swedish or Finnish component or both; very few include all five countries (Dahl, 2014). For obvious reasons, the number of projects in which Iceland, which does not have a military force of its own, has participated is quite limited. In short, it can be described as a pragmatic *à la carte* integration (Järvenpää, 2014, p. 141).

Of the five COPAs (Cooperation Areas) within which all NORDEFECO activities are organized and managed, with leadership rotating annually among the Nordics (except Iceland), the first two COPAs are the ones primarily related to the purchase and development of capabilities (NORDEFECO, 2020; Järvenpää, 2014; and 2017 provides a detailed analysis of the COPAs). COPA/Strategic Development was in 2013 renamed Armaments (COPA/ARMA) in an effort to match the name and the tasks undertaken, namely procurement and maintenance of equipment and supplies. COPA/Capabilities (CAPA) looks for ways to develop and improve capabilities, with projects that include air surveillance, tactical air transport, cyber defense, and much more.

The remaining three COPAs deal with the multiple other activities that are perhaps more anonymous, but equally significant in evaluations of NORDEFECO. Human Resources and Education (COPA/HRE) has, for instance, resulted in language studies programs – such as Pashto in Sweden and Farsi in Denmark at the time of the Afghanistan operation – a Nordic Center for Gender in Military Operations headquartered outside Stockholm, and, not least, veteran affairs, with several conferences held in the Nordic capitals.

In COPA/TEX – short for Training and Exercises – the Nordic countries' military training and exercise activities are coordinated and harmonized within a five-year plan. This includes the previously mentioned Iceland Air Meet. Another prominent example is the Nordic contribution to NATO's Trident Juncture exercise in Norway in 2018, the largest NATO exercise since the Cold War. The Nordics contributed with more than 13,000 soldiers, bases and airfields in Finland, Sweden, and Iceland were used, and large contingents of troops transited through Denmark and Sweden on their way to Norway.

However, the most spectacular – and crucial – part of COPA/TEX is NORDEFECO's showcase activity, the flagship Cross-Border Training North (CBT-N) aerial exercises which have been held in the very northernmost parts of the region since 2009. With aircraft operating out of their respective airbases – Bodø in Norway, Swedish Kallax, and Rovaniemi on the Finnish side – these joint aerial combat training missions are performed across national boundaries on an average of around once a week. Apart from the interoperational value of these regular exercises, the CBT-N also sends a strong message to potential aggressors of Nordic determination and unity (Dahl, 2014, p. 8).

Starting in 2013, this was further enhanced when the CBT-N program was extended from a purely Nordic to a multinational level, as outside participants, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and other NATO allies were invited to participate in the air exercise Arctic Challenge Exercise (ACE). This training event, which thus is based on the CBT-N, is now held every other year and has enjoyed an increasing number of participating countries, with Arctic Challenge 19 hosting more than one hundred aircraft from nine nations and supported by NATO-operated AWACs (NORDEFECO, 2019; 2020). ACE19 was described by the Swedish Air Force responsible for organizing the event that year as “a cost-effective and high-quality opportunity to all participating nations to develop national capabilities and interoperability” ([www.forsvarsmakten.se](http://www.forsvarsmakten.se)).

While the CBT-N comes across as a bright and shining example of what NORDEFECO can achieve, a corresponding cross-border aerial training exercise program in the southern part of the region (CBT-S) has proven less successful (Interview). Denmark's strong priority on exercises within a NATO framework, primarily with the United States, is one major reason for this. Another is the fact that while the CBT-N has grown from the bottom up, the Danish-Swedish CBT-S can be described as resulting from the opposite development (Engvall, Frisell & Lindström, 2018, p. 36). However, as of 2019, Denmark participates indirectly in the CBT-N through the Arctic Challenge.

Finally, the fifth and last COPA (COPA/OPS) handles Nordic cooperation in military operations, with a focus on planning and preparing deployment (and redeployment), force contributions, operational and logistical issues, and transportation in connection with on-going operations. COPA/OPS was particularly busy during NATO's ISAF mission in Afghanistan, which saw substantial Nordic contributions. But other faraway places have also received Nordic assistance, such as military advisers to the Eastern African Standby Force (EASF) in Kenya, capacity-building at the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre, and transport aircraft and a Mobile Training Team for the UN-led MINUSMA mission in Mali (NORDEFECO, 2018).

The extensive list of projects and programs with a NORDEFECO label shows that “smart defense”, in a wider sense of the term, remains well and alive. Today, the term “smart defense” has basically gone out of fashion, though, as loud demands for major increases in national defense spending have come to dominate the security agenda. All efforts within the Alliance have instead turned toward reaching the two-percent goal of military spending by 2024, as agreed upon at NATO’s Wales Summit. But while the vocabulary changed accordingly, with “smart defense” more or less vanishing from the political and military dictionary, the activities to a large extent continued. This became abundantly clear in the spring of 2014, when the dramatic events in Eastern Ukraine provided an unexpected push to deepen military cooperation in the Nordic region (Dahl, 2016b, p. 38ff).

### ***The game changer***

The Russian aggression in Ukraine and the illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in the spring of 2014 profoundly shocked the Western world, where Moscow’s blatant disregard of international law and legal principles were observed with disbelief and horror. This was not a first, though. Already in the summer of 2008, Russia had stunned the world by militarily intervening in another neighboring country, the small and vulnerable Georgia, where two provinces were rapidly occupied and to this day remain under Russian control. Nevertheless, relations with Moscow surprisingly quickly returned to normal after the “little world that shook the world”, to quote a book title by the late Ronald Asmus (Asmus, 2010). In 2014, the Western world watched in horror as Russia once again, though now on a much larger scale, used military force to stop a neighboring country from fulfilling its political desire to “go West”. New phrases and terms made it into our collective vocabulary as Russian-speaking “little, green men” flooded the territory of Eastern Ukraine, engaging in one of many forms of what would from now on be known as “hybrid warfare” (Dahl, 2016b).

The severely deteriorated security situation opened a sad new chapter in the European security system, as the relationship between Moscow and the West sank to an all-time low in the post-Cold War era. The dramatic events were a true eye-opener to the Nordic countries, who saw their region being tossed into the geopolitical eye of the storm as a result of the rapidly deteriorated situation. As mentioned, there had been various signs of such a development, though, as Russian incursions in the air, at sea, and on land had become a much too familiar – and deeply distressing – feature. Now, the Baltic Sea region emerged as a new strategic frontline between Russia and the West in a fashion not seen since the chilliest days of the Cold War.

The West in general and NATO in particular scrambled to meet the new challenges on the European ground where deterrence and the Article 5 security guarantee made a comeback after decades of being put on the backburner in out-of-area operations in faraway regions (Dahl, 2016a; 2018a). With heavy Russian pressure on the three Baltic countries and massive weaponry stationed right across the sea from the Nordic countries in the Russian enclave at Kaliningrad, an A2/AD scenario began to hover over the region (Rasmussen, 2018). A host of reassurance and deterrence measures were agreed upon at the NATO summit in Wales in September after the eruption of Russian hostilities in Ukraine, with a follow-up in Warsaw in the summer of 2016 (Shea, 2018).

However, the fact that two of the Nordic countries – the two that dominate the map of the region with their substantial territory and long shorelines – remain outside of NATO as nonaligned partners, provided an additional complication as the Alliance was planning the defense of the region. Without Sweden and Finland, there were very definite limits to the practical involvement of two key countries in these measures. They, on the other hand, were startled to find NATO’s door abruptly closed after years of intimate cooperation in international missions under NATO command, in Afghanistan in particular, where the nationality of the troops mattered far less than their actual contributions (Dahl, 2018b).

As NATO returned back to basics, to the defense of Europe and Article 5 guarantees, the nonaligned partners discovered that they had no role to play. However, with their strategically significant islands – the Åland Islands and Gotland – the two Nordic partners constituted key actors for the security in the region. Reversely, Sweden and Finland desperately needed the support of the Alliance. The obstacles posed by their nonaligned status – and with no change in policy toward NATO membership in sight – were overcome at the Wales Summit with the formula for an Enhanced Opportunities Partnership (EOP) which included the two Nordic countries and three other operational partner countries: Jordan, Georgia, and Australia, in geographic locations of equal strategic significance around the world (Dahl, 2018b, p. 130ff). The five were joined by Ukraine in June 2020.

The EOP offered the select group of participants a variety of mechanisms for deepened – enhanced – military cooperation, fine-tuning interoperability, and political consultations. It also facilitated partner participation in NATO training and exercises, which would multiply in the Baltic Sea region in the wake of the Ukraine crisis.

The creation of the EOP was an efficient way to circumvent the obstacles that nonalignment placed on the West's military response to an openly aggressive Russia in the Baltic Sea region (Dahl 2018b). Another instrument available for this purpose, and which also served to incorporate the two nonaligned partners in NATO's efforts to meet the Russian provocations, was already there: NORDEFECO. Seemingly overnight, the focus of NORDEFECO shifted from internal cooperation to external threats, from defense integration to hard core security and military defense, and from economics and money-saving as the main driving force to dealing with very real security issues (Saxi, 2019, p. 671). For NORDEFECO, the spring of 2014 thus represents nothing short of a game changer, with a clear "before" and "after" which divides its work and purpose (Friis, 2021, p. 11).

### ***Back to the Baltic Sea***

After the many disappointments that had piled up the previous year, as one procurement project after another had failed – though these failures should thus not be allowed to obscure the fact that a multitude of other NORDEFECO programs and projects quietly prospered – new areas for cooperation lined up from 2014 onwards (Interview). Accordingly, the Nordic countries, in the soon-to-be Swedish Defense Minister Peter Hultqvist's oft-cited words shortly after the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine, moved on to "assume more responsibility for our own security in our region." What mattered more than anything else now, according to Hultqvist (2014), was "the defense of Sweden in Sweden" rather than operations in faraway parts of the world. To achieve this goal, Sweden needed help, though, and this is where NORDEFECO came in handy. In fact, this was increasingly the case for the entire Nordic group. Subsequently, the projects and activities pursued within the NORDEFECO framework became increasingly concrete and hands-on.

One immediate reaction to the crisis was to increase national defense spending – dearly needed after several rounds of severe cuts in previous years. Another unexpected, though happily acknowledged, result was the return of Denmark to its own neighborhood; the country had been a key player in the Baltic Sea and highly instrumental in the enlargement of NATO with the three Baltic countries on former Soviet ground (Dahl, 2021: ch. 2 & 3). In NORDEFECO's first phase, Denmark had as mentioned been a rather distant participant, at times mostly an observer. In Copenhagen, the Nordic region has traditionally been treated as secondary to Danish relations with the United States, the United Kingdom, and generally with NATO (Wivel, 2018, p. 1ff).

As an assertive Russia forced NATO back to Europe and to the Baltic Sea region, Denmark, as is its habit, rapidly followed suit, signing up for NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) with the British-led battalion in Estonia and once again contributed, as it has regularly since 2004, to NATO Air Policing in the Baltic states with yet another deployment at the airbase in Siauliai in Lithuania. To pursue these tasks, there was an obvious need for close cooperation with Sweden, which is located between Denmark and the Baltic countries, and also with regard to the Danish island Bornholm, off the southern Swedish province Skåne, which has been targeted on several occasions by Russian aircraft. In this process, the Danes discovered the utility of NORDEFECO, which enabled an intensified level of security cooperation with the two nonaligned partners (Interview).

As a consequence, Easy Access has been at the top of the Danish agenda in NORDEFECO, with an agreement ratified in Copenhagen in November 2016 (NORDEFECO, 2016). It was preceded by a bilateral Swedish-Danish agreement on enhanced defense cooperation in January the same year, whereby the two neighbors were granted access in peacetime to each other's naval ports and airbases, in addition to measures to enhance surveillance and the exchange of information. "It will now be possible for Danish F16s from our defense readiness units to cross into Swedish territory in connection with the rejection of foreign aircraft flying in to Danish territory. Among other things this will shorten the response time," noted the then-Minister of Defense of Denmark, Peter Christensen ([www.defensenews.com](http://www.defensenews.com)).

Securing easy military access to airbases and harbors for the purpose of training, exercises, and other activities is vital for the defense of the region, as is the need to simplify procedures and administration. Further shortening the timespan between a request to access another country by air, sea, or land and the actual crossing of the border, that is the notification period, remains a key ambition. The agreement on Easy Access has subsequently become something of a success story for NORDEFECO and has even provided inspiration to NATO and the EU on the topic of military mobility, or "military Schengen", as it is referred to in the EU (Interview; NORDEFECO, 2020).

Closely related to the topic of Easy Access is the agreement on Alternative Landing Base (ALB) for military aircraft – a key feature when it comes to planning air operations and ensuring safe landing for aircraft that are running out of fuel or face bad weather conditions. So far, the ABL is restricted to unarmed aircraft,

but there is ongoing work within NORDEFECO to extend the agreement to also armed aircraft, which would include aircraft *en route* to and from air policing and air defense missions (Interview; NORDEFECO, 2018).

Air surveillance has long been a crucial topic for NORDEFECO, and has proven a promising one when it comes to cooperation. In 2012, the Nordic Enhanced Cooperation on Air Surveillance (NORECAS) was established with a Memorandum of Understanding on information exchange in 2017 and a Technical Arrangement (TA) signed by the air chiefs of the Nordic countries the following year (NORDEFECO, 2018.). In 2017, an agreement was also reached on increased radar data sharing to further enhance situational awareness and the overview of activities in the Nordic-Baltic region. Another significant step is the establishment of secure and direct communication channels between the Nordic countries, enabling classified communication in a closed system which from an international perspective is considered quite unique (Interview). However, these are areas where the problems related to different security doctrines come into play: “The Nordic NATO states worry about becoming dependent upon these arrangements, only to see their radar screens go dark and landing rights withdrawn in a crisis” (Friis, 2021, p. 14).

Other areas of increasing relevance today concern various forms of cooperation within the realms of civil emergency, total defense, and resilience, areas which Sweden in particular – and Finland traditionally – has highlighted in the last few years, and which have become even more urgent as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (NORDEFECO, 2020). Equally significant and related to this is cyber security, which was identified by Denmark as a key area for its 2020 chairmanship (NORDEFECO, 2020). Denmark has been the target of various massive cyber-attacks with severe effects on the country’s infrastructure, and increasing Nordic resilience towards such threats is considered a top priority (Finkielman, 2019; NORDEFECO, 2019). This is also, as is often the case for Denmark, in line with the emphasis placed on this by NATO, with cyber and space added as new operational domains in the last few years. In addition, in early 2020, Denmark embarked on a project to develop its own “space defense”, according to an announcement from Copenhagen (*Berlingske*, 5. February 2020).

Lastly, the Swedish chair celebrated an important achievement at the end of 2019 with the establishment in NORDEFECO of mechanisms for crisis consultations – a major step as all cooperation has hitherto been restricted to peacetime (Interview). The creation of such a platform was listed as one of the targets in the Vision 2025 agreed upon in November 2018, and a top priority for Stockholm. This mechanism will enable enhanced situational awareness and information exchange and provide a forum for discussions and strategic messaging of particular value during a crisis or conflict (NORDEFECO 2019).

For nonaligned Sweden – and Finland – the value of such a mechanism can hardly be overestimated. Denmark is ready to help if Sweden or Finland would become the target of an attack, physically or through the cyber domain, Danish Defense Minister Trine Bramsen stated when Denmark took over the chairmanship of NORDEFECO at a meeting in Stockholm (Krog, 2019). However, this mechanism is far from the Nordic security guarantee envisioned in the last paragraph of the before-mentioned Stoltenberg report. A “Stoltenberg II” report will be presented by former Icelandic minister Björn Bjarnason at a meeting in the Nordic Council in the fall of 2019.

### ***Conclusion: The next decade***

Departing from the questions posed at the beginning of this article, a number of conclusions can thus be drawn. One is the great significance of the year 2014. Tragic as it was, Russian aggression in Ukraine provided NORDEFECO with an, at that stage, much needed boost of energy and purpose after a series of discouraging failures related to the area of procurement. The dramatic events in early 2014 abruptly pushed the Nordic countries into a new strategic reality, as an aggressive Russia once again became *the* defining factor for Nordic defense cooperation (Friis, 2021, p. 10). The crisis brought this already close-knit group even closer together, while their joint activities in NORDEFECO were upgraded to a substantially higher operational level in order to meet the Russian challenge in the Nordic-Baltic region.

As this article shows, the Nordic nonaligned countries are without a doubt the greatest beneficiaries of NORDEFECO’s work, as they struggle to meet the challenges from Moscow with, in the Swedish case, still limited national capabilities. Meanwhile Denmark – the other of the two Nordics which this article has focused on – found NORDEFECO of greater value, as the country came to the rescue of its Baltic allies with contributions to the eFP and air policing, etc.

Though the Danes were happily greeted by their fellow Nordics when they returned back to the region, it is however crucial not to misinterpret the upgraded Danish engagement in NORDEFECO as the result of a sudden “Nordistic” awakening in Copenhagen (Interview). As Wivel has pointed out, “Nordicness seems only to play a marginal role in the big and decisive decisions in Danish foreign policy,” and increasingly so, as

Denmark has assumed a “super-Atlanticist” stance in international affairs (Wivel, 2018, pp. 1–2). Rather, the Danish turn toward the Nordic region was quite simply a pragmatic adjustment to the evolving security situation there and a consequence of Russian aggression. As NATO, and the United States, swiftly returned back to Europe and focused on developments in the Baltic Sea region, Denmark followed suit, as is its tradition.

Meanwhile, Norway, though also an active contributor to NATO deterrence, appears to have taken on a more subdued role within NORDEFECO, after initially having been one of the great enthusiasts of Nordic cooperation. Instead, Oslo’s main focus at the Nordic level now seems to be the emerging trilateral cooperation with Sweden and Finland (Petersson, 2021, p. 3f).

Events in the past seven years have shown both the strengths and restraints inherent in NORDEFECO. On the one hand, NORDEFECO provides a pragmatic, flexible, and useful instrument for bypassing the restrictions imposed by the different security doctrines of its participants. On the other hand, this fact – nonalignment versus NATO – remains *the* hindrance to taking the cooperation further, and places very definite limits on how far the various multinational projects and activities can go (Dahl, 2014). With two Nordics outside of NATO – even as enhanced partners – no joint defense planning or sharing of NATO secrets can be pursued among all five. Thus, the need to stretch intelligence sharing, air surveillance, and secure communication – and other parts of NORDEFECO – as far as possible and to complement the work in NORDEFECO with the other fora in the region.

The much-greeted crisis mechanism, though an important step, does not change this. In reality, it is of limited use or actual interest to the three allied Nordics, which all have more far-reaching instruments at their disposal within NATO, first and foremost of course the security guarantees in Article 5. As such, the NORDEFECO crisis management mechanism is basically an act of generosity from three neighbors toward the other two, but should not be compared to actual solidarity guarantees (Interview). The bilateral agreement that Sweden and Finland have embarked upon actually goes much further, as it declares to extend “beyond peacetime” – though still short of any security guarantees between the two nonaligned (Petersson 2021).

The importance of enhancing the transatlantic relationship is a permanent feature of every NORDEFECO declaration (NORDEFECO, 2020). Bringing the Baltic countries into the NORDEFECO fold, and enlarging this to a NB8 format, is often emphasized as one way to deepen the “NATO component” and further tie the Nordic cooperation to the West. Baltic membership of NORDEFECO has even been proposed, though it has also been pointed out that the Baltic interest in such a step is quite limited, in part due to equally limited resources (Interview; Järvenpää, 2017, p. 12). The present dialogue and cooperation across the Baltic Sea is actually already quite extensive, including regular meetings scheduled at the margins of NORDEFECO’s fall sessions, while all COPA activities “in essence” have been open to the three Baltic states since 2014.

Multinational cooperation in the Baltic Sea, and the wider Nordic-Baltic region, is also pursued within other fora than NORDEFECO, such as the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and the Northern Group. Of these, the latter is of particular interest as an extended security network which brings additional NATO allies to the table and thereby increases the commitment to Nordic-Baltic security within the Alliance. At the end of the previously mentioned annual meetings, the Nordic and Baltic defense ministers are joined by their colleagues from Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, and in addition, the country that chairs NORDEFECO automatically assumes the chair of the Northern Group in the fall of every year. Latvia, the Northern Group chair for early 2020, was therefore succeeded by Denmark as chair of the Northern Group in the last part of that year.

This larger network may prove especially relevant, as regional security concerns are gradually moving north toward the High North and the Arctic, which contrary to Nordic wishes is not likely to remain – or even is right now – an area of low tension. Today, in many ways, it makes more sense to speak of the Nordic-Baltic region than solely the Baltic Sea region. The Danish chair, with the huge territory of Greenland as part of the Kingdom, accordingly put enhanced focus on the Arctic on the list of priorities for 2020 (NORDEFECO 2019; 2020).

To conclude, the picture of NORDEFECO is therefore mixed. It is indeed, as Järvenpää puts it, “a considerable success” with a long list of remarkable achievements in practical and pragmatic cooperation across the Nordic borders in defense and security (Järvenpää, 2017, p. 11). As an instrument to deepen military cooperation beyond security affiliations, to maximize the influence and input of the two nonaligned partners in regional security, and to establish a climate of deep trust in the most sensitive of areas, it is second to none in today’s world (Interview).

However, these very affiliations – or rather the Swedish and Finnish lack hereof – also put a stop to how far defense integration can go. Realization hereof has become a cause of deep frustration in Helsinki and Stockholm (Interview). As diplomat Tomas Bertelman eloquently phrased it in his official study, “no single factor would stimulate the enhancement and efficiency of Nordic cooperation like a common membership

in a defense alliance, that is NATO" (Bertelman, 2014, p. 30). Only when all five Nordic countries are members of NATO will true Nordic cooperation in defense become a reality. Sadly, that is not likely to happen in the foreseeable future (Dahl, 2019b).

Nevertheless, NORDEFECO, as has been pointed out above, has indeed great value as an instrument for circumventing the limits posed by nonalignment and for integrating the two non-NATO allies in regional security through practical, hands-on projects across borders. And to those concerned about Russian sensitivities, in Moscow, NORDEFECO is no doubt much preferred to Swedish and Finnish membership in NATO, which, it could be argued, in itself provides a convincing argument in favor of such memberships.

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## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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