

Bulwark and balancing act

The Strategic Role of the Royal Norwegian Navy

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Introduction

The most common approach to explain a navy's role in strategy is by using sea power theory. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, many naval thinkers developed similarly minded approaches to thinking about the broad roles and functions of navies (Hattendorf, 2013, p. 5). Naval theorists like Corbett and Mahan provide us with theories for explaining sea power and its strategic role, use and purpose. Taken together, their theories offer a wealth of information and knowledge on various aspects of naval warfare. For better or for worse, naval classical thinkers influenced generations of practitioners and theoreticians. A navy's culture, the way it wages war, and doctrine cannot be fully understood without a thorough understanding of the ideas of the great and lesser naval thinkers (Vego, 2009, p. 16). Unfortunately, these theories all have their origins in syntheses of historical events. Naval history constitutes the experience and practice that one uses to verify sea power theories. In effect, sea power theory therefore has an empirical basis but no scientific verification. Their scope, that is, under what conditions and when they apply, remains scientifically unverified (Berndt Brehmer in: Kristiansen & Olsen, 2007, p. 35). One must therefore question whether these theories are normative. Obviously, sea power theory is strategic thinking, but theory developed for a specific context and a specific public. Mahan and Corbett's theories do appear and are generally accepted as general theories – but only from a great power and open sea perspective (Till, 2004, pp. 28-29). Thus, Mahan and Corbett's theories, and other sea power theories, do not cover properly the role of small navies in general and the Norwegian navy in particular, within contemporary naval strategy and application of maritime power. Moreover, a common assumption in naval thinking is that a lesser sea power has to compete symmetrically with its stronger opponent in order to accomplish their goals (John B. Hattendorf in: Hobson & Kristiansen, 2004, pp. 151-152; Holmes, 2012). That is a dangerous and erroneous idea. Small navies have distinctive purposes, functions and characteristics in and of their own. As a small nation, Norway's military-strategic aims

are limited and distinct, allowing tailor-made naval forces for definite strategic circumstances and aims. Such forces cannot be good at everything nor can they challenge a superior sea power symmetrically. They can, however, prevent a greater power from accomplishing its goals through focusing on specific tasks and objectives, and by utilising the inherent advantages our limited strategic scope and geography provide, they can do this with great effect.

Even if these theories do not explain or clarify the strategic role of a small navy, they do nevertheless provide us with a language and a strategic framework usable for explaining and clarifying this role.

In my presentation, I will explore and explain the Norwegian Navy's strategic role as a tailor-made navy for our specific strategic environment and strategic requirements; hereunder the balancing act between existential military-strategic requirements, i.e. defence of Norway, and other maritime and security interests which the Norwegian Navy has to handle.

Defining strategy

Strategy is about getting more out of a situation than what the balance of power would indicate; it is the art of creating power. Strategy therefore has to be seen as the art and science of using military force to achieve political goals through the use of or threat of violence (Lykke Jr., 1997, p. 183).

According to Corbett, the strategic role or roles of the Navy are determined by what part the fleet must play in relation to the action of the land forces; it scarcely needs saying that it is almost impossible that a war can be decided by naval action alone (Corbett, 1911:2004, p. 13). An ideal maritime strategy is thus fully complementary to the national military strategy, and describes how naval forces can make a strategic difference (Barnett, 2007, p. 32). However, to understand what this role is one must look at strategy as what connects strategic purposes and strategic conditions, where purposes are what one wants to achieve, while strategic conditions are those facts that frame our strategic options. Strategic conditions are nothing but the sum of strategic dimensions such as national policies, foreign politics, command and control, geography, financing, logistics, preparations (administrative, recruiting, training and structure), operations, technology, information and intelligence, the enemy, friction, uncertainty and time (Gray, 1999, pp. 23-44; Howard, 1979, pp. 975-986. The list is not exhaustive). Amongst these, geography takes precedence as it defines, influences, and delimits most other dimensions. Yet, before looking into our geostrategic position, we must take an overview of our strategic interests.

Norwegian maritime interest beyond national defence

Norwegian maritime interests are far from limited to the territorial defence of Norway. Norway's economy is one of the most open and internationally orientated economies in the world. For

instance, maritime industries, that is oil and gas, shipping incl. financing, classing and insurance, yards and equipment, fisheries and aqua farming, collectively contribute to 31% of Norway's national outcome by kind of main activity ("Annual national accounts, 2016," 2016). Furthermore, ships or subsea pipelines carry 80-90% of Norwegian export and import. Such numbers by themselves illustrate that the Norwegian economy is heavily dependent on a stable world order with set regulations for conduct of business. Any major changes in how the world works, e.g. the conduct of international trade and business, could cause catastrophic economic consequences for Norway. Hence, international law and order, and the maintenance of a world order akin to the existing is crucial for Norway. Norway does and will continue to promote, improve and secure the existing world order by all available means; hereunder strictly adhere to the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea, UNCLOS. Although our military forces are insignificant compared to major powers, we do involve ourselves in conflicts all around the world to promote our interests, but mostly as part of coalitions or by other means than military ones. Such involvement comes in many forms but sea power is and remains one of the most tangible and cost effective tools we have.

At the same time Norway, as a small although wealthy state with far-flung interest, cannot, in any foreseeable situation, build and maintain naval forces that can effectively shield, protect or sustain our maritime interests by ourselves beyond our own waters. Norway is therefore dependent on allied support or of being part of a broad international coalition with the same objectives in support of the existing world order. Being part of an alliance or coalition means that you have to contribute; one cannot base allied support on goodwill and common interest alone, and definitely not if one expects our views and interests to be taken into account when actions are decided.

The Norwegian navy also has a large number of tasks and missions in a national context, as detailed below. Tailor-made forces are the most effective way to accomplish these purely national tasks. However, such forces have characteristics and capacities that do not necessarily match the requirements of international or overseas operations. On the other hand, if we focus our structure towards international requirements, we will end up with a navy that is poorly suited, or at least ineffective, for our own existential defence. In addition, Norway have huge economic interests and obligations in our economic zones and on the continental shelf. Our Coast Guard upholds our sovereign rights, national authority and partly delivers SAR capacities in these waters. The Coast Guard is part of the navy, but still distinctly different concerning both missions and force structure.

Our navy's strategic role or roles, and hence force composition and operational capabilities, are thus a precarious multifaceted balancing act – a dilemma. This dilemma, this balancing act between our capabilities to influence developments globally, maintain our sovereign rights, and fulfil our

defensive requirements, is not new. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, where Norway suffered famine and economic collapse because of blockade by the dominant sea power, Norway has always aimed at being neutral towards or allied to the greatest sea power in our region. If we end up on the wrong side, i.e. lose control of the maritime domain, we could be defeated as a sovereign state regardless of developments ashore in Norway proper. Our economy would collapse, our people starve, and our political freedom would become severely restricted or quickly coerced into submission. However, as 1940 showed, if our navy is incapable of denying an enemy access to our strategic heartland, then being on the right side does not help.

Norwegian military geography - inside out

The meaning of the very name of Norway largely explains our navy's strategic role in a national setting. "Norway" means the fairway to the north. Norway is not a continuous piece of territory, but numerous small and scattered settlements along 100,915 km of coastline (2,500 km baseline) and 239,057 islands. Land communications are likewise few and concentrated near the coast, and in many instances dependent on ferries to cross fjords. In fact, much of Norway's long land frontier and territory is mostly impassable for large military units. However, if one sees our seaboard as a 'frontier', it becomes glaringly obvious that Norway has an extremely unfavourable ratio of circumference to area. A strong maritime power is therefore our most dangerous opponent, as it would master the approaches to our longest frontier.

Nations like the French and Russians can abandon their peripheries and fall back into the heart of their countries. This Norway cannot do as the bulk of our population lives along the three-thousand-kilometre coastline. Moreover, almost all the towns and practically the entire economic base is located here as well. The hinterland, on the other hand, is mostly mountains and forest.

Geostrategically, Norway is inside out. The seaboard is not the country's outer shell but its living heart. A sea power can assault this long, exposed heart wherever it wishes. Within Norwegian territory, moreover, the sea does not divide, but links together, so that a maritime invader can outflank any landbound defender (Pugh, 1984, pp. 99-100).



Figure 1: Part of Troms County. This map is illustrative for Norway's geographical configuration.

Geostrategic position

The strategy for a small state with an overall defensive or status-quo approach in their relationship with other states is to a very large degree determined by others' interest in our territory, airspace and waters, and not so much our own ambitions beyond our national strategic aims, which are to secure our sovereignty, territorial integrity and political freedom of action. It is therefore Norway's absolute and relative geographic position in relation to major powers and our strategic resources that determine whether, with what, and to what degree other states might use military power against us.

Today Russia is the only state that constitutes a major military threat to Norway's existential political aims, although others like the US and many European states also have a vital interest in whom controls Norway. Controlling the Norwegian territory and the waters of Norway provides ability to threaten both Western and Russian strategic centres of gravity. Foremost amongst these are Russia's nuclear deterrence in the form of strategic submarines and their second-strike or retaliation capability (60% of which is based in the Northern Fleet). In any conflict between Russia and NATO/USA these submarines constitute the key arbitrator for Russia. The Russian strategic deterrence concept is not only a matter of preventing use of force but also aims at limiting the potential for use of force against Russia. It combines deterrence and coercive actions in one package. Russian strategic deterrence does not end with war but works continuously also in war. Nuclear deterrence capabilities, and especially their strategic submarines, ensure that Russia always

maintains an ability to prevent unwanted escalation, secures an ability to deescalate, and can be used to enforce an abrupt end to warfighting when Russia requires. This fact also means that Russia is likely to take preventive action to secure their strategic submarines and associated infrastructure before a conflict renders offensive action against these key Russian assets likely. They will set their so-called Bastion defence whenever they view an armed conflict with NATO as likely or if it has already erupted. This also means that NATO does not deter Russia from establishing and extending their Bastion, NATO causes it.

Norwegian territory, our infrastructure, and the seas off our coasts are essential if Russia are to maintain their submarine based nuclear deterrence. Therefore, offensive action against Norway remains likely before a full-scale conflict erupts and regardless of whether the origin of the conflict is in our region or not.

Russia's concept for strategic deterrence is furthermore universal and includes coercive means in order to minimize threats against Russian interests, meaning Russia will use every available tool to promote the strategic aims. In shaping their security environment they will thus utilise means such as economic and information operations (Mastriano, 2017, pp. 14-15). However, it is only within one economic domain that Russia holds tools that could influence or coerce the West. That is energy supply. Through incentives and extortion, they can pressure other states into compliance, and Russia has used energy supply as a weapon before. Nonetheless, energy warfare is a tool which could backfire (Mastriano, 2017, p. 15). It is therefore likely that Russia will show restraint and only use such a tool if it is overwhelmingly likely to be effective.

In 2013, the EU imported about 161.5 Gm³ of natural gas from Russia; i.e. approximately 30% of Europe's gas consumption. Beyond Russia Norway, 106.6 Gm³, and Algeria, 32.8 Gm³, were the two other major suppliers of gas to Europe (2012 numbers). Norway, Algeria, Azerbaijan and Iran can potentially increase their delivery of gas by 40% (ca. 65 Gm³) (CIEP, 2014). Replacing Russian gas fully is only possible if one supplements such an increase by Liquid Natural Gas delivered by shipping. That would increase cost, but simultaneously reduce energy warfare to a rather inefficient tool. It would be wholly another matter if Russia could control Norwegian gas export as well. Closing off both Norwegian and Russian gas would leave Europe dark and cold. Thus, Norwegian gas production is of vital interest for not only Norway, but also for the EU, including the UK and Russia, and does render Russian use of military power against Norway plausible regardless of whether there is a bilateral or regional conflict between Norway and Russia or not.

Furthermore, both the Bastion defence scenario and the energy scenario could happen in circumstances when NATO's most capable rapid response forces are already fully occupied, or when

NATO, or some NATO members, are unwilling to risk escalation and full-scale conflict. Rapid and ample response and support from NATO would or could therefore be unlikely. To a large degree, Norway must therefore be able to handle such situations by ourselves, i.e. unsupported and against potentially overwhelming odds.

Operational factors that determine strategic approach

Beyond the above listed geographic and geostrategic factors, one must also consider operational and technological approaches Russia uses in its strategic concepts. This paper does not leave room for an extensive exploration of such operational concepts, but one ought nevertheless to consider that Russia would likely hold initial escalation dominance in every conflict involving Norway. Russia therefore would determine what means they employ, when, and where.

In any war with limited strategic aims, which a war between nuclear powers mostly likely would be, the establishment of a *fait accompli* takes precedence. To attack efficiently first has always been important, but as our resources and units today are very limited and impossible to replace in the short-term, a *coup de grâce* has become all the more achievable. Furthermore, it is entirely inconceivable that Norway could attack effectively first unless warfighting already has erupted. Therefore, Norway suffers a double strategic challenge. We may be subject to a hybrid warfare approach that gradually reduces our will and ability to defend ourselves and must simultaneously be able to meet a full-scale and comprehensive strategic surprise attack in all domains.

Russian anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities and concepts, which are key in their defensive approach for securing their Bastion, cause three further major challenges for Norway. Firstly, our forces must be able to survive and fight within a Russian denial area. In open waters that is only possible for submarines and other hidden means such as naval mines. Such means are effective in the long-term, but against a single operation, they depend on being in the right place at the right time as they lack tactical mobility and are thus fairly easy to outmanoeuvre for an opponent that determines time and space. We must therefore also utilise our geography, i.e. our littorals, as a force multiplier, i.e. operate and hide amongst thousands of islands, utilising radar shadows and challenging navigational conditions to our advantage. Only by supplementing our submarines with highly mobile units that can hide amongst islets and in fjords and be able to deliver long-range precision attacks into open waters may we sustain sea denial for any substantial time cost-effectively. Secondly, a Russian push to extend their A2/AD zone would require access to Norwegian territory. Only maritime power projection into our littorals renders that possible. If they are already in place, having achieved a *fait accompli*, they will turn our geographic advantage against us. It is therefore key to eliminate before they arrive inshore. Thirdly, due to the combination of long-range precision

strikes, few and vulnerable landlines of communications, a likely unfavourable air situation, and Russian open-water sea denial capabilities, we must maintain sea control in our inshore fairways if we are to have mobility and logistic support. If we cannot protect these waters, we cannot receive landbound reinforcements, move them or own forces, nor secure or resupply them at an acceptable risk.

To defend Norway at sea and from the sea therefore requires very specific and specialised forces, but also forces that complement each other. We cannot fulfil our strategic role without the capacity to conduct open water and inshore sea denial. We cannot respond to attacks or sustain own forces and population without the capacity to ensure sea control in our inshore waters, and finally, we cannot receive, stage and utilise allied reinforcements without securing their access to Norwegian waters and sustainment and mobility for these after they have arrived.

Conclusions

The strategic power potential constituted by maritime power projection is highly dependent on geostrategic context, that is what one aims to achieve and in what geographic context. Therefore, against an unreservedly maritime nation such as Norway, maritime power projection constitutes a huge, if not decisive, strategic potential. Norway might very well lose a war at sea due to the indirect effects loss of maritime communications would cause. Without maritime communications Norway would be unable to concentrate, uphold or utilise fighting power when and where required.

Therefore, our ability to conduct sea control and sea denial operations is essential for Norway. Only through sea control, limited in time and space, can we maintain manoeuvrability, mobility and sustainment of forces. Only through sea denial can we prevent an enemy from accessing our strategic centre of gravity.

Furthermore, as Norwegian territory, air space and waters are vital to project power towards Russia's military centre of gravity, their strategic submarines, and likewise for Russia to project military power against NATO, our grand-strategic aims might very well be undermined or impossible to achieve even if naval warfare off our coast does not influence us directly. This means that should our allies' freedom to utilise maritime communications be reduced or lost, it could very well cause strategic defeat also for Norway even if we maintain physical control over our territory. Defence of Norway is therefore not an isolated affair, nor is Norway only an importer of security. Our ability to influence the maritime theatre in support of allied requirements could very well be vital to ensure our strategic aims even if we are not the target for strategic offensives ourselves.

As shown, Norway is a maritime nation through and through both geographically and economically. That means that Norway's strategy has to take into account the sea as a substantial factor in any armed conflict. According to Corbett, the strategic role or roles of the Navy is determined by what part the fleet must play in relation to the action of the land forces, as, according to him, it scarcely needs saying that it is almost impossible that a war can be decided by naval action alone (Corbett, 1911:2004, p. 13). Corbett's revelations are however not a universal truth – they are only rough guidelines applicable in specific conditions. The strategic interests of others do in fact determine the kind of war and operations we would have to fight. It could indeed render Corbett's view on the relationship between land and sea power irrelevant or even turn it inside out in some instances.

As a small nation, Norway's military-strategic aims are limited and distinct allowing tailor-made naval forces. Such forces cannot be good at everything nor can they challenge a superior sea power symmetrically. They can however hinder a greater power from accomplishing its goals through focusing on specific tasks and objectives. Such tailor-made forces could provide us with significant ability to secure our own national survival, support our allies' overall strategic aims, and make us into a relevant partner for the Atlantic powers, i.e. the USA and the EU. Nevertheless, in periods when international tasks are abundant and the territorial threat from e.g. Russia is low or at least perceived as low, Norway must support our allies and interests when and wherever required – if not, allied support and reinforcements would be even less likely than today as we would be seen as a free-rider.

Therefore, our Navy has evolved and been structured, and will continue to develop, quite differently from most other navies in Europe. Norway still maintains a large fleet comparable with most other states, but also a navy that is specialised for our particular requirements. For instance, anti-surface warfare based on discreet and hidden assets takes precedence; we focus on inshore counter mine measures, our ability to protect inshore sea lines of communications, and on assets that can operate with almost full tactical impunity also within a Russian denial zone. However, as weapon technology evolves with increasing range, lethality and precision, we cannot fight only in the littorals anymore. At present, we must be able to project power into the open sea – this gradual but accelerating change in strategic realities does in fact cause our navy's strategic roles to change as well. Traditional anti-invasion forces focussing on sea denial in inlets to our fjords is no longer as relevant. Gradually we must increase our ability to deny an enemy his operational freedom also in open waters far from shore. This is a challenge we have not yet fully absorbed or responded to in a credible way.

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