



Navigating High-Profile and Low Availability: Norway and the Emerging US Maritime-Strategic Approach

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Recommendations

- Strengthen the Norwegian defence and naval budgets.
- Continue and increase European defence integration and cooperation efforts such as Joint Expeditionary Force.
- European operational planning should reflect the likelihood of limited US naval assistance in the initial phases of a conflict.
- Work towards European cooperation on maritime out-of-area operations.
- Explore the potential of replacing Marine Corps presence in Norway with that of the US Army.

Introduction

Despite a resurgence of Russian naval power, and subsequent increase in US maritime-strategic interest in the Northern Flank and Norway, the grand return of US naval forces to this region is unlikely. Rather, a combination of four separate but interconnected developments form the basis of a new, albeit unarticulated, US maritime-strategic approach to NATO's Northern Flank: first is the primacy of Asia in US strategic priorities; second the significant Russian naval challenge on the Northern Flank; thirdly, the US is attempting to balance strategic challenges and available resources by prioritising mostly short-term, high-profile presence; and fourth, US naval forces' ability to assist its allies in the case of crisis or conflict on the Northern Flank is limited. In combination, these four developments make up what I have termed a High-Profile/Low-Availability (HIPLA) approach to the Northern Flank. This policy brief will describe HIPLA by first looking briefly at the two first characteristics as embodied in US maritime-strategic priorities before going into the details of the high-profile and low availability aspects. Finally, I conclude and address the likely implications for Norway, the Northern Flank and Europe.

US Maritime-Strategic Priorities

The most significant factor driving the HIPLA-approach is the re-emergence of great-power competition and the emergence of China as a strategic challenger. From a maritime perspective the Asian giant is the pacing threat, drawing forces away from other theatres such as Europe, including the Northern Flank. However, Russia's place in current US naval priorities is more prominent than it has previously been in the post-Cold War era. There is also a myriad of other maritime and naval challenges that confront the US naval services, although these are considered as lesser ones. US naval forces struggle to address all these challenges. In extremis, the US may face a two-front war with China and Russia, an eventuality that must be considered even during regular great-power competition. In this myriad of maritime challenges and threats, Washington's priority of China will continue to have significant implications for the Northern Flank and Norway.

Low Availability

Although US naval presence in Norway between 2016 and 2021 has been at its highest level since the end of the Cold War, the availability of US forces in the case of major crises is low. This issue is likely to become more pressing as great-power competition intensifies and other challenges remain. There are

three main traits of low availability: the subordinate position of Europe in US maritime-strategic thinking; long US readiness time; and short warning time. The result is that timely US reinforcements will depend on what forces happen to be in the region.

Although Russia will be at a clear disadvantage in a drawn-out conflict, Moscow's strategy of [active defence](#) and emphasis on the initial phases of a conflict exploits NATO vulnerabilities and may circumvent the alliance's advantages in a drawn-out war. The primary challenge for US naval assistance to Europe is therefore the availability of rapid reinforcements. Reinforcing the Northern Flank will encounter at least three significant issues: Firstly, in a major war between Russia and NATO, the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the Northern Flank will all require the attention of US and NATO maritime forces, likely leading to their dispersal. Secondly, [Russian layered defences](#) can impose significant costs on US and NATO operations that would probably become progressively higher the closer they come to Russia. Thirdly, and as mentioned above, Russian emphasis on the initial phase of conflict makes time critical for a US response. US naval forces are central to the defence of Europe and NATO's northern flank, and genuine availability of significant US naval forces is thus paramount to such an effort.

Perhaps the most visible maritime-strategic proof of US strategic priority of Asia is the shift in US Navy home basing, as it affects both the likely deployment area of forces as well as the transit time of vessels from one theatre to another. Previously the balance was 60/40 in favour of the Atlantic, but this has slowly been reversed over the past 20 years and is now favouring the Pacific by 60/40. Out of a total of 293 ships, about 39 ships should theoretically be available for operations in the Atlantic at any one time and about 50 in the Pacific. In case of crisis or conflict, steaming time from the Pacific to the Norwegian Sea is about 18 days, compared to seven days from Norfolk. Furthermore, the most advanced ships of the surface fleet are based in the Pacific, another significant indication of US maritime-strategic priorities.

The US Navy's readiness and availability is affected by maintenance delays, resulting in [a loss equivalent of 15 ships](#) on average per year between 2014 and 2020. Although the Navy has taken steps to alleviate the maintenance issues, fixing the problems [will likely take years of significant effort](#). In addition, the Navy struggles with an excessive operational tempo taking a severe toll on crew and equipment, which again affects availability quite severely and compounds the maintenance issues. Indeed, the US Navy's availability for significant surge deployment for crisis or conflict is currently dire, despite efforts to address the excessive operational tempo.

One way to address the availability issue is to increase the force structure, and the Navy is currently planning for a force between 398 and 512 manned and unmanned vessels. Despite the spending hikes the past few years, it is unlikely that defence budgets will keep pace with such an ambition, as building a fleet of 400 ships would increase the Navy's budget from \$200 billion to \$279 billion per year. A navy of 512 ships would be much more expensive. One option for financing the Navy is to carve a significant piece of the Army's budget, however, this would likely spark a furious inter-service rivalry and would be very difficult to pass in Congress.

Capacity issues in the US shipbuilding industry are also likely to hamstring the effort to build a larger navy. Furthermore, China's rapidly growing navy would act as a gravitational pull on the US Navy's basing and operations, limiting the effect a larger fleet would have on the availability for crisis and conflict on the Northern Flank and in Norway. Another way of reducing the operational tempo would be to significantly scale back everyday presence and operations around the world, making more ships available for surge operations. The majority of surge-ready ships would have the Pacific as their primary theatre, however, and the timeliness of reinforcements would still present an issue. Furthermore, lack of US everyday presence could produce a strategic vacuum that China and Russia could fill.

The Marine Corps is currently being transformed, investing in operational concepts and capabilities designed to contribute to maritime operations, and divesting in heavy, land-centric equipment. However, the investments are aimed at the Pacific, while the cuts have affected the Marine Corps across the board, raising questions of how suitable and available the Marine Corps will be for operations in Norway. Furthermore, preparing and transporting 4500 Marine Corps troops to pair up with their prepositioned equipment in Norway will likely take days or even weeks, and transporting the entire 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force across the Atlantic would take months. Significant Marine Corps assistance thus relies on substantial warning time, which is unlikely. The most rapid US naval reinforcements to Norway and the Northern Flank would probably be ground based aircraft such as maritime patrol aircraft.

Pentagon's 2018 Dynamic Force Employment (DFE) was designed to alleviate some of the availability issues outlined above, however it's potential to do so is only partial. The essence of the concept is unpredictable and flexible deployments, and the efficient exploitation of resources. Even if DFE solves the issues with excessive operational tempo, it does not address the short warning time on the Northern

Flank and in Norway, and it is only a small part of a larger solution for the Navy's shipbuilding and maintenance troubles. In short, US naval forces are likely to be late to the fight, and rapid and substantial reinforcements depend largely on forces that happen to be in the region.

High Profile Presence

The language in current US maritime-strategic documents implies the use of significant naval forces for presence and forward operations to signal US intent and to counter and deter adversaries, and it is therefore natural to assume that US naval presence operations will have a relatively high profile. This high-profile presence is further facilitated by the Dynamic Force Employment concept. Furthermore, high-profile presence on the Northern Flank and in Norway has a history, and the 1980s is of special note in that regard.

The High-Profile approach is evident in recent US presence operations. An aircraft carrier in the Norwegian Sea in 2018, US destroyers exercising or transiting the Barents Sea on three occasions in 2020, the publicly announced dockings of US submarines in the arctic town of Tromsø in 2020, 2021 and 2022 were all high profile. The US Navy is also investing in longer-term presence and infrastructure in Iceland and Scotland, and the recent Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement between Norway and the US underscores US enduring interests in the region and facilitate presence. In the greater North Atlantic region, the US Navy also has four destroyers based in Spain, and conducts high-profile presence in the Baltic, Mediterranean and Black seas. Furthermore, US Marine Corps presence in Norway has kept a higher profile than the UK and Dutch marines that also operate in Norway.

Thus, it is natural to conclude that US maritime presence in Norway and on the Northern Flank has increased to a level not seen since the Cold War. Grounded in national and maritime-strategic publications and concepts, the presence is generally high-profile and act as a stand-in for substantial availability of US naval forces to signal enduring US interest. The high profile is more a sign of weakness, rather than strength, and since the challenges described here are underlying issues for the US naval services in general, the high-profile and low availability concept likely extends beyond Norway and the Northern Flank and applies to maritime Europe in general and even other regions.

HIPLA, Norway and Europe: All Roar and no Bite?

The US naval services are currently in the middle of the most important changes since the Cold War. Facing two near-peer opponents and several other challenges, they are shifting their efforts towards the Pacific and China. The numerous challenges and commitments have stretched the US naval services, however, and according to some [commentators](#) they are [nearly broken](#). The above has shown that High-Profile presence and Low-Availability for crisis and conflict in Norway and on the Northern Flank has been a central response to these challenges.

Norway and the Northern Flank are not isolated from the larger strategic context, however, and the issues discussed above are likely to apply to Europe in general and may be applicable to other regions as well. The issue of steaming time, for example, is certainly applicable to Europe in general, although the exact details vary somewhat depending on which part of Europe. Perhaps most importantly in the larger strategic context, however, is that China's place as the pacing threat and challenge to the US naval services will inevitably have a great influence on US maritime-strategic, operational and force structure development in general, not just the developments on the Northern Flank.

The above has painted a bleak picture of US naval forces' ability to assist Norway and on the Northern Flank, lending credence to the assertion that it is "all roar and no bite", however, that lacks some nuance. Despite all challenges an alliance with the US likely still maintains a significant deterrent effect, and even though the initial phase of war is central, NATO is still likely to win a drawn-out fight with Russia. The enduring relevance of the US notwithstanding, HIPLA will have significant implications for Norway and Europe.

Perhaps the most obvious implication is that Norway and Europe must take more responsibility for its own maritime security, but what does that entail? Firstly, Norway and its European allies must be prepared to increase their defence and naval budgets, as well as develop European cooperation on defence matters in general. The most obvious way forward is to strengthen the [Joint Expeditionary Force](#), while also pursuing joint [acquisition](#) and logistics projects. Furthermore, operational plans must reflect the time it will take for significant US naval reinforcements to arrive, and that Europe likely will have to manage with limited US naval assistance in the initial phases of a conflict. Norway and its European allies must also strive to coordinate their approach to maritime out-of-area operations to ensure the optimum use of resources and cover any resulting gaps in naval forces in Europe.

Since China is the top US naval priority, Europe and Norway must also prepare for a US naval force that is increasingly adapted to and structured for combat in the Pacific. It may for example be beneficial to both the US and Norway to have the US Army take over as the land component of US reinforcements, as the Marine Corps' future suitability for operations in Norway may be questioned. Furthermore, the Dynamic Force Employment concept's emphasis on surprise [may not always be in the best interest of Norway](#) and the other nations on the Northern Flank. In conclusion, the US' strong emphasis on China, coupled with the unpredictability and flexibility of DFE, as well as the limited resources of the US military, all facilitate the High-Profile/Low-Availability approach. Indeed, they may put into question how 'strategically predictable' the US will be, and whether the emphasis will increasingly be on the bark, not the bite.

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