High North deterrence

Pål Berglund

Takeaways

- It is arguably of strategic interest for Norway and Finland that their strategic posture in the High North is coherent.
- Norway and Finland should be able to influence NATO's posture in the region to adhere with theirs.
- Today, Norway aims to modulate national and allied presence in the Arctic in a balancing act between deterrence and reasurance.
- Finland aims to strengthen its existing deterrent posture in the High North with NATO assets.

Following Finland's and Sweden's decisions to join NATO, with Russia continuing to threaten stability in Europe, the Nordic countries are debating their military posture. Their policy on allied training, operations and basing, as well as a new look on regional strategy are examples.

Russia's border with NATO has been extended by 1340 kilometres, doubling the length of the land border. This has unsurprisingly caused some reactions in Russia, which has already on several occasions protested and announced that there will be consequences. Russian military measures include the reestablishment of the Leningrad Military District close to Finnish territory.[1]

Both Norway and Finland, the two NATO countries bordering Russia in the High North,[2]

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have as stated goals of their security policy to *deter* Russian aggression in the region.[3] However, because of different geography, history and strategic culture, their approaches to deterrence are different.

To contribute to the discussion on the consequences of NATO expansion in the High North, this article uses a theoretical framework on deterrence to analyse the military posture and strategies of Norway and Finland, and how they interact with Russian approaches. Analysing and comparing using this theoretical framework necessitates simplification, as the two countries' approaches to deterrence have not only evolved over time, but are also multifaceted. The advantage of using a clear-cut theoretical framework is, however, that it brings out important aspects and differences. It should be noted that the primary focus here is *deterrence* – approaches to avoiding conflict, and not *defense* – how Norway and Finland intend to defend themselves, in the event of war.

It is the author's belief that changing policy and strategic approaches due to changes in the strategic situation in the High North should be based on a thorough strategic analysis. This necessitates a clear understanding on what the aims are of all activities contributing to deterrence, such as strategic communications, maritime or surveillance operations, exercise activities and military presence.

One risk involved in failing to conduct such an analysis, is that military posturing could fail to achieve overall strategic and political objectives by not presenting a coherent deterrent posture. This would further limit Norway and Finland's ability to use the tools of escalation and de-escalation. In addition, understanding how Russia is likely to evaluate and modulate their own deterrence should be considered.

This Insight seeks to explore what differences exist between Norwegian and Finnish approaches to deterrence in the High North, and what consequences such differences may have, considering Finland's accession to NATO. In particular, it will be argued that using the theoretical framework on deterrence, there has historically and culturally been a fundamental difference between Norway's "deterrence and reassurance" approach that is grounded in "deterrence by punishment" (based on Norway's membership in NATO), and Finland's threshold approach along the lines of "deterrence by denial".

These approaches are reflected in a different strategic posture, where Norway aims to modulate national and allied presence in the High North in a balancing act, while Finland seems to aim to strengthen its existing posture with NATO assets. It will be argued that these approaches need to be aligned in order to achieve a coherent NATO approach in the High North. This is especially true considering the indications of a more active approach to deterrence from Russia. The posture adopted needs to consider that Russian military interest in the High North is primarily the Kola Peninsula nuclear complex, and Nordic deterrence should align in this perspective to ensure that activities, operations and presence contributes to political and strategic objectives.

THE HIGH NORTH – WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT?

The potential for conflict in the High North is often misunderstood. Much literature focuses on unresolved territorial claims, natural resources, and the Northern Sea Route, proposing a kind of a "great game" of the Arctic.[4] However, as illustrated in Figure 1, the majority of both discovered and undiscovered resources in the Arctic is estimated to be within internationally recognised territories, and not around the North Pole where there are still some unresolved claims. Further, the Arctic nations agree on the mechanisms to resolve the borders around the North Pole in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.[5] While the Northern Sea Route has potential for trade, this is uncertain. Studies differ in expectations, but according to the Arctic Institute for example, the Arctic Council estimates that passage without icebreakers may only be possible 100 days a year in 2080,[6] and hence, probably at least not critical for the vital interests of Arctic states.

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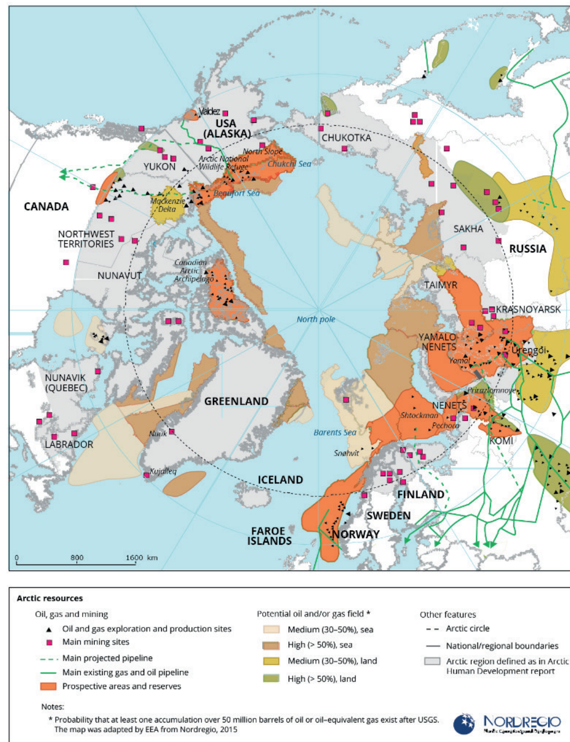

Figure 1, Arctic resources.[7]

Arctic nations recognise the environmental fragility of the Arctic and are concerned about the impact climate change may have on the region. They have significant interests in sustainable development of fishing, tourism, and regional prosperity in general. This has therefore also been emphasized in the work of the Arctic Council over the years.[8] The Arctic has rich natural resources, and thus is important for the Arctic nations, but there is also little in terms of resources to gain from acquiring new territory.

These factors mean that all Arctic states have a vested interest in a stable and secure Arctic, and that this is arguably more important than potential gains following a conflict. There is ample research supporting this.[9] The current situation, with an equilibrium balancing the interests of the actors, may at least assure that the Arctic will not be the source of a conflict in the future.

However, the High North is also home to the world's largest stock of nuclear weapons. The Russian military complex on the Kola Peninsula houses the strategic submarines (SSBNs) that constitute the primary guarantor for Russia's second-strike capability. From Kola, Russia's Northern Fleet also has access to the Atlantic, where it can threaten trans-Atlantic maritime lines of communications. The Kola military complex therefore remains the primary reason for the strategic significance of the High North.[10]

Russia's access to the Atlantic has three primary routes. First, from the Black Sea, whose future is uncertain pending developments of the war in Ukraine and the control of Crimea. Second, from the Baltic Sea, with a radically changed strategic situation after Sweden and Finland joined NATO.[11] This means that the relative importance of the third, the High North and the Barents Sea, is increasing as the primary access route for Russia to deploy naval assets into the Atlantic.

The potential for conflict in the Arctic about the Arctic in itself is therefore unlikely. Given this, both Russia and NATO have as their primary interest to deter each other from threatening strategic interests. In Russia's case, the most important is their second-strike capability, and for NATO allies' – particularly Norway and Finland's – territorial integrity, as well as securing the trans-Atlantic link. In other words, with regards to peacetime security, the Arctic is primarily about deterrence.

DETERRENCE AND DEFENCE

In the High North, where the situation is relatively stable, deterrence means keeping the balance, coercing your opponent from doing something, i.e. threatening your strategic interests Lawrence Freedman describes this as "Deliberate attempts to manipulate the behaviour of others through conditional threats".[12]

Deterrence theory traditionally differentiates between *deterrence by denial* and *deterrence by punishment*. In addition, *extended deterrence* is used when either of the former is used in the context when an allied provides the deterrent. There are, however, typological differences. Adamsky's work on how western thinking about denial and punishment is not necessarily a good way to describe Russian approaches,[13] tells us that deterrence needs to be contextualized with regards to who you are trying to deter.

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To *deter and defend* is a common phrase in defence policy. Deter enemy aggression, and *if deterrence fails*, being able to defend against the aggressor. There could be a contradictory value in these aims. Different forces, constructs, and capabilities may play different roles with regards to how they contribute to either deterrence or defence. Snyder describes how deterrence addresses the enemy's intentions while defence reduces the enemy's capability.[14]

In the balancing of a nation's capabilities within constrained budgets, governments will therefore have to make hard choices in their strategic approach. Defence spending will have to prioritize to find the right balance appropriate to their chosen strategic approach.

FINLAND: DETERRENCE BY DENIAL

The denial form of deterrence is about making it unlikely for adversaries to be able to achieve their objectives. Traditionally described as building up a military force that makes it obvious for the strategic calculus of the opponent that it would be very costly, if not impossible to achieve its objectives. Freedman discusses this strategy using the term *control* – that you "control the situation sufficiently to deny the opponent strategic options".[15] For a formerly neutral small state like Finland, this approach has inevitably been the predominant one, lacking access or volume to provide "punishment" capability.

Henrikki Heikka argues that Finnish post-Cold War strategy has been characterized by Europeanization, coupled with retaining homeland defence – "the hard core of self-government, in Finnish hands".[16] Finnish strategic culture and thinking has been dominated by building a resilient society and army of mass, based on large volumes of reserves, presenting a high threshold for Russian military success in Finland. As such, it is a classic case of deterrence by denial.

However, Tapio Juntunen and Matti Pesu note how Finland's NATO membership can change Finland's approach to deterrence: "NATO membership introduces a new element to the Finnish deterrence mix: extended deterrence provided by allied nuclear forces. This creates a novel dimension for policymaking and options for the national contribution".[17]

In the 2000s, bi-lateral arrangements primarily with the US started this process towards integration that was completed after joining NATO. It seems though, that increased allied presence and activities on Finnish soil, is not put into the same context as in the Norwegian case. Following their accession to NATO, the Finnish government has not presented any caveats or limitations on NATO activities in Finland the way Norway has, other than the NATO Secretary General emphasising that no NATO activities will be done without the consent of the Finnish government. Finland has for example allowed US intelligence flights along its eastern frontier since 2023.[18]

Finland, previously primarily focused on the southern part, capital, and Baltic Sea, is now by association much more a part of NATO presence close to Kola peninsula like Norway. In the lead up to, and following NATO membership, there seems to have been a large increase in especially US and other NATO activity in northern Finland, presenting a changed posture, especially if viewed from Russia.

DETERRENCE BY PUNISHMENT: NORWAY

Deterrence by punishment is when an actor convinces its adversary of its ability to punish them to an extent that would outweigh their gains, should they try to cross the lines that were set out, thereby influencing them to not do so. Often connected with nuclear means, Snyder described it as "the threat and capacity to inflict nuclear punishment".[19]

Discussion about non-nuclear deterrence by punishment also exist, for example by Freedman, Mearsheimer and Huntington.[20] The idea that an offensive would not only be stopped (Mearsheimer), but also trigger retaliation (Huntington) is what creates the deterrent effect. To have a credible threat of conventional punishment towards Russia, one would not only have to have sufficient force to defend, but also to retaliate in kind.

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It is unlikely that small, non-nuclear nations like Norway or Finland will ever have this capability alone. NATO, or the US bilaterally, is thus what provides the possibility for an approach of deterrence by punishment through *extended deterrence.*

Norway was a founding member of NATO and its security policy has ever since the Russian withdrawal from the northernmost part of Norway in World War Two, been characterised and influenced by the proximity to Russia. In Norway, a policy of "deterrence and reassurance" prevailed.

Reassurance in the Norwegian approach has been about reassuring Russia that there were no offensive intentions or threats from the Norwegian side, and the focus of Norwegian-Russian relations was directed towards cooperation on sustainable fishing, rescue at sea and other non-military activities. Self-imposed restrictions such as on military training and allied presence east of the 24th parallel, was put as something like a buffer between Russian and NATO territory.[21] This approach of reassurance is different from the interpretation of the term in some other countries. For example, NATO presence in the Baltics is meant to be reassuring for the Baltic states, and deterrent for Russia, whereas in the Norwegian typology, it is Russia that is to be reassured.

Norway has also been reluctant to be seen as too active in NATO nuclear activities. In the postwar era when the strategy of balancing between deterrence and reassurance took form, the domestic political environment was reserved with regards to nuclear weapons. The policy of no nuclear presence on Norwegian territory in peacetime is still valid. As Norway has participated in NATO's nuclear cooperation, including in nuclear exercises, also this policy is characterized as a balancing act between deterrence and appeasement.[22]

Since joining NATO, Norway's defence policy has also always relied on NATO for credible deterrence. Even before reductions and transformation in the 1990's, allied integration and bi-lateral agreements have been the basis for Norway's approach to how to defend in case of a Russian invasion.

Seen from Russia, the deterrent effect would primarily be constituted by the fact that war with Norway would mean a NATO article 5 situation, and a subsequent potential for an escalation of the conflict (including to the nuclear level). In other words: Deterrence by punishment in the form of extended deterrence.

RUSSIA DETERRENCE

In contrast to Western deterrence, which relies heavily on verbal warnings and posture, the Russian approach to deterrence emphasizes practical measures and active involvement with rivals throughout all stages of conflict. This strategy combines nuclear, conventional, and informational methods of influence and is firmly grounded in Russia's strategic heritage and historical military practices.[23]

In the period preceding Finland's accession to NATO, Finland experienced an increased number of cyberattacks believed to be originating from Russia, as well as a change in Russian discourse on Finland. In addition, Russia announced the deployment of S-400 air defence missiles near the Finnish border. For Norway, challenges have been GPS jamming of military activities, aggressive Russian flight profiles towards high profile infrastructure, or like for Finland, sudden fluxes of refugees coming across the Russian border.

Russia has in the post-Soviet period viewed its neighbours, and particularly former Soviet states, to be within the Russian privileged sphere of influence and vital for the idea of Russia as a great power. Maintaining this sphere has thus been an important objective for Russian policy. Alexander Cooley argues for example that the invasion of Ukraine was just as much about countering Western "encroachment" as it was about Ukraine for its own purpose.[24]

Finland and Norway are distinct neighbours in this context, as they are not former Soviet states. Finland has through its neutrality in one regard still represented some sort of buffer, and Finland's government has in the past decades managed a particular *active neutrality*, balancing relations between Russia and the West. Norway on the other hand, has not been neutral, and has, as discussed, balanced between *deterrence and reassurance*.

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In general, it can be argued that Russian deterrence after the cold war has been largely unsuccessful. If one aim of Russian deterrence has been to maintain a Russian sphere of influence in Europe for instance, NATO expansion and alignment away from Russia suggest that this has failed. The subsequent Russian evaluation and re-thinking of its approach to deterrence due to this failure, has come to pose several potential challenges. Adamsky writes about this as Russia's new nuclear normal,[25] identifying for example the possibility that Kremlin is purposely lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons.

The Russian form of active or activities-based deterrence has so far been well below the threshold of what has required retaliatory measures other that stark diplomatic responses. Russia will likely adapt its deterrence activities in response to the changing strategic environment as Russia sees it; or in other words, react to the *posture* of its adversaries.

CONSEQUENCES – POSTURING

One obvious source of differences between Norwegian and Finnish force structures and postures is that Norway as a NATO member has been able to calculate alliance capabilities into the balance of deterrence and defence in a way that has not been possible for Finland until now. And because this has been the case for over 70 years, it is likely that this has also contributed to differences in the strategic cultures. Adamsky demonstrates how strategic concepts evolve differently in various ideational contexts,[26] and it is likely that this is also valid for approaches to deterrence.

Some difference between Norwegian and Finnish force structures may be related to this. Norway has a standing national joint headquarter and manned command structures down through brigade and battalion level in the army. The aim is to easily integrate and take part in NATO joint operations. This ability to demonstrate allied joint capability has been important in Norway's strategic narrative, and an important part of posturing. Finland's army has been relatively light on officer and non-commissioned officer (NCO) manning. It has rather prioritized the ability to mobilize large numbers of reserves, while not having standing headquarters for all levels of their mobilized structure, with lower interoperability as a probable result.

It is likely that there is a potential for unclear strategic messaging from NATO if Norwegian and Finnish posturing play out differently. This could especially be true for NATO activities in the two countries. Coupled with a potentially more aggressive Russian approach to deterrence, there are risks for miscalculations and unintended escalation.

To manage posture, escalation and de-escalation measures would necessarily need to be identifiable as some sort of change from a "baseline posture" to be predictable. This could for example be defining relative distances from Russian vital interests that different types of military activities normally do or do not occur. Further, a common approach to escalation is necessary. A good starting point would be to acknowledge that deterrence in the Arctic should primarily relate to the Russian second-strike capability. A dilemma for Finland with regards to this, is that there may be other approaches which are relevant for the south of Finland and the Baltic Sea theatre of operations. The complexity of Finnish deterrence is evident and requires thorough analyses.

The movement of forces or building up new units are examples of posturing. Russia's announcement to reestablish the Leningrad military district because of Finland's accession to NATO, represents one kind of signalling to adversaries. NATO exercises in the High North or other military activities near strategic areas, demonstrating capability, is another.

The key point is that with regards to deterrence, your posture is a way of communicating to your adversary with the aim of influencing the strategic calculus.

An interesting part is the Norwegian self-imposed restriction on foreign military activities east of the 24th parallel. Most of Finland lies east of this line, and in a regional context, the line does no longer serve any purpose as such. However, should Norway no longer take this into account at all, with NATO activity stretching well east of this line, this would neglect the strategic issue at hand: the Russian second-strike capability. Finland,

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traditionally not having had to take this into consideration in a NATO context, has not presented any caveats with regards to proximity or posture towards Russia.

It could well be argued that the severity of nuclear conflict increases the likelihood that conflict in the Arctic will remain conventional. The question of whether deterrence by punishment is still a viable concept in this case, is justified. Conventional allied reinforcement may be less reliable and timely in order to work as a credible deterrent. This raises the question of the level and posture of allied conventional presence in the Arctic as well. Both Norway and Finland therefore aim to build national resilience both in military and civilian terms to also present defence and denial capabilities. This deterrence mix can with both countries, as well as Sweden, now being NATO members, now working together to gain increased denial credibility. The Joint Nordic Air Operations Centre recently established for exercise Nordic Response is a good example.

CONCLUSION

The fundamental differences between Norwegian and Finnish approaches to deterrence discussed in this Insight, and consequent differences in strategic posture, where Norway aims to modulate national and allied presence in the Arctic in a balancing act, and Finland aims to strengthen its existing posture with NATO assets, have received limited attention in the discourse.

Matti Pesu argues in his study for the Finnish Institute for International Affairs that Northern Europe constitutes a buffer between Russia and central Europe, and that geography suggests a division of labour with regards to deterrence and defence between “frontline states” (such as Finland), “hubs” (Norway), “providers” (UK) and “guarantors” (US).[27] Pesu’s approach, weighing the geographical shift in NATO landmass, is not uncommon. Much of the discussion on the new Nordic approach to defence dwells on geography, logistics and lines of communication.[28]

Considering the arguments put forth in this Insight, this approach seems too linear, and fails to consider what Russia’s vital interests are, and the Russian approach to deterrence in the region. As have been shown, the strategic centre of gravity in the High North is still the nuclear complex on the Kola Peninsula and this should be taken into account when developing a common approach to deterrence in the High North.

A policy should come to terms with how deterrence by punishment and/or denial will be interpreted in Russia, as well as a common approach to posture to reinforce such a policy. In addition, mechanisms of escalation and de-escalation should be identified, and a common policy of implementation developed. There could be options that range from looking at some sort of “Nordic denial” with a clear Nordic profile to posture in the High North, to, conversely, leaning more towards a “punishment” approach that weighs in alliance capabilities. Each has advantages and disadvantages, also regarding Russian responses.

Given the importance and risks involved in posturing, it is arguably of strategic interest for Norway and Finland that their strategic posture in the region is coherent, as both countries will likely be affected by changes in the situation. Furthermore, both Norway and Finland should be able to influence NATO’s posture in the region to adhere with theirs. This is more likely to be successful if the Nordic countries have a common policy and can present a unified approach in alliance discussions. Nordic political, strategic-military, and branch level discussions should therefore be initiated.

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END NOTES

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