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James Cameron & Kristin Ven Bruusgaard

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Norway, deterrence, reassurance and strategic stability in Europe

James Cameron ^a and Kristin Ven Bruusgaard^b

^aDepartment of Archaeology, Conservation and History, Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway; ^bCenter for Intelligence Studies, Norwegian Intelligence School, Oslo, Norway



ABSTRACT

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has placed stability in Europe under severe strain. This special issue explores Norway's policy of balancing deterrence and reassurance of Moscow and the deterrent interaction between NATO and Russia to produce insights into how NATO states can craft a more stable Europe. It emphasizes how new technologies and capabilities reshape the landscape of strategic stability. Although the prospects for a more stable European continent seem dim with Moscow as an unwilling partner, calibrating deterrence and reassurance has proven adaptable and will likely remain important in Norway's and potentially NATO's future efforts to mitigate the security dilemma.

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Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine represents the biggest upheaval in European security since the Cold War, doing potentially lethal damage to existing arms control and risk reduction efforts that have been part of the European post-Cold War security architecture. Moscow's actions have renewed the debate within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on how to strengthen deterrence through a range of nuclear, conventional and unconventional tools, including through increased resilience to new threats such as information operations.¹ A historic enlargement of the Alliance is taking place in its Northern Flank, with significant potential to alter NATO-Russia security dynamics further.² As such, Russia's invasion

CONTACT James Cameron  j.j.cameron@iakh.uio.no  Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History, Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo, PO Box 1008, Blindern, Oslo 0315, Norway
¹'NATO's Military Presence in the East of the Alliance', North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, accessed 1 Jan. 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm.
²Jyri Lavikainen, 'Russia's Redefined View on Strategic Stability: A Security Dilemma in Northern Europe?', *FIIA Briefing Paper* 308/April (n.d.); 'H-Diplo|RJISSF Policy Roundtable II-4: NATO's Northern Enlargement: How Did It Happen, Where Will It Lead?', 7 July 2023, <https://issforum.org/policy-roundtable/h-diplorjissf-policy-roundtable-ii-4-natos-northern-enlargement-how-did-it-happen-where-will-it-lead>.

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represents a significant threat to strategic stability in Europe, that is, a condition of 'peaceful and harmonious relations' between states, under which neither side has the incentive to use nuclear weapons first or engage in competitive arming against the other.³

This special section argues that current concepts of strategic stability, derived primarily from the Cold War experience, may be an insufficient basis for today's European security environment, which is characterized by greater asymmetry and broader security threats than was the case during the US-Soviet confrontation. Instead, NATO governments should look beyond the US-centric concept of strategic stability to engage more closely with specific regional dynamics in Europe, as well as with underexplored cases or states whose security policy traditions more closely reflect the asymmetrical deterrent relationship seen between NATO and Russia today.

The section does so by examining the emergence and practice of a Norwegian conception of balancing 'deterrence and reassurance' of Moscow. This concept was first propounded by Norwegian scholar-statesman Johan Jørgen Holst to characterise the practice of Norwegian security policy since the country became a founding member of NATO in 1949.⁴ The papers in this section demonstrate how the Norwegian conception of a balance between deterrence and reassurance has evolved over time, illustrating how both political and military measures may be used in combination to provide more a flexible approach to the handling of relations between two adversaries. It examines how Norway has applied the concept in practice, identifying lessons for Norwegian and other European policymakers as they consider the extent to which reassurance measures regarding Moscow still have a place in today's challenging security landscape. A resurgent and aggressive Russia, combined with the enlargement of NATO in the Nordic region produces new ground truths toward which this approach must be adapted.⁵

The section also explores how traditional deterrence and reassurance models can incorporate new technologies and capabilities, including in the cyber and information realm. Given asymmetries in the value attached to and utilization of a more diverse set of deterrent tools, deterrence and reassurance dynamics may need to be more carefully calibrated across domains and sectors, including in an information environment where both deterrence and reassurance policies can be exploited for information warfare.

³James M. Acton, 'Reclaiming Strategic Stability', in Elbridge A. Colby and Michael S. Gerson (eds.), *Strategic Stability: Contending Interpretations* (Carlisle PA: US Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College P, 2013), 117–118.

⁴Johan Jørgen Holst, 'Norwegian Security Policy: The Strategic Context', *Cooperation and Conflict* 1/4 (1966), 64–79.

⁵Forsvarsdepartementet, 'NOU 2023: 14 Forsvarskommissjonen av 2021. Forsvar for fred og frihet' 3 May 2023.

Mitigating the security dilemma through common views of strategic stability

The first article of this section sets the broader context by examining the deterrence dynamics at play in Europe today writ large. *Deterrence Asymmetry and Strategic Stability in Europe* examines the applicability of Cold War concept of strategic stability in a security environment that is characterised by a greater asymmetry of concerns, objectives and postures between NATO states and Moscow than those which existed in the period 1949–1991. Overlapping views of strategic stability provide a common basis for what constitutes reassurance amid a deteriorating spiral of insecurity resulting from mutual deterrence efforts. And yet, the security dynamics between NATO and Russia today display at times asymmetry in objectives, means and capabilities through which the two sides produce security for themselves. The asymmetry in how these actors seek to enhance their own security has ‘produced a situation where each side perceives of the other’s actions as the most dangerous possible course, designed to directly undermine its security and thus undermine strategic stability’. Instead, today’s ‘blending of nuclear, conventional, and non-conventional deterrent measures in an asymmetrical deterrent relationship’ between NATO and Russia ‘makes deterrence stability nearly impossible to achieve’ proceeding simply from the premise of a stable balance of military-technical capabilities.⁶ This asymmetry precludes deterrent messaging and inhibits a mutual deterrent legibility that would make measures to reassure the adversary credible. The paper demonstrates a need to retain a long-term policy focus on how Europe, should it become more stable in the future, may have to account for potentially diverging views of what a strategically stable continent looks like.

The concept and practice of Norwegian ‘deterrence and reassurance’

Deterrence, Reassurance and Strategic Stability: The Enduring Relevance of Johan Jørgen Holst examines the intellectual origins and Cold War practice of Norway’s balancing of deterrence and reassurance of the Soviet Union, which was designed to deal with asymmetric deterrence challenges and mitigate the security dilemma. Bordering a militarily far stronger state and reliant on a relatively distant superpower for its security, Norway’s strategic position since at least the end of the Second World War has been defined by asymmetry. Norway could not ensure its security by establishing a military that matched the Soviet units deployed near its borders, nor – primarily for domestic political reasons – did it want to host American and other allied

⁶Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, ‘Deterrence Asymmetry and Strategic Stability in Europe’, this issue.

nuclear and conventional forces necessary to achieve a stable balance. While imbued in the new US nuclear-strategic studies literature of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Holst found strategic stability a poor fit for the Norwegian reality, instead developing a security concept that better served Norwegian needs.

Holst defined the primary aim of Norwegian security policy as maintaining a balance between deterrence of the Soviet Union through membership of NATO and reassurance of Moscow that Norway would not become a base for a NATO strike on the USSR. Under this conception, Norway's ability to build up NATO forces on its territory rapidly in a time of crisis or war would act as a deterrent to Soviet offensive action. At the same time, Moscow could be reassured by established pledges that Norway would not host nuclear weapons or permanently station allied conventional forces on its territory in peacetime. These measures, combined with restrictions on exercises, flights and naval activity near the Soviet border, constituted Norway's policy of reassurance toward the Soviet Union. By pledging that these measures would remain in place if the threat to Norway did not increase, reassurance was contingent on Moscow's conduct, thus adding a further motive for Moscow's restraint.

While implementation of the policy was sometimes difficult, Holst's balance of deterrence and reassurance gave Norway the conceptual framework necessary to navigate the Cold War. The deterrence-reassurance pairing was most effective when the Norwegian government used reassurance to mitigate domestic political opposition to enhanced deterrence measures, such as NATO's 1979 dual-track decision on intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) and the 1981 Norway-US agreement to pre-stock US Marine Corps equipment in Norway. The policy was least effective when the Norwegian government pursued reassurance measures without coordination with its NATO allies, such as its support for a Nordic nuclear weapon-free zone (NWFZ), which did not contain a significant deterrence component.⁷ The importance of Alliance coordination and the incorporation of reassurance measures into an overarching deterrence package should be borne in mind by Norwegian and other NATO policymakers considering any future reassurance initiatives vs. Moscow.

The evolution and flexibility of Norwegian deterrence and reassurance

The dual 'dual' policy: two 'deterrence and reassurance' dyads in Norwegian security policy and analyses demonstrates how this Norwegian conceptual

⁷James Cameron, 'Deterrence, Reassurance, and Strategic Stability: The Enduring Relevance of Johan Jørgen Holst', this issue.

pairing of deterrence and reassurance has proved flexible and durable, encompassing two distinct 'balancing acts'. When the concept originated during the Cold War, it referred primarily to a policy of 'calibrated deterrence', particularly reflected in how the deterrent effect of Norway's NATO membership was moderated by unilateral limits on allied conventional and nuclear forces on its territory in peacetime. Towards the end of the Cold War, however, the dyad has also been used to describe a broader 'balancing act', between two theoretically conflicting ways to security: calibrated deterrence versus reassurance understood as an aim for *détente* and 'common security'. In the post-Cold War world, the reassurance dimension of Norway's policy towards Russia became more dominant and more ambitious – from acting as a moderator of deterrence to an attempt to change the basis of the relationship to one founded on mutually beneficial cooperation across policy domains. Based on the assumptions of liberal internationalist thought, reassurance through transformation became a parallel track of Norwegian policy, operating somewhat independently of the traditional realist and security-focused deterrence-reassurance dyad.⁸

After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and particularly in the wake of its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the ambition of transforming the Norway–Russia relationship through cooperation seems to be over – for now. As NATO–Russia relations sink to new post-Cold War lows, there is a danger that the calibration of deterrence achieved during the Cold War era will be jettisoned along with the latter, more ambitious, agenda. A clearer distinction between these two different reassurance policies makes it possible to sustain the debate on a policy of calibrated deterrence, even as the hope of full transformation of the NATO–Russia relationship has been diminished.

Deterrence and reassurance in the face of new challenges

In an evolving geopolitical landscape, deterrence and reassurance strategies must evolve to address new technological and political shifts. The Nordic nations have historically adopted diverse approaches to their security strategies in reaction to neighbouring Russia's mix of conventional and nuclear deterrence. These varied approaches are evident in how Russia has historically sought to influence these countries, consistently advocating for reduced deterrence actions and NATO presence. Russia has consistently argued that a more significant NATO and U.S. presence undermines the security of the Nordic region.⁹

NATO's deterrence posture has prompted Russia to seek alternative, sub-threshold methods of influence to reach its objectives while avoiding escalation.

⁸Ingeborg Nortvedt Bjur, 'The dual "dual" policy: two conceptions of "deterrence and reassurance" in Norwegian security policy and analyses', this issue.

⁹Karen-Anna Eggen, 'Designing around NATO's deterrence: Russian Nordic information confrontation strategy', this issue.

This approach is part of a larger Russian strategy that blends non-military (political, economic, ideological and so on) and military methods, including nuclear options. These non-military tactics are crucial in Russian warfare theory, aiming to obscure the lines between war and peace. Consequently, Russia's information campaigns employ an integrated approach, utilizing non-military, military and nuclear strategies to exert psychological pressure.

This paper underscores the necessity of broadening our understanding of coercion and more closely integrate non-military methods. While not new, this perspective requires reassessment in today's complex, interconnected environment, where powers like Russia use asymmetric tactics to exploit grey zones, especially under conditions of nuclear parity and fluctuating conventional power dynamics.

As a new Nordic security era dawns upon the region, Russia is unwilling to accept strategic failure; instead, it intensifies its subtle aggression to portray its Nordic neighbours negatively, preparing for potential escalation and undermining unity. The Nordic countries are now an established part of Russia's broader confrontation with the West, causing Russia to up its intimidation strategy to influence the nature of Finland's NATO membership and prevent Sweden's NATO integration, while increasing Moscow's focus on strategic regions like Norway's northern territories and the Svalbard archipelago. Deterrence and reassurance will also have to adapt to new technological and political realities. Focusing on Russia's information operations against Norway, Sweden and Finland, *Designing around NATO's deterrence: Russian Nordic information confrontation strategy* highlights the importance of non-military coercion for designing future deterrence and reassurance policies.

Lessons for Europe

In the immediate wake of Russia's further invasion of Ukraine, it is not surprising that the European debate – including the Norwegian one – has swung towards strengthening deterrence and away from measures designed to reassure Moscow of NATO's non-aggressive intent.¹⁰ However, as Europe adjusts to the new security environment and seeks a more strategically stable

¹⁰Astri Edvardsen, 'For å holde på USAs interesse, må Norge legge mer i potten, sier FNI-direktør', *High North News*, 23 Mar. 2023, accessed 22 Dec. 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/nb/holde-pa-usas-interesse-ma-norge-legge-mer-i-potten-sier-fni-direktor>; Arne O. Holm, 'Knapt noen snakker lenger om lavspenning i Arktis', *High North News*, 17 Mar. 2023, accessed 22 Dec. 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/nb/knapt-noen-snakker-lenger-om-lavspenning-i-arktis>; Ingeborg Nortvedt Bjur, 'Norges strategi har vært å avskrekke og berolige Russland. Må vi tenke annerledes nå?', *Aftenposten*, 14 Mar. 2022, accessed 22 Dec. 2023, <https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/kronikk/i/QtyOP98/norges-strategi-har-vaert-aa-avskrekke-og-berolige-russland-maa-vi-tenke-annerledes-naa>; Svein Efestad, 'Vi har vært og er veldig fokusert på trusselvurderingene og det russiske bastionsforsvaret', *Forsvarets forum*, 1 Feb. 2023, accessed 22 Dec. 2023, <https://www.forsvaretsforum.no/forsvaret-forsvarskommisjon-kronikk/vi-har-vaert-og-er-veldig-fokusert-pa-trusselvurderingene-og-det-russiske-bastionsforsvaret/307889>.

situation, NATO will have to strike a new balance between deterrence and reassurance of Russia – one that takes the inherent asymmetries of the two sides' military-technical capabilities into account.

In this context, the traditional Norwegian emphasis on credible political signalling alongside military capabilities may be useful. Faced with a situation in which a strict military balance was simply not possible, Norway crafted a series of strictly conditioned policies on nuclear weapons, basing of foreign troops and military exercises that were designed to reassure Moscow of its non-aggressive intent and manage East–West tensions in its subregion.

NATO will need to formulate an appropriate posture to preserve stability on its reshaped Northernmost corner. The history of Norway's Cold War implementation of deterrence and reassurance shows that any NATO reassurance efforts should come as part of a larger package of deterrence measures, rather than as stand-alone efforts, and be coordinated closely within the Alliance as a whole. Norway remains one of very few frontline states with Russia that has not changed its military posture or enhanced the presence of NATO forces on its territory after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. And yet, NATO enlargement entails a significant shift in the balance of forces between NATO and Russia on the northern flank. This development will entail rethinking the principles and practice of calibrating deterrence vis-à-vis Russia.

The balance between deterrence and reassurance will differ by sub-region. Given the direct threat Russia poses to states on NATO's eastern flank, it is hardly conceivable that the political assurances and accompanying military postures of these countries, particularly on foreign basing, could be the same as those Oslo gave decades ago. Insight into the objectives of Russia's information campaigns will be necessary to maintain an accurate picture of Moscow's intentions, including how it is attempting to shift the balance away from deterrence towards reassurance, and adjust NATO policies accordingly.

The Cold War dilemma of European allies' reliance on a distant superpower for protection against a proximate adversary remains and is now exacerbated by large differences in NATO's and Russia's concerns and military capabilities. Fostering future stability in European security policy will necessarily have to account for such asymmetries, seeking to reduce the security dilemmas they exacerbate. A balance between deterrence and reassurance – tailored to the new security and technological environment – could provide a way to mitigate an escalating security dilemma between Russia and NATO, in the Nordic Region and beyond. There are overlapping concerns over strategic stability between NATO and Russia that may and can be capitalised on in a future European security order. Such commonality of views must also form the basis for any measures to seek to reassure a potential adversary that if they do not cross salient thresholds, they will not be attacked.

The debate on how reassurance can calibrate deterrent messaging and military posture was conceived during a Cold War period of significant political confrontation. The confrontation is now again a fact, with a perceived absence of a trustworthy partner in Moscow. This means that attempts to prevent a spiral of insecurity in Europe will be extremely difficult, but no less important. Concepts such as deterrence and reassurance may in fact hold some flexibility that can help manage this confrontation today and in the long term may provide the basis for more ambitious and transformative policies. Such ambition will be necessary to overcome rather than manage the insecurity spiral on the European continent.

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Notes on contributors

James Cameron is Associate Professor of Modern North American History at the University of Oslo. His research focuses on the history of arms control from the nineteenth century to the present and the lessons it holds for contemporary policy. He is the author of *The Double Game: The Demise of America's First Missile Defense System and the Rise of Strategic Arms Limitation* (Oxford University Press, 2018). He holds a PhD and BA in History from the University of Cambridge and an MPhil in Russian and East European Studies from the University of Oxford.

Kristin Ven Bruusgaard is the Director of the Norwegian Intelligence School. Her research focuses on Russian and Soviet deterrence strategy and nuclear weapons, comparative deterrence strategy, security dilemmas and European security, including Northern Europe. She holds a Ph.D. from King's College London, an MA in Security Studies from Georgetown University and a BA (Hons) in Politics and International Studies from Warwick University.

ORCID

James Cameron  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2816-1319>

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