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**THE IMPACT OF REGIONAL AND BILATERAL DEFENCE
COOPERATION AGREEMENTS (DCA) ON EU SECURITY
AND DEFENCE COHESION: CAUSING DIVISIONS OR
PROMOTING EUROPEAN DEFENCE?
THE CASES OF THE NORDIC DEFENCE COOPERATION
AND US-NORDICS DCAS**

WRITTEN BY
GIORGIA BOTTER

EDITED BY
DIMITRA PETARAKI

SUPERVISED BY
RICCARDO ANGELO GRASSI

Introduction

Between 2016 and 2023, the US signed extensive bilateral Defence Cooperation Agreements (DCAs) with Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway as part of a strategy conceived to ensure regional security. The evolving security challenges in the Nordic and Baltic regions, exacerbated by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, paved the way for the conclusion of the DCAs. These agreements were crucial to Finland and Sweden's entry to NATO, as they had already legitimised and governed US presence on their territories. Under the DCAs, the US Armed Forces have been granted unrestricted access to almost all military infrastructures and bases of these countries (Edvardsen, 2023). In addition to that, these agreements aim to enhance defence capabilities through joint exercises, training missions and logistical support. From the jurisdictional point of view, all Nordic countries renounced their right to exercise their criminal jurisdiction over US military personnel.

The Nordic countries are not the only ones who have signed bilateral agreements in the field of defence with the United States. For instance, Poland and the Baltic states have both recently concluded similar treaties. Consequently, it is necessary to consider this phenomenon not as a series of isolated events but as a part of a broader pattern of bilateral defence cooperation agreements designed to increase the American presence in the Nordic-Baltic region. This, in turn, facilitates the deployment of equipment and personnel in the event of an emergency.

This paper will analyse the influence of bilateral defence cooperation agreements on the European Union's security and defence framework, with a focus on those between the US and Nordic countries. In this regard, some argue that this kind of cooperation undermines the Union's efforts to advance towards a real common security and defence policy through separate negotiations with the Transatlantic partners. Others claim that the DCAs with the Nordic states enhance European security. In fact, leveraging their EU membership / as EU Member States, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland could act as catalysts for a more cohesive European Defence integration framework. The paper also examines the evolution of Nordic countries' relations with the United States in the defence field, as well as their type of regional cooperation within the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO). In any case, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that, due to the current challenges and the slow advancement of the EU in the field, the Nordic countries did not have other choice but to pursue this course of action, even though this system can lead to several inefficiencies at the European level.

The development of the Nordic Defence Cooperation

During the Cold War, Nordic cooperation in the field of security, defence and foreign policy was very limited due to Finland special relationship with the Soviet Union and their cooperation was restricted under the UN peacekeeping framework (Bengtsson, 2020). In the post-Cold War period, Nordic countries intensified their collaboration on defence and security matters, despite diverging in their approach to both NATO and EU membership. Indeed, Denmark, Sweden and Finland became EU Member States in 1995; Iceland and Norway are not part of the Union; Norway, Denmark and Iceland are NATO's founding members (1949); Sweden and Finland initially opted for the non-alignment, but they recently became NATO's members.

Nowadays, the situation has significantly evolved, with security and defence cooperation becoming a central focus of Nordic collaboration. Since 2009, Nordic countries have been united under NORDEFECO, which aims to 'strengthen the participants' national defence, explore common synergies and facilitate efficient common solutions' as stated in the Memorandum of Understanding between the five countries. One of NORDEFECO's main goals was to achieve a more cost-efficient production of military capabilities (NORDEFECO, 2009). However, this cooperative initiative of NORDEFECO, which was initially regarded as a model worthy of emulation, ultimately proved unsuccessful (Friis & Tamnes, 2024) as it became evident that it could not attain its ambitious objectives the different commitments and affiliations of the parties, the presence of strong national interests and priorities in the defence policy field and some economic constraints (Saxi, 2019). Above all, a significant shortcoming of the Nordic cooperation had been its inability to procure joint equipment through collective planning (Saxi, 2019). However, this failed type of economic-driven cooperation was superseded by a new form of collaboration driven by the intensification of the Russian threat. Since 2014, all Nordic governments have increased their defence spending on defence and have worked to reinforce cohesion with NATO and the EU. They have significantly sought to conclude bilateral agreements, primarily with the US but also with Germany and the UK.

The relations with the US

NORDEFECO never aspired to become an alternative to NATO, rather to function alongside it. Bilateral relations between the US and the Nordic countries are particularly strong in general, except for a short period of tensions during the Trump administration (Archick, 2023). The Defence Cooperation agreements collectively envisage US investment in forty-eight military bases across the Nordics to facilitate the expeditious deployment of US troops and military equipment between the countries.

Iceland

The US has been a defence provider for Iceland since 1951 through the US-Iceland Defence Cooperation Agreement. The two countries reaffirmed the 1951 bilateral defence agreement and committed to further expanding the indispensable partnership during the 2024 annual US-Iceland Strategic Dialogue in Reykjavik (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Norway

With regard to Norway, Oslo has consistently been a crucial partner of Washington, providing a secure storage facility for prepositioned US military equipment and training. Norway and the US signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement in 2021 (Edvardsen, 2023), further facilitating US military training and infrastructure investment. The United States has been granted multiple airbases and a naval base within the country, with two of them in the High North, encompassing the deployment of P-8 maritime patrol aircraft in Evenes and the potential expansion of the Marine Corps Prepositioning Program in Norway (Archick, 2023). These developments exemplify the comprehensive nature of the US-Nordic defence collaboration.

Denmark, Finland, Sweden

Subsequently, in 2023, the US concluded similar bilateral DCAs with Denmark, Finland and Sweden. The aforementioned agreements permit the United States to station troops across Europe's northern region, thereby facilitating enhanced military cooperation. The US military presence has been extended within the DCA framework to include three air bases in Denmark, namely Karup, Skrydstrup, and Aalborg, while Washington has gained access to all Swedish and Finnish air and naval bases throughout the entire territory (Tarociński, 2023). Regarding Greenland, the Pituffik Space Base, which is the northernmost US military installation, remains a pivotal facility in missile warning and space surveillance. Both countries have also continued important air policing and antisubmarine missions bilaterally and in the context of NATO's ongoing missions.

Security and Defence in Europe

The issue of Common Defence within the European Union has long been debated since the beginning of European integration, as the failure of the European Defence Community (EDC) in 1954 reveals (Lefebvre, 2024). Other initiatives took place in the following years until the European Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) was introduced with the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 according to which the Union can take 'a leading role in peacekeeping operations, conflict prevention and in the strengthening of international security' (European Union, 2009). Accordingly, The CSDP was not born with the aim of building a collective defence (Eriuyas & Soydemir, 2022). Yet the 2014 Crimea's crisis reminded Europeans that they must take a step forward in deterrence and collective defence. In 2017, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) was initiated as part of the European Security and Defence Policy. Through PESCO, Member States are encouraged to pursue structural integration in the military field (EEAS, 2022). Nevertheless, defence cooperation remained the exception and not the rule (Monaghan, 2023) despite the general increase in defence spending (EDF, 2023).

Even though the EU is still facing serious persisting issues in the defence cooperation field, since 2022, Europe has experienced historic changes, especially regarding the Northern flank. Not only have Finland and Sweden abandoned their long-standing policy of formal neutrality, but last year Denmark concluded a three-decade period of opting out of European Union Defence Cooperation by joining both the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation agreement (PESCO) and the European Defence Agency (Mcleary & Kayali, 2023). Nevertheless, the history of Nordic countries reveals their reluctance to advance at a fast pace towards greater European integration in every policy area, and as a consequence they mainly rely on the US concerning defence cooperation (Kristin Haugevik & Øyvind Svendsen, 2021). Indeed, they all consider NATO membership primarily an alliance with the United States, secondarily with other EU countries, and lastly with each other (Arnold, Bergmann & Friis, 2024).

The impact of regionalist alliances and bilateral cooperation on the EU unity and strategic autonomy

The impact of regionalist alliances and bilateral defence cooperation agreements (DCAs) on EU unity and strategic autonomy is multifaceted, presenting both challenges and opportunities.

Firstly, the numerous bilateral agreements emphasize the need for coherence and quality over quantity to reduce fragmentation, which is certainly not paving the way for stronger common Defence Cooperation at the European level. Indeed, since almost all EU Member States maintain their own bilateral security and defence agreements with the United States, it is important to identify the domains where each state recognises a common need to engage in defence discussions with Washington. This opens up new possible areas of cooperation at the EU level (Andersson, 2023).

In addition to bilateral partnerships, European states also seek to cooperate on defence within regional defence coalitions (Bengtsson, 2020). In this intricate landscape, understanding whether the actual system constitutes an obstacle to a more integrated European defence or if it enhances the overall European security and defence framework can be very complex. However, some considerations can be drawn. Some regionalist alliances, such as NORDEFECO, The Baltics, and the Visegrad Group Defence Cooperation, share overlapping features that could easily be pursued within a common structure, which would enable more direct and quick communication with NATO. Moreover, in some instances, membership also overlaps, as shown by NORDEFECO and the subsequent Sweden-Denmark-Norway separate defence cooperation agreement signed in 2021.

Secondly, the DCAs, even if probably causing differences among states, are of fundamental importance to preserve the presence of the United States in the Baltic region and Europe in general. Considering that a more substantial US involvement is needed in the Indo-Pacific to deter potential threats posed by China, the American presence in Europe is likely to be reduced, a fortiori in the event of a Donald Trump re-election (Heisghbourg, 2024). It is clear that the Nordic region is currently facing a more difficult situation than other areas of Europe, which has subsequently led two of the most neutralist countries in the world to join the North Atlantic Alliance. The signature or renewal of several defence cooperation agreements with the US is a result of a legitimate fear (Edvardsen, 2023) that has so far been unable to find any other form of reassurance given the dire state of European defence cooperation (Monaghan, 2023).

The Nordic countries are probably better protected than ever before (Eds, 2024), but they must be aware that this could be a temporary solution (Arnold, Bergmann & Friis, 2024). Thus, while a more integrated Europe is definitely desirable, the numerous existing treaties and agreements complicate discerning where the European security architecture is heading (Leimand, 2024).

Conclusion

Bilateral Defence Cooperation Agreements and all other forms of regional defence coalitions, enhance regional security, particularly in response to immediate threats. However, they also highlight the significant challenges the EU faces in achieving an effective common Security and Defence due to the fragmented landscape they produce. Even though the new situation strengthens the overall NATO defence system, the multifaceted defence cooperation framework at the European level can create deeper divisions within Europe (Olsen, 2024). The effects of this will need to be evaluated when the presence of the United States on the Continent diminishes. In the short term, the DCAs offer immediate security benefits, yet in the long term, they are likely to fragment further the European concert, which is already primarily divided by political factors. The case of the Nordic countries' security framework offers an illuminating example: despite their progress in building closer cooperation among themselves and with the US, they will urgently need their European allies' support in case of protracted conflicts in the North (Arnold, Bergmann & Friis, 2024). In conclusion, rather than pursuing an individual strategy of securing the most advantageous bilateral agreement with the United States, European countries should better focus on resolving their long-standing defence dilemma.

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