

## **NORDEFCO AND THE PARADOX OF REGIONAL INTEGRATION**

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### **Abstract**

*The Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO), established in 2009, represents regional security integration among Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. This paper examines the paradox of NORDEFCO enhancing collective defense through joint exercises and procurement. At the same time, member states uphold distinct national security policies due to different historical perspectives, alliance commitments, and evolving threat perceptions, particularly regarding Russia's aggression. Using qualitative research, including document analysis and case studies, the paper employs frameworks like Regional Security Complex Theory and neorealism to analyse cooperation dynamics. It investigates Nordic security collaboration from Cold War constraints to modern hybrid threats and cyber defense. Although NORDEFCO has improved interoperability and cost-effective defense, fostering regional identity, its incremental and consensus-based approach poses challenges for full integration. The findings emphasizes balancing national interests with collective goals, showcasing both successes and challenges in Nordic regional security integration.*

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**Keywords:** NORDEFCO, Regional integration, Regional Security Complex Theory, Collective defence.

### **Introduction**

The Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO), established in 2009 represents a significant step towards regional security integration in Northern Europe. Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden are members of NORDEFCO. These nations, bound by historical, cultural, and linguistic ties and a tradition of multilateral cooperation within frameworks like the Nordic Council and the United Nations (Jakobsson, 2006), have historically maintained limited defence collaboration. The Cold War era, marked by Sweden and Finland's neutrality and Denmark, Iceland, and Norway's North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) membership, constrained the development of joint defence mechanisms. The post-Cold War landscape witnessed Finland and Sweden progressively engaging with NATO, fostering incremental advancements in Nordic Defence collaboration and ultimately leading to the formation of NORDEFCO. This cooperative framework aims to strengthen national defence structures, identify synergistic capabilities, and promote effective collective solutions, advocating for a more streamlined defence collaboration at both military and political levels.

However, regional security integration is a complex and dynamic process, seeks to enhance collective security through cooperation among neighbouring states. Theoretical frameworks, such as neorealism, emphasizing state interests and power dynamics, and liberal institutionalism,

highlighting the benefits of cooperation through established mechanisms and treaties (Bredesen & Friis, 2019), offer lenses to understand the motivations and challenges inherent in such integration efforts. NORDEFCO is a crucial case study in regional integration within Northern Europe. Its core objective is to bolster the defense capabilities of its member states through initiatives like joint training, procurement, and strategic synchronisation (Friis, 2021). Nevertheless, NORDEFCO faces a fundamental paradox: despite increasing security cooperation, the national security policies of member states continue to diverge due to varying geopolitical priorities and external pressures, particularly in response to Russian actions in Ukraine (Vitsenko, 2023).

This paper examines this paradox of regional integration within NORDEFCO, exploring the tension between growing collaboration and persistent divergences in national policies. The analysis will first review the theoretical underpinnings of regional integration. Second, it will evaluate the evolution of NORDEFCO and its key initiatives. Third, it will investigate the challenges of external threats and internal policy discrepancies. Finally, it will discuss the implications for the future of security cooperation in the Nordic region. This paper aims to provide a meaningful contribution to understanding NORDEFCO, regional integration and its practical limitations by addressing these dimensions.

## **Materials and Methods**

This study employs a qualitative design focused on document analysis, case studies, and a historical review of Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) related to regional integration. NORDEFCO serves as the main case study, highlighting regional collaboration dynamics. Data collection involved primary and secondary sources. Primary data came from official NORDEFCO websites, relevant documents, and annual reports. Secondary data included books, journal articles, academic publications, and analyses from respected scholars. Since the research relies on document analysis instead of direct interviews, it poses minimal ethical risks, with careful attention given to the appropriate use of all sources.

## **Literature Review**

The expanding domain of regional security cooperation has seen the rise of various frameworks designed to strengthen collective defence and stability. Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) is a noteworthy, though frequently overlooked, instance of regional integration in security. This literature review examines the scholarly and policy-focused literature regarding NORDEFCO and its implications for regional integration, particularly in the Nordic area and the wider European context. It will investigate the historical development of Nordic defence cooperation, the motivations and goals driving NORDEFCO, its institutional framework and operational initiatives, the challenges and opportunities it encounters, as well as its broader impact on the theory and practice of regional integration. The seeds of NORDEFCO can be traced back to the post-World War II era, driven by shared geopolitical realities and security concerns amidst the Cold War. Early forms of collaboration were primarily bilateral and focused on specific areas like military exercises and information sharing (Johannesson, 2005). The establishment of the Nordic Council in 1952 provided a formal platform for broader regional cooperation, including security-related discussions. However, a formal defence alliance remained elusive due to differing security policy orientations (Denmark and Norway are NATO members, and Sweden and Finland maintain neutrality/non-alignment) (Browning, 2018).

Despite the absence of a formal treaty, pragmatic cooperation continued and evolved. Initiatives like the Nordic Peacekeeping Forces (NORDSAMFN) in the 1960s demonstrated a commitment to joint action in international peace operations (Dörfer, 1982). The end of the Cold War and the subsequent shifts in the European security landscape provided new impetus for more formalised and comprehensive defence cooperation, culminating in the establishment of NORDEFCO in 2009 (Mattelaer, 2016). This evolution from informal collaboration to a structured framework highlights a gradual but persistent trend towards deeper regional integration in the security sphere, driven by shared interests in stability and efficiency (Lunden, 2019).

The establishment and continued development of NORDEFCO are underpinned by a complex interplay of motivations and objectives. A key driver is the pursuit of enhanced security and stability in the Nordic region. Faced with shared vulnerabilities and potential threats, the Nordic countries recognize the added value of collective action in addressing security challenges that transcend national borders (such as, cyber threats, maritime security, and crisis management) (Heisbourg, 2018). *Efficiency and resource optimization* also play a significant role. By pooling resources, coordinating procurement, and sharing infrastructure, the Nordic countries aim to achieve economies of scale and enhance the cost-effectiveness of their defense capabilities, particularly in an era of budgetary constraints (Tarociński, 2024). This pragmatic approach allows smaller states to maintain credible defense forces and address capability gaps more effectively than acting in isolation (Veenendaal & Corbett, 2015).

Furthermore, NORDEFCO is a platform for strengthening *interoperability and military cohesion* among the Nordic armed forces. Joint training exercises, standardised procedures, and shared operational doctrines enhance their ability to operate seamlessly in various scenarios, ranging from crisis response to collective defence (Saxi, 2011). This enhanced interoperability benefits regional security and strengthens their contributions to international security initiatives like NATO-led operations. Finally, NORDEFCO can be seen as an expression of *Nordic solidarity and identity* in security policy. Rooted in shared values and a history of cooperation, NORDEFCO reinforces the sense of a distinct Nordic security community, even amidst differing formal alliance affiliations (Hyde-Price, 2018). This shared identity facilitates deeper trust and cooperation in sensitive areas like defence.

NORDEFCO operates through a decentralized structure, primarily based on political consultations and voluntary participation in specific areas of cooperation. The *Ministerial Council*, composed of the Nordic defense ministers, serves as the highest decision-making body, providing strategic guidance and setting priorities (NORDEFCO, n.d.). The *Chiefs of Defence (CHODs) Committee* oversees military-strategic matters and operational planning. Various working groups and expert panels address specific areas of cooperation, such as capability development, training and exercises, and logistics (NORDEFCO, n.d.).

NORDEFCO's operational activities encompass a wide range of areas, including:

- I. **Joint Military Exercises:** Regular exercises enhance interoperability and test the ability of Nordic forces to operate together in diverse scenarios.
- II. **Capability Cooperation:** This includes joint procurement projects, specialization of military roles, and the sharing of defense infrastructure.

- III. **Information Sharing and Situational Awareness:** Enhanced collaboration in intelligence gathering and analysis contributes to a shared understanding of the regional security environment.
- IV. **Crisis Management and Humanitarian Assistance:** NORDEFCO facilitates coordinated responses to natural disasters and humanitarian crises within and beyond the Nordic region.
- V. **Cyber Security and Hybrid Threats:** Recognizing the growing importance of these domains, NORDEFCO is increasingly focusing on joint efforts to enhance resilience and response capabilities.

The flexible and project-based nature of NORDEFCO allows for pragmatic cooperation in areas where common interests converge, while respecting the individual security policy choices of the participating states (Saxi, 2011). Despite its successes, NORDEFCO faces several challenges. The differing security policy orientations of the member states, particularly the NATO membership of Denmark and Norway versus the non-aligned status of Sweden and Finland (until Finland's recent accession to NATO), can create complexities in terms of strategic alignment and operational integration (Dahl, 2021). National sovereignty concerns and bureaucratic hurdles can also impede deeper integration in sensitive areas like defense procurement and operational command (Garner, 2013). Furthermore, resource constraints and competing national priorities can limit the scope and ambition of joint projects. The need for consensus among five independent nations can also lead to slower decision-making processes (Movsisyan, 2008). However, NORDEFCO also presents significant opportunities for enhanced regional integration. The evolving security landscape in Europe, particularly in light of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, has underscored the importance of regional security cooperation and has arguably created a stronger impetus for closer Nordic defense ties (Bertoldini, 2023). Finland's recent NATO membership, and potentially Sweden's in the future, could further streamline cooperation and open up new avenues for integration within the NATO framework (Alberque & Schreer, 2022).

NORDEFCO can also serve as a model for other regions seeking to enhance security cooperation without necessarily pursuing full-fledged military alliances. Its pragmatic and flexible approach, focusing on concrete areas of mutual benefit, offers valuable lessons for regional integration in the security domain (Hyde-Price, 2018). NORDEFCO's experience offers valuable insights into the broader dynamics of regional integration, particularly in the security sector. It demonstrates that regional integration can occur in a gradual and incremental manner, driven by pragmatic considerations and evolving geopolitical realities, even in the absence of formal supranational structures (Friis, 2021). The case of NORDEFCO highlights the importance of *shared identity and values* as facilitating factors for regional cooperation, even when formal institutional integration is limited (NORDEFCO, n.d.). The long history of Nordic cooperation in other areas, such as economic and social policy, has likely contributed to the trust and understanding necessary for deeper security collaboration.

Furthermore, NORDEFCO illustrates the interplay between *internal drivers* (e.g., efficiency, enhanced capabilities) and *external pressures* (e.g., evolving security threats) in shaping the trajectory of regional integration (Shatilo, 2020). The changing geopolitical landscape has consistently acted as a catalyst for deepening Nordic defense cooperation.

Finally, NORDEFCO's relationship with broader European security structures, particularly NATO and the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), underscores the complex and multi-layered nature of regional security governance (Dorosh & Lemko, 2024). While NORDEFCO operates independently, its member states are also embedded in these larger frameworks, creating both opportunities for synergy and potential for overlap or divergence. The literature on NORDEFCO reveals a compelling case study of regional integration in the security domain. Evolving from informal bilateral cooperation to a structured framework, NORDEFCO demonstrates the potential for pragmatic and effective security collaboration among sovereign states with shared interests and values. While facing challenges related to differing security policies and resource constraints, NORDEFCO offers significant opportunities for enhanced regional security, interoperability, and efficiency. Its experiences provide valuable insights into the drivers, dynamics, and limitations of regional integration in the complex and ever-evolving landscape of international security. Future research should continue to explore the impact of Finland's NATO membership on NORDEFCO's future trajectory, its role in addressing emerging security threats, and its broader contribution to the theory and practice of regional security governance.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) is a prime example of regional security collaboration in Northern Europe. Understanding its dynamics demands a theoretical analysis grounded in international relations perspectives. There are four major theories—Security Community Theory, Regional Security Complex Theory, Neorealism/Neoliberalism, and Constructivism—that evaluate how NORDEFCO operates within the Nordic regional security architecture. This paper posits that the NORDEFCO and its impact on regional integration in the Nordic region can be effectively analyzed through the principles of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). RSCT was developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, provides a valuable lens for understanding the dynamics of security interdependence and the patterns of cooperation and competition within a geographically contiguous area.

### **Core Tenets of Regional Security Complex Theory:**

In order to apply RSCT to NORDEFCO, it's crucial to understand its key concepts:

- I. **Regional Security Complex (RSC):** An RSC is defined as a geographically coherent set of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart (Buzan & Wæver, 2009). These linkages are characterized by patterns of amity and enmity.
- II. **Security Interdependence:** States within an RSC are significantly interdependent in terms of their security. Threats and vulnerabilities in one state can have direct and significant repercussions for others in the complex. This interdependence can drive both cooperation and conflict.
- III. **Amity and Enmity:** Relationships within an RSC are not uniform. They range from amity (friendly, cooperative relations) to enmity (hostile, conflictual). The balance between these forces shapes the complex's overall security dynamics.

- IV. **Polarity:** Similar to the international system, RSCs exhibit different forms of polarity (e.g., unipolar, bipolar, multipolar), which influences the distribution of power and the patterns of interaction.
- V. **Overlay:** External powers can project their influence into an RSC, creating an overlay that affects the complex's internal dynamics. These external actors can become either integrators or disruptors.

### **Application of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to NORDEFCO and Regional Integration:**

Let's apply these tenets to understand how NORDEFCO influences regional integration within the Nordic region:

- I. **The Nordic Region as a Regional Security Complex:** The Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) exhibit characteristics of an RSC. Their geographical proximity, shared historical and cultural ties, and increasing security interdependence, particularly in the Baltic Sea region and the Arctic, link their national securities. While historical periods have seen varying degrees of amity and enmity, the post-Cold War era has largely been characterised by a high degree of amity and cooperation (Bengtsson, 2006).
- II. **NORDEFCO as a Manifestation of Security Interdependence and Amity:** The establishment and evolution of NORDEFCO can be seen as a direct outcome of the recognized security interdependence and the prevailing amity among the Nordic states. Recognizing shared security challenges and the potential for collective benefits, these nations have sought to enhance their defense cooperation through NORDEFCO. This cooperation encompasses areas such as joint military exercises, capability development, information sharing, and potentially, interoperability.
- III. **Navigating Polarity and External Overlays:** The Nordic RSC is influenced by external powers and shifts in the broader European and global security landscape. The presence and actions of actors like Russia, NATO, and the European Union constitute an overlay on the Nordic RSC. NORDEFCO can be seen as a mechanism for the Nordic states to collectively manage these external influences and enhance their collective security posture within these broader contexts. For instance, NORDEFCO can facilitate closer coordination among the Nordic NATO members and non-members in addressing shared security concerns arising from external actors.
- IV. **NORDEFCO's Role in Deepening Regional Integration:** NORDEFCO contributes to regional integration in several ways:

**Functional Integration:** By fostering practical cooperation in defense matters, NORDEFCO promotes functional integration. This can spill over into other areas of cooperation, building trust and shared norms among the participating states (Haas, 1958).

**Security Community Building:** The sustained cooperation within NORDEFCO can contribute to the development of a "security community" (Deutsch et al., 1957), where states share expectations of peaceful change and do not anticipate using force

against each other. The regular interaction and shared understanding fostered by NORDEFCO can strengthen these bonds.

**Normative Convergence:** Cooperation in the security domain can lead to a convergence of security perspectives and norms among the Nordic states, further solidifying their regional identity and shared understanding of threats and responses.

**Increased Interoperability and Standardization:** Efforts within NORDEFCO to enhance military interoperability and standardization of equipment and procedures can lead to deeper institutional integration within the defense sector.

Applying Regional Security Complex Theory provides a solid framework for understanding the dynamics between NORDEFCO and regional integration in the Nordic region. It emphasises how shared security interdependence and a strong sense of amity have driven the establishment and evolution of NORDEFCO. The cooperative activities within NORDEFCO, in turn, contribute to functional integration, security community building, and normative convergence among the Nordic states. Furthermore, RSCT helps to contextualize NORDEFCO within the broader European and global security landscape, recognising the influence of external actors. By analyzing NORDEFCO through the lens of RSCT, we gain a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between security cooperation and the broader regional integration processes in the Nordic context.

## **Historical Development of NORDEFCO**

The Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) represents one of Europe's most innovative regional security frameworks. It was born from the Nordic states' shared commitment to collective defence in an era of shifting geopolitical threats. This section examines NORDEFCO's evolution from its Cold War-era divisions to its current role as a cornerstone of Nordic-Baltic security, highlighting its successes, challenges, and prospects.

Due to differing security policies, Nordic Defence collaboration was limited during the Cold War. Denmark, Norway, and Iceland joined NATO, while Sweden and Finland chose neutrality to avoid provoking the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, informal cooperation persisted, such as Sweden's intelligence-sharing with NATO in the 1980s (Dahl, 2021). The Cold War's end in 1991 transformed the security landscape. Neutral countries like Sweden and Finland joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (Pfp) program in 1994, signalling a readiness to engage with Western defence frameworks. Early efforts, like the Nordic Armaments Cooperation, aimed to reduce costs through shared procurement. At the same time, the Nordic Coordinated Arrangement for Peace Support allowed for collaborative peacekeeping in the Balkans and Afghanistan. However, these initiatives lacked institutional coherence, highlighting a lack of unified strategic vision.

The 2000s saw a paradigm shift in Nordic defence thinking due to rising non-state threats like terrorism and Russia's resurgence under Vladimir Putin. The Nordic Battle Group (2004–2009), a 2,500-strong European Union (EU) rapid reaction force, marked a turning point. Although never deployed, it showcased interoperability and highlighted logistical gaps, leading to calls for a permanent framework (NORDEFCO Annual Report, 2015). In 2008, Finland, Norway, and Sweden initiated the Nordic Supportive Defence Structures (NORDSUP) feasibility study,

identifying over 140 cooperation areas, from joint training to cyber defense. This effort resulted in the Stoltenberg Report (2009) by former Norwegian Foreign Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg, proposing 13 integration measures, including mutual defense pledges and shared airspace surveillance (Security Outlines, 2022). On 4 November 2009, all five Nordic states signed the NORDEFCO Memorandum of Understanding, merging NORDAC, Nordic Co-ordinated Arrangement for Military Peace Support (NORDCAPS), and Nordic Supportive Defence Structures (NORDSUP) into one entity.

NORDEFCO's initial focus on "Smart Defence" prioritized cost-saving measures, such as shared submarine rescue capabilities and joint exercises like Cold Response in Norway. However, progress was uneven. National procurement policies, such as Sweden's investment in the Gripen fighter and Norway's purchase of F-35s, hindered joint acquisitions (Skemman, 2019). A 2012 review noted achievements in training but lamented the lack of political will for deeper integration. The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea became a catalyst for change. Nordic states, particularly Finland and Sweden, recalibrated their threat assessments, recognizing the vulnerability of the Baltic Sea and Arctic regions. NORDEFCO shifted its focus from joint procurements to operational readiness, initiating weekly air patrols and bi-annual Arctic drills (NORDEFCO Annual Report, 2015).

The Crimea crisis transformed NORDEFCO into a hub for operational collaboration. Key initiatives included:

- I. **Enhanced Exercises:** Large-scale drills like Arctic Challenge (involving over 100 aircraft) and Aurora (Sweden's largest exercise since the Cold War) focused on high-intensity conflict scenarios.
- II. **Cyber Defense:** Joint threat assessments and capacity-building programs, such as the Nordic Cyber Defence Network, addressed hybrid threats.
- III. **Baltic-Nordic Synergy:** Partnerships with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania on intelligence-sharing and hybrid threat mitigation, exemplified by the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) framework.

Finland and Sweden's deepening ties with NATO, including participation in the \*Enhanced Forward Presence\* initiative, further blurred the line between alignment and non-alignment (Dahl, 2021).

NORDEFCO's 2018 Vision emphasised resilience against hybrid threats, technological innovation, and third-party partnerships. The concept of "flexible participation" allowed non-Nordic countries like the UK and US to engage in initiatives like the Nordic Defence Industry Cooperation (NDIC), focusing on AI and Arctic warfare technologies. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 intensified integration efforts.

- I. **NATO Accession:** Finland joined NATO in April 2023, followed by Sweden in March 2024, altering NORDEFCO's strategic context.
- II. **Defense Spending:** Nordic states increased budgets, with Sweden targeting 2% of GDP by 2024 and Norway allocating \$8.6 billion to modernize its armed forces (Dahl, 2021).
- III. **Arctic Security:** Joint investments in satellite surveillance and ice-capable patrol ships, like Norway's \*\*Jan Mayen-class vessels \*\*\*, addressed Russia's militarization of the Arctic.

NORDEFCO's evolution from a loose cooperative framework to a security innovator reflects the Nordic states' adaptability in an uncertain geopolitical climate. While challenges remain, its emphasis on flexibility, technological advancement, and regional solidarity positions it as a model for 21st-century defence cooperation. As the Arctic emerges as a contested domain and hybrid threats multiply, NORDEFCO's ability to integrate emerging technologies and foster cross-regional partnerships will determine its enduring relevance.

## **The Vision of NORDEFCO**

The Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO), founded in 2009, is a platform to enhance national defenses and implement joint solutions. In light of Russia's aggression towards Ukraine and the NATO accession of Finland and Sweden, NORDEFCO has introduced a bold new vision outlined in the "Vision for Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO)" document, emphasising collaborative military capabilities and a more integrated NATO role. NORDEFCO's vision focuses on a unified commitment among Nordic nations to strengthen deterrence and defense in the Nordic region and Euro-Atlantic Area. This operational shift aims to enable joint military operations against current and emerging security challenges in coordination with NATO allies (High North News, 2024). A unified Nordic defense posture enhances overall deterrence in Northern Europe.

To operationalize this overarching vision, NORDEFCO has set several key objectives to be achieved by 2030

- I. Enhanced Strategic Dialogue and Cooperation:** Encouraging deeper discussions on the changing security environment and intelligence sharing.
- II. Combined Joint Operations Capability:** Planning and executing joint military missions, supporting national and allied efforts.
- III. Improved Host Nation Support and Logistics:** Effective logistical support for joint operations and allied reinforcements.
- IV. Military Mobility:** Easing movement barriers for military personnel and equipment.
- V. Aligned Capabilities:** Establishing defense capabilities aligned with NATO and EU initiatives.
- VI. Defense Materiel Cooperation:** Enhancing military equipment interchangeability and joint procurement.
- VII. Military Supply Security:** Strengthening the Nordic defense industry's foundation for resilience.
- VIII. Total Defence Approach:** Fostering collaboration across societal sectors to enhance defense readiness.

Finland's 2025 chairmanship of NORDEFCO is crucial for advancing this vision, focusing on operationalizing Vision 2030, updating founding documents for the new security context, enhancing defense materiel collaboration on ammunition, developing military mobility, and continuing NATO cooperative efforts

NORDEFCO envisions an integrated and operationally effective Nordic defense collaboration that significantly contributes to regional and Euro-Atlantic security within NATO. By improving interoperability, joint operational capabilities, and defense industrial collaboration, NORDEFCO aims to prepare the Nordic nations for present and future security challenges.

## **Operational Achievements of NORDEFCO**

The Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) has facilitated several operational achievements among its member states (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden). These achievements aim to enhance the Nordic countries' defense capabilities, promote interoperability, and foster cooperation in various military domains.

### **Key Operational Achievements**

- **Military Cooperation:**
  - **Joint Military Exercises, Training, and Operations:** NORDEFCO has significantly enhanced joint military exercises, training, and operations. For example, the "Arctic Challenge Exercise" (ACE) is a recurring high-intensity air combat exercise involving Nordic air forces and allies, designed to enhance interoperability and effectiveness in multinational air operations. These exercises not only improve national capabilities but also demonstrate the strong cooperation between Nordic countries.
  - **Interoperability and Standardization Efforts:** A key focus of NORDEFCO is to improve interoperability and standardization among the Nordic armed forces. This is evident in initiatives like the development of common exercise plans, such as the Combined Joint Nordic Exercise Plan (CJNEP), which aims to synchronize exercises and strengthen cooperation with transatlantic and Baltic countries (Nordefco, n.d.).
  - **Cooperation in Specific Domains:**
    - **Air:** Nordic air forces conduct regular combined air combat training missions, and exercises like ACE involve extensive coordination of multinational air operations (Nordefco, n.d.).
    - **Naval:** NORDEFCO has fostered cooperation in naval mine counter measures to enhance interoperability and the ability to conduct joint operations in this critical domain (Nordefco, n.d.).
    - **Cyber:** While specific details on cyber cooperation may be less publicly emphasized, NORDEFCO facilitates information sharing and coordination to address cyber threats, recognizing the growing importance of this domain in modern defense (NORDEFCO Annual Report 2015).
- **Defense Capabilities:**
  - **Joint Procurement Projects and Defense Industrial Cooperation:** NORDEFCO has promoted joint procurement projects to achieve cost-efficiency and enhance

defense capabilities. The Nordic Combat Uniform project, where Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden collaborated to procure a common uniform system, is a prime example of successful defense industrial cooperation (Ministry of Defence Finland, 2022). This project not only reduces costs but also improves interoperability among Nordic forces.

- **Strengthening Defense Capabilities:** Through initiatives like joint exercises, standardized training, and collaborative procurement, NORDEFCO has contributed to strengthening the defense capabilities of its members. These efforts ensure that Nordic forces can operate effectively together, enhancing their collective ability to respond to security challenges.
- **Civil-Military Cooperation:**
  - NORDEFCO also enhances civil-military cooperation in critical areas. This includes cooperation in:
    - **Crisis Management:** NORDEFCO facilitates dialogue and coordination in crisis management to ensure effective responses to emergencies (Government.se, 2015).
    - **Disaster Relief:** While not always the primary focus, NORDEFCO's emphasis on interoperability and coordination can also benefit disaster relief efforts, enabling Nordic countries to provide more effective assistance in times of need.
    - **Cyber Security:** Recognizing the growing threat of cyber attacks, NORDEFCO promotes cooperation in cyber defense to protect critical infrastructure and enhance resilience (NORDEFCO Annual Report, 2015).
- **International Cooperation:**
  - **Relationship with International Organizations:** NORDEFCO works closely with other international organizations, most notably NATO and the EU, to enhance regional security. The Nordic countries, many of whom are NATO members, see NORDEFCO as a complement to their NATO commitments, strengthening their ability to contribute to collective defense (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024).
  - **Role in International Security Operations:** NORDEFCO has played a role in coordinating Nordic contributions to international security operations. For instance, Nordic countries have cooperated in supporting operations in Afghanistan and Africa, demonstrating their commitment to global security (NORDEFCO, n.d.).

NORDEFCO's operational achievements have significantly enhanced military cooperation, strengthened defense capabilities, and fostered civil-military and international cooperation among the Nordic countries. Through joint exercises, procurement projects, and coordination in various

domains, NORDEFCO has improved the interoperability, effectiveness, and readiness of Nordic forces. As the security landscape continues to evolve, NORDEFCO remains a vital framework for Nordic defense collaboration, complementing their engagement with other international organizations and contributing to regional and global security.

### **Challenges Facing NORDEFCO**

#### **Different Security Priorities and Foreign Policies:**

Denmark, Norway, and Iceland are founding members of NATO, anchoring their security within the transatlantic alliance. Their focus often aligns with NATO's broader strategic objectives, including collective defense against external aggression, particularly from Russia. They have actively participated in NATO missions and exercises. Sweden and Finland, historically neutral or militarily non-aligned, have traditionally prioritized their territorial defense and regional stability. However, Russia's increasing assertiveness, especially the invasion of Ukraine, has led both countries to significantly reassess their security postures, culminating in their recent NATO membership. Iceland, uniquely, has no standing army but relies on NATO for its defense. Each nation also navigates its relationship with the European Union differently, with Denmark and Finland being members, while Norway and Iceland are part of the European Economic Area (EEA). These varying affiliations influence their perspectives on defense and security cooperation within a purely Nordic framework.

#### **Balancing National Interests with Regional Cooperation:**

The inherent challenge lies in reconciling these diverse priorities. For instance, while all Nordic countries recognize the threat posed by Russia, their approaches to countering it may differ based on their alliance commitments and geographical locations. Denmark and Norway might prioritize contributions to NATO's forward presence in the Baltic Sea, while Finland and Sweden focus on their land and maritime borders. Balancing these national imperatives with the collective need for a unified Nordic security posture requires constant negotiation and compromise. As noted by Mouritzen (2017), regional cooperation often hinges on the lowest common denominator, potentially limiting the ambition and scope of joint initiatives.

#### **Complexities Arising from Different Relationships with NATO and the EU:**

The varying relationships with NATO and the EU further complicate NORDEFCO. NATO members might prioritize their obligations within the alliance, potentially viewing NORDEFCO as supplementary. Sweden and Finland's recent NATO accession, while strengthening overall Nordic security, also introduces new dynamics within NORDEFCO. Their integration into NATO's command structures and strategic planning will inevitably influence their capacity and priorities for purely Nordic defense initiatives. Similarly, EU membership for Denmark and Finland brings obligations and opportunities within the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which might, at times, overlap or compete with NORDEFCO initiatives (Hyde-Price, 2019).

#### **Defense Budget Cuts and Economic Constraints on NORDEFCO's Activities:**

Following the end of the Cold War, many Nordic countries experienced periods of defense budget reductions. While there has been a recent uptick in defense spending due to the changed security environment, historical constraints have left their mark. Limited resources can hinder joint procurement projects, joint training exercises, and the development of interoperable capabilities. Economic downturns can further exacerbate these limitations, forcing difficult choices between national defense needs and contributions to regional cooperation. This can lead to a situation where ambitious NORDEFCO plans are scaled down or delayed due to a lack of funding or personnel.

### **Organizational Structure and Decision-Making Processes of NORDEFCO:**

NORDEFCO is primarily a framework for voluntary cooperation, lacking a supranational authority or a binding legal framework. Decisions are typically made through consensus among the participating nations. This consensus-based approach, while respecting national sovereignty, can be slow and cumbersome, particularly when dealing with urgent security matters or when national interests diverge. The lack of a strong central secretariat with independent resources and authority can also limit NORDEFCO's ability to initiate and implement large-scale projects effectively.

### **Lack of a Unified Command Structure and Its Implications:**

The absence of a unified military command structure is a significant limitation. In a crisis or conflict scenario, the Nordic countries would operate under their respective national commands or within the NATO framework for the allied members. This lack of a joint command hinders seamless interoperability and the ability to conduct coordinated military operations under a single Nordic banner. While there is cooperation on exercises and standardization, the absence of a unified command structure can lead to delays and complexities in a real-world contingency.

### **Russia's Military Buildup and Assertive Foreign Policy:**

Russia's military modernization, increased activity in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic, and its willingness to use force have fundamentally altered the security landscape for the Nordic countries. This shared threat perception has been a significant catalyst for closer Nordic cooperation. However, the direct impact and perceived urgency of this threat can vary. For Finland and Norway, sharing long borders with Russia, the threat might feel more immediate than for Denmark or Iceland. This difference in perception can influence national priorities and the willingness to commit resources to joint Nordic initiatives.

### **Terrorism, Cyber Warfare, and Hybrid Threats:**

These transnational threats require a coordinated response that transcends national borders. NORDEFCO provides a platform for sharing intelligence, best practices, and developing joint capabilities to counter these threats. However, the diverse national legal frameworks, intelligence-sharing protocols, and levels of technological expertise can create challenges in achieving seamless cooperation. For instance, cyber security strategies and capabilities might vary significantly across the Nordic nations, hindering a unified response to a large-scale cyberattack targeting the region.

### **The Paradox Revisited: Integration against the Odds**

Despite a growing recognition of shared security threats, particularly from Russia, the deep-seated divergence in national interests, resource constraints, institutional limitations, and varying threat perceptions act as significant impediments to deeper integration. The desire for enhanced security through regional cooperation is often counterbalanced by the imperative to protect national sovereignty, prioritize national defense needs, and adhere to existing alliance commitments. This creates a tension where the logic of collective security in the face of external threats clashes with the realities of independent state action and differing strategic cultures. Deeper integration necessitates a willingness to pool sovereignty, resources, and command structures to a greater extent than currently exists within NORDEFCO. The historical legacy of neutrality for some, the strong anchoring in NATO for others, and the practical limitations of budgets and bureaucratic processes make such a fundamental shift challenging. While the recent geopolitical realignment has spurred closer cooperation, it has also, in the case of Finland and Sweden's NATO membership, potentially shifted their primary security focus towards the alliance, rather than solely on a Nordic framework. The paradox lies in the fact that while the need for collective security is evident, the path towards deeper integration is fraught with political, economic, and institutional hurdles that are difficult to overcome.

In conclusion, NORDEFCO operates within a complex web of national priorities, resource limitations, and institutional structures. While external threats provide a strong impetus for closer cooperation, these internal and external factors contribute to the persistent paradox of striving for deeper regional security integration while facing significant obstacles in achieving it. Overcoming this paradox will require sustained political will, a greater convergence of national security interests, and a willingness to explore more ambitious forms of institutional cooperation.

## **The Future of NORDEFCO**

Despite the challenges, NORDEFCO possesses significant potential to deepen its cooperation across various domains, enhancing the collective security of the Nordic region.

- I. Joint procurement of defense equipment presents a promising opportunity. By combining resources and standardising requirements, Nordic countries can achieve economies of scale, reduce costs, and enhance interoperability (Gstöhl, 2016). For instance, a collaborative approach to acquiring advanced air defense systems or maritime patrol aircraft could yield more effective and economical solutions than isolated national efforts. This strategy would also foster stronger regional industrial collaboration and technology sharing.
- II. Efficiency improvements can be achieved by specialising and dividing labour within defence. Each Nordic nation could focus on unique abilities where they excel, collaborating on other fronts. For example, one country may focus on Arctic warfare, another on cyber defence, and a third on maritime surveillance. This requires strong trust and coordination in defence planning, but could lead to a more resilient and adaptable defence stance.
- III. Improving defense strategies is essential for effective crisis management. This includes creating joint operational plans, conducting frequent military drills, and implementing standardised situational awareness systems. Ongoing discussions at both strategic and

operational levels can promote a unified understanding of threats, facilitating cooperation during crises (Waltz, 1979).

- IV. To address hybrid threats blurring lines between peace and conflict, a coordinated approach using both conventional and unconventional strategies is essential. NORDEFCO can enhance collaboration in intelligence sharing, strategic communications, and resilience-building. Joint training should cover disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and critical infrastructure manipulation. Additionally, strengthening societal resilience through public awareness and cross-sector collaboration is vital (Bajarūnas & Keršanskas, 2018).
- V. Cybersecurity is a critical domain for enhancing cooperation, including joint cyber threat intelligence centres, common cybersecurity standards, and joint exercises to improve resilience. Sharing best practices for protecting critical infrastructure and coordinating responses to cyberattacks is essential for safeguarding national and regional security in the digital age.
- VI. In an era of increasing great power competition, particularly among the United States, Russia, and China, NORDEFCO can serve as a valuable platform for coordinating Nordic responses and safeguarding regional interests. By speaking with a more unified voice, the Nordic countries can exert greater influence in international forums and boost resilience against external pressures. Increased cooperation within NORDEFCO can complement and strengthen their individual and collective relationships with NATO and the EU.
- VII. Fluctuations in the transatlantic relationship highlight the need for a strong Nordic security framework. While NATO is the cornerstone of defense for its Nordic members, a robust NORDEFCO adds an extra layer and addresses regional challenges not aligned with NATO priorities, enabling tailored Nordic solutions to specific concerns.

## **Conclusion**

NORDEFCO serves as a notable example of regional security integration, highlighting both the potential and challenges of collective defense among states with varying historical backgrounds and national priorities. Its development—from initial initiatives and joint exercises to more advanced operations like enhanced cyber defense and Arctic security—illustrates how shared vulnerabilities can foster cooperation. However, the differing strategic perspectives of its members often limit the extent of integration. The interaction of national interests, alliance obligations (considering distinct roles in NATO and different EU ties), and budgetary restrictions has led to a structure that excels in practical collaboration and trust-building, yet lacks a unified command or binding policy frameworks. Overall, NORDEFCO demonstrates that even when states share a common security context, pragmatic approaches and consensus-driven decision-making may improve interoperability and efficiency, while also revealing the inherent challenge of reconciling sovereignty with collective defense.

## **Recommendations**

### **I. Enhance Integrated Command Structures:**

II.

To address operational delays and improve crisis responsiveness, NORDEFCO should investigate ways to create a more flexible and cohesive command framework. This might include forming sub-units dedicated to swift decision-making in emergencies while maintaining national sovereignty during peacetime operations.

III. **Strengthen Joint Procurement and Standardization Initiatives:**

IV.

The Nordic countries should build on past achievements by intensifying joint procurement efforts—like standardized equipment and common defense technologies—to further cut costs and enhance interoperability. Establishing a formal and binding framework for these projects would alleviate the challenges arising from varying procurement policies.

V. **Enhance Strategic Discussions and Intelligence Exchange:**

VI. In light of the changing threat landscape, which includes hybrid and cyber threats, NORDEFCO needs to establish more regular and structured strategic discussions. Improved intelligence sharing and the creation of joint cyber defense centers will be pivotal for a coordinated response to unconventional security challenges.

VII. **Utilise NATO and EU Collaborations:**

VIII.

Although every member has unique ties to NATO and the EU, establishing clear cooperation protocols within these larger frameworks can enhance joint defence efforts. This collaboration would strengthen collective defence and also align the operational priorities of NATO-aligned and historically non-aligned nations.

IX. **Encourage Specialization and Labor Division in Defense Capabilities:**

X.

The Nordic countries can gain from identifying specific areas of expertise—like Arctic warfare, cyber defense, and maritime surveillance—and subsequently combining resources. This labor division would allow each nation to thrive in its specialised field while maintaining a strong and comprehensive defense strategy in the region.

XI. **Cultivate Ongoing Political Commitment and Adaptability:**

XII.

Addressing deeply rooted national interests necessitates sustained political dedication from leadership. Consistent evaluations of changing security threats, along with flexible policy frameworks, are crucial for maintaining the significance and efficiency of NORDEFCO amid great power rivalry and regional difficulties.

By adopting these recommendations, NORDEFCO can transform from a loosely organised cooperative body into a more dynamic and effective regional security mechanism. This evolution will capitalise on historical connections and mutual vulnerabilities, while addressing the current challenges posed by a swiftly changing geopolitical landscape. Further research and policy efforts may explore the operational implications of Finland and Sweden's deeper integration into NATO,

offering more insights on how NORDEFCO can maintain its distinct position in Nordic and Euro-Atlantic security.

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