



Metis

Study

The future of NATO's northern flank

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Summary

The High North, in particular NATO's northern flank, has faced Russian provocation for several years. In contrast to the situation on its eastern flank, the Alliance has not yet come up with a

deterrence strategy to respond to this new challenge in the region. This study outlines what a potential deterrence policy in the High North could actually look like and what Germany could do to contribute.

Russian provocations in the High North

Almost unnoticed by the general public, the Russian federation has been testing NATO's defence preparedness in the High North for several years. In addition to plenty of maritime activities above and under water, these provocations have included repeated flights by Russian fighter jets, bombers and reconnaissance aircraft. Although these flights usually take place in international airspace, their flight route often takes them very close to the national airspace (flight information region) of Northern European countries. There have even been incidents of the airspace of individual countries briefly being breached. The affected countries responded by scrambling interceptor aircraft, which then chased the intruders in order to identify them and force them out of their airspace.

This increased Russian activity on the Alliance's northern flank exposes a weakness. While the measures taken by NATO since 2014 to deter the Russian Federation in the Baltics can certainly be considered successful and have so far prevented extensive conventional aggression from Moscow against any of the three Baltic States, NATO does not seem to have such a coherent deterrent strategy in the High North. From a military perspective, the High North also has a completely different significance for the Russian Federation than the Baltics. The GIUK gap (the maritime area that extends along a straight line from Greenland via Iceland to the United Kingdom)¹, Bear Island (between

the North Cape and Spitsbergen), and the Barents Sea are important strategic areas of operations for the Russian Navy's Northern Fleet. In addition, the Russian Federation uses these areas to keep any potential NATO operations at bay in the event of a conflict.

There are several reasons why the Alliance is struggling to formulate a coherent policy in the High North. Firstly, not all Alliance members see the Russian challenge in this region in the same light. Secondly, Sweden and Finland, which are both affected alongside Norway, are not members of NATO. And last but not least, one of the reasons for the lack of strategy in the High North is that the Alliance's military force packages are already tied up with deterrent measures on the eastern flank and with operations outside of NATO territory.

Regional cooperation

Regardless of what is happening in NATO, the Northern Group – an informal forum of Nordic and European countries² – has intensified security and defence cooperation in recent years. The Northern Group does not see itself as an alternative body but as an addition to the efforts of its NATO member states to stabilise the situation on the Alliance's north-eastern flank. Because it comprises both NATO and non-NATO members, the Northern Group has

¹ See "Maritime strategic thinking: The GIUK example", Metis Study No. 17 (June 2020).

² The members of the Northern Group are: Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, the Netherlands, the UK and Germany.



the potential to influence the Alliance through the NATO countries that are represented in it.

Since 2008, the Nordic countries have increased their cooperation on defence policy, leading to the establishment of NORDEFECO, the Nordic Defence Cooperation, in 2009. NORDEFECO is a collaboration between Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland. Its main objective

is to better coordinate the defence policies of the northern European countries and to intensify cooperation among them. In their *Vision 2025*, which they jointly adopted in 2018, all members explicitly point out that NORDEFECO is a mechanism not only for peacetime but also for times of crisis.

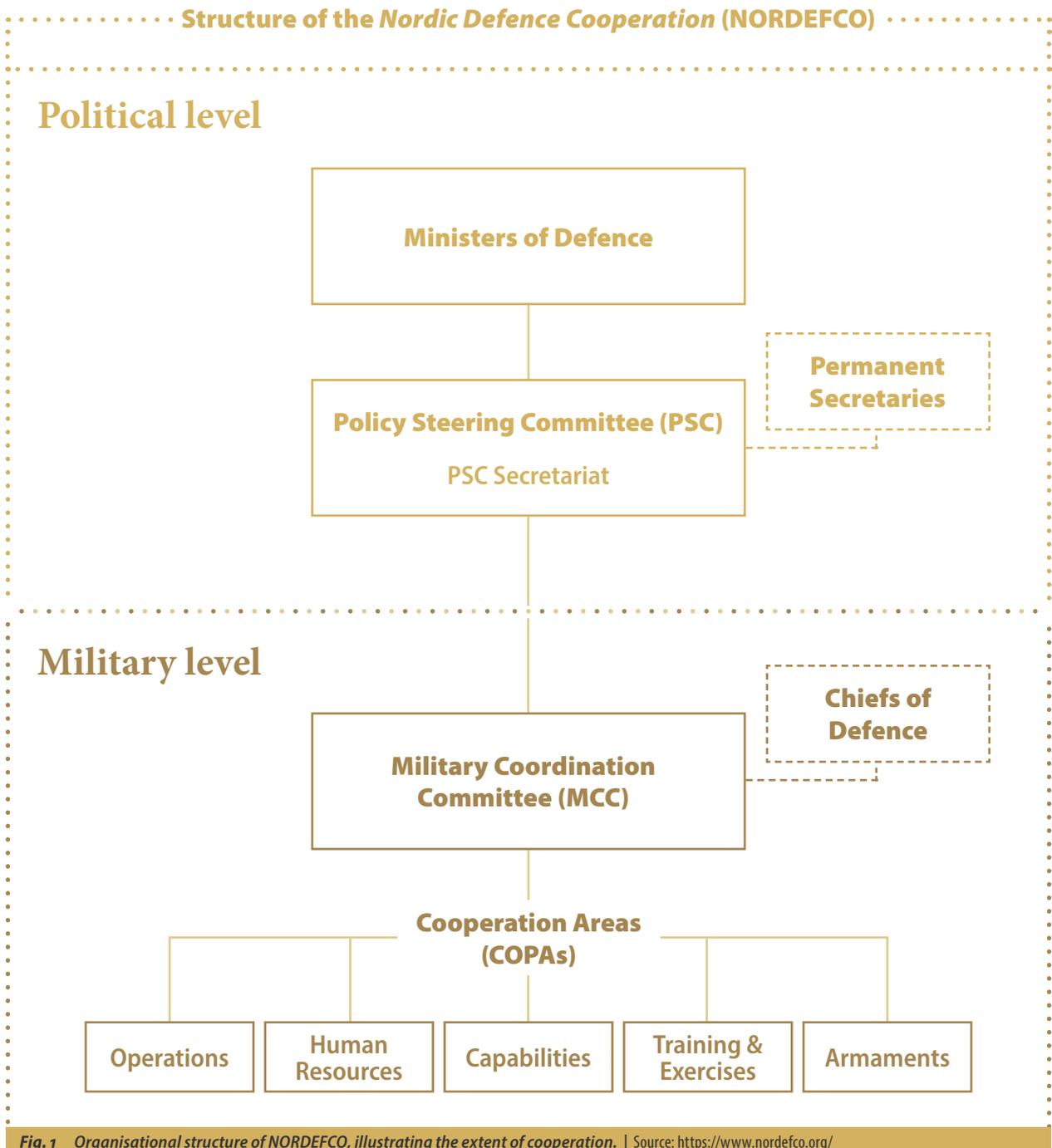


Fig. 1 Organisational structure of NORDEFECO, illustrating the extent of cooperation. | Source: <https://www.nordefco.org/>



There are thus structures in place in the High North that could be factored into considerations on how to curtail or deter increasing provocation from Russia.

Of the non-Nordic countries that – for historic and strategic reasons – are particularly committed to this region, particular mention must be given to the United Kingdom. But the United States, too, has increased its commitment in the region in recent years. Particularly noteworthy in this respect is the deployment of a B-1 bomber aircraft at the Orland Air Base in the south of Norway. In preparation, the US had already deployed around 200 soldiers to Norway. However, the question is to what extent these two countries will also be able to sustain their commitment in the region in the future. The UK with its *Integrated Review* and the US administration under President Biden are both increasingly turning their attention to the Indian Ocean and the Pacific and are focusing on a potential conflict with China.³

Possible German contributions

The long-term objective of German policy (in cooperation with its partners in the Northern Group) should be to contribute towards a regional defence structure in which NATO is the last line of defence in the High North. In the long term, the countries of the Northern Group and NORDEFCO must be put in a position to make a greater contribution towards deterring Russia's policy of aggression in the region. The following is a list of concrete steps that could be taken as part of these efforts.

- rotating deployment of European NATO forces in High North countries (only if they agree to such deployment, of course)
- logistic support for the expansion of defence infrastructure in the region

- establishment of a permanent maritime structure among the member states of the Northern Group, which would have to be located outside of NATO structures but would need to coordinate with the Alliance's two Standing Naval Forces
- NATO member states should become advocates of the non-NATO members of the High North in the Alliance's committees, which would mean that any measures decided within the Northern Group would also have to be introduced by the NATO countries into the North Atlantic Council and into the Military Council
- closer cooperation in the field of defence technology (the cyber domain would be a preferred option, but also joint developments for anti-submarine warfare)⁴
- worth considering to what extent the concept of capability integration partnership can be applied to the non-NATO members of the High North, which would mean that the NATO members among the Northern Group would look for key countries with which they could cooperate more closely in the military sector
- joint procurement and joint use of maritime unmanned systems (MUS) for submarine reconnaissance would be a further concrete course of action

Ultimately, the objective of any initiative taken in the High North can only be to strengthen the capability of neighbouring countries. Since NATO will not have the political interest or the materiel capability to become more active in this region in the foreseeable future, any contribution must aim at sustainably supporting the Nordic countries – politically and otherwise – in their efforts to regionalise defence policy. They must be equipped with the materiel and capability to play a substantial part in deterring Russian aggression and provocation in the region.

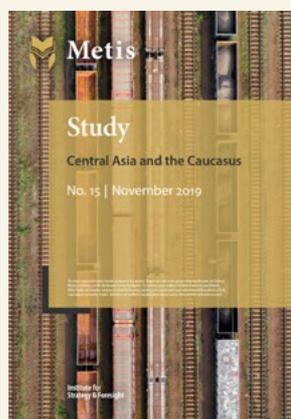
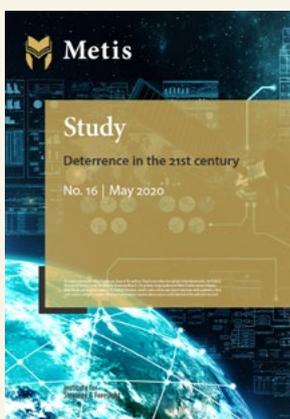
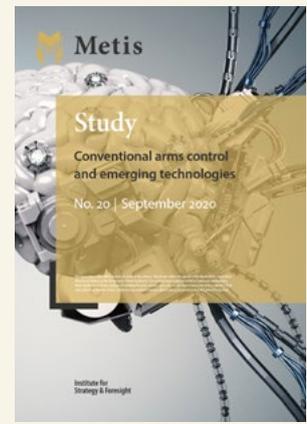
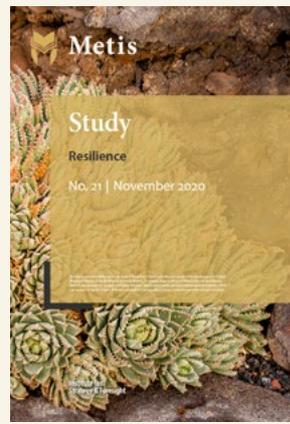
³ See "Relief and re-engagement – German initiatives for stronger transatlantic cooperation", Metis Study No. 22 (January 2021).

⁴ See "Maritime strategic thinking: The GIUK example", Metis Study No. 17 (June 2020).



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Metis Institute
for Strategy and Foresight
Bundeswehr University Munich
metis.unibw.de

Author

Prof. Dr. Carlo Masala
metis@unibw.de

Creative Director

Christoph Ph. Nick, M.A.
c-studios.net

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