

# Norway and the UK: a defence and security perspective

By Clive Archer

Norway and the United Kingdom (UK) have much in common in their maritime histories, in their political and economic orientation to North America, and in their reservations about political links with continental Europe. The defence relationship between the two countries has been one of ebbs and flows but has always been close.

Norway and the UK had close defence and security links even before the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in April 1949. Since independence in 1905, Norway looked to Britain as its natural protector. During the First World War, Norway had become what Olav Riste called "The Neutral Ally" of the UK. Nevertheless, the German invasion of Norway in 1940 and the subsequent Norwegian Campaign showed the difficulty of translating belief into reality. After the British withdrawal from Norway, the relationship entered a wholly different phase, with the Norwegian royal family, government, remnants of armed forces and merchant marine exiled in the UK. In May 1945, it was a British general who exercised allied authority in Norway for the month after German capitulation as Stalin had tacitly agreed that Norway would be a British sphere of influence.

With the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, defence relations between the UK and Norway became institutionalised within NATO. This signalled the rise in influence of the United States in defence and security matters and the comparative weakening of the UK with regard to Norway. Still, Britain still played a significant role in Norwegian security during the period from 1949 to 1989 and, increasingly, UK policy, plans and provisions were centred on the northern-most part of Norway and the seas around that region.

In the 1950s the priority for NATO was the defence of Germany and continental Europe with the Norwegians being expected to hold the Skibotn line in North Norway in the event of a Soviet attack. In the maritime area, the British contribution was secondary to the US. However, the 1960s saw a more active British involvement, with exercises involving the defence of Norway. The move from



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"out-of-area" by UK forces meant a greater concentration on the defence of Europe, especially the "flanks" such as Norway. The Royal Navy took on anti-submarine warfare tasks in northern waters and British Royal Marines exercised in north Norway.

By the end of the Cold War in 1989, the UK was closely engaged in the defence of Norway. British land, sea and air forces were an important part of NATO's planned reinforcement of Norway and the defence of the Atlantic. Norway was successful in keeping the UK committed to the reinforcement of the Northern Flank of NATO and of Norway. With increased Soviet air and maritime power, the far north became of increasing interest for UK air defence, and military communications and intelligence.

The end of the Cold War changed the British-Norwegian security framework. Events in the world outside Europe—the "9/11" terrorist outrage, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—as well as those in southern Europe—the conflict in Yugoslavia—altered their security interests.

The UK's security interests moved from being mainly within Europe and the North Atlantic to being engaged "out-of-area" in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. The priority risks listed by the UK government in 2010 were international terrorism, cyber attacks, international military crises and major accidents or hazards, demonstrating the widening of the understanding of security. The government still had a preference for multilateral responses. Notably, it also wished to maintain an active presence at sea, with deployable capabilities across the whole conflict spectrum.

Norway also moved from the Cold War emphasis on the north to accepting a range of insecurities with Norwegian forces being involved "out-of-area". This journey was not straightforward. Norway's stance

did not change as quickly as other NATO states: Norway still wanted its NATO allies such as the UK to maintain a capability to reinforce Norway, should the need arise. However, Norway did increase modestly its own "out-of-area" operations, with missions in Afghanistan and, later, Libya.

Norway was still following closely Russian military activities in areas adjacent to its border and in 2010 the Norwegian defence minister, Grete Faremo, asked that NATO balance afresh its commitments between "home" and "away". This Norwegian core initiative within NATO was at first not welcomed by the UK. Nevertheless Norwegian perseverance paid off when London gave support to the new NATO strategic concept adopted in Lisbon in November 2010 that, in part, reflected concepts of a balanced NATO effort.

Furthermore, the centre-right government in the UK since May 2010 appears to have brought a closer relationship with Oslo on defence. Its approach to security issues increasingly spoke to Norwegian concerns. In the UK government's strategic defence and security review, Norway was designated as "one of our key strategic partners". The UK Secretary of State for Defence attended a meeting of Baltic and Nordic defence ministers in Oslo in November 2010, and the British prime minister invited the prime ministers from the Nordic and Baltic states to a meeting in Downing Street. This renewed closeness on defence and security was reflected in the joint UK-Norwegian statement by the two countries' prime ministers in January 2011.

It is a fair appraisal that British security interests and presence in Northern Europe have diminished since the end of the Cold War, whereas Norwegian interests have increased. Nevertheless, the official understanding of security has broadened in both countries with common interests in NATO's maritime strategy and energy security.

Despite these shared concerns, it is doubtful that a renewed British defence and security interest in the wider Nordic-Baltic region will be matched by increased UK resources at a time when defence capabilities are cut back and other deployments demand priority. There may, however, be an increased UK diplomatic interest in the region as the UK involves itself through multilateral institutions such as the Arctic Council and EU. Where these concerns gain a higher priority, the UK will certainly be able to build on its strong and mutually beneficial relationship with Norway.



**The Nordic dimension.** David Cameron delivering his speech at the UK Nordic Baltic Summit, 20 January 2011. Crown copyright / the Prime Minister's Office