Nordic Countries Supercharge NATO's Deterrence
By

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Nordic countries formed the Nordic Defense Cooperation (NORDEFCO) as a cooperative security effort. Among several defense coordination initiatives, one is related to European airspace when faced with threats from Russia. A sub-regional grouping of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden signed a Declaration of Cooperation on Cross-Border Airspace.

This declaration ensures that all North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member-states' military authorities can establish and use airspace from these five countries for NATO training and exercises. Realistic training in the air domain is critical to NATO's collective deterrence, security posture, and European defense build-up.

For NATO to ensure air dominance in a Nordic area often harassed by the Russian air force, but also threatened by its submarines, NATO requires close coordination and cooperation between civil and military authorities. This requires operating in and around large swaths of Nordic countries' national airspace.

Nordic countries are leading in the implementation of decisions endorsed at the NATO Summit Defense Industry Forum as part of multi-domain operations, industrial base reconstruction, and securing defense technology supply chains. NATO members launched a strategic initiative to enhance capabilities relevant to the space and cyber domains.

NATO created the Alliance Persistent Surveillance from Space (APSS) program. The APSS marks the largest multinational investment in space-based capabilities in NATO's history. APSS will boost the Alliance's ability to monitor activities on the ground and at sea with unprecedented accuracy and timeliness.

Next, the signing of the letter of intent for the allied software for cloud and edge (ACE) services by 22 NATO member-states is expected to provide key building blocks to the Alliance-wide digital backbone. NATO's no-nonsense goal is to streamline and integrate all member's hardware and software infrastructures—getting up to speed with cloud and edge computing. The pressing challenge to solve is intelligence and battlefield data fragmentation. It will be ACE's job to improve operational efficiency by ensuring unified communications and enabling seamless data sharing across multi-domain operations.

This NATO effort, with a significant contribution by Nordic countries, also indirectly supports the US Department of Defense's (DoD) Arctic strategy, which emphasizes space and satellite capabilities. The DoD's 2024 Arctic strategy focuses on enhancing space and satellites capabilities for improved communications, intelligence gathering, and monitoring in response to evolving geopolitical challenges in the Arctic, an area now contested by both China and Russia. Both were recently spotted flying joint missions within the Alaskan air defense identification zone (ADIZ). The strategy calls for both military and commercial solutions to improve tactical and strategic communications, while emphasizing the need for agreements with NATO allies and partners to enhance satellite coverage in the region.

A case in point for Nordic leadership in NATO's space domain is its two new members Finland and Sweden. Seizing the opportunity to fill in the gaps of NATO's space strategy, Sweden is keen to establish itself as a key player in the international space domain by virtue of its geographic position. Sweden just adopted the country's first-ever defense and security space strategy. With the aim of making the nation a space hub for allies, Northern Sweden is now home to the Esrange Space Center, the first European mainland orbital spaceport. Overall, the Swedish space strategy is to create a portfolio of space-related

capabilities and services in line with the country's "total defense and crisis preparedness" concept.

According to Colonel Ella Carlsson, Sweden's space chief, the Swedish Defense Materiel Administration acquired, in 2023, Smart-L long-range radars from Thales. This will allow the Swedish to detect threats at a range of up to 2,000 kilometers—Russian incursions. Colonel Carlson said, "We can use space as part of the solution to find, detect and hit targets or threats with partners."

She also said that in Sweden's quest for new sensors, the country is cooperating with the Netherlands, which also has the Smart-L radar, to assess further use cases. The Swedish Air Force additionally signed a Space Situational Awareness sharing agreement with US Space Command in 2022. In early 2024, Sweden participated in the US-led Global Sentinel space exercise, demonstrating its desire to support NATO space efforts.

As for Finland, it is home to the company ICEYE, based in Espoo. ICEYE owns the world's largest synthetic-aperture radar (SAR) satellite constellation, monitoring any location on Earth. The company's capabilities support defense operations.

In August 2022, ICEYE signed a contract with the Serhiy Prytula Charity Foundation that would give the Armed Forces of Ukraine access to one of its satellites. According to the Ukrainian intelligence agency, the now dubbed "People's Satellite" helped Ukraine hit over 1,000 targets. This crowd-funded satellite indeed enabled Ukraine to have a much better independent view of the battlefield, as well as targets in Russia.

These examples of actions taken by NATO's newest members illustrate the value they are already providing and where they see their contributions securing the Alliance's defense. NATO's new Nordic member-states demonstrate leadership beyond government and the established industrial base. As the Finnish example of ICEYE demonstrates, entrepreneurs and investors are supporting the defense build-up, particularly in the space and cyber domains.

The United States and other NATO member-states should continue to cheer on the efforts of Finland and Sweden. Given their strategic position next to Russia, both nations can provide the Alliance a tremendous advantage against Russian aggression.

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