

Nordic military operations highlight NATO's preparations to attack Russia from the north

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Recent months have witnessed levels of military activity in the Arctic regions of Norway, Sweden, and Finland that are unprecedented since World War II. One major NATO exercise has followed another, with tens of thousands of troops participating, while the US has expanded its bilateral defence agreements with all three countries to create what resembles a massive American staging ground for an invasion of Russia from the north.

During the first two weeks of March, some 20,000 NATO troops from 13 countries participated in Nordic Response 2024. The exercise was the successor to the long-running biennial Norwegian Cold Response manoeuvre, which was expanded to include Sweden and Finland following their accession to the aggressive US-led military alliance. The deployment included large contingents of ground, air, and naval forces in a simulated battle triggered by the invasion of a “fictitious adversary.” The exercise included the first trial of a Joint Nordic Air Operations Command, with the air forces of Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden controlled from one base in Bodo, northern Norway.

Nordic Response was part of the larger Steadfast Defender mobilisation, a series of continuous military manoeuvres involving 90,000 NATO personnel that began in January and extends into June. The area of operations stretches from the Arctic through the Nordic and Baltic regions to Central Europe. In its first stage, the exercise involved the transportation of US military personnel across the Atlantic to support European NATO members in a war scenario. The next stage, which is now well advanced, involves the transit of American personnel from their landing sites along the Nordic coast eastwards towards the Russian border.

Operation Immediate Response started in late April, when a cargo ship carrying large quantities of US military supplies docked at the northern Norwegian port of Narvik. The exercise involved transporting the equipment, which belongs to the 10th Mountain Division of the US Army, by rail and road through Sweden to Finland, where it will be used in the Northern Forest manoeuvre. Around 1,600 US soldiers and 200 military vehicles arrived in Finland this past week after

completing the 550-kilometre journey. Another location for the exercise further south was Kalundborg in Denmark, where military equipment was also brought ashore. “This operation is important within the NATO framework. It shows the Americans’ ability and will to deploy rapidly and our ability to receive and be a transit country,” commented Colonel May Brith Valen-Odlo from the Norwegian armed forces. “In line with NATO’s new plans, we could quickly become a transit country to receive forces, prepare them, and send them through Sweden and Finland.”

The last time Norway and Sweden served as “transit countries” was for Nazi Germany during World War II. After the Nazis invaded the country and set up a puppet regime under Vidkun Quisling in April 1940, the Wehrmacht’s *Armee Norwegen* (Army Norway) was established. As part of the subsequent launching of the war of extermination against the Soviet Union in June 1941, the 163rd Infantry Division was transferred from Norway via neutral Sweden to serve alongside the Finnish army as it invaded the Soviet Union. The Nazi advance along this front took troops within 30 kilometres of Leningrad, which Finnish soldiers helped blockade with their Nazi allies. *Armee Norwegen* commanders led operations against Soviet troops in Lapland.

In the months leading up to the latest major NATO manoeuvres, the US concluded a series of bilateral agreements with the Nordic countries to secure unrestricted access to dozens of military facilities within striking distance of the Russian border. Three defence cooperation agreements (DCA) concluded with Finland, Sweden, and Denmark in December 2023, and an updated DCA finalised with Norway in February 2024, cover a total of 47 “Agreed areas” of operation across the four countries. In an “agreed area,” which is usually associated with a military base or training ground, US soldiers can operate freely and store materiel to be used in future deployments. A total of 15 of these “agreed areas” are in the Arctic regions of Finland, Norway, and Sweden, close to the Russian border with Norway and Finland. American military personnel also have

the power to exercise authority over civilians within or in the “immediate vicinity” of the “agreed areas.” In “extreme cases,” this power can be extended beyond the “immediate vicinity” of an “agreed area.” The agreements make clear that the US has the first right to prosecute its soldiers under American laws for any crimes committed while on- or off-duty.

The initiative for these agreements, which recall the dictates of a neocolonial power over its occupied territories, was taken by the United States. The US government insisted that the first DCA agreed with Norway in 2021 was an “indispensable precondition” for further US investments in military infrastructure in the country. American imperialism views access to the Arctic as essential under conditions in which climate change is opening up the region to resource exploitation and intercontinental trade. Washington is determined to ensure its dominant position in the high north at the expense of Russia, China, and other potential rivals. This includes its erstwhile European allies, who, led by German imperialism, are making their own moves to boost their presence in the region.

Military cooperation is also being expanded dramatically between the Nordic nations themselves. The Nordic Defence Command (NORDEFECO) was established in 2009 by Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. The collaboration initially served principally as a mechanism to enable Finnish and Swedish forces to participate in NATO exercises, and gain experience in training and using NATO equipment to the alliance’s standards. Now, however, with all the nations in NATO, the command structure is being consolidated to integrate Nordic operational capabilities.

A new Vision 2030 strategy was recently unveiled by NORDEFECO that includes “vigorous joint action” in eight defence and security areas. Writing in the Swedish daily *Dagens Nyheter*, the defence ministers from Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, and Iceland’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, stated, “Altogether, we have unique knowledge of the North Atlantic, the Arctic and the Baltic Sea, and an almost 1,500 kilometers long land border with Russia. In total, we have over 250 fighter planes and 350,000 soldiers. Together, we will be able to provide the conditions required for the reception, deployment, and further movement of allied troops to and through our countries.”

One main area of focus is strengthening the “deterrence and defence” of the Nordic and Euro-Atlantic regions by improving operational cooperation. A recent NORDEFECO meeting was held in the Faroe Islands to discuss NATO military options stretching from Greenland in the west, where the US has maintained a military presence since World War II, through Iceland, which relies on its NATO

allies for air protection as it has no armed forces of its own, to the Nordic countries in the Arctic and Baltic regions. The alliance also aims to strengthen “host nation support and logistical support” for troops from other NATO allies operating in the region, cooperation in the purchasing of defence materiel, and the “Nordic defence industrial base” to improve the reliability of supply lines.

The strategy document underscores that the ambition is to subordinate all areas of society to the goal of waging war. NORDEFECO will strive for “Total defence to secure adequate support from all sectors of society to the defense sector in all threat scenarios and situations,” the document noted.

Of all the Nordic countries, Finland has gone farthest in implementing a “total defence” strategy. With a population of just under 5.5 million, it can mobilise over a quarter of a million soldiers rapidly and has some 900,000 members in the military reserve. Finland recently spent close to \$10 billion to purchase 64 F-35 fighter jets from Lockheed Martin, the equivalent of a country the size of Germany purchasing around 1,000 of these aircraft.

During a visit to Berlin last week, Finnish President Alexander Stubb received a warm response to his appeal for other countries to “be like Finland.” According to German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, whose government has massively increased military spending and revived Germany’s global imperialist ambitions, Germany can learn a lot from the Finnish approach. “We would like to learn from the Finnish experiences with Russia as a neighbour,” Scholz said in connection with Stubb’s visit. “We are also interested in the Finnish approach to civil defence.”



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