

The Nordics Are Building Europe's Northern Security Shield



by Ravi Balgobin Maharaj

- Europe's security increasingly depends on resilience, not simply military strength, as energy, infrastructure, industry and supply chains become strategic assets.
- The Nordic countries are demonstrating how regional cooperation can strengthen European security without creating new institutions or weakening NATO.
- A stronger Europe should complement American power, building the capacity to sustain itself while remaining firmly anchored within the Atlantic alliance.

There is a question increasingly facing European governments that is rather less dramatic than the usual debates about defence, but perhaps more important than it first appears. If Europe were confronted with a serious and prolonged security crisis tomorrow, would it have the ability not only to defend itself, but to keep itself functioning?

That is a question that concerns whether governments can maintain energy supplies, move goods and military equipment, protect infrastructure, sustain industrial production and keep essential services operating when normal systems come under pressure. And it is becoming one of the central questions of European security, and developments in the

Ravi Balgobin Maharaj is an independent policy analyst specialising in Transatlantic affairs, whose work and commentary engage policymakers and institutions across North America and Europe. ✉ ravibmaharaj@icloud.com



Nordic region offer an important indication of where the answer may be heading.

On 2 September, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, together with Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland, signed the **Joint Nordic Declaration on Security of Supply**. The declaration is deliberately practical as it proposes greater cooperation on stockpiles, critical raw materials, production, logistics and the relationship between governments and business. But more notably, it does not establish a new alliance and it operates within the existing European and NATO frameworks.

The Nordic Declaration operates within the existing European and NATO frameworks

It would therefore be easy to regard it as another preparedness initiative, but that would underestimate what is happening. The more significant development is that the Nordic countries are beginning to organise some of the underlying capabilities on which European security depends, as the declaration appears to be part of a wider movement towards regional resilience, and that movement has implications well beyond the five Nordic states.

Europe is having to reconsider what security actually means

For much of the post Cold War period, security could be discussed largely in military terms as defence policy centred on armed forces, deterrence and the preservation of territorial integrity, while economic policy was often treated as a separate field, and supply chains were expected to function through increasingly globalised markets.

The experience of recent years has made that separation increasingly difficult to sustain however, and the war in Ukraine has demonstrated the importance of industrial

capacity and logistics to a prolonged conflict. The **disruption of international shipping** has also shown how quickly events outside Europe can affect European economies. None of this means that conventional military power has become less important, but quite the opposite, it means that military power depends upon a much wider system of economic and civilian capabilities.

That is where the Nordic approach becomes particularly interesting as the countries of northern Europe have spent decades developing habits of cooperation that were not originally designed as a single defence system. The Nordic Council, economic cooperation and arrangements facilitating movement between the countries created a level of regional interdependence that survived considerable differences in their relationships with NATO and the wider European order. And while that history remains relevant, it is the most important part of the story today.

What matters now is that the strategic circumstances have changed and all five Nordic states now operate within the same military alliance, while their existing economic, political and infrastructural relationships have remained in place. This has changed the practical geography of northern Europe and has made the Baltic Sea part of a connected security environment that extends northwards into the Arctic and North Atlantic and southwards into the wider European eastern flank, with Finland's position alongside Russia; Sweden's geographical importance; Denmark's position at the entrance to the Baltic; and Norway's role in the High North all contributing to that picture.

But geography alone does not create security

What makes the present moment different is the growing ability of these countries to operate together as the Baltic states are an important part of this development, but I would be cautious about describing the emerging system simply as



a Nordic-Baltic bloc since the wider significance is European. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have particular experience of the security challenges posed by Russia and of the vulnerability of infrastructure and societies exposed to hybrid pressure. Their geographical position gives the Baltic region an importance that extends beyond their own borders, while at the same time, the Nordic countries possess substantial industrial, technological, maritime and energy capabilities and the interaction between these capacities matters because European security is increasingly about the ability to connect them.

This is why the phrase “security of supply” deserves more attention than it might ordinarily receive as it describes a form of preparedness that sits between economic policy and defence policy. The Nordic declaration is particularly significant because it recognises that supply security also affects **NATO’s ability to defend its members**. For European governments, a crisis no longer has to take place on European territory to become a European security problem and that understanding is likely to become more important as governments reconsider their assumptions about resilience, and that also changes how the relationship with the United States should be understood.

There has sometimes been a tendency to frame European strategic autonomy as a contest between Europe and America but that is too simplistic. The United States remains indispensable to NATO as American intelligence, strategic capabilities, air power, logistics and wider military capacity continue to underpin European deterrence, and the Nordic countries understand this very clearly, particularly given the importance of the Arctic and North Atlantic.

But American strength does not remove the need for European capacity

The **United States has made clear** that European allies should assume greater responsibility for the defence of their own continent. The sensible

response is not to regard that expectation as a choice between American leadership and European independence. It is to build a Europe that is capable of doing more while remaining firmly within the Atlantic alliance and the Nordic countries are now providing an example of how that might be achieved. Their objective is not to recreate American military power on a smaller scale, but rather it is to make better use of the capabilities they already possess and to organise them more effectively across national boundaries. And that principle could have relevance for Europe as a whole.

The Nordic region has built mechanisms that allow countries with separate governments to work together where their interests overlap

The European Union has enormous economic and industrial resources, but those resources do not automatically translate into strategic capability. The challenge for Europe is therefore increasingly one of organisation, and this is perhaps where the Nordic experience has the greatest significance. The region has not needed to create a single political authority in order to cooperate extensively, and as such, it has built mechanisms that allow countries with separate governments to work together where their interests overlap, and that model fits the present European environment rather well.

Europe does not need another institution for every new security problem, but rather, it needs existing institutions and national governments to become better at working together. NATO provides the military framework, while European Union provides economic, regulatory and industrial capabilities while individual governments retain responsibility for their own societies. Regional arrangements can then connect these different levels where



geography and common interests make closer cooperation sensible, and the Nordic countries are well positioned within this system because they already operate across several of these boundaries.

Their relationship with the European Union differs from country to country, and so this gives them an unusual ability to translate regional cooperation into wider European capability. And the same applies to the Baltic states as their importance does not lie simply in being located on Europe's eastern frontier, as they have developed considerable expertise in resilience, digital security and preparedness precisely because their security environment has demanded it.

The practical meaning of greater European responsibility

The **United States will remain a central part of European security** for the foreseeable future, and as such, a stronger Europe should not be understood as a weaker transatlantic alliance. Moreover, if European governments were to sustain their own infrastructure, increase industrial production, improve military mobility and protect essential supply routes, they would only become more useful allies to Washington over time.

The Nordic declaration is therefore important not because it creates something entirely new, but because it brings together a number of developments that have been gathering momentum across Europe. Of course, the next

stage will be considerably more difficult than signing the declaration as governments will have to determine what should actually be held in reserve, where production should take place, how critical industries can be protected, how goods and military forces can move rapidly across borders and how governments should work with companies that own much of the infrastructure on which national security depends.

Those are difficult questions because resilience costs money, and so implementation becomes an economic factor as much as a security obligation. The Nordic countries have begun to do so at a regional level, and their experience may provide a useful model for other parts of the continent, but the objective should not be autarky, as Europe cannot and should not attempt to produce everything it needs within its own borders. Europe needs to figure out which dependencies are acceptable, which are dangerous and which capabilities must be available at home or within trusted partnerships when a crisis occurs, and that is ultimately what the emerging Nordic approach is about.

The real significance of the Nordic declaration may therefore only become apparent over time and depends on whether Europe can build the resilience required to remain secure in a world where crises travel quickly across borders. As such, the question Europe should now be asking is not simply whether it can respond when the next crisis arrives, but whether it will have prepared sufficiently well for that crisis to keep its societies functioning when it does.

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affari Internazionali*), two book series (*Trends and Perspectives in International Politics* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17
I-00186 Rome, Italy
T +39 06 6976831
www.iai.it



Latest IAI Commentaries

Interim Editor: **Riccardo Alcaro** (r.alcaro@iai.it)
ISSN 2532-6570 | DOI 10.82088/IAIcom2640

-
- | | |
|---------|--|
| 26 40 | Ravi Balgobin Maharaj, <i>The Nordics Are Building Europe's Northern Security Shield</i> |
| 26 39 | Julia Khrebtan-Hörhager, <i>Meloni between Trump and Europe: The Limits of Political Adaptability</i> |
| 26 38 | Ferruccio Pastore, <i>The Trap of Migration Sovereignism: What the Ceuta Tragedy Teaches Us</i> |
| 26 37 | Alessandra Scalia, <i>From Settler Terrorism to State-Enabled Violence: Rethinking Counterterrorism in the West Bank</i> |
| 26 36 | Mohammad Hassan Sangtarash, <i>Beyond the Chokepoints: The Arctic and the Making of a Networked Heartland</i> |
| 26 35 | Houston Wilson, <i>Europe in an Age of America First Economics</i> |
| 26 34 | Paolo Stohlman, <i>The Euro's Global Backstop: Building an ECB Swap-Line Network</i> |
| 26 33 | Riccardo Alcaro, <i>The Perils of the US-Saudi Nuclear Deal</i> |
| 26 32 | Filippo Simonelli, <i>From Projects to Delivery: The Mattei Plan in 2026 and Beyond</i> |
| 26 31 | Nona Mikhelidze, <i>The False Equivalence of Sovereignty in Melnichenko's Essay in the Economist</i> |
-