Norway's Most Important Peace Project

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Leonie Petzoldt and Joseph Ejnelind



The recently published Norwegian Arctic Strategy is Norway's first arctic strategy in 8 years. Both the previous 2017 strategy and a 2021 white paper on the arctic were published before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While their publication came after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, these strategy papers still emphasise cooperation with Russia in economic, environmental and infrastructure-related areas.

But the tides have since turned in the north, which was once described as "Norway's most important peace project": The 2025 Arctic Strategy states that "Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine is the greatest secu-

rity threat facing Europe and Norway today" (6). Given its close geographic proximity to Russia and Russia's strategic interest in the region, the (Norwegian) Arctic becomes a key factor in this security threat, a sentiment which is discussed at length in this new Arctic strategy. This change in direction can be seen as emblematic for a change in the post-cold war European conception of defence at large, and it is this shift that makes it worthwhile to examine this Norwegian strategy a little closer, as it can be seen as a symptom of a changing security infrastructure that redefines priorities, alliances and the role of the civil society in all of Europe. This strategy is therefore a roadmap on the basis of which Norway will make its arctic policy decisions in the future. It has been called an ambitious strategy and contains a clear shift in focus from cooperation and collaboration to security and defence.

In this brief we will therefore take a look at the main pillars of the new Norwegian arctic strategy and examine their impact on civil society and the rest of Europe.

1. Norway's freedom of action and influence in the High North

The first pillar of Norway's new arctic strategy is: Norway's freedom of action and influence in the High North.

This section highlights the renewed relevance of Nordic cooperation, especially given Finland and Sweden recently having joined NATO. The passage especially underlines the security aspects of this new Arctic strategy and emphasises Norway's commitment to international law and international institutions like NATO and the Arctic Council, which it seeks to strengthen.

This section defines the Russian aggression towards Ukraine as the largest contemporary security threat for Europe. In light of this situation, Norway announces to further minimise cooperation with Russia in the Arctic and at the same time strengthen surveillance, infrastructure and mobility in the Russian border regions, especially in cooperation with neighboring Sweden and Finland. This heightened security capacity in the region is increased both on a military and on a civilian side and aims "to counter complex threats such as cyberattacks, disinformation, sabotage and the use of migration as a tool to exert pressure on the Schengen external border." (10)

Furthermore, this section highlights Norway's role as a Polar Nation with extensive research infrastructure and capacity. To further this research, the government commits to further strengthen research efforts, especially in Arctic waters.

2. Total defence that ensures security, activity and preparedness in the north

In this section, the new strategy empowers Norway's "total defence" strategy, defined by its government as the sum of the country's civilian and military resources, which work together to prevent and manage crises, armed conflicts and war. In the country's northern region of Finnmark, investments into military and civilian infrastructure aim to improve hard power capabilities while strengthening local communities. The long term strategic goal is to facilitate cross-sectorial cooperation between the armed forces, government agencies and private businesses to strengthen the region's resilience. Here, the plan is to invest in human capital and civilian infrastructure for Finnmark's communities as well as to increase civilian-military cooperation in order to strengthen local communities' ties to the armed forces – especially the national guard "Heimvernet".

3. Vibrant, safe local communities

Strategic investments into civilian infrastructure by rejuvenating Finnmark's housing, expanding digital services and infrastructures while investing in improved conditions for the local labour market aim to strengthen local municipalities and inter-municipality cooperation. The strategy recognises population sparsity as a major hurdle to the creation of tightly knit local communities, and sees digitalisation as a possible solution through decentralising initiatives in e-education and e-health services. Finally, administrative flexibility is to be achieved through structural reforms in modes of cooperation to "encourage joint problem-solving and service development" (18). From a Scandinavian total defence perspective, such civilian measures may include aiding hospitals in preparing and training for mass casualty events (which is outlined earlier in the strategy itself) and preparing food stockpiles in strategically sensitive areas.

4. Infrastructure to connect communities

In this section of the strategy, a closer collaboration between the military and the infrastructure sector is outlined. This collaboration aims to facilitate civil and military mobility in the North, and is envisioned as a collaborative project between Sweden, Finland and Norway. Specifically, "a strategic corridor for military mobility through north Norway, north Sweden and north Finland is to be developed" (21).

At the same time, the port- and sea infrastructure will be improved as "fishing ports are a prerequisite for value creation, jobs, and settlement in communities that depend on fisheries." (21) This measure aims to protect this traditional section of the labor market in the Northern regions which could further contribute as a stabilising factor for the population numbers in the area. Simultaneously, this improves military access to the northern sea ports and thereby aims to contribute to the securitisation of a naval-

military infrastructure. The new strategy thoroughly emphasises its impact on the indigenous Sámi peoples, aiming to ensure that its proposed initiatives within infrastructure as well as cultural capital and export occur in tandem with the wishes of local traditional communities. The new strategy begins by recognising the importance of Sámi culture to Norway's historical heritage while aiming to "give due consideration to [their] culture and traditional [...] industries" (14).

Digital infrastructure is another priority for the government as it is expanding mobile and broadband networks and reinforcing data infrastructure to support security, business, and daily life in the northern region. To address GPS disruptions in East Finnmark, the National Communications Authority will strengthen its local presence and resilience measures.

5. Business development that creates value

Rounding off Norway's arctic strategy is a relatively brief account on key private sector industries that require investment in order to facilitate societal resilience. Three areas are highlighted – traditional fisheries, resource extracting industries like the oil, gas and mineral mining industries as well as space infrastructure. Broad sustainability investments into aquaculture, farming and reindeer husbandry aim to improve local communities' self-sufficiency while driving the country's steadily growing tourism industry. Improved space infrastructure will supplement military capabilities by providing surveillance, communication and navigation in North Norway and Norwegian waters in conjunction with deepening cooperation with the European Space initiative and the United States. A central theme is the importance in utilising and expanding green energy while preserving and maintaining dialogue with the local Samì peoples to ensure that future growth remains stable and holistic.

Takeaways

As Director of the Fridtjof Nansen Institute, Andreas Østhagen describes the strategy: "defense and security policy is the driver" (HNN). Taken together, this new strategy sends a clear message: Security and defence need to be drastically increased in the North.

Defence and security here are not just military endeavours, but concern all of northern civil society, and in line with the concept of total defence, northern civil society is counted on to contribute to this security and defence infrastructure. As outlined in section 3 (vibrant and safe communities), total defence implies a close civil-military cooperation to ensure maximal defensive capacities in a given area. It is what some describe as a "whole-of-society- approach to security" (Britain's World)

This concept is prevalent in Scandinavian security politics, but remains largely unaddressed in broader EU-defence strategies, as the recently published White paper for European Defence reveals. Here, civil-military

cooperation is only mentioned in the context of innovation and knowledge transfer, while the new Norwegian strategy's heavy emphasis on total defence is revealed through measures like the cooperation between the defence sector and local suppliers, but also through the aim to increase expertise and capacity in areas like the Finnmark directly through increasing the number of young people who are "motivated to serve in the Armed Forces" (14). Most of the initiatives described in the strategy that concern civil society can be linked to a military interest as well, like the large infrastructure investments that increase civil but also military mobility.

Overall, this new strategy marks a shift in Norway's approach to the Arctic towards a holistic and deterrence-based security architecture. Once "Norway's most important peace project", the Arctic is now embedded in a comprehensive security logic that sees defence, infrastructure, and civilian life as interlinked. This strategy's implications extend beyond the High North: They demonstrate a new model of governance in which the lines between civilian and military domains blur and a model which may increasingly influence European defence thinking. In this light, Norway's 2025 Arctic Strategy can be read not only as a blueprint for safeguarding the country's northern territories but also as an early indicator of how European societies might evolve under the pressures of a changing security landscape. Whether this marks a necessary adaptation to new geopolitical realities or the gradual militarisation of civil society, however, remains to be seen.