



The **Scottish Council** on **Global Affairs**

Implications of the Russo-Ukraine war for security in the ‘wider north’ of Europe.

A Scottish Council on Global Affairs Insight

Four research questions

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About Us



The **Scottish Council** on **Global Affairs**

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Insight Preamble

02

The Russian full-scale invasion of February 24, 2022 and the war crimes committed by Russian forces since then have also destroyed many of the preconceptions that existed amongst the security actors in the region. What will replace these is still in the formative stage, and one of the purposes of this project is to determine what the new policy agenda could be.

We believe it is imperative to start a study on the implications of the Russo-Ukraine War for the Security in the “Wider North” of Europe. The region we are examining in this study is one that has particular hard security concerns shared by a range of nations and actors, and is a region considerably larger than that often described as the ‘High North’.

This area might be considered a northern or Nordic theatre, as it runs east to west from European Russia through Scandinavia to the United Kingdom and terminating around Greenland. From north to south the region runs from the North Pole to the southern land coasts of the Baltic Sea.

Our Wider North has been delineated because regardless of

the outcome of the war with Ukraine, it will be, along with the Black Sea, the place where Russian military force has the most potential to be employed. Russia’s Northern fleet, particularly its modernized submarine force, is based in the region and its Air Force, still mostly intact, operates here regularly as well. Finland’s recent NATO accession just doubled the direct land border between Russia and NATO.

The area also has great overlapping concerns about space vehicles and merchant shipping stretching across the North Atlantic either into the Arctic (and through the Northern Sea Route in the Arctic as climate change increases) or into the North Sea and Baltic.

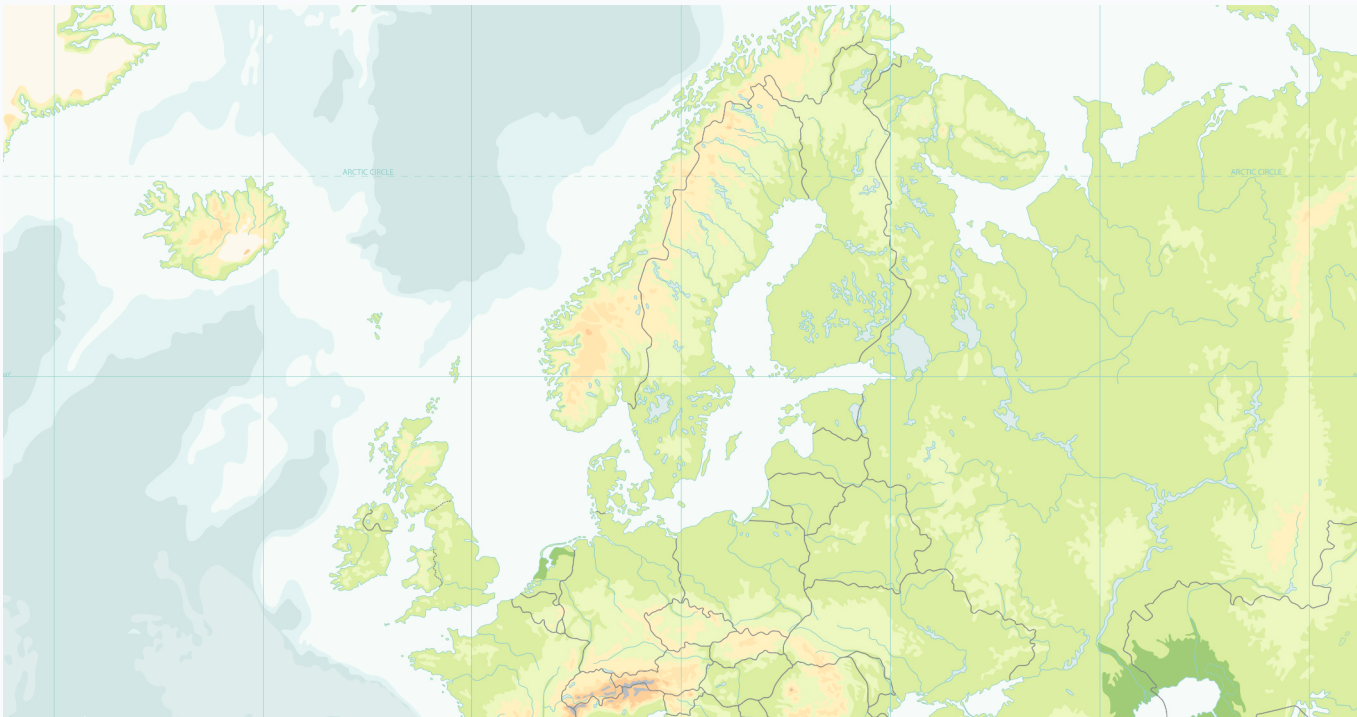
Insight Preamble (cont.)

02

Though it is a wide space with different land masses and islands, and a myriad of different seas and passages, in security terms it can be seen as a vital area which will determine much of the future relationship between Russia and the rest of Europe. The Russian full-scale invasion of February 24, 2022 and the war crimes committed by Russian forces since then have also destroyed many of the preconceptions that existed amongst the security actors in the region.

What will replace these is still in the formative stage, and one of the purposes of this project is to determine what the new policy agenda could be.

To start the project, we have devised four research questions, which we believe will guide much of the Wider North's security considerations in the years and decades ahead. Each one has been formulated to open up a particular line of enquiry.



The Four Questions

1.

What is the Russian security challenge/ threat now in the Wider North and what will it be in the near future?

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The Russo-Ukraine War was the result of a Russian pre-meditated attempt to seize a bordering sovereign nation. It has also revealed that the present Russian regime is capable of committing genocidal-type crimes. As such, it is the direct Russian challenge that will determine much of the security space in the Wider North now and for the foreseeable future.

That being said, the results of the Russian invasion so far provide other actors in the region with the opportunity to more carefully plan for their future than many would have expected. Russian military power is presently being degraded in Ukraine, with estimates of up to 97% of Russia's army deployed in the fighting. At the same time, the results of the war have revealed extensive shortcomings in training, motivation, equipment procurement and storage, and strategic decision-making. Estimates vary as to how long it will take Russia to rebuild from this self-inflicted catastrophe, but considering that it took a lengthy and apparently incomplete

reform process since 2008 to create the present Russian military, we are assuming that it will take a significant number of years if not more than a decade.

It is vital, therefore, for a project like this to provide a system to examine rigorously the process of Russian strategic recovery. Russia at some point will reconstruct its military, and that process needs to be monitored to provide a holistic understanding of what Russia is putting in place while at the same time not overestimating Russian military capabilities in the way that they were before February 24, 2022.

That being said the two most powerful parts remaining of the Russian military today are those with a particular interest to the Wider North. These are different Russian sea and air assets. The Russian submarine force, both its nuclearpowered and nuclear-armed elements have been significantly improved over the previous 20 years.

The Four Questions (cont.)

03

There have been both modernization and upgrading of existing vessels and the construction of newer ones, a number of which entered service just before February 24, 2022.¹ There has also been a significant modernization effort for the surface vessels of the Russian Navy, including those based in the Northern Fleet.² These combined submarine and surface vessel assets are located in the High North, with direct access to the waters of the Barents Sea.³

Likewise, the Russian Air Force, which has suffered significant losses in the war with Ukraine, still maintains a numerically large number of aircraft that it ostensibly could try and activate.⁴ Like its naval force, the Russian Air Force had gone through a modernization process over the previous 20 years and was, at least before February 24, 2022, considered perhaps the most effective weapon in Russia's

military arsenal. Therefore, if Russia is to try and threaten the use of military force against Wider North states in Europe, its most reliable units still in existence would be air-sea assets and these would be most easily deployable in the region. The other more immediate threat from Russia that needs to be considered is that which would result from an internal political split or splits in the present regime. A state built on authoritarian/dictatorial rule, such as Russia's, often experiences succession issues. In this case, they could be exacerbated by the strains of Russia's bloody and expensive invasion. Already there are signs of the jockeying for succession, with strong undertones of extreme nationalism being employed by different actors.⁵

There is no way to tell what kinds of threats and challenges an even more nationalistic, right wing regime would try to unleash to consolidate power.

To sum up:

- Russia has been significantly weakened and will take a long period to rebuild its military.
- Russian military reconstruction must be monitored closely.
- At present the most threatening military assets that Russia can deploy are sea-air and particularly of interest to the Wider North
- The question of political rule could exacerbate tensions in the region, particularly if there is more of a nationalistic, chauvinistic turn in the upper echelons of the Russian regime.

The Four Questions (cont.)

2.

How does the integration of Finland and Sweden change the security equation for NATO?

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine triggered a major transformation of NATO. The Baltic States and Poland were proven right in their warnings of the Russian threat and the Alliance identified Russia as 'the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area' at the Madrid summit in June 2022.⁶

The process of bringing NATO back to Europe had already started after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, but proceeded too slowly – i.e. it took the Allies until 2020 to agree on and implement new and adapted defence plans for the Baltic States.

In Madrid, NATO committed to defending "every inch of Allied territory at all times" and to massively increase troop deployments on the eastern flank and the number of high readiness troops, indicating a shift back to a

strong focus on Article 5 collective defence.⁷

The big question remained, however, how to deliver on the ambition – e.g. Britain and Germany first increased deployments to the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) NATO troops in the Baltics, and then had them scaled down or moved further away due to limited availability of both troops and infrastructure.⁸

This revealed that Europe was not ready for war. It is all the more crucial from NATO's point of view that Finland and Sweden drew a very clear and swift conclusion from Russia's war against Ukraine and applied for NATO membership fewer than three months after February 24, 2022.

The Four Questions (cont.)

03

Finland, which became NATO's 31st member in early April 2023, brings into the Alliance one of Europe's largest land forces (wartime strength 280,000 and total reserve 870,000) and stores of heavy weaponry.⁹

Furthermore, Finland has – in a notable exception to the general Western European trend after the Cold War – kept the focus on territorial defence, including a conscription army. Now that territorial defence in Europe is again high up on NATO's agenda, after decades of focus on overseas crisis management operations, Finnish know-how will be highly valued.¹⁰

Sweden has substantially smaller troop size (approximately 55,000 including reserve) but has a notable – and fully NATO compatible – defence industry. What is more, Swedish territory alone revolutionises NATO's defence planning, especially for the Baltic

States: Southern Sweden gives the Baltic States strategic depth that they geographically lack, sandwiched between Russia and the Baltic Sea.

Sweden reaches all the way down to the Southern Baltic Sea and thus connects Finland and Norway in the north, with Denmark, Germany, and other continental NATO Allies in the South. The Swedish island Gotland is located in the middle of the Baltic Sea, only 330km from the Russian enclave Kaliningrad, and provides not only an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier' for NATO but also generally an important logistics hub.¹¹

Swedish territory is crucial for several Allies' security of supply, as well as military mobility especially higher up in the north, from Norway's Atlantic coast to Finland.

The Four Questions (cont.)

03

With Finland and soon also Sweden in NATO, the correlation of forces in the wider North will tip in NATO's favour, thereby fundamentally changing the calculation for Russia. This must be taken into consideration when making NATO's defence plans for the region and potentially if the Alliance's joint command structure will be reformed as a result.

The main question is: how to create a defence and deterrence posture that is unambiguous and leaves no room for misunderstanding on Russia's part? Nordic cooperation is an important factor in the equation.

In an unprecedented step, spurred on by the heightened Russian threat, the air forces of Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden signed a declaration of intent to start working towards operating their approximately 250 fighter jets (of which 143 soon will be Danish, Finnish and Norwegian fifthgeneration F-35s) as an integrated fleet.

Similar steps towards deeper operational integration could follow for the Nordic navies, given the already existing cooperation structures.

To sum up:

- NATO's response to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 was too slow and insufficient. Hence it is important to learn the lessons now and respond to Russia's full-scale invasion more decisively.
- Finland and Sweden are both net security contributors and their membership in the Alliance will alter the correlation of forces in NATO's favour in the Nordic-Baltic region.
- The Nordic enlargement raises questions of a reform of NATO's command structure, including how to build a deterrence posture especially in NATO's new Arctic dimension, within close proximity to Russia's nuclear capabilities.

The Four Questions (cont.)

3.

Can Wider North regional resilience be improved?

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Societal resilience in times of crisis is an important issue for the Nordic countries of Finland, Sweden, and Norway, which all have large territories but small populations (Finland 5.5 million, Norway 5.4 million, Sweden double the size with 10.4 million but also with larger territory).¹² Under such demographic and geographic conditions, security must be thought of from more than purely a military perspective.

Finland has the most extensive practice with the “comprehensive security concept,” which views security as a whole-of-society effort.¹³ The concept includes both passive elements, such as obligatory civil shelters and placements for explosives in bridges, and active elements, including military defence and well-functioning civil-military cooperation.

The annual national and regional defence courses are a good example, bringing together main stakeholders from all parts of society (government, local administration, business, critical infrastructure providers, media representatives) to work through different worst-case scenarios and how to keep Finnish society functioning under any circumstances.¹⁴

The Finnish concept is based on Sweden’s total defence concept. In Sweden however, this exists more on paper, having massively scaled down the armed forces and overall readiness in the beginning of the 2000s, in what is called in Sweden a “strategic timeout”.

The Four Questions (cont.)

03

The 2013 simulated Russian nuclear strike on Sweden and the 2014 annexation of Crimea were a rude awakening, after which Sweden started building its military capabilities back up.¹⁵ However, scaling up takes longer than scaling down.

This has been recognised and Sweden is currently investing in improving its overall societal readiness and resilience. Norway also has a modernised total defence concept (as compared to the Cold War), and civil-military cooperation has recently been an emerging focus in Norway's defence policy.¹⁶

The northern parts of Norway, Sweden, and Finland are on the one hand particularly relevant in terms of NATO's future force posture, as they are located close to Russia's northern military district and the nuclear-capable submarines in the Kola Peninsula, which constitute Russia's second-strike capability.¹⁷ On the other hand, the region is faced with particular challenges in terms of military mobility and security of supply – both important

parts of resilience – as infrastructure such as railways simply do not exist in the very sparsely populated area.¹⁸

Therefore, the three countries will need to work together to improve their joint resilience, especially in the northernmost parts of the countries. This issue has been recognised by the Norwegian Chief of Defence, who recommends closer cooperation between the Nordic countries on not only the military, but also the civilian aspects of their total defence approaches and joint investments into infrastructure.¹⁹

From the perspective of the UK, the US and key Atlantic allies, the contingency planning concerning hard security in the Nordic region is of vital interest. Denmark plays an important role in connecting Norway and Finland to continental Europe via Sweden, and for controlling access to the Baltic Sea via the Danish Straits.

The Four Questions (cont.)

03

Iceland does not have its own armed forces but is strategically located along the so-called Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap, which marks an important line of defence for NATO in the Wider North in case of a Russian air and/or naval attack from the Murmansk Northern Fleet base.

As Russia's other capabilities have been and are continuing to be depleted in Ukraine, it is likely that the Northern Fleet with its nuclear-capable submarines will become even more important for Russia's power projection.

This will necessitate increased focus on the Arctic region on NATO's part. Hence, securing supply lines and building essential mobility infrastructure in the North Calotte region, from the UK to Norway's Atlantic coast and through Sweden to Finland, will necessitate close cooperation between the UK, the US, and the Nordic Allies.

In order to succeed in building a robust new security framework – not only a strong deterrence but also defence plans that work in a worst case – it is essential for the

Wider North countries, including the UK, the Nordics, the Baltics, and the US, to make sure that NATO's command structure accurately reflects the threat environment and makes the most of the two new allies' transformative potential.

The current Joint Force Command (JFC) structure separates the Nordics between JFC Norfolk (Norway, Iceland, and potentially Sweden), and JFC Brunssum (Denmark, Finland). This goes against the expressed preference of the Nordic countries to be united under the same JFC and highlights the need for a speedy reform of the command structure.

Furthermore, NATO's defence plans agreed on at the Vilnius summit in July 2023 foresee three regional plans, one for the European Arctic and the Atlantic; one for the Baltic and Central Europe; and one for the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.²⁰ Separating the Arctic and the Baltic into different defence plans risks re-fragmenting the regional security architecture that the NATO membership of Finland and Sweden was to unify.

The Four Questions (cont.)

03

To sum up:

- Finland, Norway and Sweden all have national resilience concepts based on the comprehensive understanding of security as a whole of society issue. However, only Finland has kept the practice of civil-military cooperation on a high level.
- As these Nordic nations are sparsely populated with expansive territories, civil-military cooperation is essential in terms of effective defence. Especially in the northern parts of the countries, border cooperation for military mobility and security of supply will be crucial going forward.
- From a UK and US perspective, securing supply lines and building necessary infrastructure to enhance military mobility from the UK to Norway's Atlantic coast and through Sweden to Finland, is of vital interest and requires close cooperation with the Nordic Allies.
- The Wider North countries must make sure that NATO's command structure and defence plans enable, not limit, regional cooperation and integration. The command structure reform is thus a priority, to make sure that no dividing lines are drawn across the Wider North region.

The Four Questions (cont.)

4.

What are the most pressing issues now and in the near future that require cooperation with Russia in the Wider North?

At present, under the pressures of the Russian invasion, cooperation in the Wider North will be necessarily limited to the minimum. However, even now two areas potentially necessitate at least some form of communication.

The first is in coordinated search and rescue operations in the Arctic, one of the more treacherous sea routes on the globe.²¹

The second area is in space-related activities. The Wider North is an area of growing satellite launch capacity (in other words ballistic missile launch) and many satellites, including Russian military ones, maintain their orbits over the region.²²

Cooperation of some type would therefore be beneficial to both stop misunderstanding and provide some transparency with vehicles operating in close proximity.

While calibrating the right approach to keeping communication lines open, the West must be careful not to fall for the “Arctic exceptionalism” any longer and not to open up channels of cooperation exploitable by Russia in bad faith.²³

One of the pressing environmental issues is nuclear waste clean-up and disposal. A large number of decommissioned, nuclear-powered Soviet/Russian naval vessels and other radioactive waste have been sunk off Russia’s Arctic coast.²⁴

03

The Four Questions (cont.)

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These present an environmental challenge that could become dangerous in the coming decade. When possible, it would be beneficial to resume now discontinued cooperation on preventing such a disaster. In addition, issues related to space call for more coordination.²⁵ With space activities set to grow, it would be worthwhile to create more robust systems for de-confliction and, even, de-militarization.

Finally, the impact of climate change, which is already influencing the region significantly and holds out the possibility of even more drastic change. Climate and environment-related cooperation with Russia has traditionally been a vital interest of the Western Arctic countries Finland, Norway, and Sweden and the origins of the Arctic

Council are in environmental cooperation.²⁶ The possibility of more extensive Arctic ice melt could lead to the High North becoming one of the most heavily used maritime travel areas on the globe.²⁷ This would make clear communication imperative, especially in places where there are conflicting territorial claims between Russia and other Arctic countries, such as Denmark and Canada, the North Pole and Arctic Ocean seabed being a case in point.

Right before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Russian state was trying to increase its presence on the Island of Svalbard—Norwegian territory but to which Russia believes it has a historic claim—and which controls an area of significant mineral wealth.²⁸

To sum up:

- At present cooperation will be strictly limited, but there are areas (space and search/rescue) which necessitate at least communication on common concerns.
- One important area of shared concern is the environmental clean-up of Russian nuclear waste sunk off the Russian Arctic coast.
- Climate change leading to increased maritime activity in the region necessitates coordination, if not cooperation, in areas such as the navigation of global commons.²⁹

04. About the Authors

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