

FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS? NATO AND THE EUROPEAN NEUTRALS IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

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NATO's Partnership for Peace programme provides Europe's neutral/non-aligned states with a framework through which to engage with the Alliance in capability building, interoperability and crisis management tasks. However, in the new security environment, these relationships require re-examination to match security needs with available opportunities.

Key findings

- Defence coordination between the Nordic neutrals and NATO needs to be improved both in operational and strategic terms.
- The myriad of threats posed by hybrid warfare compels greater alignment, but the EU neutrals are more likely to favour EU collective security projects over NATO where such projects exist.
- None of the neutrals are likely to join NATO in the short-term. It is possible Austria, Ireland and Switzerland would roll back the relationship should NATO pivot away from crisis management and return to a concept primarily focused on collective defence.

Executive summary

The European neutrals face a number of political, strategic and economic challenges in their relations with NATO. For the Nordic neutrals, defence challenges at operational and strategic levels are the most important to address. The capacity and political will of Austria, Ireland and Switzerland to expand relations with NATO on the other hand appears absent. With the myriad of security threats to Europe's security environment, and overlapping EU CFSP commitments, the neutrals may not be making the most of their relations with NATO.

For the Nordic neutrals, greater defence coordination with NATO and regional NATO members at operational and strategic levels is required to best profit from their already deeply intertwined relations. Austria, Ireland and Switzerland should explore participation in the joint EU-NATO Centres of Excellence to enhance their experience of identifying and tackling hybrid warfare threats. Such



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collaboration could supplement their commitments under the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).

Analysis

The security needs of Finland and Sweden are more pressing than those of the other neutrals. Their proximity to a revanchist Russia which has staged military exercises simulating attacks on the Baltic/Nordic region and their threats of reaction should the Nordic neutrals join NATO has prompted increased preparedness at the national level. Remaining outside military alliances is still central to their non-alignment policy and public opinion still favours maintaining this stance. However, within this constraint, they have nonetheless pursued a three-pronged approach to enhance their security: (1) increasing preparedness for total defence; (2) appealing for an international rules-based approach to security problems; and (3) signing collaboration agreements with NATO and NATO members in the region as part of their deterrence strategy.

While much media comment has suggested that the Nordic neutrals will imminently join NATO, this is not foreseeable in the short-term, if ever. In any event, the reliability of the United States to come to the aid of NATO members should Article V of the Alliance's Charter be activated is questionable under the current administration. Sweden and Finland should therefore improve their national defence postures by addressing tactical issues, generate a strong will to resist attack amongst the population and keep in close contact tri-laterally with regional NATO members who may be more reliable partners.

The other neutrals have more limited engagement with NATO. For them, the PfP has been useful for ensuring they can continue to effectively contribute to international and regional peace through crisis management operations such as SFOR, KFOR and ISAF. KFOR is the primary operation in which they are currently involved. Austria has contributed a large contingent of combat troops to this mission (around 550), Ireland deploys far fewer (12), while Switzerland provides around 200 peace-keeping and peace-building personnel. Interoperability will remain an important focus for the neutrals in their relations with NATO, which acts as an international standards body for defence forces. However, their continued engagement with the Alliance could be threatened were NATO to abandon its crisis management focus and revert back to its original mutual defence mandate.

None of these states are likely to abandon neutrality. It is a cornerstone of their national identities and for Austria and Switzerland in particular, mediation of international conflicts through dialogue is their primary focus. Austria has already signalled its commitment to acting as a neutral mediator between the West and Russia since the Ukraine crisis. Sweden is the most positively disposed to the idea of joining NATO of all the neutrals, however positive public opinion on joining the Alliance has not gained sufficient critical mass and support for the idea of joining NATO in the short-term has shown signs of waning. Were a critical mass to occur, Finnish security needs would complicate the decision as their security is heavily intertwined and the Finns show little public enthusiasm for joining NATO.

Why does this matter to the European neutrals?

The myriad of threats to security in Europe compels greater collaboration between all European states. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has undertaken a comprehensive security mandate



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and provides a framework through which Europe's neutral states can engage in collective security with regional partners.

The transnational nature of threats has increased significantly over recent decades. Collaborating with regional partners to ensure peace and stability on the European continent is in the interest of the neutral states. They cannot avoid the knock-on effects of regional instability to their economic, political, human, data, environmental, energy, and territorial security. Effective collaboration on common security threats requires effective international frameworks. NATO provides one framework to fulfill this need and supports the EU in developing another.

Both the EU and NATO have tried to address comprehensive security threats, but the EU-NATO strategic partnership has never been sufficiently empowered despite frequent calls for greater cooperation. The EU has focused more on integration and soft security issues, but the recently activated PESCO framework indicates a mindset shift which could see the EU as a security actor overlap to a greater extent with NATO tasks.

In this context, the neutrals need to consider their relations with NATO and identify opportunities not available elsewhere to address their specific security needs.

What should the European neutrals do?

For Finland and Sweden, improving planning and coordination is key. Clearly defining and communicating their national defence tactics to relevant stakeholders and ensuring alignment with NATO, and NATO members in the region, is crucial to smooth and effective performance in a time of national crisis. They also need to ensure adequate training is provided and where possible they should continue to seek to gain practice in the field.

Austria, Ireland and Switzerland need to determine whether they can provide for their own defence or else more seriously pursue collective security either through NATO or EU frameworks. Ireland's ability to defend against cyber-attacks and protect its skies is the most limited. Both Ireland and Switzerland have cautiously engaged in collective security tasks through the EU and NATO, but they should seek to participate in their joint Center of Excellence (CoE) for countering hybrid threats of which Austria is already a member. These states need to begin focused national debates to determine how they will address their national security needs. Without the political will to divert more funding to defence budgets, it is unlikely they will keep pace with emerging security threats.

Conclusion

The European neutrals are unlikely to join NATO any time soon. Opportunities to broaden the relationship exist for Austria, Ireland and Switzerland, particularly through engaging with NATO's CoEs, however the political will to do so is lacking. Transnational threats should compel them to make hard choices between providing for their own defence or deepening regional cooperation. To achieve this, they will need to begin focused national debates. However, should NATO revert to its traditional mutual defence focus and abandon its crisis management focus, it is likely to negatively affect their engagement with the Alliance. The Nordic neutrals should continue their efforts to



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improve coordination and training between their defence forces and NATO members. This is important for the credibility of their deterrence strategy.



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