



# Command and Control in Northern Europe: Challenges and Potential Solutions

*Svein Efstad*

## SUMMARY

Command and control (C2) is a fundamental requirement for military action. Despite the regional tensions currently faced in Northern Europe, however, deficiencies remain in NATO's current system. As such, this policy brief examines NATO's ability to perform C2 amid the region's evolving security landscape, and how this might be strengthened going forward. The brief concludes that the newly established Joint Forces Command (JFC) Norfolk should assume responsibility for Allied C2 in regional crisis management and conflict.

- NATO enlargement, coupled with technological and political changes – including the rise of China and Russian aggression in Ukraine and other parts of Europe – has placed new demands on Allied C2 arrangements.
- More specifically, the entry of Finland and (soon) Sweden into NATO has spurred debate over the future C2 architecture for NATO forces in the Nordic–Baltic region.
- Following the end of the Cold War, NATO chose to abolish its existing C2 architecture, which was designed to counter the Soviet threat in Europe and the North Atlantic, and instead focus on out-of-area operations.
- Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, and especially its invasion of Ukraine in 2014, have led to changes in NATO's military organisation, notably the establishment of a new JFC in Norfolk, Virginia.

## Introduction

Command and control (C2) is a crucial function in all armed forces and a prerequisite for military activity. In order to organise its collective defence, therefore, NATO has established a system of command positions and corresponding headquarters at various levels, to which command authority for the forces placed at their disposal by national leaders is delegated.<sup>1</sup> This system includes designated strategic, operational and tactical commanders, and corresponding headquarters with multinational staffs. In peacetime, NATO-assigned forces include both those conducting operations – such as the Kosovo Force (KFOR) or air policing missions – and those committed to standing multinational units, such as the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) or Standing NATO Maritime Groups (SNMGs). If faced with a major crisis or conflict, member states can transfer the command of designated forces to NATO commands in order to facilitate a unified response. In such circumstances, unity of command is crucial, meaning the transfer of authority should occur at an early stage. Rather than assign their forces to the national headquarters of the member state being reinforced, national leaders will likely seek to place them under NATO's integrated command structure. Meanwhile, for the member states on whose territory Allied military operations are being conducted, it is important that commanders and their headquarters maintain situational awareness and the capability to address regional security challenges.

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The Nordic countries face a complex security landscape. To the north, the Arctic region remains a priority for Russian defence and economic policy, and is subject to growing Chinese interest. Much of Russia's ability to project force on a global scale lies in units, industry and infrastructure on the Kola Peninsula and in the White Sea region. To the south, the Baltic Sea and Baltic region has seen extensive military activity – some of it aggressive – and a proliferation of Russian hybrid activity, making it the focal point of the NATO–Russia standoff. Amid this context, the Nordic region is now recognised as an integral military theatre: the Nordic countries field capable armed forces and have developed extensive defence cooperation (NORDEF) built on shared interests and, increasingly, threat perception.

The assumption of NATO membership by Finland and Sweden has finally opened the door to multinational C2 structures for deterrence and defence in the region. How this plays out in practice, however, depends on both military and political factors, as well as economic and manpower constraints. New technologies and strategy will also have a role to play, as does NATO's future trajectory, including US involvement in Europe.

This policy brief reviews the development of NATO's C2 structure in Northern Europe and discusses current challenges. In particular, it examines how operational responsibility for the Nordic countries should be allocated, as well as the various challenges to operations in the Baltic Sea, before going on to discuss regional sub-commands and the future role of functional commands.

## Background

During the Cold War, NATO maintained a comprehensive C2 structure to enable military operations in Northern Europe. The region was divided between the three Major NATO Commands: Allied Command Europe (ACE), Allied Command Atlantic (ACLANT) and Allied Command Channel (ACCHAN).<sup>2</sup> Responsibility for mainland Denmark and Norway fell to Allied Forces Northern Europe (AFNORTH), which was subordinate to ACE and headquartered in Oslo. AFNORTH in turn had three subordinate commands with specific geographical responsibilities: Baltic Approaches (BALTAP), Southern Norway (SONOR) and Northern Norway (NON).<sup>3</sup> Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Svalbard, Jan Mayen and the surrounding seas fell under the jurisdiction of Eastern Atlantic (EASTLANT), subordinate to ACLANT, while ACCHAN was given responsibility for the English Channel and parts of the North Sea. Following the November 1991 publication of NATO's New Strategic Concept, which called for a flexible C2 system to address the new emphasis on crisis management and conflict prevention,<sup>4</sup> a series of reforms led to a new command structure with a single strategic-level command – Allied Command Operations (ACO) – and two operational-level headquarters without specific geographical responsibilities: Joint Force Command (JFC) Brunssum and JFC Naples.

Over time, as Russia rebuilt its military forces and started to challenge Western values and interests, this arrangement became steadily more unsatisfactory. NATO's structures offered no updated operation plans and little insight, while its warning systems remained silent prior to and during Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia. Command exercises, such as the recurring Crisis Management Exercise, demonstrated NATO's inability to plan and execute military operations. As such, the longstanding assumption that small nations, such as Norway, would transfer command authority to NATO at an early stage of a conflict was no longer credible.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, NATO has taken substantial steps towards an effective C2 arrangement for Northern Europe, the most important being the 2018 establishment of JFC Norfolk (JFC-NF) in Virginia. Command of JFC-NF is held by a US Vice Admiral and dual-hatted with command of the newly re-established US Second Fleet. Both commands were instituted in an effort to counter the Russian threat to Atlantic security. Once Sweden has assumed full NATO membership, it is expected that all the Nordic countries will be placed under the auspices of JFC-NF. Currently, however, the US Second Fleet's area of responsibility (AOR) is limited to the Western part of the North Atlantic, with the Sixth Fleet responsible for the North, Norwegian and Barents seas. The commander of JFC-NF is also more junior in rank than his counterparts at JFC Brunssum and JFC Naples. At a broader level, NATO's command structure has not adapted to the doubling of allied countries over the past 30 years. Given this, and in order to improve its capabilities managing the entire conflict spectrum, NATO should consider making further use of national commanders in dual-hatted capacities.

NATO's C2 structure must be employed during exercises if the Alliance is to remain relevant to regional security. It therefore presents a challenge that, rather than being led by NATO headquarters, multinational exercises involving NATO members have often been invitational exercises under national control. Prominent examples include the recurring Cold Response, led by Norwegian Joint Headquarters, and Baltic Operations (BALTOPS), led by US naval commanders. While this may in part be explained by member countries seeking to maintain the capability to lead military operations without NATO involvement, it could also reflect poor faith in the competency of NATO headquarters. Recent years have, however, seen a possible reversal of this trend.

### Command and control in the Nordic and Baltic regions

The admission of Finland and Sweden into NATO creates an opportunity for the Nordic states to further strengthen their comprehensive defence cooperation, which since 2009 has been organised through Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO). Together, the Nordic states' footprint extends far into the Atlantic, up into the Arctic, and towards Central Europe. Thus, cooperation in operational and force planning, as well as exercises and total defence, could lead to the group of countries becoming a strong, coherent part of NATO's deterrence and defence posture. The Nordic countries will aim for all their territory to become part of JFC-NF's AOR, thereby maintaining a strong link between North America and Europe. Moreover, the substantial forces mustered by the countries could also be used in support of NATO operations in other regions.

The forward military presence in the three Baltic countries and Poland, combined with an extensive Polish military buildup, have totally altered the balance of forces in the region. Until recently considered a soft spot in NATO's defences, the region's force availability and geostrategic context have substantially improved at a time when Russian forces are being redeployed to Ukraine. Finland's accession, together with Sweden's imminent membership, will make it much easier for the Alliance to project force into the region.

Assuming the boundary between the AORs of JFC-NF and JFC Brunssum is drawn through the Baltic Sea, the two headquarters will need to establish close relations aimed at coordinating and deconflicting operations along this line. During the Cold War, such requirements were often fulfilled by designated supporting and supported commands. Of particular importance today is the fact that air and ground systems on both sides of the Baltic Sea will be able to engage surface targets from coast to coast. A significant proportion of Finland's and Sweden's populations and economic activity is concentrated along the Baltic coastline – given their armed forces are largely based in these same areas, it seems reasonable to assume they could be concentrated there during a crisis or conflict. From Finnish or Swedish territory, possibly deploying via southern Norway or Denmark, forces could be readily operationalised in Scandinavia or the Baltic region.

The vast distances and complex strategic environment confronting the Nordic region points to the need for a sub-regional headquarters to address C2 challenges. Moreover, in light of the numerous ground forces contributed by multiple countries, a strong case can be made for a multinational corps headquarter to coordinate operations along the border with Russia. Consideration should also be given to a dedicated headquarters that can manage receiving, staging, and onwards movement and logistic support for Allied reinforcements. By 2030, the Nordic countries will be able to field a combined total of 250 modern combat aircraft. Gaining the best possible impact from these forces requires improved capacity for planning and control, which could be achieved by establishing a Nordic combined air operations centre. Furthermore, the inlet to the Baltic Sea will be a critical area of operations in any regional crisis or conflict, and should therefore become the responsibility of a sub-regional headquarters in cooperation between Denmark and Sweden, which are in a unique position to direct operations in the area. As was common practice during the Cold War, these commands could be established as dual-hatted positions, paired with national commands.

Lastly, Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM) at Northwood, UK, has a role in protecting underwater infrastructure, naval support for shipping, and perhaps also deploying operations at sea. If JFC-NR is to assume responsibility for the Northern Europe, however, the role played by MARCOM in a crisis or war needs to be clarified. The latter could possibly operate as a forward headquarters for operations in the Eastern Atlantic, similar to the role played by EASTLANT during the Cold War.

### Conclusion

It is impossible to know how much military activity there will be in the Arctic over the years to come. Although global warming will have an impact, it could take a long time before it leads to substantial increases in civilian and military traffic in the High North. Meanwhile, Russian capabilities and strength in Northern Europe will be dictated by the outcome of the war in Ukraine, while the future role of China in the region poses further uncertainties.

Currently, the US, the UK and Norway conduct intelligence gathering in the High North. Some other nations have also started patrolling the region. While NATO is not directly involved in these efforts, it is a recipient of relevant intelligence information. Going forward, NATO may consider taking a more involved role in peacetime operations in the High North. This could provoke controversy between and within NATO members. Therefore, as long as Russia does not threaten Allied forces or territories, it may be advantageous for these operations to remain under national command. Nonetheless, information sharing and coordination among the states directly involved in operations and intelligence gathering needs to be improved, and military operations policy for the region discussed. While some efforts along this line are already



being pursued through the framework of the Arctic Chiefs of Defence Board and the Arctic Forces Roundtable, these venues lack a political mandate and the relevant meetings seem to have had little impact.

NATO is adapting its posture and policy to the new international situation. Measures are lagging, however, in the field of command and control. Although a final arrangement cannot be put in place until Sweden is formally admitted to NATO, the requirements are already clear: the Allied C2 framework in Northern Europe needs to

establish strong links to North America, while effectively supporting, through deterrence and defence, NATO's exposed members in the Baltic region. Towards this end, NATO should leverage the existing, strong framework of cooperation in the region.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For an extensive discussion of command authority in multinational operations, see Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Multinational Operations*, Joint Publication 3-16, 1 March 2019, validated on 12 February 2021, [www.jcs.mil/Doctrine/Joint-Doc-trine-Pubs/3-0-Operations-Series/](http://www.jcs.mil/Doctrine/Joint-Doc-trine-Pubs/3-0-Operations-Series/).

<sup>2</sup> Within NATO's integrated command structure, each command (e.g. ACE), is headed by a designated commander (e.g. Supreme Commander Allied Powers Europe, SACEUR), who is supported by a corresponding multinational headquarters (e.g. Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, SHAPE). Unless otherwise specified, this policy brief refers to the various nodes in NATO's C2 structure by the name of the respective commands, not commanders' titles or the names of headquarters (where they differ).

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive review of AFNORTH's history, see Are Sandvik, ed., *Headquarters Allied Forces Northern Europe, 1951-1994* (AFNORTH Magazine, 1994), <https://archives.nato.int/headquarters-allied-forces-northerneurope-1951-1994>.

<sup>4</sup> William T. Johnsen, 'Reorganizing NATO Command and Control Structures: More Work in the Augean Stables?', in *Command and Control in NATO After the Cold War. Alliance, Nation, and Multinational Considerations* (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 1997), [www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep12031.8.pdf](http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep12031.8.pdf).

**Svein Ejfjstad** Ejfjstad had 40 years' service at the Norwegian Ministry of Defence before he retired in 2022. He has since been a senior adviser at NUPI.

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NUPI  
Norwegian Institute of International Affairs  
C.J. Hambros plass 2D  
PO Box 8159 Dep. NO-0033 Oslo, Norway  
[www.nupi.no](http://www.nupi.no) | [info@nupi.no](mailto:info@nupi.no)

