



# German–Norwegian relations in security and defence: What kind of partnership?

European View  
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## Abstract

The article contributes to the debate on European defence cooperation and integration by analysing the German–Norwegian security and defence partnership. I define this partnership as being based upon mutual interests and values, and one in which the minor partner has important resources to contribute which accord with the larger partner's interests and values. The article analyses this partnership within the framework of European integration and Atlantic cooperation, and in terms of how the discourse on strategic autonomy shapes the partnership. The article discusses two specific areas of cooperation, the High North and German–Norwegian collaboration on defence procurement. When analysing this relationship, I argue that Norway applies strategies such as *acting as an external resource*, *adaptation* and *shielding* to influence German policies vital to Norwegian security.

## Keywords

Norwegian foreign policy, German foreign policy, NATO, EU, High North, Cooperation on defence procurement

## Introduction

In the Norwegian government's strategy paper for Germany, made public in June 2019, the government states that Germany is '... Norway's most important partner in Europe' (Norway, MFA 2019b, 4), and furthermore that '... Germany is one of the European countries with which Norway will build more systematic and long-term relations. In particular, foreign and security policy cooperation with Germany will be deepened' (Norway, MFA 2019b, 6).<sup>1</sup> That Erna Solberg's first official trip abroad as prime minister

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in November 2013 was to meet German Chancellor Angela Merkel illustrates the long-standing nature of this partnership (Berglund 2013).

The aim of this article is to achieve a better understanding of how the bilateral German–Norwegian security and defence partnership is evolving and what underpins it. Obviously, the relationship is highly asymmetrical. Germany is more important to Norway than the other way around. Consequently, it is up to the Norwegian authorities to develop strategic thinking regarding the country's relationship with Germany. This is especially true on issues such as protecting the High North and securing German support when important decisions on European security are made. I argue that Norway is pursuing three different, but interdependent, strategies to influence German decision-makers. These strategies are *adaptation*, *acting as an external resource* and *shielding* (Knutsen et al. 2000, 21–3). Adaptation implies a strategy whereby Norway aligns its defence policy with German priorities. Acting as an external resource implies that Norway can further develop its role as a respected partner in international military operations and as a significant military power in Germany's northern neighbourhood. Shielding is a strategy aimed at limiting German or EU influence on Norwegian security. This might be appropriate if there are divergences on security and defence policy that become too large.

Nevertheless, such strategies would be useless if German authorities considered Norway to be of less interest to them. This is, however, not the case. The coalition agreement between the German Christian Democratic Union (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands) and the German Social Democrats (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) from 2018 states that Germany will 'together with France, . . . continue the agreed projects of the German–French work plan. . . . The same applies to the German–Dutch and German–Norwegian cooperation that we want to expand' (Koalitionsvertrag 2018, 146). Since both parties are interested in closer cooperation, a security and defence partnership is evolving. I define this partnership as a relationship in which the minor partner has important resources to contribute which accord with the larger partner's interests and values. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Germany and Norway on cooperation on new submarines, missiles and other naval defence *matériel*, signed in Eckernförde (Germany) on 22 August 2017 is at the core of this partnership.

In fact, studying the German–Norwegian security and defence partnership is interesting because both states are fundamentally dependent upon the functioning of an institutions-based multilateral system (Norway, MFA 2019b; Germany, Federal Ministry of Defence 2016). It is also interesting due to the differing foreign policy outlooks. Norway has a strong Atlantic security identity, with a security and defence perspective that focuses on the north and west (Lindgren and Græger 2017), while Germany's far more European-integration-minded security perspective focuses more on the east and west (White 2019; Eberle and Handl 2020).

In the next section, I further scrutinise the German–Norwegian partnership within the framework of European integration and Atlantic cooperation before analysing the two case studies, the High North and cooperation on defence procurement. Thereafter, I draw

a conclusion and try to pinpoint in which direction the German–Norwegian partnership might head.

## Common interests and values?

The 2017 MoU could have served as a starting point for an assessment of the security and defence partnership between Norway and Germany (Norway, MoD 2017). Equally, the same is true of the 2018 coalition agreement between the two ruling German parties. However, such approaches would not have allowed us to understand the real underpinnings of this partnership. Instead, it seems appropriate to take a step back and look at the changing security environment during the 2010s.

What seems to underpin the partnership is the more vigorous German multilateralism since 2014, including Germany's inclination to take the lead in European security (Wright 2018; Aggestam and Hyde-Price 2020). The Russian annexation of Crimea (2014), the migration crisis (2015), Brexit (2016) and the election of Donald J. Trump as US president (2016) have all undoubtedly challenged European security and, more specifically, the transatlantic security community. From a German perspective, these challenges have led to a need for stronger leadership from Germany and the EU in the world (Wright 2018). In a multipolar world, the intensifying China–US rivalry will challenge multilateral cooperation and increase pressure on long-standing norms in international affairs. Furthermore, the US has not only pivoted its foreign policy orientation towards East Asia but is also moving away from multilateralism and a willingness to lead in international affairs (Melby 2017).

The European answer to this challenge is not only to defend the multilateral order, but also to insist on the need to reform institutions such as the UN, NATO and the EU. Obviously Germany is dependent upon a functioning multilateral order and still has a strong civilian security identity (Maull 2018). This means that Germany defines its security interests within such collective frameworks and as the default and moral way of solving international problems (Eberle and Handl 2020, 48). Hence, the German *White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr* (Germany, Federal Ministry of Defence 2016, 24–5) underlines Germany's commitment to 'maintaining a rules-based international order' and to 'deepening European integration and consolidating the transatlantic partnership'.

The newly established EU 'defence package' of the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation, of which Germany, together with France and the European Commission, is one of the main drivers, is a clear example of both building and reforming the EU's ability to act (Biscop 2019). Furthermore, it represents an effort to defend a European security order based upon integration and collective security. The same goes for the development of NATO, for which Germany provides the foundation for the successful implementation of the decisions made at the ground-breaking 2014 Wales Summit (Major and Mölling 2015). The success of NATO's biggest adaptation since the end of the Cold War depends upon German leadership.

It is this changing European security order that brings Germany and Norway closer together. It is no coincidence that the same day as the Norwegian government presented its *Strategy for Germany* paper, it also submitted its *White Paper on Norway's Role and Interests in Multilateral Cooperation* to the parliament (Norway, MFA 2019b; Norway, MFA 2019a). Germany's Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas participated in the presentation of both documents, together with his Norwegian counterpart Ine Eriksen Søreide.

In the White Paper, the Norwegian government states that it will '... support binding international cooperation and the multilateral system, enabling us to strengthen our ability to address common challenges and safeguard national and global interests' (Norway, MFA 2019a, 5). The Norwegian approach corresponds well with the German one. The two governments also share many of the same concerns regarding the challenges the multilateral system now faces. From the Norwegian side it is especially worrying that states might choose to solve their challenges 'bilaterally or unilaterally, rather than as part of a larger community' (Norway, MFA 2019a, 6). Hence, Brexit has made Germany an even closer political partner for Norway.

From a Norwegian perspective, several ideational and concrete factors point in the direction of enhanced cooperation between the two countries. These are mutual trust, common values and previous experiences of concrete cooperation efforts. Factors that point in the other direction are the little attention paid to the High North in Berlin, the different attachment to and priority given to the EU, and the differing cultures and traditions between the German and Norwegian militaries.

What the two countries also have in common is a stated will to enhance European defence capabilities, including the European defence industry. Consequently, from 2021 Norway will be taking part in the EDF—the only European Economic Area member to do so. As part of the European Economic Area, the Norwegian defence industry is regulated by the same single market rules as EU member states (Norway, MoD 2015, 11; Norway, MFA 2020a). In addition, since 2006 Norway has had an administrative arrangement with the European Defence Agency. The cornerstone of this participation is defence research and technology activity. These frameworks shape the conditions for the German–Norwegian partnership using EU rules and regulations. But this goes further, as the Norwegian government is adapting its policy to fit the EU's security and defence agenda. Norway is in fact one of the third countries most engaged in the Common Security and Defence Policy through its alignment with the EU in many foreign policy areas such as engagement in EU missions and operations (Hillion 2019, 32). This is the case even though Norway's relations with the EU in this realm are not dependent upon an institutional set-up as they are in other fields of cooperation.

However, due to its Atlantic security identity Norway has an ambivalent relationship with the EU in the field of security and defence. It has previously expressed a hope and belief that the EU will not develop an autonomous foreign, security and defence policy (Norway, NOU 2012, 723). Consequently, Norway still regards the EU as part of a wider

Atlantic framework in which the EU–NATO relationship is at the centre of the wider Western security system. This is an important factor in Norwegian politics, as seen in the Norwegian reluctance to take part in the debate on European strategic autonomy. Norwegian politicians seldom refer to this debate. One of the very few exceptions was Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Søreide’s speech to Parliament on 17 November 2020, but this took a much broader perspective than just security and defence (Norway, MFA 2020b). In fact, the Norwegian perspective seems to be very similar to German Minister of Defence Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer’s criticism of the European debate on this issue. Concretely, this refers to the ‘European illusions’ regarding strategic autonomy: ‘Europeans will not be able to replace America’s crucial role as a security provider’ (Kramp-Karrenbauer 2020). From the German defence minister’s perspective, Europe remains dependent on US military protection. Furthermore, she states, the EU needs to take on more responsibility for its own security, especially in the wider European neighbourhood.

To analyse these similarities and differences, I now turn to the two case studies on the High North and cooperation on defence procurement. I will assess the use of the three strategies outlined above in these two areas to answer the question of what kind of partnership is now developing between Germany and Norway.

## **The High North in the German–Norwegian partnership**

The German approach to the High North is still to a high degree linked to climate change and global warming issues. This is evident in both the 2013 and the 2019 versions of the Arctic policy guidelines from the federal government (Germany, Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013; 2019). The 2019 Arctic policy guidelines nevertheless state that there is the potential for ‘non-cooperative behaviour in the Arctic’ (Germany, Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019, 23). This might affect German security interests as set out in the 2016 White Paper on German security policy. In addition, it illustrates how the High North now ranks higher in German military planning. Nevertheless, Germany will still pursue ‘a multidirectional policy that unites different factions in NATO’ (Kamp 2018, 73). This explains why German policymakers are unwilling to increase the Bundeswehr’s presence in the High North substantially (Kamp 2018, 70–1). This must not be seen as an unwillingness to view security developments in the High North as being of interest to Germany. The German participation in 2018 in Trident Juncture, the largest NATO exercise on Norwegian soil since the Cold War, in which 9,000 German military personnel took part, is a clear example of Germany’s interest. Germany sees its participation in such exercises as contributing to the security of the High North.

The Norwegian aim is to draw Germany’s attention northwards, to achieve binding commitments to reinforcement in times of crisis (Tamnes 2018, 19). This does not necessarily mean collective defence only, but to have Germany as a supporter when important decisions on European security are made. The main Norwegian strategy in this regard is *adaptation* to one of the most important German defence initiatives of recent years, the Framework Nation Concept (FNC). The idea behind the FNC is that a larger country

takes on responsibility for plugging specialised support capabilities ‘into the back-bone provided by the framework nation’ (Saxi 2017, 176). Since the concept was introduced in 2013, it has changed and is now more strongly linked to NATO’s deterrence and defence posture (Major and Mölling 2016). Therefore, ‘Germany will become the indispensable framework nation for most of its smaller FNC partners’ (Glatz and Zapfe 2017, 2). Since the FNC has been even more closely linked to Article 5 commitments, Norway can also apply the strategy of being an external resource by acting as ‘NATO in the North’. In addition, it is a significant defence actor in Germany’s northern vicinities, with several modern military capabilities such as new fighters and frigates. This is further substantiated by even closer cooperation with Germany in the defence procurement field.

### **German–Norwegian cooperation on defence procurement**

Germany is already Norway’s most important partner in the supply and joint acquisition of defence *matériel*. The exception to this is fighter aircraft, where the US still dominates supply. The MoU paved the way for long-lasting cooperation on the acquisition of new submarines, naval missiles and other defence systems (Norway, MoD 2017). The timespan covered by the memorandum is a minimum of 40 years, which is the life expectancy of the 6 submarines Germany and Norway are developing together. The first one will arrive at the end of the 2020s. In parallel, Germany and Norway also agreed in 2017 to develop a common missile based on the Norwegian naval strike missile, ensuring identical missiles in both countries’ navies. It is the submarine agreement that ensures that this German–Norwegian partnership in defence procurement will be in place for a long period of time.

When assessing the importance of the German–Norwegian partnership, the Norwegian government’s budget proposition for 2021 states that: ‘The decision to purchase submarines together with Germany, the agreement on maritime defence cooperation and the close land-based operational cooperation linked to NATO’s rapid reaction force, contribute to further strengthening relations with Germany’ (Norway, MoD 2020, 39). The relationship therefore has depth and there is a high degree of trust between the parties. It is nevertheless important to note that the new European security order, with the rebirth of NATO’s collective defence commitments, is an important precondition for the close partnership in defence procurement.

Within the realm of cooperation on defence procurement, Norway primarily acts as an external resource. Being a respected defence actor in Germany’s northern neighbourhood, Norway acts as a politico-military enabler for Germany. By cooperating on the production of submarines and other defence *matériel*, Norway contributes to enhancing both German and Norwegian military capabilities within naval security. Furthermore, through the MoU, Norway will ensure delivery of the submarines it requires and at the same time contribute to closer cooperation on defence procurement within the EU and NATO. Such an approach also corresponds well with the strategy of adaptation, to both EU and NATO norms, but also to a German-based approach to the design of the

submarines. By basing the procurement on an existing German submarine design, Germany and Norway will avoid an extensive development project, with the risks and costs that this would involve.

From the Norwegian side, there are hardly any limits to how far German–Norwegian cooperation might go. However, from the German side, the aim of the cooperation with its northern neighbour is to exploit military synergies and achieve an overall improvement in Europe’s defence capabilities.

## Conclusions

The German–Norwegian partnership in security and defence is close. It is characterised by a high degree of trust and a common approach to several international challenges and threats. Nevertheless, there are also some important divergences. Even though it might be inappropriate to use the term ‘shielding’ in this context, in the 2021 state budget the Norwegian government originally proposed not to take part in the EDF (Norway, Ministry of Defence 2020, 36). The government’s position changed, however, when it negotiated the 2021 budget proposal with the Eurosceptic Progress Party (‘Fremskrittspartiet’), which insisted that Norway should take part. As they now see it, the government and the Progress Party agree that the development of defence equipment and technology is part of strengthening NATO’s and Europe’s defence. Hence Norway, as part of NATO, needs to cooperate closely with alliance partners in the EU. This also means that Norway can avoid taking part in the discourse on strategic autonomy since it considers cooperation with the EU in this field part of strengthening NATO. This confirms Norway’s Atlantic approach to European security and defence. Even though Germany’s defence minister underlines the need to avoid ‘illusions’ of strategic autonomy, it is nevertheless an important concept when discussing the role the EU will have in a more multipolar world. To avoid such debates might harm Norwegian security interests in the end, and it will also limit how close the German–Norwegian partnership in security and defence can become.

## Note

1. All translations are by the author.

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