

How to defend Norway? An inquiry into the military-strategic conceptual defence debate in Norway after 2014

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Extended Abstract (300-800 word)

This article examines the debate within the Norwegian defence sector over a new military-strategic concept in the wake of Russian aggression against Ukraine, 2014–2022. It examines the debate within the Norwegian defence sector about how Norway’s military forces should best be developed, structured, and employed to ensure that the Norwegian Armed Forces contributed to credible deterrence and defence.

Three main military-strategic alternatives have dominated this debate, supported respectively by adherents of what I will term the “traditionalists”, the “modernists” and the “radicals”. Each of these schools of thought have put forward in the debate their own operational concepts for the Norwegian Armed Forces. Due to its specialized, technical, and partially classified nature, the debate was conducted only partially in public forums.

Adherents of the “traditionalist” school of thought argue that the Norwegian Armed Forces should remain a balanced force consisting of land, air and sea forces, and that Norway should seek to meet any aggression in all domains. This requires strengthening the whole force, particularly Norway’s land forces, and requires building up the presence of the armed forces in the most exposed parts of Northern-Norway. In peacetime, such a force should aim for “deterrence by denial”, signaling to the opponent that any attack would be risky, costly, and unlikely to succeed. If deterrence should fail, the force would strive to maintain control over most of Norwegian territory for as long as possible until allied reinforcements arrive.

The main alternative to the “traditionalist” school can be termed the “modernists”. Its adherents argue that Norway cannot afford to build the balanced military forces supported by the “traditionalists”, and that the results will be a minuscule force which will not offer credible deterrence, and which will be unable to defend the most exposed parts of the country if deterrence should fail. Instead, they argue for a less ambitious military-strategic concept. If deterrence should fail, they argue that the Norwegian Armed Forces should be structured and employed to achieve “operational denial” in Finnmark county and the northern maritime areas. Enemy forces should be located and engaged with long-range precision strike weapons and special-forces-type raids, but not symmetrically engaged in the land domain by mechanized forces. The aim is to impose high costs on the adversary and signal to allies that there is an active combat situation in Norway, encouraging allies to prioritise Norway for reinforcements.

Several other and more radical alternative concepts have also been proposed, but these have fewer adherents within the defence sector establishment. To broaden the alternatives which are discussed in this project, one radical proposal will be included – a so-called “deterrence by

punishment” strategic-level concept. Adherents of this approach argue that Norway should attempt conventional “deterrence by punishment”. That is, to signal a willingness to employ long-range precision strike weapons deployed from combat aircraft, surface, or subsurface vessels, to target political and strategic targets of vital importance to an opponent in case of an armed conflict. The purpose is to signal a willingness to impose prohibiting costs on an adversary in order to deter aggression. This is a far more offensive strategy at the strategic-level and runs contrary to traditional Norwegian security policy and military strategic thinking.

The article will seek to describe and explain the different positions, as well as to determine who in the defence sector supported which positions and discuss why they held these views. In order to do this, the article draws on written primary and secondary source documents in Norway and selected allied countries, as well as interviews with senior Norwegian officers and officials. Some of these written and oral sources will be classified, and as such can only provide background information which cannot be utilized or acknowledged in the project’s published findings.

The following research questions will be examined: What are the main arguments of the adherents of the different military-strategic concepts? What strengths do they argue that their preferred strategy have, and what weaknesses do they find with the alternative concepts? How do outside observers, who do not fall into any of the main “camps”, regard these competing concepts? To what extent are Norway’s NATO allies aware of these debates, and how do they evaluate the different proposals? Who are the main adherents of the different schools of thought? When, where and how did they develop and put forward their proposals? What institutional affiliations do the members of a school of thought predominantly hold? Do particular institutions favour certain military strategies and operational concepts? If so, why? What has been the main impact (if any) of these debates on Norwegian defence policy and strategy since 2014?