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Becoming allies: Finland, Norway, and the Nordic security community after Russia's invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

This article analyses Finland and Norway's evolving narratives about one another as neighbours, partners, and allies against the backdrop of political and scholarly discourses about the broader Nordic security community. Drawing on International Relations (IR) theories on regional security complexes and security community formation, we find that a swift reframing of the Finnish-Norwegian relationship was possible after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 because it was formulated against the backdrop of the already established narrative about the well-functioning and trustful Nordic security community. The intense interaction dynamics between Finland and Norway in recent years have brought the Nordic security community to an unprecedented level of integration, and an all-time high sense of 'we-ness' now characterises Finnish-Norwegian relations.

Keywords

Security community, political narrative, Nordic region, regional security complex

Introduction

Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022 changed security and defence debates in the Nordic region overnight. Longstanding truths about Finnish, Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian security and defence policies ceased and analyses of Nordic security dynamics had to be revisited. This was not least the case in the Fennoscandian Peninsula: when Finland applied for NATO membership shortly after the outbreak of the war, it profoundly changed the country's relational dynamics with bordering states Russia, Sweden, and Norway. For the very first time, two NATO allies – Finland and Norway – shared a land border in the Nordic region (Sweden later also joined NATO). In the fall of 2022, Finnish and Norwegian political leaders signalled that their bilateral relationship had entered a new phase. Norway's Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre's statement in 2022, that Norway had "no better friend" than Finland (Niinistö and Støre, 2022), serves to exemplify the exceedingly amicable account of Finnish-Norwegian relations during this period, in sharp contrast to the once dominant historical account of a touchier relationship at times marked by mutual suspicion and even distrust. What made this rapid and profound reframing of their relationship possible?

In this article, we trace and analyse the evolving political and scholarly narratives around the Finnish-Norwegian relationship against the backdrop of narratives about the broader Nordic security community. Within regional security complexes like the Nordics, the nature and intensity of bi- and minilateral dynamics form a fundamental, yet understudied, part (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). As Tilly (2003, p. 405–406) notes, all security communities are inevitably underpinned by a myriad of different social structures, including various dyads and triads. The Finnish-Norwegian case presents us with an opportunity to analyse how key dyadic relations evolve in relation to, and relative to, the security communities of which they form part (Adler and Barnett, 1998; Tilly, 1998). It also allows us to study the interplay between the 'we-ness' of security communities and the 'we-ness' of these communities' intrinsic dyads and triads. We suggest that the effective reframing of the Finnish-Norwegian relationship after Russia's invasion of Ukraine was possible because it was formulated against the backdrop of an already established narrative about a well-functioning and trustful Nordic security community. In short, the narrative surrounding the Nordic security community offered a 'secure base' around which the new Finnish-Norwegian relationship and shared narrative could be reformulated (Dupuis and Thorns, 1998, p. 29; Lupovici, 2023; Haugevik and Svendsen, 2023).

Subsequently, we explore how Finland and Norway have portrayed and approached one another as neighbours, partners, and allies in the context of the Nordic security community, first historically and then in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. We begin by positioning our study within IR scholarship, discussing relations between neighbouring states from the perspective of theories about the internal dynamics of regional security complexes and security communities. Next, we focus on the historical narratives about the Finnish-Norwegian relationship before delving into the process of political alignment between Oslo and Helsinki and how scholarly and political accounts of a more mature Finnish-Norwegian friendship emerged. In conclusion, we discuss potential future avenues for strengthened Norwegian-Finnish cooperation in foreign and security policy.

Neighbours, borders, and regional security complexes

State relationships are constantly evolving, changing in kind, degree, and manifestation over time. Enemies can be 'civilized' and transformed into friends (Jackson, 2006; Kupchan, 2010) and friends can become estranged if one party turns away from commonly established orders (Svendsen, 2019). Relations between bordering states make for a special, but understudied, category in IR scholarship

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(see Hofius, 2016). While geographical proximity does not in and of itself determine the nature of state relationships, it does seem to have an impact on the *intensity* of these configurations. Borders are fundamental to all states, with issues of sovereignty, trust, and everyday border management at the core, but are ultimately what states themselves 'make of' them (Wendt, 1999). While friendly states typically seek to soften borders to reduce transaction costs and ease the everyday movement of goods, capital, services, and people, rivalling or inimical states will seek to maintain control over the same borders, keeping 'the other' at a distance.

Crucially, however, all state interaction transcends formal state borders. There are numerous ways of conceptualising how this transcendence materialises in practice, but for the sake of our study, two related analytical conceptions appeared particularly useful. The first is the concept of a *regional security complex*, defined by Buzan and Wæver (2003) as a regionally based cluster where the members' security is interdependent. The second is that of a *security community*, a type of regional security complex inside which collective, amicable identity formation stands at the core (Deutsch et al, 1957; Adler and Barnett, 1998). Security community theory describes the process through which strategic collaboration between states progresses into more profound unity as the involved parties increasingly come to identify with and trust one another. In Adler and Barnett's (1998) prevailing account, all security communities – whether nascent, ascending or more mature – are characterised by some degree of multilateralism, unfortified borders, and a common definition of threat, and with military planning only directed at community outsiders. A shared 'language of community' is also crucial (Adler and Barnett, 1998, pp. 55-56). When security communities become *tightly coupled*, they are expected to also involve arrangements for cooperative and collective security, a high level of military integration, policy coordination against 'internal threats', free movement of populations, internationalisation of authority, and a sense of shared rule "at the national, transnational, and supranational levels" (Adler and Barnett, 1998, pp. 56-57).

In the present context, a noteworthy criticism of security community theory is that it has attached too much importance to common identities and *sameness* (Tilly, 1998; Browning and Joenniemi, 2014). While Nordic cooperation has been described as 'the standard example of an uncontested security community' (Wæver, 1998, p. 72) and a 'model security community' (Wiberg, 2000), some of the bilateral relationships within the Nordic clusters have historically also been characterised by difference and even elements of mistrust (see e.g., Juntunen and Pesu, 2018). While these tensions are often explained by the different formal security arrangements of the Nordic states that emerged after the Second World War, scholars point out that the Nordic states also tend to safeguard their niche identities and internal differences when operating in Nordic settings (Haugevik and Sending, 2020).

Observing that even the most tightly coupled security community will be marked by some form of internal differentiation, Browning and Joenniemi (2014) make the case for a more nuanced theorisation of the pair identity/difference in security communities:

> *While communities clearly do require some sense of commonality and sameness, critically they are also bound by their differences and the existence of complementarities between different identities on the inside whereby the others appears simultaneously as both other and like.*

Similarly, Tilly (1998) suggests placing social interaction – rather than systems, societies, units or individuals – at the centre of analysis when seeking to understand how security communities work. Such an approach, he argues, will allow a better grasp of the complex and dynamic interplay between the various social structures underpinning that community. Within and across security communities, relational structures will be manifold, the identities involved will be public and relational, and actors

will deploy multiple identities – "at least one per tie, role, network, and group to which the actor is attached" (Tilly, 1998, pp. 400-401).

If we focus on the network of bi- and minilateral ties within the Nordic security community, then the Finnish-Norwegian relationship appears to be one of the dyads most strongly altered by the new framework conditions after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. While the Finnish-Norwegian relationship has also, in security community language, been *maturing* over the past decades, the two states' different security arrangements have remained a barrier to more formalised and committed defence cooperation. Representations of partnership and bilateral cooperation have been few and far between. The fact that all the Nordic states are now bound together by the mutual defence commitment enshrined in the North Atlantic Treaty adds a new dimension to the study of the Nordic region as a security community. Specifically, it alters the narrative about a highly integrated community prohibited from finding binding arrangements for collective security and military integration.

In what follows, we explore the evolving account of the Finnish-Norwegian relationship in the context of the evolving Nordic security community. Focusing on the representations of Finnish and Norwegian scholars and politicians, we follow Somers (1994) in studying narratives as social sites productive of both identities and action paths:

> *…narratives are used to define who we are; this in turn can be a precondition for knowing what to do. This 'doing' will in turn produce new narratives and hence, new actions; the relationship between narrative and ontology is processual and mutually constitutive (Somers, 1994, p. 618).*

We suggest that a new narrative about Finnish-Norwegian friendship was possible after 2022 because it linked to existing rhetorical commonplaces about the Nordic security community while also securing a positive account of how the bilateral relationship itself has progressed (Krebs and Jackson, 2007).

The historical record: Peaceful but detached neighbours

Whereas Finland's neighbourly relations with the Soviet Union/Russia and Sweden have been subject to extensive and systematic scrutiny (see e.g., Koivisto, 2008; Rentola, 2023; Wahlbäck, 2011; Ojanen, 2023), its relations with Norway have been less so, despite the two states sharing a 736 km-long land border in the north.[1] Correspondingly, studies of Norwegian security and defence policy have typically foregrounded the two Atlantic powers – the United States and the United Kingdom – or the Nordic states either as a collective or as a potential theatre for security tensions and military action. As an individual partner and ally, Finland has been in the background until recently.

Finland and Norway are both relatively young sovereign states – Norway separated from Sweden in 1905, while Finland acquired its independence from Russia in 1917. Diplomatic ties between the two states were established in 1918 and scholars note that the early bilateral relationship was described in friendly or 'correct' terms (Kaukiainen, 1997). However, the early relationship was not trouble-free. In the early 20th century, Finnish immigration to Northern Norway was peaking and scholars make note of a widespread fear expressed in Norwegian politics at the time that Finnish nationalists would use immigration to assume greater control over Finnmark. This concern was referred to as 'the Finnish danger' and generated both scepticism and ill-treatment towards the Finnish population in Northern Norway (Eriksen and Niemi, 1981; Fure, 1997, pp. 50-51). Finnish historians echo this

1 To our knowledge, there are few detailed studies of Norway's bilateral security and defence cooperation with other Nordic states (see Saxi, 2010; Bredesen and Friis, 2017).

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account (see e.g., Kallenautio, 1985, p. 117).

Finnish and Norwegian historians seem to agree that the Finnish-Norwegian relationship warmed towards the mid-1930s against the backdrop of a deteriorating international security environment. The rapprochement, it is argued, was driven both by Finland's new Nordic orientation (see e.g., Selen, 1974; Fure, 1997) and by Norway's interest in securing supply routes to the northernmost part of the country (Kaukiainen, 1997, p. 149). When the Soviet Union attacked Finland in 1939, prompting the Winter War, the Norwegian government expressed profound sympathy for Finland and the Finnish population and sent aid, both in the form of humanitarian assistance and facilitative equipment such as fuel.

At the same time, the Norwegian government was cautious about maintaining its official policy of neutrality, fearing being dragged into the war. While more than 700 Norwegian volunteers fought alongside Finland, the government put restrictions on further participation (Fure, 1997, pp. 329-331). In the ensuing years, the complex web of hostility and alliance between the warring great powers pushed Finland and Norway onto different sides of the Second World War. In 1941, concerned about Russian aggression, Finland aligned itself with the Third Reich (which had occupied Norway in April 1940) and participated in Operation Barbarossa against the Soviet Union. In August 1941, Norway severed diplomatic relations with Finland, following the United Kingdom, where its government-in-exile was based. Still, it is worth noting that over 1000 Norwegian volunteers fought on Finland's side during the Continuation War (Arneberg, 1993).

Diplomatic relations resumed after the war, but Finland and Norway ended up adopting different security orientations in the Cold War security environment. Finland's signing of the *Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance* (FCMA) with the Soviet Union in 1948 ensured the country's territorial integrity, but it also restricted its room for foreign and security policy manoeuvre. One concrete implication was that Finland was practically prohibited from joining international organisations and initiatives considered hostile towards the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, unpersuaded by Swedish attempts to establish a Scandinavian Defence Union, Norway joined NATO as a founding member in 1949. From then on, NATO membership, and particularly relationships with the United Kingdom and the United States, became the cornerstone of Norwegian security and defence policy. Finnish decisionmakers expressed that Norway's NATO membership made the Finnish-Norwegian relationship challenging. In fact, in the early 1980s, Finland's President Mauno Koivisto described the relationship with Norway as one of Finland's most sensitive and difficult (Ovaska, 2023, pp. 78–79).

The source of friction was first and foremost structural, relating to the two states' different security arrangements. Encapsulating this setup, the influential Finnish diplomat and grey eminence Max Jakobson described Finland and Norway as 'counter-poles':

> *The objective of Finnish security policy is to prevent a situation, where the mutual defence mechanism of the FCMA treaty would be triggered; the objective of Norwegian security policy is to ensure that NATO's collective defence mechanism would indeed work if push ever came to shove. In Finland, we are afraid that we must receive military support from a great power; in Norway, they are afraid that such assistance is not given (Jakobson, 1980, p. 321).*

Underlying this assessment was a wider Finnish recognition "that the security doctrines of the Nordic countries were interdependent: political decisions in regard to security made by one Nordic country would necessarily affect the strategic position of the whole region" (Juntunen, 2021, p. 224). This logic was also present in official narratives about the Finnish-Norwegian bilateral relationship – increased allied presence in Norway could lead to further Soviet pressure on Finland, a scenario

Helsinki wanted to avoid. In a similar vein, in the early- and mid-1960s, Norway expressed concern about certain Finnish foreign policy initiatives seen to be effectively aimed at limiting the (potential) scope of NATO presence in Norway. A positive take on this delicate situation is found in the 'Nordic balance' model borne out of Norwegian scholarship (Brundtland, 1966). In this account, the Nordic states' sensitivities towards one another's security policy situations helped secure peace and stability in the region, helping reduce great-power tensions in Northern Europe.

Different readings of the security climate occasionally put Helsinki and Oslo on a collision course during the Cold War. In 1963, Finland's President Urho Kekkonen made a proposal of a Nordic Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone, suggesting that the Nordic countries would not procure nuclear weapons or station them in their territory. The proposal – which Finland further developed during the 1970s and 1980s – went against Norway's policy of not stationing nuclear weapons during peacetime but did maintain an option for stationing them during a crisis (Apunen, 1980; Juntunen, 2016). Two years later, in 1965, Kekkonen started another initiative which came to be known as "the border peace proposal", suggesting that Finland and Norway should formally agree that neither of them would allow the use of their territories as an attack platform against the other. The aim of this effective non-aggression pact was to pacify the delicate security environment of Northern Fennoscandia. Finnish Lapland, including the Fenno-Norwegian border, was after all a potential transit area for both NATO and Soviet troops (Suomi, 1994, pp. 311–319).

Kekkonen's lukewarmness towards Norway's NATO membership was a long-standing attitude. Already as prime minister in 1952, he envisioned a neutral Nordic alliance involving Sweden, Denmark, and Norway – a direct challenge to Norway's NATO membership (see e.g., Nevakivi, 1997). Kekkonen's proposal on a Nordic nuclear weapons-free zone echoed Soviet preferences and improved Finland's and Kekkonen's image in Moscow. Both proposals aimed at disengaging NATO and the Soviet Union from each other, which, in the Finnish view, would have made the region more stable. Kekkonen's position resonated among other leading Finnish policymakers: in 1981, Aimo Pajunen, one of Finland's most prominent defence officials, publicly criticised Norway's decision to allow the United States to preposition military materiel on its soil. Pajunen deemed Norway's foreign and security policy incompetent and warned that it could exacerbate already tense great-power relations.

The Norwegian press picked up on Pajunen's comments, which reportedly offended key officials in Oslo. Pajunen's remarks were likely driven by the fear that the Soviet Union would tighten its stance towards Finland in response to Norway's decision (Tala, 2024, pp. 183-197). In addition to serious friction between Finland and Norway, the structural tensions sometimes manifested as more minor political incidents. In 1977, a satirical drawing in the Norwegian pro-NATO, Centre Party affiliated newspaper *Nationen* portrayed Kekkonen as the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev's hunting dog. Kekkonen – not known as a champion of free speech – was viscerally offended. Eventually, Norwegian Prime Minister Odvar Nordli was forced to make a secret trip to Helsinki to apologise (Tamnes, 1997, pp. 45–56).

In summary, despite emphasising peaceful neighbourly relations, the dominant political and scholarly accounts of the Finnish-Norwegian relationship during the Cold War revealed friction and political distance due to conflicting security policy orientations. These were not stories of friendship and trust, but rather walking on eggshells to keep relations operational and prevent a larger great-power conflict from materialising in the Nordic region. At the same time, scholarly accounts such as the 'Nordic balance', offered a more positive take on the situation, suggesting that the Nordic states' different security positions helped stabilise the region as a whole.

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Towards more integration: A partnership in the making

Their different security doctrines notwithstanding, Finland and Norway collaborated in Nordic institutional forums during the Cold War, including the Nordic Council (1952) and the Nordic Council of Ministers (1971). The *Helsinki Treaty* explicitly limited cooperation in these forums to "legal, cultural, social and economic fields" as well as transport, communications, and environmental protection (*Helsinki Treaty*, 1962, art. 1). Cooperation in security and defence matters was limited to peacekeeping, as all the Nordics were active contributors to UN-led peacekeeping operations in various parts of the globe (see e.g., Jakobsen, 2006).

For Finland, these Nordic collaboration structures became a 'window to the West' during the Cold War and they had notable political significance. Recent studies find, for example, that cooperation related to peacekeeping allowed Finnish military officials to discreetly discuss potential wartime cooperation with the Nordic countries (Pesu, 2020). More broadly, extensive cooperation in areas of low politics allowed Nordic-wide security community building despite different security affiliations and a lack of cooperation in hard security matters (Creutz, 2018). This collaboration enhanced the underpinnings of Nordic cooperation and strengthened the whole Nordic community (see e.g., Strang, 2016). 'Nordicity' or 'Nordicness' even became an identifiable 'brand' known for bridge-building and international solidarity, although there were considerable differences in the respective security doctrines of the Nordic countries (Browning, 2007; see also Brommeson, 2018).

Towards the end of the Cold War, mutual understanding between Helsinki and Oslo of their respective foreign policy standpoints increased. Norway even started to cautiously warm up to the Finnish idea of a Nordic Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone (Juntunen, 2021, pp. 231-233; see also Cameron, 2024). Meanwhile, Finnish policymakers acknowledged that Norwegian security policy also had a mature element – more precisely, that Oslo did not only aim at deterring but also *reassuring* the Soviet Union (Nyberg, 1983, p. 159). Helsinki welcomed the Norwegian policy of reassurance as the appropriate approach to Moscow's policies, which were purportedly driven by defensive objectives.

After the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Finland and Norway gradually stepped up their collaboration under more allowing circumstances – initially within the Nordic context and multilateral settings such as the UN, the OSCE, and the Arctic Council. In 1994, Finland and Sweden both joined NATO's *Partnership for Peace* initiative, allowing the two states to – inter alia – deploy troops to NATO-led peacekeeping operations in the Balkans and additionally Afghanistan, where Finnish and Norwegian troops operated closely (Mustasilta et al, 2022). In 1995, both Finland and Sweden joined the EU. While Norway did not, following a second nation-wide referendum on EU membership, both Finnish and Swedish membership processes formed a key part of the Norwegian government's argument as to why Norway had to join. While the different institutional choices of the Nordic countries still complicated formalised security and defence cooperation, Nordic cooperation grew in this domain, as well as in the extended institutional contexts of NATO and the EU.

In the new security landscape that emerged in the 1990s, Finland fully endorsed Norway's security policy positions – a notable diplomatic and rhetorical turn from previous lukewarmness. The government's 1995 report on Finnish security policy stated that "Norway's consistent defence policy and the security guarantees given to Norway by the United States within NATO are an essential element of military stability in northern Europe" (The Government of Finland, 1995, p. 31). Further, the 1997 report on security and defence again contained a lengthy section on the basics of Norwegian defence policy, reiterating the view that US commitment to Norwegian security was a core pillar of Northern European security (The Government of Finland, 1997, pp. 33-35, 43). However, these more

permissive structural factors – and the noteworthy shift in Finnish official discourse – did not result in a deep Finnish-Norwegian relationship in the 1990s or during the first decade of the 2000s.

From Helsinki's point of view, the relationship with Norway was now cordial and unproblematic, but strengthening bilateral ties was not a priority. This is reflected in the remarks of Finnish decision makers in Norway-related events, which consistently had a broader scope than the bilateral relationship. In his speech at the University of Oslo in 1994, for example, President Martti Ahtisaari observed how the positive view of Norway had further been enhanced in Finland and how Norway has been blessed with beautiful nature and rich natural resources. However, the focus of the speech was on Arctic cooperation and Russia's evolving role in the North (Ahtisaari, 1994). Similarly, at a state banquet in honour of a visit by the Norwegian king and queen in 2007, Ahtisaari's successor Tarja Halonen did not address the bilateral relationship as such but spoke instead about Norway's global role and its relations with the EU (Halonen, 2007).

During this period, we thus see the emergence of a broader Nordic security community evolving through alignment with NATO and the EU. Nordic practical cooperation increased in the security and defence domain as the 'hard' institutional restrictions from the Cold War were no longer as strongly present. This development is in (stark) contrast to what the Nordic countries have been known for, such as "do-gooders" focusing on humanitarian aid and international peace and security (Wivel, 2017; Browning, Lehti and Strang, forthcoming; de Bengy Puyvallée and Bjørkdahl, 2021). However, with less friction, the bilateral Finnish-Norwegian relationship continued to be subject to limited political attention and interest and was rather noted as part of the context of the broader Nordic security community.

Crises and catalysts: New narratives in the making

Towards the end of the 2000s, broader dynamics pulled Finland and Norway closer together. Nordic policymakers now began to actively elevate regional cooperation to the security and defence agenda, hence bringing more relevance, substance and concrete interaction to the Finnish-Norwegian bilateral relationship. In 2008, against the backdrop of the international financial crisis and the Russian-Georgian war, the Nordic foreign ministers tasked Norwegian diplomat and ex-Foreign Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg with evaluating the possibilities for enhanced Nordic foreign, security and defence collaboration. The process resulted in a report with thirteen specific proposals as to how this could be done (Stoltenberg, 2009). The same year, NORDEFCO was established. One concrete result was that the Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish air forces began cooperative exercises on almost a weekly basis (see e.g., Dahl, 2021). This facilitated increased everyday practical cooperation between military officials, contributing to a strengthened community of practice in this domain. From this point onwards, security and defence – which in the past had been a 'no-go' – became the new engine of Nordic cooperation and integration.

During this period, Nordic cooperation also rose on the Finnish security and defence agenda, bringing more depth and substance to Finnish-Norwegian collaboration. Statements from Finnish leaders during this period confirmed that Finland placed a stronger emphasis on its relationship with Norway. In 2012, then President Sauli Niinistö declared in Oslo that the two countries are "welded together by sheer geography", adding that Finland and Norway enjoyed a relationship that went far beyond the traditional diplomatic jargon of a "good and well-functioning" relationship. Niinistö (2012) identified multiple avenues for deeper collaboration not only in security and defence but also economically. It was broadly conceived that the peak in Finnish-Norwegian relations was yet to be seen, a view confirmed by civil servants as well (Creutz, 2018, pp. 338).

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The deterioration of the security environment eventually precipitated deeper Nordic military cooperation. Following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Finland and Sweden increased their military training and exercises with the other Nordic states, including as part of the Norwegian-hosted NATO exercise 'Trident Juncture' in 2015. Collaboration among the Nordics was now driven by concrete security threats, and it gained unforeseen traction (Saxi, 2019). The security and defence policies of the five Nordic states progressively became more aligned. They not only increasingly offered similar assessments of the security environment but also shared the same partner preferences and participated in the same collaborative structures (Haugevik et al, 2022; Saxi, 2022; Brommesson, Ekengren and Michalski, 2023). Collaboration progressed, even as Nordic cooperation faced strains in other areas, such as border management during the global COVID-19 pandemic (Creutz et al, 2021).

In Finland, the enhanced Nordic cooperation constituted a focal part of a new security strategy of "alignment", in which Helsinki maintained nominal non-allied status but sought to deepen existing and forging new military partnerships. The aim of the policy was to bolster deterrence and to generate conditions for wartime cooperation (Pesu and Iso-Markku, 2024; Iso-Markku and Pesu, 2024), a notable change to the policy of military non-alignment. As part of this policy, Norway started to play an increasingly prominent role in Finnish security thinking. Initially, some Finnish observers noted that Norway seemed to not be as equally interested in cooperating with Finland and leaders in Helsinki got the impression that Oslo was hesitant to intensify the military relationship with a non-allied nation (Nurmi, 2023). However, this allegedly lukewarm attitude changed in the ensuing years and Norway warmed up to the idea of cooperating with Finland (Efjestad, 2019).

Finnish security documents also began to emphatically underscore the importance of Norway to Finland. In 2019, the Finnish government programme declared that cooperation with Norway would be deepened – an objective that was widely shared across the political spectrum (The Government of Finland, 2019, p. 99). The Finnish government's 2021 defence report, the last preceding Russia's war of aggression, again dealt explicitly with three bilateral partners, one of which was Norway. It stated that "defence cooperation with Norway will be increased and deepened, both bilaterally and together with Sweden". In terms of Finnish-Swedish-Norwegian trilateral cooperation, the stated objective was to "create prerequisites to execute military operations in times of crisis and conflict, if separately decided". Norway was also mentioned in connection to the Joint Expeditionary Forces (JEF), the aim of which is, inter alia, "to work together in crisis situations" (The Government of Finland, 2021, pp. 44-45, 59).

Russia's attempt to seek security guarantees in December 2021 along with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 prompted Finland to seek NATO membership and started an even more conspicuous alignment between Finland and Norway. The Russian military build-up in and around Ukraine and the ensuing aggression significantly intensified Nordic coordination around the deteriorated European security environment. In this process, Finnish policymakers considered their Norwegian counterparts as vital interlocutors. During his visit to Oslo in October 2022, Niinistö anticipated that the relationship's importance would "only grow" with Finland's membership in NATO. By a similar token, Støre observed that "Norway has no better friend, I have no better interlocutor, than Finland and President Niinistö" (Niinistö and Støre, 2022). Furthermore, Finnish policymakers were impressed by Norway' steadfast support for its own NATO application process. Norway was among the first ratifiers of Finland's accession and Oslo also offered concrete assistance to Helsinki on many levels.

In August 2023, President Niinistö offered his gratitude to Norway in general and Prime Minister Støre personally for the support:

> *I would like to mention the role of Jonas Gahr Støre [...] he was with us all the time and very active. He helped in any way he could. He spoke for our cause everywhere. From his position within NATO and from his strong position as a well-known diplomat, (…) Støre played an important role in this process (Niinistö, 2023).*

The process leading to Finland's NATO accession further elevated Norway's importance in the eyes of Finnish decisionmakers. Finland's and Norway's respective security policy doctrines were now practically aligned, which enabled new avenues for both formal and informal collaboration. Norway's experience as a Nordic country in NATO served as a model and inspiration for evolving Finnish policy in the alliance, and the utility of 'the Norwegian model' for Finland was subject to considerable public debate during its NATO membership process (see e.g., Solli and Solvang, 2024). In November 2023, a public seminar in Helsinki explored how Norway has balanced its role as a NATO ally with a principled and value-based approach to international affairs (FIIA, 2023). Inside observers have described Norway as a "model and tutor" for Finland in NATO, even if Finnish policymakers have been clear that they would not copy-paste or emulate "the Norwegian model" – e.g., with self-imposed restrictions on, e.g., foreign bases.[2]

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Finnish-Norwegian relations have been described by observers as "record-close" and "never been closer and better" (Nykänen, 2023). Indicative of Finland's new security doctrine as well as its deepened relationship with Norway, Finland's new president Alexander Stubb made his first foreign visit to Norway to observe the high-visibility Nordic Response military exercise together with Prime Minister Støre (President of the Republic, 2024). Moreover, the Finnish Government's report on foreign and security policy from June 2024 underscored how "cooperation between Finland and Norway will become closer now that both countries are NATO members and share a land border with Russia" (The Government of Finland, 2024, p. 24.). In June 2024, Helsinki and Oslo signed a new bilateral defence agreement, detailing 20 areas of cooperation and further solidifying their strengthened bilateral relationship (Ministry of Defence of Finland, 2024).

After Russia's invasion: New opportunities and potential challenges

The formalisation of a defence alliance further increased Finland and Norway's relevance to, and attentiveness of, one another, pushing the relationship higher on their respective agendas. In the 2020s, Finland and Norway have increasingly become relevant as reference points and models also for one another's security and defence policy. There are several areas where Finland and Norway may benefit from comparing notes and exchanging viewpoints in the coming years. One such area relates to the maintenance of relations with the United States, especially if Donald Trump re-enters the White House after the 2024 presidential election. Both Norway and Finland had good relations with the first Trump administration (Creutz, 2018; Haugevik and Sending, 2020) in terms of security and defence cooperation, to the degree that the then Finnish defence minister Jussi Niinistö stated that "Finland has never had closer relations with the United States" (Salmela, 2018).

A second area concerns the future dynamics between Russia and the West, where both Finland and Norway have considerable experience with peaceful, pragmatic management of everyday relations with Russia. Both countries have been considered models on how to handle Russian relations (Bogdanoff, 2018), even though these perceptions appear in flux. Questions about the management of the two states' land borders to Russia form a key part of this, as exemplified in recent domestic

2 Roundtable discussion, Oslo, March 2023.

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debates about how to respond to migrant flows via Russia suddenly appearing at the Finnish and Norwegian borders. As noted by President Niinistö during a visit to Oslo in 2022: "Russia will not disappear. It will continue to be our neighbour, even if there is no turn for the better. Finland can never afford to ignore it. NATO membership will not change that reality. In this, too, I think there is a lot Finland and Norway can learn from each other" (Niinistö & Støre, 2022).

The relations with Russia also constitute a political conundrum to which Norway and Finland have slightly different approaches even though both countries have experienced Russia's assertive actions in the form of hybrid operations, deteriorating political climate, and disinformation campaigns, to name a few (Spansvoll, 2023). From a Finnish perspective, Norway's approach to Russia appears ambivalent, situated between reassurance and deterrence. Norwegians again are surprised by the U-turn in Finnish Russian policy, where no official discussions are held except on very basic cooperation (border officials remain one example). The subtle difference seems to lie in the ability of Helsinki to imagine (and practice) non-relations with Russia. To illustrate, the newly elected President Stubb stressed during his campaign that he would not pick up the phone should his Russian equivalent call. Meanwhile, Norway's long-term everyday cooperation with Russia on – inter alia – fisheries, Svalbard, environmental governance, search-and-rescue, and oil-spill preparedness are seen as a reason to uphold a minimum level of communication (Kelman et al, 2020). Thus, scholars have argued that Norway should "continue its prudent politics of balancing appeasement and deterrence" (Waehler, 2022). In other words, disaster diplomacy seems relevant for both countries' policies towards Russia. For Finland, it nevertheless indicates the maximum level of cooperation with Russia, whereas for some Norwegian policymakers it may constitute minimum-level cooperation.

A third point relates to how – with the notable exception of the EU – Finland and Norway operate within the same institutional frameworks. Norway's role as a prospective mentor for Finland in NATO has been mentioned. Similarly, Finland, along with Denmark and Sweden, has served as a key information and access point for Norway in relations with the EU (Haugevik, 2017). With the rules-based international order under pressure, there is also a potential for Finland and Norway to cooperate more closely – with each other and the other Nordic states – in the context of other multilateral forums and platforms. Norwegian lessons learned will, for example, be highly relevant in Finland's upcoming bid for a seat at the UN Security Council (2029-30) as part of the prearranged Nordic rotation system.

Fourthly, Finland and Norway will have a shared interest in highlighting the security connection between the Arctic and Baltic Sea areas. With both states inside NATO, new possibilities have emerged for cooperation on capability development – including procurement and acquisitions – and in operational terms where deterrence on NATO's Northern Flank is now supported by a potent and interoperable fighter plane structure. Furthermore, new investments in infrastructure and military mobility in Northern Fennoscandia would be vital enablers of more intense Finnish-Norwegian operational cooperation. Such investments could arguably form part of a Nordic "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)" as called for by policy experts (Penttilä, 2023). Finally, while Finland is keen to learn from Norway's NATO experience, the organisation of Finland's national defence and total defence concept will serve as important models and reference points as Norwegian security and defence structures adapt to a new security context (see NOU, 2023, p. 14).

Conclusion

This article set out to explore how the narrative surrounding Finnish-Norwegian relations could be redefined into a 'special' bilateral relationship so swiftly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Finland's subsequent application for NATO membership. It is significant that the change in narrative occurred so rapidly, as the two states have been relatively distant historically and it was not a given that this bilateral axis would flourish within the broader Nordic (and NATO) security community after 2022. We have argued that the effective reframing of the Finnish-Norwegian relationship as an exceptional friendship after Russia's invasion of Ukraine was possible because it was formulated against the backdrop of the already established narrative about the well-functioning and trustful Nordic security community. The intense interaction dynamics between Finland and Norway in recent years have taken the Nordic security community to an unprecedented level of integration, and an all-time high sense of 'we-ness' now characterises Finnish-Norwegian relations.

To this end, we have identified the role of specific bilateral relationships within security communities. At the level of community, much has been said about unequal power relations and dynamics, but intra-community relations remain largely unexplored to our knowledge. For Finland, intensive bilateral interaction with Norway became a tool to further its broader integration into the transatlantic security community. This can be attributed to external factors such as geography, shared size, or mutual threat perceptions, but the relative political detachment from which integration began and accelerated shows how intensive bilateral interaction can further security community integration. Narratives alone do not necessarily produce effects beyond the narratives themselves, but they are representations which can pave the way for further change. Future studies of security communities could explore a range of intra-community interactions and their effect on the broader security communities to which they belong. This includes further exploration of Finnish-Norwegian relations, as our analysis has illustrated that this could be a critical case of successful bilateral security community integration in an exceptionally short time.

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