Discussion Article

# Strategic allies or Nordic outposts? Comparing US and Nordic perspectives on Nordic Defence Cooperation Agreements (DCAs)

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## Abstract

In recent years Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden have signed or updated bilateral Defence Cooperation Agreements (DCA) with the United States. These agreements were presented as enabling deeper defence cooperation with a strategic ally in a severely deteriorated European security environment. The agreements provided strategic flexibility for increased US presence in Northern Europe. However, rather than signalling unique relations between the Nordic countries and the United States, they should be seen as an extension of America's overall strategic approach to military presence and cooperation with allies and partners in Europe. For the Nordic countries, the implication is that they cannot insulate themselves from political risks in the transatlantic relationship.

## Keywords

Defence cooperation, DCA, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, NATO, Norway, USA

## Introduction

In recent years four Nordic countries – Norway (2021), Sweden (2023), Finland (2023) and Denmark (2023) – have signed and ratified bilateral Defence Cooperation Agreements (DCAs) with the United States. (US Department of State, 2025) These agreements have been widely welcomed by Nordic governments as supplementing NATO's Article Five security guarantees and as symbolising strong bilateral relations with the United States at a moment of heightened threat from Russia and increased uncertainty in the transatlantic partnership.

However, this discussion article argues that the Nordic DCAs do not represent a unique relationship between the United States and the Nordic countries, which would insulate them from political risks and transatlantic turbulence. Rather, they are an extension of broader US European strategy and thus their implementation is impacted by shifts in US strategic thinking over issues such as military basing and global force posture.

The article begins with a short overview of the significance of Defence Cooperation Agreements in interstate relations. The article then compares domestic discussions in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden regarding bilateral US-Nordic Defence Cooperation Agreements. Finally, the article assesses how the Nordic DCAs fit into the overall US European strategy and analyses possible implications for the Nordic countries. The article provides the first extensive analysis of the Nordic Defence Cooperation Agreements, their surrounding domestic debates, and the US strategic perspective.

## Defence Cooperation Agreements in interstate relations

In the past three decades, Defence Cooperation Agreements have become one of the primary legal frameworks for interstate defence cooperation. The number of DCAs has increased rapidly, with some 2000 such agreements signed since the 1980's. While the contents of the agreements vary, they have several connecting features. The agreements provide an overall legal and technical framework for regular defence cooperation, for example joint exercises, procurements, information exchange and Host Nation Support (HNS). Kinne (2020) defines DCAs as "formal bilateral agreements that establish institutional frameworks for routine defense cooperation." Simplifying Kinne's formulation, I define DCAs in this article as interstate framework agreements facilitating defence cooperation.

One reason for the increasing popularity of DCAs in interstate relations is that they provide an alternative to formal alliance agreements. (Kinne, 2020). They do not contain formal security guarantees or legal obligations for military support or coordination in case of invasion. This allows countries to deepen practical defence cooperation and signal externally about close bilateral relations while avoiding associated costs of formal alliances, such as collective action problems and entrapment or abandonment risks. However, while there has been increasing interest in the use of DCAs in interstate relations, there has been little research on the use of DCAs between allied countries.

The United States has increasingly come to utilise DCAs in the overall management of its global alliance network and force posture. Considering the extent of American military presence and commitments around the globe, American military planners have an interest to harmonise and simplify regulations and legal frameworks governing its access to allied and partner territory and facilities. (Salonius-Pasternak, 2024.) In practice, this has meant insisting on uniform clauses in its Defence Cooperation Agreements. These include, for example, clauses on the entry and status of US forces in a host country, taxation, criminal jurisdiction and ownership of infrastructure built by US forces. In Europe, the primary legal function of DCAs has been to modernise the 1951 NATO Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA)



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on a bilateral basis. After ratification, DCAs are often complemented with separate implementation agreements on specific technical topics, such as infrastructure or taxation.

## Comparing the Nordic Defence Cooperation Agreement debates

In all four Nordic countries, governments argued that the DCAs would strengthen cooperation with a key strategic ally, the United States. In the two NATO founding nations, Norway and Denmark, the agreements were presented as deepening and modernising long-standing historical cooperation. The Danish government argued that the agreement would also allow Denmark to take more responsibility for European security. (Government of Norway, 2022b; Ministry of Defence of Denmark, 2023b; Parliament of Denmark, 2025a.) For Finland and Sweden, the agreements were framed differently, presented as natural extensions of their recent accession to NATO. Specifically, the Finnish government highlighted that the DCA would complement and reinforce Finland's national defence efforts. (Parliament of Finland, 2024a; ibid, 2024b; Government of Sweden, 2024.)

The primary justification given for the agreement was the unpredictable and deteriorating security environment in Europe. In Norway and Finland, the two countries bordering Russia, governments emphasised that the DCAs would enhance their capacity to receive support, enable US investments into local military infrastructure and facilitate joint planning. (Government of Norway, 2022b; 2022c; Government of Sweden, 2024; Parliament of Finland, 2024a; 2024b; Ministry of Defence of Denmark, 2023b; Parliament of Denmark, 2025a.) Danish Prime Minister Frederiksen contended that existing uncertainty in US-European relations made closer cooperation even more crucial, specifically to hedge against a scenario where the US might disengage from Europe (Bryant, 2025). After Donald Trump's election in 2024, more emphasis was placed on the agreements also facilitating regional cooperation by creating a coherent joint approach to security and defence in Northern Europe.

In Norway, Sweden and Denmark, the agreements were approved with clear parliamentary majorities, and in Finland the final approval was unanimous after several amendments were voted down. In all four countries the primary criticism came from left-wing political parties. In Norway the Socialist Left (Sosialistisk Venstreparti, SV) and the Red Party (Rødt, R), in Sweden the Left Party (Vänsterpartiet, V) and the Green Party (Miljöpartiet, MP), in Finland the Left Alliance (Vasemmistoliitto, Vas.), and in Denmark the Red-Green Alliance (Enhedslisten, EL) and the Alternative (Alternativet, ALT) party. (High North News, 2024b; Parliament of Sweden, 2024b; Parliament of Finland, 2024c; Parliament of Denmark, 2025a.)

Critical political debates centred largely on two key themes: the potential loss of sovereignty and the risks associated with nuclear weapons. Critiques concerning sovereignty highlighted the dangers of ceding control over national territory and, specifically, waiving criminal jurisdiction for US forces. Active debates occurred in all four countries regarding the risk of nuclear weapons being placed or stockpiled on their territory, though with different emphases. The Norwegian and Danish agreements include a clause respecting existing national policies regarding bans on the stockpiling or deployment of nuclear weapons. In Finland, the agreement referred to respecting national legislation, which currently bans the placement or stockpiling of nuclear weapons. Sweden was an outlier, as its agreement does not explicitly refer to national legislative or policy restrictions on nuclear weapons. In all the countries critics argued that existing restrictions did not go far enough.

Specific national concerns were also raised. In Norway, opposition parties were critical of weakening traditional Norwegian policies on the ban of permanent foreign bases during peacetime. In Denmark, critics saw it as a mistake to deepen cooperation with an unreliable and unpredictable USA at a time when the Trump administration was raising tensions over Greenland. In Norway and Denmark, there

were also concerns about the agreements causing increased tensions in relations with Russia. In Finland, critics raised the risks of waiving jurisdiction over criminal cases where the death penalty could be involved. Another concern was the parliament's right to receive information on the implementation of the agreement. (Parliament of Norway, 2022; 2024; Parliament of Sweden, 2024a; Parliament of Finland, 2024b; 2024d; 2024e; Bryant, 2025; Parliament of Denmark, 2025b; 2025c.)

In response, governments argued that the DCAs fully respect national sovereignty and would not alter existing policies or legislation restricting US activities. While jurisdiction would be waived in criminal cases regarding US forces, governments retained the right not to waive jurisdiction under certain conditions. Any American activities would only take place with full political consent. The Danish government further contended that the DCA, rather than causing a loss of control, would clarify the legal framework governing US presence. Governments also asserted there was no need for new legislation or stronger clauses outlining national restrictions, including those on nuclear weapons, as any American activities would only take place with political consent. This was bolstered by the Swedish government's assurance that any changes to restrictive policies would require political consensus, and the Finnish government's statement that legislative changes would require parliamentary approval. (High North News, 2022; (Government of Norway, 2024; Parliament of Sweden, 2024a; Parliament of Finland 2024b; 2024c; 2024d; 2024e; Parliament of Denmark, 2025b; Parliament of Denmark, 2025c.) However, in a historic shift, the Swedish and Danish Prime Ministers refused to rule out the possibility of nuclear weapons being placed on their territory in wartime, thereby creating strategic ambiguity about potential policy changes in the future (Sveriges Radio, 2024; Pröschold, 2025).

A key element of the DCAs was the establishment of Agreed Areas and Facilities designated for the joint or exclusive use of American forces. Sweden and Finland adopted broad-based models, opening 17 and 15 areas respectively. Originally, Norway agreed to open 4 additional military areas for the use of American forces. However, after more far-reaching commitments by Sweden and Finland, it amended the total number of new areas to 12. Denmark, in contrast, chose a narrower path by identifying only 3 areas. However, this agreement notably included an explicit reversal of its 1953 policy restriction banning the permanent placement of foreign forces or bases. The change is not applicable to the Faroe Islands or Greenland. The overall result was an unprecedented level of access to Nordic military infrastructure by the American military. For Norway, this served as an early indication that, following Swedish and Finnish memberships in NATO, Norway would no longer be able to regulate allied presence in Northern Europe alone. The newer member states, Sweden and Finland, saw the Agreed Areas and Facilities as crucial for creating a long-term framework for US presence and investments into national military infrastructure, rather than relying on ad hoc solutions during a crisis. (High North News, 2024a; Parliament of Sweden, 2024b; Parliament of Finland, 2024a; Ministry of Defence of Denmark, 2023a; Parliament of Denmark, 2025b.) For Finland, geographic and strategic concerns over a long-shared border with Russia and logistical reliance on the Baltic Sea made enhanced US engagement and presence especially urgent (Linnainmäki, 2023).

## Nordic Defence Cooperation Agreements in US European Strategy

From a strategic perspective, the Nordic DCAs allow the United States to reassure allies in a deteriorated and unpredictable security environment, strengthen NATO's regional deterrence and defence and facilitate US force projection in Northern Europe and the European Arctic. However, the Nordic DCAs should be seen as part of an overall American effort to secure access to allied military sites and facilities for logistics and power projection. The United States has concluded or updated DCAs with all countries



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on NATO's eastern and northeastern flanks from the European Arctic to the Black Sea. This happened in three waves. First with Romania and Bulgaria in 2005 and 2006, then with eastern NATO allies after the annexation of Crimea, and finally with old and new Nordic allies as part of an overall response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.[1]

The result has been an incremental shift of American military presence from Central Europe to Easten Europe. In Poland, the US has been building a stronghold for regional presence. In 2023, US Army V Corps headquarters were moved to Poznan. (Nicastro & Tilghman, 2024; Badertscher and Moreno-Riano, 2024). In Romania, the US is investing up to 2,7 billion USD to Mihael Kogălniceanu Air Base with the aim of expanding it into a regional air hub for power projection and logistical support (Tanghe, 2025). Overall, however, the American approach in the eastern flank has been characterised by a lighter, more reflexive and responsive footprint, rather than relying on traditional vast military bases and permanent force (Carlough, Harris and McGowan, 2025).

The Biden administration viewed the Nordic DCAs in terms of strengthening cooperation with like-minded allies. The US viewed the Nordic countries as capable allies acting as regional security providers. The agreements were presented as further enhancing interoperability and practical military-to-military cooperation. They also emphasised that taken together the European DCAs form a broad network of Defence Cooperation Agreements reaching from Northern Europe all the way to the Black Sea. Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine and joint US-European efforts to respond provided the context for the agreements. (US Department of War, 2021; US Department of State, 2021; Clark, 2023; US Department of State, 2023; US Department of War, 2023; US Embassy in Finland, 2023; US Embassy and Consulate in the Kingdom of Denmark, 2023.)

From a practical perspective, the agreements provide the US with wide access to Nordic military bases across all domains. Based on this unprecedented US access to Nordic military areas, practical cooperation in all domains is likely to expand. However, the extent of increased US presence in Northern Europe is regulated by several factors. First, the US views the Nordic countries as capable allies practising self-help, rather than security-consumers in need of a large-scale permanent or rotational US presence. Second, air and maritime capabilities, which have previously been the focus of US cooperation with the Nordic countries, are more mobile and logistically easier to shift between theatres than land forces. As US global strategic priorities turn away from Europe and toward security concerns in the Indo-Pacific and its own hemisphere, as stated in the new 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS), there is a growing risk that at least some air and maritime capabilities will be removed from Europe. Finally, since the end of the Cold War, American doctrine has shifted away from new large-scale permanent bases toward an access-based model relying on rapid reinforcements. This trajectory appears poised to deepen during Donald Trump's second term. Further, as part of ongoing Defense Strategy (NDS) and force posture reviews, the Trump administration is currently assessing potential adjustments and reductions to the US military posture in Europe. (Bergmann and Svendsen, 2025; Tanghe, 2025; Lungescu, 2025.) All of this means that the United States currently sees little strategic or military need for a large-scale permanent presence in Northern Europe

1 US has made or updated DCA agreements on the northeastern flank with Romania (signed December 2005, entered into force July 2006), Bulgaria (signed April 2006, entered into force June 2006), Lithuania (signed January 2017, entered into force February 2017), Latvia (signed January 2017, entered into force April 2017), Estonia (signed January 2017, entered into force July 2017), Hungary (signed April 2019, entered into force August 2019), Poland (signed August 2020, entered into force November 2020), Slovak Republic (signed February 2022, entered into force April 2022), Norway (signed March 2021, entered into force June 2022), Czech Republic (signed May 2023, entered into force September 2023), Sweden (signed December 2023, entered into force August 2024), Finland (signed December 2023, entered into force September 2024) and Denmark (signed December 2023, entered into force July 2025).

This has several implications for the Nordic countries. The experiences of NATO's eastern allies imply that attracting and building up US military presence is arduous and takes time even when strategic interests align. US military presence in Europe is still largely positioned in legacy bases in Western Europe. Expanding US presence on the eastern flank has happened only partially and incrementally. This means that the Nordic DCAs are unlikely to bring large-scale permanent or long-term rotational US presence into Northern Europe. Attracting US investments into Nordic military infrastructure will likely also take time. For the United States, Northern Europe is not currently a priority theatre. On the other hand, bureaucratic inertia and 10-year duration clauses in the Nordic DCAs also somewhat cushion against political turbulence in the transatlantic relationship by providing a long-term perspective for military-to-military cooperation. However, considering the ongoing shift of US strategic priorities away from Europe, the Nordic countries should not approach the DCAs as insurance against worst-case scenarios such as a sudden large-scale drawdown of US presence in Europe. Rather, they should actively make the case to Washington that defence cooperation serves US global strategy by ensuring that NATO's deterrence toward Russia holds and America is not drawn into a regional war in Europe.

## Conclusion

This article has provided the first extensive comparison of Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, Swedish and US perspectives on the Nordic Defence Cooperation Agreements. The Nordic DCAs were negotiated in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as well as Finland and Sweden acceding to NATO, which meant that the Nordic countries shared a joint threat perception of Russia. Critical debates in all four countries centred on loss of sovereignty, risks of nuclear weapons being placed on their territory and a changing relationship with the United States.

For the Nordic countries, the DCAs facilitated the creation of a unified operational area in Northern Europe as well as a joint Nordic approach to defence cooperation with a strategic ally. In other words, in an unpredictable and deteriorated security environment, the Nordic countries considered NATO's Article 5 security guarantees as insufficient on their own.

For the United States, Northern Europe acts as an outpost for power projection into the European Arctic and the Baltic Sea region. The Nordic countries are seen as capable allies and security providers and the DCAs created strategic flexibility for increased US presence in Northern Europe in support of regional deterrence efforts. However, the main direction of US defence efforts in Europe will remain in Central and Eastern Europe. Rather than signalling a unique relationship between the Nordic countries and the United States, the Nordic DCAs should be seen in the context of these broader US strategic efforts in Europe.



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