



A reluctant European: How Norway responds to the EU's quest for strategic autonomy

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Abstract

The development of the EU as an actor in the field of security and defence is a challenge for Norway. Being a NATO member, but outside the EU, Norway offers an interesting case study of how a non-member adapts to the growing importance of the EU in security and defence affairs. The war in Ukraine has made the issue even more interesting. The article illustrates and explains two phenomena: how a country outside the EU perceives this development and how it responds to the Union's new status. The article does this by looking into not only Norwegian policy documents on how the country is adapting to the EU's new role, but also how the country's authorities and defence industry have been setting strategy with regard to it. The response from and strategy taken by Kongsberg Defence and Aerospace AS, the largest Norwegian defence firm, regarding this new role for the EU is taken as a case in point.

Keywords

EU, NATO, New actor, Norwegian security and defence policies, Defence industry, Kongsberg Defence and Aerospace AS

Introduction

The war in Ukraine marks a defining moment for the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. In contrast to the situation during the 1990s when the EU appeared weak and ineffective when trying to address the civil war in the former Yugoslavia, this time the EU more closely resembles a strategic actor, able to define its interests regarding this external threat (Karnitschnig 2022; Knutsen 2022b). In addition, on 21 March 2022, the EU published its Strategic Compass document (Council of the European Union 2022).

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The intention of this document is to set a common strategic vision for the EU, which aims to operationalise its strategic autonomy, ‘to refine [its] level of ambition, and to better link [its] strategic, operational and capability needs’ (EEAS 2021; EPRS 2021b; Knutsen 2022a, 166).

This new role for the EU in security and defence poses challenges for Norway. As a non-member of the EU, Norway has cooperated deeply with the Union on these issues since the Common Security and Defence Policy became operative in 2003. From a foreign policy analysis perspective (see, e.g., Hudson and Day 2020), this article illustrates how Norway both adapts to and sets strategy with regard to the EU’s security and defence policies. This also includes how Norway’s largest defence firm, Kongsberg Defence and Aerospace AS, has adapted to the existence of the new European Defence Fund (EDF), which together with Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) makes up the EU’s ‘defence package’ that will enable the EU to achieve strategic autonomy.

In fact, Norway is one of the third countries most engaged in the EU’s foreign and security policy, notably through its alignment with the EU’s sanction policies and engagement in its civilian missions and military operations (Hillion 2019, 32; Brudzińska et al. 2020). This is still the case even though military cooperation has been on a downward trend since 2015 (Breidlid 2022). Therefore, a ‘troops for influence’ strategy seems to be an accurate description of how Norway seeks to influence European security (Græger 2002). As this article explains, Norway is a trustworthy partner to the EU, but it is also a reluctant European. This stance is primarily due to Norway’s Atlantic-oriented foreign policy outlook and its scepticism towards supranational integration, including within the field of security and defence.

Our arguments in this article are therefore organised as followed. We first discuss Norway’s traditional security and defence approaches and how the EU process challenges this outlook. Then we analyse how Norway is adapting to these challenges and, more specifically, how Norway’s largest defence firm has developed its strategy with regard to the EU’s defence package. In the conclusion, we summarise our discussion and highlight some of the challenges that Norway will face in the future.

Explaining Norwegian reluctance regarding the EU’s security and defence policies

Norway’s scepticism towards the EU is illustrated by its turning down in two popular referendums, in 1972 and 1994, the opportunity to become a member—the only country to do so. In both polls, the majority was narrow, with 53.5% voting ‘no’ in 1972 and 52.2% in 1994. Since the last referendum, the European Economic Area (EEA) agreement, which entered into force in 1994, has functioned as a national compromise between those who support membership and those who oppose it. Being part of the EEA assures Norway’s participation in the single market, but the country stays outside of EU decision-making, the customs union, the common agricultural and fisheries policies and the

monetary union. In addition, Norway participates in the Schengen area through a separate agreement. Thus, as a national compromise, the EEA agreement clearly poses some important democratic challenges. As the Norwegian government's EEA review committee wrote in 2012: 'Norway is in practice bound to adopt EU policies and rules on a broad range of issues without being a member and without voting rights. . . . Norway is not represented in decision-making processes that have direct consequences for Norway, and neither do we have any significant influence on them' (Official Norwegian Reports 2012, 7).

As the same review committee underlined, Norway is also sceptical of the EU's foreign and security policies, fearing that they might undermine the coherence of the Atlantic security framework (NOU 2012, 724). Since the beginning of the 1990s, various Norwegian governments have sought cooperation with the EU in this field. On the one hand, Norway has aimed to achieve as many deals with and as close links as possible to the EU to avoid being sidelined during the development of the EU's security and defence policy. As a result, Norway has negotiated a series of third-country agreements which include participation in the PESCO project on military mobility, the exchange of sensitive information and participation in the European Defence Agency (Rieker 2021, 121–2; Stortinget 2021). In addition, Norway's participation in the EDF is secured through the EEA agreement in accordance with Article 5 of the EDF regulation, which states that 'the Fund shall be open to the participation of members of the European Free Trade Association which are members of the EEA' (European Parliament and Council 2021, 162). On the other hand, Norway has both hoped and believed that the EU would *not* develop an autonomous security and defence policy. The ambivalence as to whether developments within the EU are desirable and whether the EU member states will succeed in their ambition to achieve a common European foreign and security policy is still an important factor in Norwegian politics (NOU 2012, 724).

Even though this review committee's report was issued in 2012, this ambivalence towards EU integration is still present in Norway. The coalition government of the Labour Party (Arbeiderpartiet) and the Centre Party (Senterpartiet) that came to power in October 2021 stated in its government platform document that it intends to 'carry out a study to assess experiences of EEA cooperation over the last 10 years. In this regard, the experiences of related countries outside the EU with alternative agreements with the EU will be studied' (Norwegian Government 2021, 79, authors' translation).

This study will be submitted in 2023. In this regard the government is emphasising that the EEA agreement continues to act as the foundation for its European politico-economic approach. However, the review committee's mandate also includes analysing other countries' relationships with the EU that are looser than that which exists between the EU and Norway. Which countries this might include is not clear yet, but the British, the Canadian and the Swiss experiences with the EU are possible examples.

In recent years scepticism towards the foreign and security policies of the EU has been expressed by politicians across the entire Norwegian political spectrum. The former

Conservative-led government had suggested that Norway should not take part in the EDF when it was scheduled for implementation in 2021. In the end the government agreed to take part, but only after negotiations took place in the Parliament in connection with the state budgetary proposal for 2021 (Knutsen 2021, 94). Representatives from the new government have also, on several occasions, indicated their scepticism. For example, the State Secretary for Foreign Affairs stated at a conference in March 2022, ‘that nothing much has happened in the EU’s foreign and security policies during the last 15 years’ (Rieker 2022, authors’ translation). This statement led one researcher at the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs to ask whether the Norwegian government really ‘understands what is going on in the EU at present’ (Rieker 2022, authors’ translation). The same state secretary also stated some weeks later that there was some ‘disappointment’ in France when Finland and Sweden applied for NATO membership since this was a clear indication that the EU’s security guarantees in Article 42(7) of the Treaty of Lisbon were apparently ‘not enough’ (University of Oslo 2022, video, 16:55).

This scepticism is, therefore, the result of a combination of several factors. The most important is a general scepticism regarding supranational cooperation beyond the nation state, even though Norway has had to adapt to and incorporate EU legislation to take part in the internal market. Furthermore, as a country with a strong Atlantic security affiliation, Norway has also long been sceptical of European foreign policy integration, which has the potential to move beyond the Atlantic security framework. From a foreign policy analysis perspective, this form of Euroscepticism is part of Norway’s unique political culture. This is a culture in which ‘all the discourses, values, and implicit rules that express and shape political action and intentions’ (Hudson and Day 2020, 132) are founded in Norwegian political history and form the basis for the discourse on its relationship with Europe (Neumann 2001). This is a political history based upon Atlanticism, whereby the UK and the US are seen as the main actors in providing Norway with security.

A reluctant European: how Norway sets its strategy regarding the EU’s defence initiatives

While Norway is a reluctant European, both its defence authorities and defence industry give priority to setting a strategy regarding EU initiatives in this field. To analyse this strategy and how it is organised, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with individuals from the defence authorities, the research community and industry. These interviews were carried out in October and November 2018 and in May and September 2021, making it possible to observe events over time and hence observe policy developments and changes. A longitudinal approach is important, and this is especially so when the developments we are analysing have been characterised by huge changes and new policies in several areas within the security and defence field. Furthermore, how Norway sets its strategy with regard to the EU’s security and defence policies can tell us a lot about how actors outside the EU respond to the EU’s new integration moves. However, it is also fair to argue that the Norwegian case is unique, making such a generalisation difficult (Official Norwegian Reports 2012, 6–7).

Our findings show that the overarching condition for Norwegian policymakers is that the EU's defence initiatives must not in any way challenge Norway's traditional security affiliations. It must not challenge the centrality of NATO or the need for bi- and multilateral cooperation with close allies, for example around the North Sea. Furthermore, Norway's participation in EU initiatives will neither change Norway's close defence cooperation with the US, nor in any way alter the country's traditional Atlantic security orientation. This is now codified in Norway's latest defence industrial strategy, published by the Ministry of Defence in March 2021 (Norwegian Government, Ministry of Defence 2021). The Government's main objective with this strategy is to maintain a competent national defence industry that can help to strengthen the defence of Norway (Norwegian Government, Ministry of Defence 2021, 8). To achieve such an aim, the Norwegian authorities consider it of the utmost importance to further develop the tripartite cooperation between the Norwegian defence sector, the defence industry and the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (Forsvarets forskningsinstitutt, FFI). In fact, earlier research also shows how such strong tripartite cooperation is a precondition for Norway successfully handling the EU's newest defence initiatives in the form of the defence package (Tvetbråten and Knutsen 2019, 414). For example, the FFI played an important role in the elaboration of the 2021 Work Programme, making it possible for Norway to position itself well within the EDF framework. As a result, Norway is now considered an equal partner with the other members. This also illustrates how important it is to have experts who can offer arguments on a professional basis. This expertise strengthens the Norwegian position and enables the country to gain influence, even though it is an EU outsider.

In the government's strategy, Norwegian participation in the EDF is considered important. The aim is to maintain Norway's defence research and industry in accordance with the nation's defence and security needs (Norwegian Government Ministry of Defence 2021, 28). An important precondition for such an achievement is maintaining close cooperation between the authorities and industry. To secure access to the European market, to be an attractive partner when consortiums are formed, and to take part in research and development opportunities are therefore the main reasons for Norwegian participation in the EU's defence package. If Norway had chosen not to join the EDF, the Norwegian defence industry could have lost some 60% of its exports to the European market over time.

Kongsberg Defence and Aerospace AS is Norway's largest defence company. The company is 'a leading supplier of defence products and systems for command and control, surveillance, space, tactical communications, remote weapon stations and missile systems', with 3,400 employees (Kongsberg Defence and Aerospace 2022). The company has been present in the European market for a very long time, with over 30% of its exports being to this market. This integration with the European market has made it possible for the company to closely follow the newest developments in European integration within the field of security and defence; this integration improved further after the establishment of an office in Brussels in 2019. The company's aim with this office is to maintain its market share, but also to enhance its competitive edge and to follow the developments in European security and defence as closely as possible. Hence, early on the company identified the strategic developments in and significance of the changing nature of European integration in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum in 2016 and the publication of the Global Strategy in

June of the same year (EU 2016). Then President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker's ambitions for a European Defence Union to create a role for the EU within the defence field, which were worked on in close cooperation with the French and German authorities, are illustrative of the ongoing changes in European security and defence at this time. In this regard, Kongsberg Defence and Aerospace AS was witnessing a convergence of state, European Commission and defence industrial interests (Béraud-Sudreau and Pannier 2020, 10), which made it necessary for the company to follow these developments. As a result of Juncker's ambitions, the defence package materialised, changing the nature of the European defence market. Of this package, the creation of the €8 billion EDF over the period 2021 to 2027 is the most significant factor.

The management of Kongsberg Defence and Aerospace AS believes it is vital to take part in the EDF since 'you will be excluded if you do not participate. If that is the case, nobody will want to talk to you'.¹ Since Norway is now a participant in the EDF, Norwegian defence companies operate under the same business conditions as other European companies, in full accordance with the EEA agreement. In this regard, the company states that it is satisfied with how the Norwegian authorities have handled the new market situation that has resulted from the creation of the EDF. The Norwegian Defence and Security Industry Association and Kongsberg Defence and Aerospace AS also consider membership of the Aerospace and Defence Industries Association of Europe (ASD) as strategically important to gain access on an equal footing to the European market. Through this membership, Kongsberg Defence and Aerospace AS gains information about ongoing and future policies and is able to influence future directives and regulations within the EU's security and defence field. This must also be seen from the perspective that the Norwegian defence industry is growing, making it important that it also gains resources from others. Thus, the importance of the EDF will also increase for the Norwegian defence industry. This is important from a European perspective as well, since the ASD is convinced that the EDF will help to develop Europe's defence capabilities and its industrial and technological base. Therefore, the ASD further states that in 'combination with other initiatives, namely PESCO and CARD, and in coordination with NATO, the EDF can lead to a real step-change in European defence cooperation' (ASD 2022). Norway's aim is to participate fully in this development as an EU outsider. This will be fundamental for European defence cooperation in the future and is also important for Norway's defence cooperation with larger EU member states such as France and Germany. Therefore, the Norwegian defence industry will also aim to take part in the forthcoming European Defence Investment Programme, which aims to contribute to closing European capability shortfalls (European Commission 2022). The war in Ukraine has made this an imperative.

The Russian attack on Ukraine led to Finnish and Swedish applications for NATO membership, resulting in the signing of accession protocols on 5 July 2022 (NATO 2022). In addition, in a referendum on 1 June 2022, Denmark voted overwhelmingly in favour of lifting its 30-year-old opt-out clause on EU defence policy. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has been widely applauded in Norway. Politicians and military experts emphasise that the accession of these two countries will improve Nordic security, leading to a 'historical strengthening of NATO both politically and militarily'

(Solvang and Solli 2022). However, other analysts have, albeit cautiously, underlined that Norway might be at risk of marginalisation, since the country's position in NATO will change and it will no longer be able to claim that it is 'NATO in the North' (Halvorsen 2022). The Danish decision to remove its EU opt-out on defence has not, in contrast, gained much attention among Norwegian politicians. Instead, several politicians, both in government and in opposition, have underlined the centrality of NATO in European security and the EEA agreement as the foundation of Norway's relationship with the EU.

That the enlargement of NATO and Denmark's lifting its defence opt-out will contribute to an even better foundation for EU–NATO cooperation has not, therefore, gained that much attention among Norwegian politicians. This lack of interest confirms not only the country's Atlantic security identity, but also Norway's position as a status quo-seeking actor, even though the security environment has undergone fundamental changes (VG 2022). The reason for this is that Norway's relationship with the EU is the most contentious issue in Norwegian politics and one that tends to split almost all Norwegian political parties. Furthermore, this is an example of how domestic politics affects foreign policy and can determine the national interests of a country.

It is these same reasons that make the Norwegian relationship with the EU an interesting case for analysts conducting foreign policy analysis. Such an analysis also contributes to explaining why the enlargement of NATO and Denmark joining the EU's security and defence policies will, seemingly, have little influence on the conditions for the Norwegian defence industry in the European market. That being said, at the overarching security political level, Norway may be at risk of marginalisation, since the country will not share the same security status as the other Scandinavian states (apart from Iceland).

Conclusion

The conclusion we can draw from this analysis is that Norwegian participation in European security and defence involves some quite substantial paradoxes. On the one hand, Norway is sceptical of the EU as a security actor, and this has its origins in Norwegian foreign policy tradition. On the other hand, despite being outside the EU, Norway is involved in European security strategy at a practical level and is therefore also able to have some influence over it. To participate in the defence package, especially the EDF, but also PESCO, has become important to both the Norwegian defence industry and Norwegian security and defence actors more generally. We can also identify a development from 2018 to 2021 whereby Norwegian defence actors in the military forces, in the defence research community and in industry have gained more knowledge and experience of the EU within the security and defence field. This creates possibilities for taking a more comprehensive strategic approach to European security.

The likelihood of doing so is small, however. As this analysis illustrates, the paradoxes in Norway's policy on Europe have led to a situation in which the country is a status quo-seeking actor. Even though the war in Ukraine has changed the European security order, Norway continues to see European security through an Atlantic lens. Therefore, the forthcoming enlargement of NATO to include Finland and Sweden, and

Denmark giving up its reservations about EU defence, are regarded by Norwegian policymakers as enlargements of the Atlantic system of governance. Others might see these developments as part of a Europeanisation of European security in close cooperation with the US. There is, therefore, a discontinuity in Norwegian foreign policy which will most probably remain for some time.

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Note

1. Interview with an anonymous interviewee conducted on 8 September 2021.

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