

Asymmetric Relations Between Indonesia and Singapore:
A Study on the Failure of the 2016 Repatriation Program for Indonesian
Citizens' Wealth and Assets Abroad

Mohammad Mohtar Mas'oed

Counterterrorism Diplomacy:
ASEAN's New Chapter of Regional Engagement

Frega Ferdinand Wenas Inkiriwang

The Logic of U.S. Deployment in Norway:
The Trump Administration and NATO's Northern Front

Dylan Motin

Angela Merkel's Leadership in Germany's Open Door Policy on Handling
the Refugee Crisis in Europe

Muhamad Dasep

The Separation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the Moscow
Patriarchate as a Reflection of Ukrainian State Identity

Civa Syadza Masnun

The Logic of U.S. Deployment in Norway: The Trump Administration and NATO's Northern Front

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Observers generally assume that domestic concerns or Donald Trump's personality oriented his administration's foreign policy. In this piece, I discuss the United States' decision in 2017 to base military forces in Norway. I argue that the Trump administration's decision is mainly explainable by balance-of-power motives and has likely little to do with domestic concerns. After showing the importance of Norway to the United States and describing the military balance of power in Northern Europe, this study considers competing International Relations theories. It suggests that realism and balance-of-power theory are more amenable for describing U.S. policy toward Norway.

A few days before Donald Trump's inauguration in January 2017, the United States deployed in Norway 330 Marines on a rotational basis for a duration of six months. Knowing Trump's vocal disinterest in alliances and maintaining troops abroad, one could have expected this deployment decided by the Obama administration not to be renewed. However, six months became one year, one year became two, two became five more, and the 330 Marines eventually became 700 (Lemon 2018). This additional American deployment also came as a surprise since Norway is quite far away from the customary hot spots of East Asia, the Middle East, or Eastern Europe. How to explain this unlikely troop commitment?

This study proposes to explain the rationale behind this deployment and suggests that the United States acted upon realist motives.¹ Indeed, the Trump administration's foreign policy has been read by many observers as based on Donald Trump's actual or alleged personal traits: alt-rightist, isolationist, or even pro-Russian. Contrary to the dominant view based on *Innenpolitik* explanations, I argue that the U.S. foreign policy under Trump was far more conventional and can be explained from a realist viewpoint

¹ Major realist works are Aron (2004), Mearsheimer (2014), and Waltz (1979).

(Abrams 2017; Chung 2017; Kroenig 2017). This case is representative of a new era of international politics, or in the words of the then-U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis, a shift toward “great power competition” (Ali 2018), which the Trump administration could not escape.

Today, great power competition is front and centre, and the Ukraine War has brought back realist insights to the forefront. However, in 2018, the Norway deployment represented a fundamental rupture with the foreign policy doctrine of the 2000s focused on terrorism, counterinsurgency, and peacekeeping operations. I argue here that this can only be explained by competition with Russia. Washington was reacting to an unfavourable balance of power on the Northern Front and was attempting to correct this military weakness.

Balance of power appears as a necessary and sufficient variable for explaining U.S. deployment in Norway. It is hard to demonstrate balance-of-power motives since diplomats and leaders usually do not discuss power politics openly. Studying the Trump administration’s decision-making process and accessing documental evidence would be necessary to make a robust assessment. However, this Norwegian deployment is very recent history, poorly documented, and has elicited little scholarly interest. Therefore, this study cannot offer a definitive account and modestly attempts to make a first cut. By showing why a balance-of-power policy for the United States made sense and why other theories available fare poorly in the case of Norway, this study hopes to offer a ‘hoop test’ for the balance-of-power hypothesis (Collier 2011). Firstly, I describe U.S. interests in Norway and the need for American troops there. Then, I show that possible alternative explanations (alliance inertia, domestic politics, and economic gain) are less amenable for describing this case.

Troops Deployment in the International Relations Literature

Several International Relations theories could explain the Trump administration’s dispatching of Marines to Norway. In this paper, I consider four of the scholarship’s most prominent explanations of foreign basing: alliance inertia, domestic politics, economic gain, and balance of power.

Alliance Inertia. The United States and Norway are allied through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Alliance inertia may create incentives to deepen a relationship and eventually deploy troops to an allied country even if the threat level does not justify such a presence. Alliances can form their own dynamic due to material causes (institutional frameworks, military-industrial cooperation, similarity in military

doctrine, etc.) and/or ideational ones (shared identity, common threat perception, trans-societal links, etc.). Therefore, alliance relationships can evolve independently from the exterior threat that originally elicited the formation of the alliance (Suh 2007).

Domestic Politics. Dispatching troops may also simply be explained by purely domestic causes. Some influential individuals or interest groups may push for it. It can also be a byproduct of the American regime and political equilibrium. Some parts of the government and/or the bureaucracy may desire such a deployment to promote parochial interests. U.S. leaders may use foreign policy to divert the attraction from the domestic arena and find scapegoats for internal problems. It can also result from a particular ideology (Allison & Halperin 1972; Allison and Zelikow 1999; Levy 1988).

Economic Gain. Some explain the presence of troops on foreign soil by economic motives. Indeed, deploying troops in a specific country could mean that “wealth is extracted from peripheral areas and redistributed to the imperial center” (Lutz 2009, p. 7). The presence of U.S. armed forces in Norway would primarily be a way to jockey for some economic benefits. A potential example could be the case of Japan in the 1980s; Japan’s dependence on U.S. forces for its defence put it in a difficult position when the Reagan Administration started to ask for economic concessions.

Balance of Power. Balancing means mobilising additional resources for deterring a hostile state or, if necessary, waging war on it. It can be done internally (e.g., by increasing military spending) or externally (e.g., by recruiting allies; Morrow 1993; Motin 2024, pp. 19–25; Parent & Rosato 2015). A relationship is balanced when the two states have an overall parity in terms of military power. It becomes unbalanced if one state has a crushing superiority over the other. To survive, it is essential to prevent hostile countries from gaining military supremacy (Mearsheimer 2014). In this case, if the United States and their allies were superior in the region, there would be no incentive to deploy more troops there. On the contrary, if NATO forces were outgunned, America would be tempted to deploy troops to correct this misbalance.

As of 2017, Norway neighboured an increasingly powerful Russia, which had for several years displayed aggressive intentions towards recalcitrant surrounding countries in what appeared to be the beginning of a ‘Cold War II’ (Kroenig 2015; also, Cottey 2022; Tabachnik & Miller 2021). The Ukraine Crisis of 2014 and the annexation of Crimea were fresh in the minds of decision-makers, pushing Oslo to rethink its defence posture. Unsurprisingly, the Norwegian government had a growing sense of a renewed existential threat coming from the East (Fouche & Solsvik 2018). It broke with the experience of the

1990s and the 2000s when Russia was more of a potential threat for a distant future than an actual problem. However, since the United States' interest in defending Norway may not be apparent, it must be described first.

The Importance of Norway

The strategic importance of Norway may not be obvious. It is a country large like Poland and populated by a little more than five million inhabitants. Norway nevertheless has significant oil resources, which is quite a unique situation in NATO Europe. Furthermore, a country's value is foremost determined by its geographical position within an international system and in relation to the location of the great powers (Aron 2004). The fundamental importance of Norway lies in its 200-kilometre-long border with Russia. Norway matters to both NATO and Russia for defensive and offensive motives. As noticed by Frühling and Lasconjarias (2016, p. 111), Kola's "strategic significance to NATO as a whole derives from the presence of Russian SSBNs, and the potential threat to Atlantic Sea lines of communication" (SLOC). Indeed, the Russian Navy has four priorities in case of war: 1) "Provision and protection of the SSBN arm of the strategic nuclear deterrent"; 2) "Homeland defence"; 3) "Conventional strategic precision strike"; 4) "SLOC interdiction" (Allport 2018, p. 52).

The problem of the defence of Norway has grown more complex since the 1990s. Finland has vastly downsized its defence posture since the collapse of the Soviet Union and is thus a far less formidable buffer than before for Norway. If the Russians were to control Finland totally or partially, it would allow them to access northern Sweden and then reach all of Norway far more easily (Bowman 1984). During the Cold War, the Soviets would, of course, have preferred to pass through a neutral Finland to access Norway effortlessly. However, they were ready to bear the costs of Finland's belligerence if it decided to resist. The main Russian objective in Finland would be to seize Inari and its regions to allow a rapid advance toward Norway. In a more ambitious scenario, the Russians would aim at the strategic city of Rovaniemi and its 3,000 meters-long runway for opening the gates to future operations toward northern Sweden and central Norway (Petersen 2014, pp. 18, 26, 40). Furthermore, Sweden was a force to be reckoned with during the Cold War and even maintained the fourth most potent aviation on the planet for a while. However, the recent decline in military spending has seriously degraded its

warfighting capabilities.² Consequently, Norway's security problem can be seen as more acute than it used to be.

The centrality of Norway was not lost on the Nazis when they invaded it in 1940. The power that controls southern Norway has a strong base for launching attacks deep into the Atlantic Ocean. During World War II, Norway was an essential staging area for German U-boats hunting down Allied convoys. Indeed, now as then, in case of a contingency, U.S. troops would have to be shipped to European ports via the Northern Atlantic. During a war against NATO, the Russians would be very tempted to try to interdict these SLOC. It was estimated during the 1980s that more than 85% of U.S. reinforcements would have had to transit by sea (Alexander 1984; Ries 1984). Debilitating Norway's military apparatus would disable the first layer of the NATO anti-submarine barriers that impede the free movement of Russian submarines back and forth to the Atlantic. Southern Norway would also be a perfect place for basing long-range aircraft able to strike the Atlantic SLOC. Land-based aircraft in Norway can be a good way for the Russians to correct a very unfavourable balance of power at sea for them (Underwood 1981). During a war, Russia would probably want to "seize some Norwegian ports or fjords for use as forward submarine bases. These bases would not be constrained by ice, would reduce the transit distance from the Kola by about 1,000 miles and would ease the [Russian] logistic support problem" (ibid, p. 46). To secure the Norwegian and Barents Seas, Russia could attack Spitzbergen, Iceland, Jan Mayen, and Bear Island (Kernan 1989; Wither 2018). To protect its SLOC, NATO has to interdict Russian ships from entering the North Sea, the Norwegian Sea and the North Atlantic by defending and retaining control over Denmark, Iceland, and Norway (Underwood 1981).³

This explains the centrality of the Kola Peninsula for the Russian war machine. The aforementioned submarines of the Northern Fleet are based on this peninsula (notably at Severomorsk). Coincidentally, Kola lies on the shortest flight path between North America and the heart of the Russian homeland. It is thus essential for strategic air and missile defence and can serve as a departure base for Russian strategic bombers.

² The Norwegians and NATO understand very well that Norway is indefensible if northern Sweden does not stand. That is why the equivalent of half of the Norwegian army, alongside other Allied forces, participated in the recent 'Northern Wind' exercise in Norrbotten, Sweden northernmost county (Nilsen 2019). On Nordic cooperation, see Saxi (2022).

³ The Soviet General Staff referred to Iceland and Norway as the "Arctic gates to the Atlantic". However, because of the great difficulties of landing on Iceland, the Russians could possibly land only a very small number of troops. Consequently, if NATO were to deploy some ground forces on Iceland soon during a crisis, it could easily deter the Russians from attempting an attack on the island (Petersen 2014, pp. 98, 105).

Moreover, Kola offers Russia its only ice-free access to the world ocean. The other main one, Petropavlovsk (Kamchatka), is very remote and fades compared to Kola, and it is not ice-free in winter. All other accesses (the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and the Sea of Japan) are limited by chokepoints held by hostile countries (Ries 1984).⁴ Only Kola can provide Russian SSBNs with sufficient air and naval defences against NATO's submarines and anti-submarine platforms. It also offers access to the Arctic, a region vital to the survival of the SSBNs:

The best submarine sanctuary would be in waters where the enemy detection systems have difficulty operating. This is precisely the case in the Arctic where submarine detection is complicated by three factors—acoustic refraction caused by salinity differences between the water layers under the melting ice cap and those deeper down, the constant background noise caused by shifting pack ice which provides the submarines with acoustic cover, and the physical barrier represented by the ice itself against any form of surface or air ASW operations. Finally, the Soviet Union's proximity to the Arctic makes it possible to provide a degree of airborne cover over these waters (ibid, pp. 874-875).

Kola's importance only increased as Russia's submarine activities returned to their Cold War levels, it reestablished continuous at-sea deterrence and its underwater fleet is set to grow (Sutton 2018; Woody 2018a).⁵

Hence, Norway is essential to Russia for deterrence, defensive, and even offensive purposes. The importance of Norway mainly lies in the strategic centrality of Kola. The loss of Kola's facilities would deal a severe blow to the credibility of Russia's nuclear deterrent. It would also eliminate Russian naval power from the Atlantic and secure the West's SLOC. Without Kola, northern and central Russia would become more vulnerable to NATO's conventional and nuclear atmospheric operations. Needless to add that Saint-Petersburg, the second largest Russian city, is only 150 km away from the Finnish border in a straight line and 200 km by road. Wheeled vehicles need only three hours to travel such a short distance.

The Russians certainly remember that during the 1939-1940 Winter War, the Allies initially planned to send troops to fight with the Finnish against the Soviets through Norway and Sweden, which nevertheless refused to cooperate (Underwood 1981). Moreover, the Germans tried to use Finnish and Norwegian territory to conquer Kola

⁴ Namely the Danish Straits, the Dardanelles, the La Pérouse, Tsugaru, and Tsushima Straits. Nevertheless, the recent rift between the West and Turkey and the consequent rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara leave the Russians some hope to change this deadlock.

⁵ During the Cold War, the Soviets expected both themselves and NATO to attack the other's nuclear capabilities in a general conventional conflict. Hence, it is likely that the Russians too expect the Americans to attack their nuclear deterrent over the course of a conventional war (Petersen 2014, p. 97).

and outflank Leningrad during World War II. Russian planners can only worry that during a general war, a NATO-controlled Norway could serve the same purpose. Norway can not only home NATO aircraft but can also be a penetration axis for U.S. cruise missiles flying toward Russia. The Russians are thus interested in pushing their air defence bubble as far west as possible (Petersen 2014, p. 96). As summarized by Kernan (1989, p. 21), “Norway’s geographical position necessitates an offensive strategy by [Russia]. Defense of its strategic assets and Mother Russia itself only add incentive to the employment of an invasion into Norway early in the war”. For Washington, the constant progress in cruise missile technology now means that the threat to the continental United States is no longer limited to ballistic weapons. Russian attack submarines departing from Kola equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles could engage targets on the U.S. eastern seaboard (Allport 2018). New classes of long-range cruise missiles actually present Europe with a threat of a new ‘Blitz’ where NATO’s political and command centres, logistic hubs, air bases, missile defence installations, and even nuclear-related sites could be attacked without escalating to the use of ballistic missiles and without sacrificing precious bombers. Frühling and Lasconjarias (2016, p. 105) summed up the problem:

The Kola bastion is of importance to Norway, which is once again growing concerned about the defence of its Finnmark region and Russia’s forward air and naval operations (which now often extend to the UK-Iceland gap), in defence of its northern bastion. During the Cold War, these concerns gave rise to the creation of the ‘Allied Mobile Force’ (a conceptual forebear of today’s VJTF), extensive prepositioning of equipment (in particular for the US Marine Corps, which still uses facilities in Norway) and increased NATO exercises in the High North during the 1980s. While all of these also figure prominently in NATO’s reassurance of the Baltic countries today, the Alliance’s increased attention to the High North has so far been largely limited to some additional exercises. During the 1980s, the maritime strategy of the US Navy included a forward battle by nuclear attack submarines and multiple carrier groups to break into the Kola bastion.

This maritime strategy seems to be making a comeback today. The recreation of the Second Fleet and the role played by the USS Harry S. Truman during recent manoeuvres testify to it (Holmes 2018).

The Need for U.S. Forces in Norway

Russia has identified Norway and its policies as a potential cause for a future war and so as a threat (Nilsen 2017b). Moreover, Moscow started in the late 2000s an extensive military modernization program and moved or raised new units near its western borders. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (2019), its Western Military District and Northern Fleet possessed in 2018 one tank division, three motor rifle divisions, one tank brigade, five motor rifle brigades, one naval infantry brigade, one

reconnaissance brigade, and two Spetsnaz brigades (without counting artillery, missile, and other support units, but including Naval Infantry units). Moreover, Russia maintained the equivalent of six airborne divisions. I conservatively assume here that it employs only one of them. If we follow a simple mathematics of 10,000 men per division and 3,000 per brigade, it represents a force of over 70,000 men. Such a force looks reasonable and coherent with what Russia employed in Georgia in 2008. It gives Russia a sizeable numerical superiority without depleting Russia's other fronts.

The Norwegian army pales in comparison. Its only major unit is a light armoured brigade. The country can count at best on 36 tanks.⁶ Even with all of its ground forces and its Home Guards Rapid Reaction Force, Norway would barely be able to assemble 10,000 men.⁷ It is hard to imagine the Home Guard reservists playing a very active role on the frontline since they are very lightly armed. They would more probably be used as rear security forces. The country's air force is more impressive, notably because it musters 57 F-16AM and F-16BM, and also 16 F-35A (IISS 2019). If we use Mearsheimer's methodology (1982) and assume a 50 km wide front, Norway would not have enough troops to field the equivalent of around one division for 20 km of front. Beyond the troops count, Russia's relative superiority in terms of tanks, armoured vehicles, and G-RAMM (guided rockets, artillery, mortars, and missiles) should also be kept in mind. The Russians would have no serious difficulties in creating a 3:1 advantage in combat power and potentially overrun Norwegian forces.⁸

The Norwegians would likely focus on mounting a strong defence of Tromsø and Bardufoss. They can hardly defend more in the east and risk major units there because they could easily be flanked through the Finnish border. Geometrical logic also shows that the bigger the numerical superiority of the attacker is, the more the defender has to base its troops far from the initial border so as not to be bypassed (Gupta 1993). Moreover, since Finnmark's terrain is relatively flat, it would be harder for the light Norwegian forces to stop heavy Russian units there than more to the West in the mountains. In addition, logistical constraints would heavily favour the Russians if they engage the enemy directly at the Russian border. Russia would likely start any war by advancing along the E6, from Kirkenes to Lakselv. Such an offensive along the coastal

⁶ All from Leopard 2A4 design. Only 30 are said to be operational (Military Leak 2018).

⁷ 8,100 men in the ground forces where I retrenched a notional 10% for general headquarters and overhead (an estimation used in Posen 1991).

⁸ This '3:1 rule' states that an attacker mustering a 3:1 advantage in combat power would have reasonable chances to overpower the defender and break through its defenses. For a more detailed description (and criticism) of this rule, see Motin (2020b).

road would probably be accompanied by coordinated airborne and seaborne operations to nullify NATO efforts to block the way and defend efficiently. Indeed, if NATO fails to reach air superiority, the Russians could use their air assault assets to outflank strongpoints or for rear attacks. This is made possible by the weaknesses of Norwegian air defences (Petersen 2014, pp. 20, 24, 51). In conclusion, Finnmark would probably be lost in the first stage of any Russian attack. The main stake is then to impede the Russians from advancing further since the more they progress to the South, the more Allied Atlantic SLOC to Europe would become vulnerable.

Such a scenario is quite similar to the one of the 2018 NATO exercise in Norway 'Trident Juncture', which "envisages an 'enemy' invading from the north of Norway (from the Russian border), occupying land and pressing south to Oslo from the Trondheim area" (Felgenhauer 2018). Indeed, in December 2013, a snap exercise included in its scenario the quick seizure by Russian troops of northern Norway along the Åland Islands and the islands of Gotland and Bornholm (Lucas 2015). The Allies would need time to assemble enough forces to mount a counterattack to liberate Finnmark, and it would not be easy work (quite similarly to the risk of a land grab in Baltic countries). Friis noticed that "military planners also regard a partial extension of [Russian] land defence into Northern Norway as likely in such a scenario. One could, for instance, envisage the deployment of mobile air defence systems in Northern Norway as part of an offensive defence of the Kola bases. In such a scenario, allies would have difficulty providing reinforcements to Norway due to the Russian denial efforts in the North Sea" (2018, p. 131). Hence, the balance of power favours Russia. Unsurprisingly, the United States and NATO would like to redress this imbalance (Motin 2020a).

The Alliance would have, at best, two weeks of clear warning. According to Bowman (1984), it would take five days to move a division from Moscow to Saint-Petersburg (700 km), one week to move a division from Saint-Petersburg to the Norwegian border (1200 km) and two weeks to move a division from Moscow to the same point (1,800 km). With recent upgrade works on the E105 road, the movement could be faster still, with a far better road from Murmansk to Norway (Nilsen 2017a). Although the distances involved are greater, the RAND estimated that NATO would only have one week of warning in a Baltic contingency (Shlapak & Johnson 2016). This limited warning time is a significant problem for Allied planners; "NATO must rely on a best case scenario of seven to ten days notice of impending attack for any chances of retaining control of the Northern Front" (Kernan 1989, p. 26). Since the Russians can

bring in overwhelming firepower within two weeks, what reinforcements could other Allied countries deploy to face the Russians within the same amount of time?

As aforementioned, the United States is now basing 700 Marines in Norway. The Marine Corps also has, since 1981, prepositioned stocks of material at several sites near Trondheim. This equipment, once manned, would make up for a Marine Expeditionary Unit and an artillery battalion (IISS 2019). Flowing troops to Europe, taking possession of the prepositioned equipment and moving them to the combat zone should take 9 to 14 days (Allport 2018). It is also noticeable that Britain maintains 800 Royal Marines in Norway (United Kingdom Ministry of Defence 2018). Therefore, this initial American/British force would represent around 4,500 men (the artillery battalion included).

The 2018 exercise ‘Trident Juncture’ is telling. The Allies started deploying their assets in August, while the exercise began on October 25. NATO needed around 180 flights and 60 shiploads to transport its equipment from the rest of Europe and America. The total force numbered around 50,000 men for 10,000 vehicles, 250 aircraft, and 65 vessels (Porteous 2018). It means that the deployment of this force necessitated at least two months. Of course, in peacetime, NATO logisticians are in no rush. In wartime, shipping would be accomplished at a faster rate. However, the number of troops and equipment deployable to Norway on short notice should be quite limited.

The first ground reinforcements would come from airlifts from Allied countries with significant projection capabilities. The U.S. 82nd Airborne Division boasts its ability to deploy a battalion anywhere in the world in 18 hours (South 2018). It means that a brigade can be airlifted in around five days. France says it can move 700 paratroopers in 60 hours (Lagneau 2018). I will assume the same capability for Britain. This would mean *ceteris paribus* that around 12,000 U.S. soldiers, 4,000 French soldiers, and 4,000 British soldiers could be airlifted within two weeks.⁹

Reinforcements coming from the sea should be rather limited. American Fast Sealift Ships moving at full speed (around 60 km/h) can theoretically travel from New York to Oslo in around four days and from Amsterdam to Oslo in 15 hours. But in a real-world situation, those ships would probably go slower. Moreover, moving the equipment from the depots, loading it on the ship, unloading it upon arrival, and then moving it to

⁹ Those numbers are more optimistic than those of Shurkin (2017). This study is concerned only with light units airlift while Shurkin inquires heavy units’ deployment capabilities. For a study of the behaviour of middle powers like Britain and France, see Kerdodé & Motin (2024).

the destination also takes considerable time. It is doubtful that major reinforcements could be sealifted fast enough.

NATO commanders would also be reluctant to risk transport ships to Russian submarines and long-range anti-ship missiles. The recent introduction of Yassen-class nuclear attack submarines, which are among the quietest submarines ever, does nothing to relieve this fear. According to Allport calculations, 20% of the Northern Fleet attack submarines should be available for SLOC interdictions. Although it does not represent a massive number of ships (around five), it should be enough to inflict painful losses on NATO's shipping. Contemporary ships are far bigger and carry far larger volumes than World War II boats. An armoured brigade combat team's heavy equipment is transportable on as few as three ships. Hence, a sunken ship could represent the destruction of a staggering one-third of a brigade (Allport 2018).

To sum up, the troops available to oppose the 70,000 men-strong Russian force assumed in this study can be divided into three tiers. The first is the Norwegian troops, mustering at best 10,000 men. The second is a U.S./British force composed of troops already based in Norway and of units raised from prepositioned equipment of 4,500 men. The third is an airlifted force of 20,000 men urgently deployed from NATO countries. This result is grossly coherent with NATO's 'Four 30s' policy, "the ability to deploy 30 infantry battalions (as many as 30,000 troops), 30 ships and 30 air squadrons (about 700 aircraft) within 30 days" (Ragozin 2018). The total force available within two weeks is so almost 35,000 men. This 2:1 ratio, although still worrying for the Alliance, means that it could still have a chance to stop the Russians somewhere in northern Norway or at least to impede a quick victory. However, airlifted NATO units and Norwegian troops are lighter than Russian heavy units and would lack punch. Russia would also have a superiority in the air on the sea, at least in the first days of the conflict.¹⁰ Furthermore, getting troops to Norway is one thing. Getting them to the Troms region under missile strikes, air strikes, and Spetsnaz attacks is another. The 1940 Operation Weserübung shows what could possibly happen in Norway; the Germans

used extensive unconventional warfare activities to confuse and disrupt the Norwegian mobilization. The British Fleet delivered a coalition counter-invasion force within three days, but the campaign was ill-conceived and poorly executed. The reinforcing British,

¹⁰ Maybe more than Russian fighters, long-range antiaircraft defense systems such as S-300, S-400, and S-500 would pose the most severe threat to NATO planes operating near the frontline. "Russian ground forces are typically heavily defended with air defense systems rather than by air support; in a situation of mutual air denial, Russian ground units would most likely enjoy a substantial advantage derived from their numerical superiority in ground-based fire support" (Boston & Massicot 2017, p. 7).

French, and expatriate Polish units lacked cohesion, heavy weapons, tactical mobility, and air cover. In seven weeks they were driven out of Norway (Alexander 1984, p. 183).

The U.S. rationale for deploying troops in Norway is clear. Although the situation on the Northern Front is not totally hopeless, Russia has a massive advantage in terms of firepower. Maybe more than anywhere, it could reasonably hope to score an easy victory against NATO and grab a big chunk of territory before NATO can mount a counterattack. The Allies could correct this weakness by the early use of tactical nuclear weapons on Russian spearheads, but the cure could be worse than the disease. Washington was thus incentivized to base troops in Norway because of this unfavourable balance of power.

Another clue of the increasing attention given by the United States to the Northern Front is the creation of a NATO Atlantic Command (based at Norfolk) and the reactivation of the U.S. Second Fleet, both with the undisguised aim of countering the Russian naval threat over the North Atlantic region. The Americans are probably willing to prevent a Russian *fait accompli* that would change the strategic equilibrium in the North Atlantic and the Arctic region.

Alternative Explanations

The preceding case study should have made clear that balance-of-power theory is amenable for explaining the U.S. force basement in Norway. Even if definitive evidence is lacking, testing how competing theories fare is valuable.

Alliance Inertia. Norway is a cofounder of NATO and is fully integrated into NATO structures. It participated with other Allied countries in the Afghan War. It dispatched military instructors to Iraq to support U.S. efforts. It also participated in the coalition fighting ISIS in the Middle East. Although small, U.S.-Norway military exchange programs create human connections (Kapustka 2012; U.S. Army War College 2015).

Norway is one of the major arms importers of Europe and has a dependency on the United States, especially concerning its air force. For example, it acquired 52 F-35 fighters to replace its older planes (Royal Norwegian Ministry of Defence 2018). Although this order is not insignificant, Lockheed Martin is bound to produce hundreds of F-35s for numerous customers worldwide. It is hard to imagine how Norway and its limited arms purchases could have a decisive influence on U.S. policymaking.

Furthermore, it seems that emigration from Norway to the United States is rather limited. "From 2007-2016, less than 1,000 Norwegians naturalized as US citizens,

according to US Department of Homeland Security data. That's an average of 100 Norwegians a year -- less than .000001 percent of Norway's population" (Fox 2018). There are far more Russians than Norwegians living in the United States. Yet, it does not seem to elicit U.S. policies friendly toward Russian interests. Hence, it is doubtful that trans-societal relations pushed America to deploy troops in Norway.

Although probably real, the power of the U.S.-Norway alliance inertia is certainly not stronger than for most other American bilateral alliances. It is unlikely to explain the Trump administration's decision. This theory, although not very convincing in this case, looks more robust than the next one.

Domestic Politics. The first argument against a domestic source of the Marines' deployment in Norway is straightforward. It goes contrary to President Trump's promise not to defend allies which are not serious about defence expenditures. As he remarked, "Norway ... remains the only NATO ally sharing a border with Russia that lacks a credible plan to spend 2 percent of its gross domestic product on defense" (Adomaitis 2018). It would make little sense for the Trump Administration to criticize Norway for its weak defence effort while deploying forces there at the same time. Norway is just too important to be left facing Russia on its own.

In the case of Israel, it is often heard that U.S. politicians are favouring pro-Israeli policies to please the Jewish electorate. However, as aforementioned, because of small numbers, the influence of the Norwegian-born voters is probably more than limited. Politicians have few incentives to show their care for a potential Norwegian lobby.

As noticed by Kupchan and Trubowitz (2007), politicians can favour foreign deployments as a way of increasing military expenditures and boosting defence-related industries. As more weapons are needed, the voters living in districts with weapons factories should be thankful to their representatives and/or the government. However, 700 Marines do not represent a significant part of a 1,400,000 men-strong military. Few additional spending is required, and it cannot boost the economy of American industrial regions in any meaningful way.

There is, however, one argument which is less easy to debunk. Parts of the American opinion and the media consider that Donald Trump is unhealthily sympathetic towards Russia and Vladimir Putin. Deploying troops in Norway could be a way for the Trump administration to show toughness towards the Russians and showcase its willingness to resist Russian aggression in the face of domestic criticisms. Hostility towards Russia is indeed one of the few topics which unite most Democratic and

Republican constituencies. Nevertheless, such an argument fails to explain why the Trump administration chose Norway for a show of force. It would have been at least as efficient and visible to send troops anywhere near Russian borders — such as Poland or the Baltic states. The last theory is weaker still in explaining the Norwegian case.

Economic Gain. Oil is often a usual suspect for explaining the presence of U.S. troops on foreign soil. Although Norway is an important oil producer, since the United States is now one of the biggest oil producers in the world, it is hard to see why it would need Norwegian oil. There are few obvious benefits for a country independent in oil for trying to control non-vital foreign oil reserves.

The United States does not import from Norway anything that is essential and cannot be replaced: “U.S. imports from Norway include mineral fuel and oil, machinery, nickel and nickel products, and Atlantic salmon. Reported U.S. direct investment in Norway is led by the mining and manufacturing sectors. Software and IT services, coal, oil and natural gas, and metals, account for the top three sectors in Norway’s reported direct investment in the United States” (Bureau of European Affairs 2018). Although Norwegian salmon is reputed, there is no visible need for a U.S. military presence to secure some strategic resources.

In 2017, the two countries’ trade represented around 10 billion dollars, with a relative balance between exports and imports (United States Census Bureau 2018). This figure is smaller than the total trade between Austria and the United States, yet there are no U.S. troops in Austria. In the same vein, Norway’s GDP in 2017 was worth almost 400 billion dollars (Trading Economics 2018b). In 2017, Austria’s one was around 415 billion dollars (Trading Economics 2018a). So even if Austria is a wealthier country and represents a potentially bigger market, it does not house U.S. forces.

Conclusion

The second part of this article explained the strategic importance of Norway. Norway is a strategic thorn in the side of Russian power in Europe and the North Atlantic. The third part justified the need for U.S. troops in Norway. Åtland (2016, p. 172) summarises the problem well: “While NATO as an alliance still enjoys a clear conventional advantage over Russia at the aggregate level, its limited forward presence on the periphery of Europe implies that Russia still retains a conventional superiority over its smaller neighbours at the local level. For instance, in the Barents Sea region, Norway is not, and will never be, able to ‘match’ the Russian naval, air, and ground forces that are located on the Kola Peninsula”. If, for some reason, NATO reinforcements were unable to reach Norway on

time, NATO would have no other choice than to use tactical nuclear weapons or to surrender Norway or parts of it. After all, as noticed by Friis (2018), the Norwegian government did not have a serious plan for defending its border or even Finnmark during the Cold War; the Soviets were to be stopped in the Troms region. That is why the United States has an incentive to deploy forces to Norway.

Although tentative, this study determined that competing theories existing in the IR field, although not irrelevant, cannot explain the situation as efficiently as realism. Two arguments may be part of the story: the mutual Norway-U.S. sympathy induced by their almost 70 years-long alliance and President Trump's need to showcase toughness towards the Russians for domestic reasons. However, both arguments seem to fade in the face of power-politics considerations. Further research would be invaluable since this case is recent and poorly documented. However, this case does not imply that the Trump administration was consistently realist. Driving a wedge between North Korea and China would have significantly helped stabilise East Asia's power balance (Motin 2022a, 2022b). Yet, Washington forewent realism by dropping diplomacy with North Korea to return to the neoconservative focus on denuclearization. Moreover, Trump abandoning the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and stopping engagement with Cuba makes little sense in a multipolar world where the United States should focus on great power competitors. The Trump administration remained an occasional realist one.

The balance of power in the North Atlantic inherited from the 1990s is evolving, and some already talk of a 'Fourth Battle of the Atlantic'. Maintaining free access and shipping from America to Europe may become more complex as Russian naval power expands (Foggo & Fritz 2016). Russian naval bases in Syria and maybe one day in Libya will increase the threat to Allied SLOC in the Atlantic from a southern angle. At the same time, potential basements in Cuba or Venezuela would allow Russian submarines to attack the SLOC without having to cross first NATO-controlled chokepoints and so limit their attrition.

Norway would likely be a secondary theatre in a general war compared to the East-Central European theatre. The Russians may be content to secure a little defensive buffer in Finnmark. In any case, they will be reluctant to deploy a significant part of their troops in Norway or suffer too many casualties. Due to political uncertainties, it is hard to prognose much more. If a general war starts elsewhere, will Norway allow NATO to use its territory for offensive use? Will Finland and Sweden fight proactively with Norway and NATO or focus on national territorial defence? On favourable terms, a prolonged attrition war in Norway may benefit NATO. The Allies enjoy in Norway the

advantages associated with defensive warfare. Moreover, Northern Norway is far away from any industrial or demographic centre. Hence, the Allies would not have any remorse to turn it into a 'free-fire zone'. Since NATO has an overall superiority in mobilisation capabilities and Russia's troops are less numerous than their Soviet ancestors, tying down Russian firepower on the Northern Front would facilitate victory on the Eastern Front at a low cost. Of course, this depends on mustering a robust defence posture in Northern Europe. Since U.S. heavy units are a scarce commodity, capable European allies should take a greater part of the burden.

Norway should be the first concerned with its own fate. However, this country has limited potential for raising a massive conventional military up to the task. The problem can be partially circumvented by focusing on low-cost passive defences such as anti-tank ditches and obstacles, fortifications, minefields, pre-chambered bridges, tunnels and roads, and even remotely controlled weapons. It is also possible to generate combat power from local inhabitants by forming quick-reaction militias equipped with readily available (for example, stocked into police stations, town halls, etc.) small weapons, anti-tank, and anti-aircraft missiles (Saperstein 1987). Finnmark is populated by around 76,000 people, including around 67,000 Norwegians. People aged 20 to 40 are almost 20,000 (City Population 2019). Assuming that 10% of them are foreigners leaves 18,000 young people at the height of their military potential. Even if only half of them could eventually be armed, it would represent a quite formidable force for facing an offensive. Those militias would impose attrition on Russian invaders and gain time for NATO to mount a counterattack (Flanagan et al. 2019).

Even if an all-out war between the East and the West seems unlikely, a limited conflict is still possible. However, any military encroachment would entail severe risks of nuclear exchange. Americans naturally tend to send their attack submarines close to the theatre, even during secondary international crises. Hence, the risk of a hostile encounter between a U.S. attack submarine and a Russian SSBN during a limited crisis over Norway would exist even if both sides were unwilling to escalate the confrontation (Kasiski 2018). Fighting near Severodvinsk and other essential elements of Russia's nuclear deterrent or the destruction of one or several Russian boomers would entail real inadvertent escalatory pressures (Posen 1991). Indeed, U.S. troops close to Russia's northern borders, alongside the growing naval competition in the Arctic Ocean likely increased Moscow's fears about its nuclear deterrent's survivability.

When considering relations with Russia, finding the delicate balance between deterrence and escalation is vital. Recent years have seen a sharp rise in East-West

hostility. The Zapad 2017 exercise witnessed a Russian deployment of force on the Kola Peninsula unprecedented since the Cold War era (Friis 2018). Russian aircraft practised in February 2018 a mock attack on a Norwegian radar station in Vardø situated around 60 km away from the Russian border (Mizokami 2019). NATO's exercise 'Trident Juncture' in late 2018 was a strong message sent to Russia. Moscow, in turn, temporarily jammed GPS signals over Norway and Finland, causing alarm in both countries and among the Allies (Associated Press 2019). At the same time, the USS Harry S. Truman became the first U.S. aircraft carrier to enter the Arctic Circle since the end of the Cold War. This move was not lost on the Russians (Woody 2018b). The war in Ukraine, ongoing at the time of writing, made the situation all the more volatile, and Moscow has vowed to reinforce its military means on the Northern Flank following Finland and Sweden's decisions to join NATO (Friis & Tamnes 2024).

According to one school, a weak defence can invite aggression and leave the defender no other choice than to surrender or use nuclear weapons. For the other school, increasing force levels exacerbates the security dilemma and is essentially an escalatory step. This debate cannot be solved here. What is sure, however, is that perfect security for Russia means insecurity for the West and vice versa. This basic logic makes some level of conflict unavoidable.

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