



## DETERRENCE IN THE HIGH NORTH

*Dr. Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, MacArthur Nuclear Security Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), Stanford University.*

*This paper is based on her comments at the Norwegian Army Summit 2018.*

**D**eterrence dynamics in the High North are characterized by the asymmetric nature of relations between Russia and Norway. Whereas Russian deterrence policy is not aimed at Norway, its realization would significantly deteriorate Norwegian security. And whereas Norwegian security policy increasingly prioritizes deterrence, a sustained focus on also reassuring Russia may insure against the calamity that Norwegian policy changes produce a change in the so far benign intentions of Russia vis-à-vis Norway.

Deterrence is a security policy concept with an essentially psychological basis that describes the mechanism by which an actor seeks to influence the perceptions and actions of another. Deterrence is about convincing an adversary that aggression will be too costly to entertain, either by way of denying him the benefits of aggression, or by way of punishing him disproportionately. Deterrence is about convincing an actor *not* to undertake an action that he may otherwise have contemplated.

This means that not all defense policy constitutes effective deterrence and not all deterrence policy entails increasing military capability. NATO official rhetoric these days tends to use the term “deterrence and defense” without clarifying the difference between the two. Important nuances in the concept of deterrence clarify such differences. If changes in defensive capability do not to change the calculations and perceptions of the adversary regarding the costs associated with aggression, they will not enhance deterrence. If an adversary is convinced the benefits of aggression supersede its costs regardless of the change in adversary capability, deterrence will be ineffective. Finally, if the adversary believes conflict is inevitable, or that the costs associated with not attacking supersede the costs of attacking, he will not be deterred.<sup>1</sup> There is not a 1:1 relationship between defensive capability and deterrent effect.

Despite the difficulty with which one may measure deterrent success, deterrence remains a key organizing

principle in most countries’ defense policy. In US policy, deterrence is becoming more important as peer competitors feature more prominently on the American security policy agenda. In Russia, “strategic deterrence” has become a key concept for deliberating and planning how to use current and future military and non-military capability to influence potential aggressors and adversaries.<sup>2</sup> In NATO, the main reaction to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine has been policies to strengthen “deterrence and defense”. In Norway, “deterrence and reassurance” has for decades been a key dichotomy in relations with the Soviet Union and Russia. In recent years, the “deterrence” component has been emphasized more: the current long-term plan for the Norwegian armed forces makes explicit and unprecedented reference to how Norway’s future military capability will contribute to “deterrence”.<sup>3</sup>

So how do Russia and Norway go about trying to deter potential adversaries? How do the deterrence policies pursued by each affect the other and what dynamic does this produce in the High North? Below, I examine each in turn.

### **Russian deterrence policy and strategy**

Russian deterrence policy in the High North is not focused on deterring Norway: it is primarily focused on securing Russia’s strategic capabilities based in the region. The sea-based leg of the nuclear triad is traditionally seen as Russia’s most secure retaliatory capability against large-scale aggression,

1 See for example Delpuch, T. (2012). *Nuclear Deterrence in the 21st Century. Lessons from the Cold War for a new era of strategic piracy*. Santa Monica, CA, RAND Corporation.

2 Bruusgaard, K. V. (2016). “Russian Strategic Deterrence.” *Survival* 58(4): 7-26.

3 Forsvarsdepartement, D. k. (2016). Prop 151 S (2015-2016) Kampkraft og bærekraft Langtidsplan for forsvarssektoren/ Long term plan for the defence sector.

both nuclear or conventional. Russia's Northern Fleet remains her largest sea-based concentration of strategic capabilities and her best protected strategic asset. This is the reason the Russian military capabilities based on the Kola peninsula are so important, including to "the very survival of the Russian state".<sup>4</sup> The key task of the Northern Fleet and of Russia's other military capabilities based in the High North is protecting this capability in times of peace, crisis and war.

The most severe regional repercussion of this is the now well-known bastion defense concept.<sup>5</sup> In times of crisis of war, at least those crises that have a strategic component, Russia's key concern will be denying any

adversary the ability to threaten these capabilities, in part through offensive strategies of denial entailing deploying own assets and threatening or attacking adversary assets far beyond Russian territory. This is the reason Russia remains particularly sensitive about strategic assets operating in and based off Norwegian territory and about the carrying out of NATO reinforcements and operations in their immediate vicinity. This dilemma drove strategic operations in the North Atlantic during the Cold War – and it remains a key issue today. The necessity of strategic depth for the defense of the Kola Peninsula is deeply ingrained in Russian strategic thought and will not be easily swayed by Western deterrence.



*The Bastion Defence. Illustration from "Unified Effort", report of the Expert Commission on Norwegian Security and Defense Policy, 2015.*

4 Kremlin (2014). Voennaia Doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii. Moscow, President of the Russian Federation.

5 See for example (2015). Et Felles Loft. Ekspertgruppen for forsvaret av Norge. Oslo, Forsvarsdepartementet.



Russia's policy and positioning in the North Atlantic is only one aspect of Russian deterrence strategy. Russia seeks to convince any potential adversary that aggression against Russia would be too costly to be worth while. Russian posturing vis-a-vis NATO countries are efforts to demonstrate that Russia has both the capability, the prowess and the credibility to stand up for its interests and defend itself against foreign aggressors. Russia's use of both military and non-military capability in her periphery and farther afield, including her use of political and information tools to influence political outcomes in other countries can be understood as efforts to influence adversaries' perception of Russia. In Moscow's view, foreign aggressors now loom larger and more plentiful than before.

Increased NATO presence and activity on Russia's Southern, Western and Northern periphery is the most prominent manifestation of this. Russia has expressed concern about the surge potential of NATO's enhanced forward presence in the Baltic Sea region. Russia has reacted in strong terms to the increased NATO and US presence and activity in the Black Sea region. Here, the change in the correlation of forces may more directly threaten Russian interests. Russia has also reacted strongly to increased NATO presence and activity in the High North. The current high visibility exercise Norway, Trident Juncture 2018, despite the conscious geographic dispersal in central Norway to avoid provocation, will likely reinforce Russia's perception of increased NATO activity from all strategic directions. The deployment of strategic missile defense assets along her periphery adds to Russia's perception of being encircled by NATO's strategic capabilities.

This presentation of NATO's activities from Russia's perspective is controversial in Western defense policy circles. Most NATO countries argue that NATO's increased activity is induced by Russia's own aggressive behavior. And yet, Moscow's perception of the security situation in Europe and of who is the potential aggressor is the antithesis to that of NATO. The policy position that there is no way Russia can believe, deep down, that NATO may have aggressive intentions, seems increasingly utopian as it becomes evident this is what drives Russian policy. There is no way NATO can convince Russia, through military activity, that it has peaceful intentions. The dynamic works the other way too as NATO is hard pressed to be convinced that Russian military posturing is for defensive purposes only.

This gets to the key paradox of deterrence, a strategy designed to instill fear in your adversary while also

seeking to preserve the peace. The so called "security dilemma" may undermine deterrence, as the actions you take to increase your own security may damage the security of your adversary so severely that it in fact creates a larger threat to yourself.<sup>6</sup> This dynamic is acute and deteriorating in Europe today. It may be overcome by striking a balance between pursuing capabilities that undermine the security of the adversary while seeking also to reassure him you have no plans of attacking him unless he attacks you. The deterrence policies of Russia and NATO today contain few reassuring elements designed to stymie the security concerns of the adversary.

### **Norwegian deterrence and reassurance**

This brings us to Norwegian deterrence and its interplay with Russian deterrence efforts. Norwegian deterrence, evidently, is much more focused on Russia than Russia's is on Norway. Norway has traditionally sought to influence Soviet, and later Russian, intentions vis-a-vis Norway through striking such a balance between deterrence and reassurance, aware that too heavy a NATO footprint in Norway could produce adverse effect for Norwegian security. The dual policy is still frequently referred to by Norwegian politicians.

Norway's key tool in imposing unacceptable cost on any aggressor in a conflict scenario is the NATO alliance. This is the key mechanism by which Norway can induce deterrence by punishment on Russia. The threat of allied retaliation should be so potent to Russia to ensure that, in the words of former politician and strategist Johan Jørgen Holst, "An attack on Norway would not result in a battle *against* Norway, but *about* Norway".<sup>7</sup> The most important element in Norway's policy to ensure this outcome is to itself be a loyal ally. The official Norwegian Afghanistan inquiry concluded that the single most important goal of the 14-year-long operation was being a good ally.<sup>8</sup> Norway also pursues bilateral and multilateral cooperation to sustain deep and predictable relations with allies.

But the credibility of allied reinforcement relies, in part, on Norway's own capability to deny the adversary an easy victory. The adversary's cost-benefit calculation regarding allied reinforcements could in fact depend on the strength and durability of Norwegian defenses, according to another Norwegian

6 Jervis, R. (1978). "Cooperation under the security dilemma." *World Politics* 30(2): 167-214.

7 Holst, J. J. (1966). "Norsk sikkerhetspolitikk i strategisk perspektiv/ Norwegian security policy in a strategic perspective." *Internasjonal Politikk* 5: 463-491.

8 (2016:8). En god alliert - Norge i Aghanistan 2001-2014/ A good ally - Norway in Afghanistan 2001-2014. [NOU Norges Offentlige Utredninger](#).

strategist, John Kristen Skogan.<sup>9</sup> This issue is no less potent today and it underlies contemporary debates on the future Norwegian force structure. The current long-term plan prioritizes strategic systems and a technologically advanced force structure that can induce significant costs on an aggressor, but with limited ability to deny him the benefits of aggression. Norway now relies solely on a denial capability that incurs costs of a scope that produces allied willingness to incur costs on Norway's behalf.<sup>10</sup> But several components of the future Norwegian force structure are still in play, including the role the land force may play in denying an aggressor a quick victory.

The reassurance element of Norwegian strategy was originally conceived as a flexible security policy tool that could be dialed up and down depending on Soviet military behavior. If Soviet force dispositions remained limited, Norway would limit allied presence and operations in the High North. It was, and remains, unilateral: it is up to Norway to determine when or whether to change policy to induce restraint. But this tool was not actively or rhetorically used for a long period, a period in which both Russian and Norwegian force dispositions in the region changed significantly. This means that the application of the principle of self-restraint in the current environment has different repercussions than during the Cold War. As the security dilemma becomes more intense and as both Norway and Russia both pursue new capabilities with advanced technological characteristics, the appropriate combination of military and non-military deterrence and reassurance may be more difficult to determine bureaucratically and to agree upon politically.

### Can Norway influence Russian intentions?

Given the asymmetry in military power, Russia's deterrence measures influence Norway more than Norway's efforts influence Russia. Russian force dispositions and capabilities have significant operational consequences for Norwegian opportunities in times of crisis. Russian military strategy focuses on exploiting adversary vulnerability, military and

non-military. This alone may in turn reduce the effectiveness of Norwegian deterrence by denial capabilities, even as Norway seeks to enhance them. Crises or conflicts may arise where Norway's force disposition may do little to change Russian calculations. For example, the Bastion Defense concept may come into play if a serious conflict or crisis arises on any part of Russia's periphery. In the case of a serious threat to her strategic assets elsewhere, Russia may take measures to secure its retaliatory capability that severely degrade Norway's military capabilities and violate Norwegian sovereignty.

Norwegian deterrence efforts could prove decisive in influencing Russian intentions if armed aggression against Norwegian territory signified a first Russian confrontation with NATO. If Russia was already facing conflict with NATO on another flank, expanding conflict to the Northern flank may be deemed inevitable for Russia. If, on the other hand, potential aggression against Norway would be what triggered conflict with NATO, the credibility of Norwegian defense and speed of reinforcing Norway could sway Russian calculations. Given that Russia would deem abstaining from aggression a viable option, Norway could be able to influence Russian intentions in some scenarios. But other crisis scenarios may lie beyond what Norway through its policies can influence. Norway's defense policy should be based on defense rather than deterrence, as most its military capability in many situations will do little to deter Russia.

But perhaps Russia's intentions vis-a-vis Norway need not be swayed through deterrence. Norwegian officials continue to reiterate that Russian intentions toward Norway do not seem aggressive. The High North remains a peaceful periphery where also Russia benefits from constructive relations. Norway can continue to produce incentives for this to remain so, through reassuring Russia and sustaining close cooperation across non-military domains. The balancing act in Norwegian security policy must be sustaining incentives for restraint while minimizing the severity of the security dilemma in the High North. As Norway seeks to enhance deterrence by instilling a certain fear in Russia of allied ability to defend Norwegian territory, it should also be focused on crafting policies that do not trigger a significant Russian military response.

<sup>9</sup> Skogan, J. K. (1999). "Norsk sikkerhetspolitikk under NATO-medlemskap / Norwegian security policy under NATO membership." *NUPI Notat* 599 (Juni).

<sup>10</sup> In the words of Rolf Tamnes, "Norway is entirely dependent on other states ability to and willingness to carry out offensive operations on their behalf. See Tamnes, R. (2015). "Et lite land i stormaktspolitikken/ A small country in great power politics." *Internasjonal Politikk* 73(3): 384-393.

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