
19. The Norwegian predicament in European defence: participation without direction

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I. Introduction: a tactical choice

In the autumn of 2004 the Norwegian Government made the decision to support Norway's participation in a European Union battle group,¹ along with Swedish and Finnish troops. That decision triggered a broad domestic debate on the modalities of participation and, in particular, on the wisdom of entering into a scheme for military cooperation under the overall political direction of a body—the Council of the European Union—in which Norway is not represented.

The speed with which the EU was advancing the European Security and Defence Policy thus, once again, forced the Norwegian Government to take a stance on important EU matters without guidance from an agreed strategy on Norway's relations with the Union. There is a consensus within the new government, which took office in October 2005 and is led by Jens Stoltenberg of the Norwegian Labour Party, that Norway should pursue active involvement in European affairs, and EU affairs in particular. This approach was shared by the out-going, non-socialist coalition government of Kjell Magne Bondevik. However, there was and still is no agreement on what direction Norway's relations with the EU should take; that is, whether the intention is to facilitate ultimate Norwegian membership of the Union or to make membership superfluous through extensive practical cooperation.

The fact that the coalition governments have been split down the middle on the EU issue—which has been perennially divisive in Norwegian politics—is well known and openly acknowledged. The issue has been defused through a so-called 'suicide clause' in both the current and preceding coalition agreements to the effect that the government will dissolve itself if the question of a renewed application for EU membership is put on the agenda again. However, no Norwegian political party is currently proposing that the membership question be reopened. The real issue is whether any Norwegian government can conduct its EU policy without having to clarify the direction of its ultimate goals vis-à-vis the Union.

¹ Norwegian Ministry of Defence, 'Utdrag fra EUs forsvarsministermøte 22. november [Extract from EU defence ministers meeting, 22 November]: declaration by Sweden and Finland and Norway on the establishment of a joint EU battle group', Press release, Oslo, 29 Nov. 2004, URL <<http://odin.dep.no/fd/norsk/aktuelt/nyheter/010051-990085/>>. The Nordic battle group will be headquartered at Northwood, United Kingdom. On the battle groups see chapter 6 in this volume.

It was during the Bondevik administration (2001–2005) that the opportunity for participation in EU defence activities first arose. While Bondevik is a member of the anti-EU Christian Democratic Party, the largest party in his coalition government was the Conservative Party, which has never made a secret of its ultimate aim of making Norway a member of the EU. In the public debate on battle groups, the Conservative Minister of Defence, Kristin Krohn Devold, stated that ‘Norway cannot isolate itself from what happens in Europe [or] remain on the sidelines as passive spectators while watching European security policy cooperation take shape without us’.² At the same time, her fellow cabinet member Dagfinn Høybråten, Minister of Social Affairs, was sending out the opposite message. Speaking in his capacity as chairman of the Christian Democratic Party, he told the national convention of *Nei til EU*, the Norwegian anti-EU movement, that Norway could best pursue its policy of international peace mediation by *not* getting involved with the great powers—including, by implication, the EU and its leading members. Instead, Norway’s policy should emphasize its independence of those powers.³

II. The background: Norway’s (lack of) policy on the EU

A striking feature of Norway’s foreign relations over the past 100 years is the country’s lack of *political* involvement in European affairs. This started with the 1907 Integrity Treaty, through which the great powers of the day promised to protect the sovereignty of the newly independent kingdom.⁴ Norway was placed on the periphery of European affairs, and since then a lack of diplomatic tradition has been evident. The one important exception to the rule of political non-involvement in peacetime is Norway’s decision to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949 and the country’s active participation in the alliance since then.

Norway has made three applications to join the EU or its predecessors. The first, in 1962, was vetoed by French President Charles de Gaulle in 1963; the second application, in 1967, and the third, in 1992, were rejected by the Norwegian people in referendums in 1972 and 1994, respectively. The political handling of these last two rejections varied greatly: in fact, completely different strategies were chosen.

After the 1972 referendum, and in the aftermath of the 1968 upheavals throughout Europe, there was a loosening of Norway’s modest ties to the EU, a turning away from Europe and an increased focus on development aid and

² Norwegian Ministry of Defence, ‘The government backs participation in Nordic rapid reaction force for the EU from 2008’, Press release, Oslo, 26 Nov. 2004, URL <<http://odin.dep.no/fd/english/news/news/010051-990083/>>.

³ *Nei til EU*, ‘Dagfinn Høybråtens hilsen til landsmøtet’ [Dagfinn Høybråten’s greetings to the national convention], 19 Nov. 2004, URL <<http://www.neitileu.no/show.php?page=single&id=9030>>.

⁴ The Norwegian Integrity Treaty was signed on 2 Nov. 1907. As well as Norway, parties to the treaty included Germany, France, Russia, Sweden and the UK.

developing countries. Association with the EU was politically taboo from that time until the Iron Curtain started coming down in the late 1980s.

In the aftermath of the November 1994 referendum, the then Norwegian Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, opted for intensified cooperation with the European Union. She apparently interpreted the motive behind the 'No' vote as instinctive support for traditional sovereignty rather than as a rejection of extensive cooperation with the EU. Brundtland's chosen course suggested itself even more strongly since two of Norway's neighbours, Finland and Sweden, were to join the Union in 1995.

It could be said that, whereas Finnish voters in 1994 saw both economic and security benefits in becoming an EU member and Swedish voters expected clear economic gains, the voters in Norway could see neither economic nor security benefits for the country or themselves in joining. What remained as the main argument in favour of Norwegian membership was the opportunity for political participation: a share—albeit small—in European decision-making processes. As could be expected, however, the political argument did not carry sufficient weight to sway the vote in the referendum.

The free trade framework of the European Economic Area (EEA), which had come into effect as recently as January 1994, served as a generous fallback option for the Norwegian economy.⁵ As originally proposed in January 1989 by Jacques Delors, President of the European Commission, the EEA was to be a means of deferring the applications of a number of potential members of the EU, thus giving the Union time to consolidate.⁶ The fact that the EEA was operational at the time of the 1994 referendum probably persuaded some Norwegian voters that a 'No' vote would have few economic repercussions.

Since then, the policies of all Norwegian governments, and the course of events in the EU and Europe in general, have led to intensified cooperation and involvement by Norway in EU matters. The Single Market has been developed further, and Norway has adopted all measures applicable to it via the EEA without making any veto attempts in the framework of the EEA institutions. Norway participates fully in the Schengen Agreement on the free movement of people and in EU-based cooperation on research and teaching, and has become a substantial financial contributor to the new Central European member states since the enlargement of the EU on 1 May 2004.

In addition, Norway has taken a keen interest in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and, lately, in the European Security and Defence Policy, in order to counter a possible marginalization of NATO and of Norway's own role in defence cooperation in Europe.

⁵ Agreement on the European Economic Area, EFTA Secretariat, Geneva, May 1992, URL <<http://secretariat.efta.int/Web/LegalCorner/>>. The members of the EEA are Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, the EU and its member states. Austria, Finland and Sweden were members before their accession to the EU in 1995. The EEA is managed by the secretariat of the European Free Trade Area, of which Switzerland is also a member.

⁶ Delors, J., Speech to the European Parliament, Strasbourg, 17 Jan. 1989.

III. Latest moves on the European Security and Defence Policy

The Norwegian Government's support for participation with Finland and Sweden in an EU battle group, to become operative in 2008, is of course a political signal. Norway's contribution is intended to be a mere 150 soldiers.⁷ At home, the government has pointed out that the use of the forces will be subject to a national veto,⁸ as will be the case for all EU contributing countries. A number of agreements on the practical arrangements surrounding the use of the forces remain to be worked out.⁹ The persistent question, however, is the degree of Norwegian participation in the overall political discourse *before* a decision is made to deploy one or more battle groups.

The EU can be expected to protect the integrity of its decision-making process,¹⁰ as the very essence of the decision to form battle groups is to emphasize the EU's political clout. Thus, Norway is under no illusions that it will be admitted into the deliberations of the EU's political institutions. Yet again, Norway is facing a situation in which it can count on a strong will to cooperate on the technical and practical level on the part of Finland and Sweden, but without a corresponding opportunity for it to take part in the political deliberations of the Union as a whole. When it comes to specific ESDP decisions, Norway will again face a 'take it or leave it' situation, as is already the case with the huge volume of legislation on the Single Market that Norway adopts in accordance with the EEA Agreement.

The latter arrangements have been accepted for economic reasons, at the same time as the net loss of *de facto* Norwegian sovereignty is deplored. The question posed by the issue of the battle groups is whether that kind of arrangement should now be extended to cover a new sector—one as politically important as the deployment of forces abroad. Moreover, the decision to opt for participation in the EU battle groups—and possibly the decision to deploy them—will be made by a government that is deeply split over whether, in the long term, Norway should work towards EU membership or whether it should keep its distance from the EU. This applied to the Bondevik administration, which initiated defence cooperation with the EU, and it applies to the new Stoltenberg administration as well.

The majority coalition government formed by Stoltenberg consists of the Norwegian Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party. While

⁷ Norwegian Ministry of Defence (note 2).

⁸ See, e.g., Kirk, L., 'Norwegian participation in EU battle groups disputed', *EUobserver*, 19 Nov. 2004.

⁹ For the agreement reached to-date on the Nordic battle group see Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Estonia and the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Finland and the Ministry of Defence of the Kingdom of Norway and the Government of the Kingdom of Sweden Concerning the Principles for the Establishment and Operation of a Multinational Battle Group to be Made Available to the European Union, Brussels, 17 May 2005, URL <<http://www.odin.no/filarkiv/247184/>>.

¹⁰ For an explanation of the procedural framework for non-EU member states' participation in the ESDP see chapter 20 in this volume.

Stoltenberg himself is pro-EU, his party is split on the EU issue and the other two coalition parties resolutely reject Norwegian participation in the EU. In the coalition government's platform the three parties agreed to tighten the conditions for Norwegian participation in an EU military venture by stating that the government will only agree to sending Norwegian troops 'when a clear and unequivocal UN mandate' supports the operation.¹¹ This is a small move away from the commitment of the Bondevik administration and of its Minister of Defence, Devold.

The United Kingdom has been active in promoting the idea of a Nordic battle group with the participation of Norway, not least in view of the latter's position as a NATO member. Norwegian involvement should ensure a close link to the alliance and associate the neutral countries Finland and Sweden more closely with NATO. This would also be a step towards closer Nordic defence cooperation and could even be welcomed by the United Nations, as the EU battle groups will be well suited for undertaking UN-mandated military tasks. However, all these choices and their implications are being shouldered by a Norwegian government that will not be privy to the decisive political considerations and debate that will precede any deployment of Norwegian forces in an EU framework.

To proceed further on the road of practical, ad hoc arrangements with the EU risks blurring, in the minds of many Norwegians, the difference between being an EU member or not. The political implications are also increasingly unclear, since the long-term effects of participation in the battle groups are being interpreted in a completely different manner by different members of the same Norwegian government. It is this author's view that, as long as Norway cannot support the idea of a political Europe with a distinct role in world affairs, it would be wrong to extend 'cooperation without political participation' to a field whose ultimate question concerns the life and death of Norwegian citizens.

¹¹ Norwegian Labour Party, Socialist Left Party and Centre Party, 'Politisk plattform for en flertalls-regjering' [Political platform for a majority government], Soria Moria, 13 Oct. 2005, URL <<http://www.dna.no/index.gan?id=46384>>, p. 9 (author's translation).