

## **ARE LAND FORCES RELEVANT IN HIGH NORTH DETERRENCE AND WARFARE?**

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Defence Minister, Chief, Fellow Soldiers, Ladies and Gentlemen!

Thank you for inviting me to this symposium, and for giving me the opportunity to talk about one of my favorite topics, namely to what extent land forces are relevant in preventing – and if needed – fighting a conventional war in the Arctic.

With 20 minutes at hand, you will hopefully forgive me for not covering the whole of the Arctic region. I will concentrate on the Norwegian High North.

Before I start elaborating on the core questions, I will – however – remind you of two eternal truths of military strategy and planning.

1. We are always too shortsighted, and forget that the structures that we establish need to be relevant 30 years from now. The most detrimental years of the modern Norwegian Army were in the first years of the 2000s, when everything circled around small niche contributions to operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the needs of a credible national defense structure were mostly ignored. We need to recognize that defense structures must be balanced and able to deal with a broad range of contingencies. If not, you can be pretty damn sure that the enemy will exploit the weaknesses you leave open and outmaneuver you.
2. We must realize the limitations of a small country facing a formidable military power. The fact that David beat Goliath in the Bible history, does not mean that the weaker part normally will prevail. Therefore I get somewhat shocked when I hear, otherwise bright, people suggest that Norway should invest in offensive strategic capabilities – like for example long range missiles – in order to hit an enemy's strategic targets, rather than acquire classic military systems. Let's face it: A small country can never match the military power of a large nation by copying his strengths and his tactics. Us employing such a strategy risks leading to unintended escalation, and easily portrays us as the aggressor in the narrative of our adversary. A far better alternative is to make his military adventure so costly, that he either decides not to do it, or that if he does – he will meet a level of resistance that will give us the time to reinforce.

The intelligence estimates for the Norwegian High North have made it clear that there is no immediate threat from Russia against Norway today. This assessment is founded on the fact that today's Russia is very different from the Soviet Union of the Cold War days. Russia is not expansionist, and has fully understood her limitations when it comes to challenging NATO's red lines. At the same time however, Russia has clearly demonstrated her will to act with force when she sees her fundamental interests threatened. Ukraine's flirt with the EU and NATO in 2014 was seen as such a threat to vital Russian national interests.

The intelligence estimates on Russia therefore focuses more on the long term risks that could result if a broader conflict should emerge somewhere else in Europe – or for that case elsewhere in the world - between, either Russia and NATO or Russia and the US.

We know pretty well how Russia would respond to a conflict that risks escalating into a strategic nuclear confrontation. In such a situation, Russia's primary objective will be to secure her Strategic Long-range Ballistic Missile systems, facilitating a robust nuclear response if her territory or fundamental interests should be deemed threatened.

Early on in a rising conflict like this, Russia is likely to establish what they themselves call the Bastion defense – a layered sea denial operation starting with attack submarines as far west as the gap between Greenland, Iceland and the UK, then surface vessels operating in the Norwegian and Barents Seas and finally a tight defense around their most valuable assets – namely the missile-carrying submarines – the SLBMs - deployed in the eastern Barents and Polar Seas. In addition to the missile subs themselves, their supporting bases on the Kola peninsula – only kilometers from the Norwegian border – are deemed essential to maintain Russia's nuclear deterrent.

It is in the light of such a scenario we must assess the composition of Norway's defense structure. I have heard people arguing that the Bastion Defense is purely a naval concept, which has little or nothing to do with Norway's land territory. I happen to disagree strongly with that. Imagine for a second that you are the commander of Russia's Northern Military District, responsible for the defense of your country's most valuable assets. You look at the map, and you realize that your key bases are within artillery range

from what you will label NATO territory. Can you live with that? Well – I couldn't.

Consequently, I believe it is not only a possibility, but indeed quite likely that a Russian Bastion operation would include a limited ground operation against Norway's northeastern county of Finnmark – in order to reduce the risk of land-based threats to key Kola bases. We are not talking about an ideologically or expansionist driven operation – solely the establishment of a buffer zone, deep enough to prevent unwanted disturbance of the crucially important activities on Kola.

Russia has, over the last ten years, significantly increased her military presence at Kola, and in the Russian High North in general. Most of the build-up is related to Russia's perceived threat from US missiles and bombers flying across the polar region and threatening Russia's heartland. There has, however, also been a significant build-up of ground forces in Russia's northwest – as well as frequent demonstrations of the ability to reinforce the Kola peninsula with ground forces from further south and from Russia's central and eastern provinces. The enormous ongoing exercise in Siberia again demonstrates Russia's ability to quickly move forces across the vast country, in the same way we saw it executed during the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine operations four years ago.

It is my assessment that Russian land forces, already in place, or quickly available through rapid deployment from other regions, have the ability to secure a buffer zone in Finnmark, should that be deemed necessary.

What can we draw from this? Well – firstly I think we can conclude that at least Russia sees a role for ground forces in the High North. The significant build-up and modernization of the land forces structure in Russia's northwest, as well as the frequent reinforcement exercises, tell me that the Russian military leadership sees land forces as key in the defense of the Kola base complex, and that the volume of such forces also facilitate limited offensive operations as part of the strategic defense - if required.

On the Norwegian side, we can of course choose to ignore these realities, but in my view that would be rather irresponsible. I do hear from time to time, however, voices – even from our Defence Research Institute, FFI, who argue that it is too difficult, some even say impossible, to defend Finnmark – and that therefore Finnmark should not be defended.

Both as a former land forces commander and intelligence chief, I fundamentally disagree with those kinds of assessments. There are several reasons for that.

Firstly, I believe that – however difficult it might be to defend Finnmark, there is an obligation for any nation state to defend its territorial integrity and population. This is obviously a moral-ethical question – but just as much a consequence of international law. The nation state is obliged to defend its people against aggression, and the population of Finnmark is just as entitled to protection as people in more densely populated parts of our country.

Secondly, I find it impossible to understand how Norway, as a NATO member, could address our alliance partners and ask for reinforcements in time of crisis or war, if we are not willing to pay the cost of defending our territory in an initial phase ourselves. We cannot credibly ask our allies to recapture Finnmark, if we ourselves were unable to establish a robust defense with national assets in the first place.

And thirdly, I fundamentally disagree with those who argue that defending Finnmark borders to the impossible. Yes, Finnmark – as well as large parts of the rest of Norway – are difficult to operate in. But let me tell you two things. 1. If Finnmark is hard to defend, it is even more difficult to attack and conquer. And 2. No one are better suited to operate in that environment than the soldiers of the Norwegian Army.

Then some people argue that – yes, we will defend Finnmark, but we won't do it with ground forces, we will do it with air power and long range missiles. They say: - On the ground we only need air and artillery controllers. To those I will say, yes, of course we should employ air power, artillery and missile systems against an advancing enemy in Finnmark. That should absolutely be one of the elements of a ground forces package defending the region. But to imagine that air power and indirect fire alone will either deter or prevent an aggressor from capturing Finnmark, is absolutely unrealistic. There are no historic examples of that happening elsewhere, and no reason to believe it could ever succeed in Finnmark.

It is therefore my strong conviction that Finnmark needs to be defended by regular, classic ground forces. And there are several reasons for that:

Firstly, the aggressor we will be facing, will consist of traditional mechanized structures with tanks, armored fighting vehicles and artillery, supported by helicopters and air power. They will be classic ground forces.

Secondly, in a NATO that is more and more divided, and where the “holy” article 5 has been cast into doubt by an unpredictable American president, a Norwegian call for article 5 reinforcements needs to be founded on a clearly established – non-disputable – situation. We need to demonstrate to our allies, before calling for help, that we have done all we can nationally to deter aggression, and limit the aggressor’s intrusion. The importance of this factor – in my view cannot be overestimated.

Thirdly, there is a factor that should be sobering to all military leaders: During operations at the Balkans, in Iraq and in Afghanistan, we have gotten accustomed to considering losses as something unacceptable – something to be avoided by all means. We told each other that in such operations no cause legitimizes the loss of fellow soldiers. In the defense of our own territory and our own people, however, losses – even heavy losses - are likely, necessary and legitimate. Our will to accept losses is also a clear signal to both the aggressor and our allies of our will to defend the country – and the seriousness of our call for our allies’ help.

In-place and rapid reinforcement ground forces – in my view – also constitute a credible and robust deterrent. Preventing war is, by definition, even more important and valuable than winning in war. The presence of a significant ground forces structure in Finnmark would constitute an important threshold with three important consequences for a potential aggressor: 1. It will influence his decision on whether to invade our territory or not, and force him to consider whether the possible costs of such an adventure are justified. 2. If he nevertheless does invade, it will slow down his advance and expose him to significant losses, and 3. It will significantly escalate the conflict – not only with Norway – but with NATO and the US.

I therefore conclude that ground forces not only are relevant in deterrence and warfighting in the Norwegian High North – they are absolutely indispensable. No other military capabilities can replace ground forces and ensure the same effects as well trained, well equipped army troops can. And – worth noticing – the Russians clearly have come to the same conclusion.

So much for the relevance of land forces in the Arctic. Just as interesting is the unavoidable follow-up question: Is today's Norwegian Army relevant for that task; deterring aggression, defending the north-eastern part of the country and being robust enough to continue the fight until sufficient allied land forces reinforcements arrive and are ready to operate.

When I graduated from the Military Academy in 1978 the Army consisted of 13 brigades and a high number of independent battalions and companies. When I became Commander of 6. Division in 2003, we were down to two brigades, and when – four years later I left as Commander Land Forces Command, we were down to one. Today's Brigade North is even further reduced, and the government's current long term plan calls for the transfer of one of its maneuver battalions to reserve status, removal of its integral helicopter support and significant delays in key equipment replacements or upgrades.

I applaud the long term plan's ambition of a stronger force presence in Finnmark, and I also applaud the investment in capabilities like new combat aircraft, submarines, air defense systems and maritime patrol aircraft. But at the same time, I see little coherence between the government's ambition of a forward presence in Finnmark and the complete lack of support for the necessary land forces structure required to support such an ambition.

As Commander 6. division and Land Forces Command, I frequently tested the army's ability to rapidly reinforce Finnmark. Up to battalion task forces were ordered to deploy to Finnmark with no advance notice. I know that this also is done by today's Brigade North. So, let's be clear; the Army can deploy to and operate in Finnmark. The key points are whether today's Army is organized and equipped in order to succeed in deterring an aggressor, or to fight and contain him if required. The answer is no!

It is my view that the government's ambition of spending 2% of our GDP on defense should prioritize a significant strengthening of the Army. Norway can and should afford a full standing brigade, equipped with the best weapon systems money can buy. This includes state-of-the-art tanks, long range artillery, air defense systems and – not to forget – integral helicopters for small unit transportation, medical evacuation and deployment of rescue and other forward elements. And, in addition, a second, reserve brigade should be established, in order to ensure endurance, follow-up capability

and the ability to respond to contingencies outside the main area of operations.

This is not necessary for military reasons only – it is first of all an obligation to the people living in this country – but also an obligation to the young volunteering conscripts willing to pay the highest price in the defense of something they believe in. They will give their very best, but they deserve a fair chance of success.

Thank you for your attention.