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Germany's Cooperation with Norway, Sweden and Finland in the Field of Security and Defense in the Mid-2020s

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Abstract. By the early 2020s, Germany had begun to significantly increase its military presence in the forward part of NATO's area of responsibility — primarily in Eastern and Northern Europe. This article examines the recent evolution of Germany's relations with Norway, Sweden and Finland in the field of security and defense. The methods of chronological and comparative analysis are used, along with the principles of neorealist theory. The author explores Germany's steps towards strategic penetration into the Arctic, based on cooperation with Norway in the mid-2010s to early 2020s, and Berlin's gradually developing support for Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO. All the decisions were considered in the context of a gradual yet consistent tightening of Germany's approach to "containing" Russia. The study analyzes three Germany's Arctic strategies (2013; 2019; 2024) and the increasing importance and share of security and defense issues within them. The paper discusses the specific features of the functioning of the N5+1 format (five Nordic countries and Germany) at the highest level, and the securitization of the content of the negotiations. In developing bilateral political contacts in the mid-2020s, Berlin paid the greatest attention to Stockholm, viewing Sweden as a potential leader in Northern Europe. The main reason for the decline in the intensity of high-level contacts with Norway was the limited military resources of Germany. This was due to both the slow growth of the Bundeswehr's overall strength and the difficulty of intensifying the deployment of its forces simultaneously in the Baltic Sea region and the Arctic. The study analyzed a range of specific solutions involving the rational deployment, in terms of timing and location, of German corvettes, frigates, mountain infantry and fighter aircraft. The author concludes that Germany's bilateral cooperation with both Sweden and Norway as key regional partners will remain unchanged in the long term.

Keywords: Germany, Norway, Sweden, Finland, NATO, Arctic, Baltic region, "containment", political cooperation, N5+1, Bundeswehr, military exercises

Introduction

In the first half of the 2020s, Germany's strategic presence system was in a state of crisis in regions distant from the Euro-Atlantic Community¹, particularly in conflict-prone countries of the Global South. This process was symbolized by the forced evacuations of German contingents (as part of multinational missions) from Afghanistan (by July 2021) and Mali (by May 2024). While by the mid-2010s, the Bundeswehr was deploying approximately 7,000 personnel simultaneously

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¹ In this article, the Euro-Atlantic Community refers to the group comprising the member states of the EU and NATO, as well as these institutions themselves.

outside the NATO's area of responsibility² (sometimes up to 10,000) (Glatz, Hansen, Kaim et al., 2018), a decade later, this figure had fallen to 1,000 military personnel³, i.e. almost a tenfold decrease.

A qualitatively different situation was observed in the forward, eastward-facing part of the North Atlantic Alliance's area of responsibility. Here, Germany was increasing the scale of the Bundeswehr's deployment. The most striking examples of this were Berlin's decisions, which set a precedent for European NATO member states, to gradually reorganize the multinational battalion tactical group (BTG) in Lithuania into a brigade (since June 2022), to staff it almost entirely with German military personnel, and to deploy it on a permanent rather than a rotational basis (from November 2023) (Trunov, 2024a). At the same time, Germany developed strategic activity on the other, external side of NATO's area of responsibility. Since February 2022, Berlin has been supplying weapons and military equipment to Ukraine, as well as participating in the training of its personnel (Schaller, 2023; Trunov, 2023a). This process of noticeable growth in Germany's military activity, both at the forefront of the Alliance's area of responsibility and in its vicinity from the outside, developed not only in Eastern Europe, but also in Northern Europe, particularly in the waters of the Baltic and Norwegian Seas (Trunov, 2025).

These trends reflected a shift in the key objectives of the German armed forces' deployment: instead of attempting to act as a guarantor of security for countries where armed conflict originates (particularly for a number of actors in the Global South), they were now engaging in "containment" of systemic opponents of "Western democracies", primarily, Russia.

In their efforts to weaken Russia, Germany and its NATO partners hope to equate the geostrategic concepts of the "collective West" and the "global North". An integral part of the latter, the geostrategic and economic value of which is significantly increasing in today's reality, is the Arctic. The ability to maintain a presence in the Arctic Ocean (both military-politically and in trade and economic terms) inevitably becomes one of the indicators of global influence for key international actors (Paul, 2023; Trunov, 2024b). Most interested states, especially those without access to the Arctic Ocean, will be able to acquire such capabilities only through close cooperation with states that have Arctic coastlines (Russia, as well as Denmark, Norway, Canada, and the United States). For Germany, as for a number of other NATO member states without direct access to the Arctic Ocean, the Kingdom of Norway is of particular value: primarily due to the fact that Oslo's Arctic possessions are located in continental Europe, and not at a significant distance from it.

Germany, whose industry is critically dependent on energy imports, is highly motivated to participate in oil and gas production and gain access to biological resources in the Arctic Ocean. It is equally important for Germany to ensure a regular naval presence of the Bundeswehr in the

² In this article, the NATO's area of responsibility is understood as the totality of territories and territorial waters of the member states of the North Atlantic Alliance.

³ Anzahl der an internationalen Einsätzen beteiligten deutschen Soldaten der Bundeswehr. Statista.de. URL: <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/72703/umfrage/anzahl-der-soldaten-der-bundeswehr-im-ausland/> (accessed 10 June 2024).

Arctic Ocean, particularly in the Norwegian and Barents Seas, combined with the deployment of various branches of the German armed forces in subarctic regions (primarily on the Scandinavian Peninsula). In this way, both practically and in terms of image, Berlin is attempting to compensate for the significant loss of influence and presence in the Global South by demonstrating its growing role within the Global North.

It is logical that Berlin is interested in Norway maximizing its capabilities to strengthen its position in the Arctic Ocean jointly with its Western partners. Among NATO member states, Germany is carrying out its effective strategic penetration into the Arctic by declaring the need to “contain” Russia. In this regard, it is extremely important for Germany that Sweden and Finland partially “relieve” Norway in building a confrontation, taking on a significant practical burden, thereby allowing Oslo to focus entirely on resolving problems in the Arctic. Stockholm and Helsinki are also highly valuable to Berlin in another respect, especially after Sweden and Finland join the North Atlantic Alliance (April 4, 2023 and March 7, 2024, respectively). The contribution of these Nordic countries significantly increases the possibility of turning the Baltic Sea into an “internal lake” of NATO, thereby limiting Russia’s capabilities in the region (see, for example (Smirnov, 2023)).

The aim of this article is to examine the characteristics and prospects of Germany’s cooperation with Norway, Sweden and Finland in the political and military spheres as of the mid-2020s. Russian and international researchers have accumulated a wide range of studies on changes in the strategic situation in Northern Europe as a whole (Paul, 2023; Konychev, Sergunin, 2024), specifically on the foreign policy of Norway, as well as Finland and Sweden, especially the process and consequences of each of these two states joining NATO in 2023–2024 (Smirnov, 2023; Chekov, Vorotnikov, Chechevishnikov et al., 2023). Germany’s cooperation has been studied either in relation to a specific country (Trunov, 2023b) or across all Northern European countries, but only up to the early 2020s (Trunov, 2021). This article represents an attempt to fill this research gap.

Methods of chronological and comparative analysis were applied in the article. Methodologically, the theory of neorealism (structural realism) was used. Its key thesis is that a state’s foreign policy can only be successful when it meets the expectations of other actors (Waltz, 1979); this is illustrated by Germany’s consideration of the concerns of the establishments in Norway, Sweden, Finland when implementing measures to strengthen and expand its strategic positions in Scandinavia and the Baltic region.

Evolution of relations between Germany and the three Nordic countries (2014–2022)

During the first decade since the outbreak of the confrontation between the Euro-Atlantic Community and Russia (March 2014), there was a noticeable increase in Germany’s political cooperation both with Norway, a NATO member state, and with Sweden and Finland, which were EU members and were regarded as maintaining a form of neutrality. Cooperation within multilateral frameworks (in particular, the Council of the Baltic Sea States) was important, but bilateral inter-

state contacts, especially at the highest level, remained of the greatest significance. Their content reflected a significant number of areas of cooperation between Berlin and Oslo (Trunov, 2023b) and Stockholm, and a limited number — with Helsinki.

In November 2014, a new *N3+1* negotiation format was established, comprising three Northern European countries united by their EU membership (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and Germany. Two years later, in November 2016, the second meeting took place⁴. Germany sought not only to demonstrate its consideration of Stockholm and Helsinki's security and defense concerns, but also its willingness to consider them in the context of fulfilling EU commitments. In this way, Berlin was indirectly showing the two nominally neutral countries that a change in their status to that of a bloc member — that is, accession to NATO — was not yet required. Furthermore, the *N3+1* platform was used to discuss multilateral cooperation issues only in the Baltic region, but not in the Arctic. Neither of the two Northern European countries, both members of the Alliance — Iceland and Norway, were included in the format.

Since the late 2010s, the Bundeswehr has been actively participating in maneuvers on Norwegian territory and in its coastal waters. One of the first such instances — its involvement in the major Trident Juncture 18 exercises (October 2018) — proved to be a large-scale operation. Germany sent a joint-force contingent of 8,000 military personnel to Norway (the third-largest after the host nation and the US), with the ground component consisting of the “core” of a Bundeswehr military brigade (the 41st Motorized Infantry Brigade). Functionally, these units formed the backbone of a counter-attack group which, according to the exercise scenario, repelled an attack by an “enemy” invading through the northern provinces. For the first time since the end of the World War II, Germany practiced the transfer of large numbers of troops to Norway, and even considered temporarily redeploying the Bundeswehr's military logistics department there (Trunov, 2025). At the same time, a year earlier, in September 2017, Germany refrained from participating in the Aurora 17 maneuvers of the Swedish armed forces, which involved contingents from the United States and France.

What are the reasons for these differences? First and foremost, the fundamentals of Germany's approach to building a confrontation, “containing” the opponent: implementing practical steps, especially military ones, gradually and consistently. This was intended to prevent (or minimize) the risk of uncontrolled escalation, while the overall pressure on the opponent, on the contrary, would increase and become more effective. The longer the period of confrontation lasted (especially without a state of “détente”), the more hostile measures Germany was prepared to take against the opponent. Conversely, in the initial (in this case, up to and including the late 2010s), and especially the earliest (2014–2015), stages of “containment”, Germany was extremely cautious in using its political and military capabilities. This approach was more pronounced in the Baltic region, where Germany initially possessed a strong position and the ability to increase its

⁴ Außenminister Steinmeier lädt Außenminister Dänemarks, Finnlands und Schwedens nach Berlin ein. Auswärtiges Amt. URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/161107-bm-dk-fin-swe-284942> (accessed 10 June 2024).

presence, and somewhat less noticeable in the Arctic, where Germany's strategic penetration was only just beginning.

In the **mid-2010s**, Germany practically did not use the Bundeswehr in either region, demonstrating its lack of interest at that time in Sweden and Finland joining NATO, particularly in the short term.

In **2017–2019**, Berlin began deploying the Bundeswehr in Norway during exercises on a large scale (e.g., the Trident Juncture 18 maneuvers) and repeatedly⁵. At the same time, the German contingent formed the basis for the Alliance's multinational BTG forward deployment force (FDF) in Lithuania, that is, in the southern Baltic region; Norway was one of the other contributors to this BTG⁶. It should be emphasized that Oslo and Vilnius were officially NATO members. In the case of Sweden and Finland, Berlin refrained from participating in exercises on their territory (a key example was Aurora 17). However, since 2017, meetings in the N3+1 format have no longer taken place, which indicated Germany's growing willingness to see the two still nominally neutral Northern European countries join NATO in the future. This was further evidenced by the launch of the N5+1 format in August 2019, bringing together, for the first time, all five Northern European countries and Germany. The meeting, held in Iceland, focused mainly on issues outside the sphere of security and defense⁷; however, for Germany, this was significant precisely because of the fact that the platform had been launched.

In the **early 2020s**, Germany continued to expand the scope and number of measures it was implementing to "contain" Russia. In Norway, the Bundeswehr participated in NATO naval exercises (using the German Navy's first, newest Type 125 frigate)⁸, as well as the Cold Response 2020 maneuvers, which involved mountain rifle units and military transport aviation (Trunov, 2025). On February 15, 2022, even before the start of the special military operation (SMO), Germany increased its contribution to the bloc's BTG FDF in Lithuania (from approximately 500 to almost 900 military personnel)⁹.

In June 2021, a group of 10 fighter aircraft and approximately 200 aircrew and support personnel (from the 31st Luftwaffe Air Wing) participated in the Arctic Challenge 2021 air force exer-

⁵ See, for example: „Sachsen“ erhält Nikolaus-Preis in Sonderform. BMVg. URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/marine/aktuelles/sachsen-erhaelt-nikolaus-preis-in-sonderform-5022470> (accessed 10 June 2024).

⁶ NATO battlegroups in Baltic nations and Poland fully operational. NATO. URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_146557.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed 10 June 2024).

⁷ „Der Klimawandel ist inzwischen sichtbar“. Bundeskanzleramt. URL: <https://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/merkel-in-island-1661974> (accessed 10 June 2024).

⁸ Manöver: Die „Sachsen-Anhalt“ bei FLOTEX SILVER 2021. BMVg. URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/marine/aktuelles/fregatte-sachsen-anhalt-manoever-flotex-silver-2021-5314338> (accessed 10 June 2024).

⁹ NATO-Staaten verstärken Nordostflanke des Bündnisses. BMVg. URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/heer/aktuelles/nato-staaten-verstaerken-nordostflanke-des-buendnisses-5364278> (accessed 10 June 2024).

cises near Rovaniemi in northern Finland¹⁰. The air component was supported by eight Bundeswehr electronic warfare systems (30 personnel), which were deployed to the Jokkmokk and Vidsel areas in northern Sweden¹¹. Thus, various Luftwaffe components practiced their operations near the Arctic Circle during the summer. Theoretically, the Arctic Challenge 2021 exercise, involving the deployment of the Bundeswehr in Finland and Sweden, could be explained as cooperation between three EU member states. However, under the auspices of the European Union, unlike the North Atlantic Alliance, there was no practice of conducting air force maneuvers (Belinskiy, 2024). Moreover, on the website of the German Ministry of Defense, Arctic Challenge 2021 was clearly designated as maneuvers of NATO member and partner states. The exercises took place outside the Alliance's area of responsibility at that time — on the territory and in the airspace of two countries that were still, in a sense, neutral. Thus, almost a year before the start of the SMO, Germany demonstrated through its practical actions that it supported the further rapprochement of Sweden and Finland with NATO and, most importantly, their potential accession to the Alliance.

The start of the Russian Federation's special military operation (24 February 2022) became not only and not so much the reason, but above all a pretext, especially an informational one, for justifying further increase in Germany's cooperation with Norway, Sweden, and Finland in the context of "containing" Russia. Germany's consultations with the two nominally neutral countries regarding a review of their non-aligned status in the spring of 2022 consisted of the following phases. Already in the first month after the start of the SMO, Chancellor O. Scholz held bilateral talks with the Prime Ministers of Finland, S. Marin (March 16)¹², and Sweden, M. Andersson (March 28)¹³. In both cases, Germany hosted the meetings, with the guests visiting in order of their countries' distance from Russia. O. Scholz emphasized Germany's readiness to provide support through the EU and advocated for deeper cooperation with NATO. Germany was, in essence, promoting the accession of Sweden and Finland to the Alliance, but had so far formally avoided stating this openly.

The same pattern was repeated during O. Scholz's trilateral talks with M. Andersson and S. Marin on May 3, 2022. The meeting was again held in Germany, at the Chancellor's residence, Meseberg Castle, which was intended to reflect Germany's role as the senior partner in both interstate dialogues. Much of the lengthy press conference following the talks was devoted to charac-

¹⁰ Kurze Wege, kilometerweise Kabel. BMVg. URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/luftwaffe/aktuelles/kurze-wege-kilometerweise-kabel-5092258> (accessed 10 June 2024).

¹¹ Polygone in der Arktis. BMVg. URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/luftwaffe/aktuelles/polygone-in-der-arktis-5090458> (accessed 10 June 2024).

¹² Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzler Scholz und der Ministerpräsidentin der Republik Finnland Marin zu ihrem Besuch in Berlin am 16. März 2022. Bundeskanzleramt. URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-und-der-ministerpraesidentin-der-republik-finnland-marin-zu-ihrem-besuch-in-berlin-am-16-maerz-2022-2016788> (accessed 10 June 2024).

¹³ Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzler Scholz und der Ministerpräsidentin des Königreichs Schweden Andersson zu ihrem Besuch in Berlin am 28. März 2022. Bundeskanzleramt. URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-und-der-ministerpraesidentin-des-koenigreichs-schweden-andersson-zu-ihrem-besuch-in-berlin-am-28-maerz-2022-2021168> (accessed 10 June 2024).

terizing a certain “Russian threat”¹⁴. During the talks on May 3, 2022, Germany finally agreed with Sweden and Finland to support their accession to NATO, thereby acting as one of the key facilitators for Stockholm and Helsinki’s entry into the Alliance. Two weeks later, on May 17, 2022, Berlin’s official position was publicly announced in the form of a government statement¹⁵.

On June 7, 2022, at a meeting with the heads of the Baltic states, the German Chancellor announced the decision to gradually reorganize the BTG FDF in Lithuania into a brigade, as part of Germany’s plans to establish the largest conventional armed forces among all European NATO member states¹⁶. These statements by official Berlin signified that it had become one of the initiators of the Alliance’s militarization of the Baltic Sea region, both its northern and southern parts.

At the same time, Germany significantly increased its activity in the Arctic, particularly its cooperation with Norway. In 2022, three rounds of bilateral talks at the personal level were held¹⁷, despite changes in the top leadership in both countries. The Bundeswehr’s contribution to the Cold Response 22 exercise was more than double that of the previous Cold Response 20. Moreover, during the maneuvers in March 2022, Germany deployed not only mountain infantry units (from the 23rd Mountain Infantry Brigade), but also marines (from a separate battalion), paratroopers (from the 1st Airborne Brigade), and ground-based robotics (Trunov, 2025).

Political cooperation: doctrinal priorities and practice

Germany adopted its first regional strategy for the Arctic Ocean — the “Guidelines of Germany’s Arctic Policy” — back in 2013¹⁸, before the confrontation with Russia. This fact indicated that Germany undoubtedly intended to secure strategic penetration into the Arctic Ocean in a modular (absolute) sense, that is, without reference to the need to “contain” Russia. Berlin used the transition to confrontation as a convenient framework for justifying its offensive goals.

At the conceptual level, Germany devoted exceptional attention to the Arctic vector. It should be noted that Germany lacked regional strategies in many areas, particularly for the Baltic

¹⁴ Pressestatements von Bundeskanzler Scholz, der finnischen Ministerpräsidentin Marin und der schwedischen Ministerpräsidentin Andersson am 3. Mai 2022 in Schloss Meseberg. Bundeskanzleramt. URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/pressestatements-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-der-finnischen-ministerpraesidentin-marin-und-der-schwedischen-ministerpraesidentin-andersson-am-3-mai-2022-in-schloss-meseberg-2030188> (accessed 10 June 2024).

¹⁵ Nationale Erklärung Deutschlands zum NATO-Beitrittsbegehren Finnlands und Schwedens. Bundeskanzleramt. URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/nationale-erklaerung-deutschlands-zum-nato-beitrittsbegehren-finnlands-und-schwedens-2040396> (accessed 10 June 2024).

¹⁶ Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzler Scholz, dem Präsidenten von Litauen Nausėda, der Ministerpräsidentin von Estland Kallas und dem Ministerpräsidenten von Lettland Kariņš. Bundeskanzleramt. URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-dem-praesidenten-von-litauen-nausėda-der-ministerpraesidentin-von-estland-kallas-und-dem-ministerpraesidenten-von-lettland-kariņš-am-7-juni-2022-in-wilna-2048428> (accessed 10 June 2024).

¹⁷ Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzler Scholz und dem Ministerpräsidenten des Königreichs Norwegen Støre am 30. November 2022 in Berlin. Bundeskanzleramt. URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-und-dem-ministerpraesidenten-des-koenigreichs-norwegen-støre-am-30-november-2022-in-berlin-2147548> (accessed 10 June 2024).

¹⁸ Leitlinien deutscher Arktispolitik. Verantwortung übernehmen, Chancen nutzen. Berlin, Auswärtiges Amt, 2013. 20 S.

Sea region. Regarding the Arctic Ocean, official Berlin adopted three such documents by 2025: in 2013, 2019, and 2024. One explanation for this is Germany's growing conceptual focus on the oceans as a whole. This was not only due to the German economy's dependence on imports of raw materials and exports of high-tech products by sea. The German establishment also saw the growing importance of a strategic presence in the oceans for its global position. Thus, in September 2020, despite the COVID-19 factor, official Berlin published the document "Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific Region" (Arzamanova, 2024). However, by mid-2025, this regional strategy had not yet been updated, and it covered the areas of two oceans rather than just one.

This suggests that there is an increased attention to the Arctic Ocean at the doctrinal level of German foreign policy. This attention is even more pronounced in regard to security and defense issues. While the 2013 regional strategy focused on these topics in a single paragraph at the end of the text¹⁹, the 2019 "Guidelines of Arctic Policy" placed the section in fourth place²⁰. In the 2024 document, it was already in the second place, following the section on the importance of the Arctic for Germany²¹. The updating of the regional strategy, on average every five years, and the securitization of the agenda were combined with a change in the level of the government body on whose behalf the "Guidelines of Arctic Policy" were published. In 2013 and 2019, this was the German Foreign Ministry, in 2024 — the federal government.

In 2019, Germany, although not an Arctic state, expressed its readiness to become a guarantor of peace and security in the Arctic Ocean²². Official Berlin outlined this aspiration more clearly in its Arctic strategy (2024), explaining the need to deploy the Bundeswehr in the region to "contain" Russia, given the scale of its capabilities in the Arctic²³. Germany thus positioned the military resources it was prepared to deploy in this area as a valuable complement to the capabilities of its Northern European NATO partners. Berlin attempted to present its offensive military activity as defensive.

In approving Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO, Berlin emphasized its readiness to cooperate with the Northern European states both within the Alliance (and, to a lesser extent, the EU) and through regional structures (primarily NORDEFCO). In each of these areas, Germany's interest in participating in military exercises was highlighted²⁴. In its "Guidelines of Arctic Policy" (2024), Germany placed particular emphasis on the possibility of cooperation with all five Nordic countries, particularly through the N5+1 framework. The document noted the existence of meetings in this format at the level of heads of military departments²⁵.

¹⁹ Leitlinien deutscher Arktispolitik. Verantwortung übernehmen, Chancen nutzen. Berlin, Auswärtiges Amt, 2013. 20S.

²⁰ Leitlinien deutscher Arktispolitik. Verantwortung übernehmen, Vertrauen schaffen, Zukunft gestalten. Berlin, Auswärtiges Amt, 2019. S. 22–25.

²¹ Leitlinien deutscher Arktispolitik. Deutschland und die Arktis im Kontext von Klimakrise und Zeitenwende. Berlin, Bundesregierung, 2024. S. 14–18.

²² Leitlinien deutscher Arktispolitik... Berlin, Auswärtiges Amt, 2019. S. 23–24.

²³ Leitlinien deutscher Arktispolitik... Berlin, Bundesregierung, 2024. S. 15–16.

²⁴ Ibid, S. 17.

²⁵ Ibid.

In practice, N5+1 meetings at the level of heads of government played a key role. In the mid-2020s, the intensity of these negotiations increased, reflecting growing mutual interest and strengthening of Germany's position in Northern Europe as a whole. The first meeting in Iceland on August 20, 2019, was followed by similar meetings in Norway (August 15, 2022), Sweden (May 13, 2024), and Finland (May 27, 2025). The negotiation agenda shifted towards security issues: while the first consultations (2019) were devoted almost entirely to environmental issues, the second (2022) focused on ensuring a Western-centric world order in the context of its transition, the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, and coordinating efforts to increase the volume and range of weapons and military equipment (WME) for Ukraine²⁶. The third meeting (2024) focused on measures to strengthen cooperation in connection with the official accession of Helsinki and Stockholm to the Alliance, particularly in the Baltic Sea²⁷. This issue, including the protection of underwater infrastructure in the Baltic Sea, initiated by NATO's specialized operation Baltic Sentry (since January 2025), became a priority at the N5+1 talks in 2025. In addition, the issue of illegal migration to Finland (from Russia) was discussed, as well as further coordination of measures to support Ukraine through the supply of military equipment and the training of its personnel²⁸. In 2024 and 2025, the agenda for the talks was determined primarily by the concerns of the host countries, namely Sweden and Finland, respectively. At the N5+1 meetings, issues unrelated to the general development of the confrontation with Russia (primarily regarding Ukraine) and Northern Europe itself were rarely discussed. For example, the parties did not examine in detail the situation in the Middle East after the "thawing" of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (since October 7, 2023). These particular features meant that the N5+1 meetings primarily served to address the concerns of the Northern European establishment, with Germany as the undisputed senior partner; this was also indicated by the format of the six-party talks, with Germany placed in a separate category. Berlin sought to position itself as the guarantor of regional security.

The Chancellor supplemented the N5+1 negotiations with bilateral consultations with the Prime Minister of the host country. In 2022, these took place not only with the head of the Norwegian government, but also with that of Sweden; indeed, O. Scholz flew to Stockholm specifically to meet with M. Andersson there²⁹. This step is illustrative: in the mid-2020s, Germany assigned a crucial role to Sweden in its system of political contacts with the Nordic countries. In the first half of the 2020s, bilateral high-level talks with Sweden began to be held more than once a year. More-

²⁶ „Wir sind mehr als nur Nachbarn“. Bundeskanzleramt. URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/kanzler-in-norwegen-und-schweden-2071104> (accessed 10 June 2024).

²⁷ Mehr als nur Nachbarn. Bundeskanzleramt. URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/kanzler-nordischer-rat-stockholm-2281682> (accessed 10 June 2024).

²⁸ Partnerschaft zwischen Deutschland und „Nordic 5“ richtungsweisend für EU. Bundeskanzleramt. URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/pk-merz-finnland-2350434> (accessed 10 June 2024).

²⁹ Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzler Scholz und Ministerpräsidentin Andersson zum Besuch des Bundeskanzlers im Königreich Schweden am 16. August 2022 in Stockholm. Bundeskanzleramt. URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-und-ministerpraesidentin-andersson-zum-besuch-des-bundeskanzlers-im-koenigreich-schweden-am-16-august-2022-2073552> (accessed 10 June 2024).

over, the change of government in the Kingdom had no impact on the development of the dialogue: on October 18, 2022, following the elections, the Social Democrat M. Andersson was replaced by the leader of the moderate liberal party, U. Kristersson.

Germany sought to expand the range of areas of cooperation with Sweden, including setting the political framework for a fundamentally new form of military collaboration in the context of the Kingdom's accession to NATO. Berlin positioned itself as one of Stockholm's main facilitators in joining the Alliance. This became particularly important and simultaneously difficult in the situation where Turkey blocked Sweden's accession to NATO in 2022–2023. Berlin attempted to influence Ankara, informing Stockholm of its efforts³⁰, but achieved no significant success. The final result was achieved due to the actions of the United States under the Biden administration.

The main reason for the increased focus on Sweden is seen to be that Berlin regarded it as a future military leader in Northern Europe, and the prerequisites for this — the Kingdom's accession to NATO and the long-term policy, adopted at the turn of the 2010s and 2020s, to significantly strengthen all existing aspects of its military power. While Germany had already been demonstrating a persistent desire to become the largest contributor to NATO forces since the second half of the 2010s (Glatz, Zapfe, 2017), Sweden will most likely strive for this role for the Northern European segment.

Germany and Sweden's central position within the European part of NATO's area of responsibility and in Northern Europe, respectively, facilitated this role. Due to this geographic position alone, the armed forces of each country represented a potentially powerful reserve for reinforcing troops in neighboring NATO member states. However, the realization of their national ambitions required Berlin and Stockholm to take practical steps: by the mid-2020s, NATO regarded measures to support the authorities in Kyiv as such actions.

By spring 2025, Germany was the largest supplier of military equipment to Ukraine among European NATO member states as a whole (second only to the US), and Sweden was the largest supplier among Northern European countries. In 2022–2024, Berlin provided military support to Kyiv in the amount of 13.7 billion euros³¹ (about 14.8 billion dollars), Stockholm — 8.2 billion dollars³². Both sides actively supplied armored vehicles: Germany allocated 18 Leopard 2A6 tanks, 103 Leopard 1A5, 140 Marder infantry fighting vehicles to the Ukrainian Armed Forces; Sweden — 10 Strv 122 tanks (modernized Leopard 2 with enhanced protection) and 90 CV90 infantry fighting vehicles. In 2023, Berlin assumed the key burden of arming and training the 47th Mechanized Bri-

³⁰ Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzler Scholz und dem Ministerpräsidenten des Königreichs Schweden Kristersson am 15. März 2023 in Berlin. Bundeskanzleramt. URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-und-dem-ministerpraesidenten-des-koenigreichs-schweden-kristersson-am-15-maerz-2023-2171296> (accessed 10 June 2024).

³¹ Diese Waffen und militärische Ausrüstung liefert Deutschland an die Ukraine. Bundeskanzleramt. URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/waffenlieferungen-ukraine-2054514> (accessed 10 June 2024).

³² The Russian Ambassador to Stockholm emphasized the seriousness of Sweden's support for Ukraine. URL: <https://iz.ru/1894034/2025-05-28/posol-rf-v-stokgolme-ukazal-na-sereznost-shvedskoi-podderzhki-ukrainy> (accessed 10 June 2024).

gade of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Stockholm played a similar role for the 21st Mechanized Brigade. Both formations were considered elite; following significant losses suffered by both brigades during Ukraine's summer–autumn offensive (2023), the 21st MB received the 47th MB's tank fleet, while the latter received the Ukrainian Armed Forces' single battalion of US-made M1 Abrams tanks.

Germany held annual high-level bilateral talks with **Finland** between 2023 and 2025. The newly elected President A. Stubb (since March 1, 2024) took a very hard line on “containing” Russia, and here the similarity between his position and that of Chancellor F. Merz (in office since May 6, 2025) is evident. Helsinki's accession to NATO expanded the potential “window of opportunity” for practical cooperation; however, in reality, the scale of such cooperation remained limited³³. For example, in the near future, the German side is unlikely to be able to provide its partner with effective assistance in strengthening its control system along the 1,271.8 km border with Russia.

Against the backdrop of the high frequency — at least on an annual basis — of bilateral high-level talks between Germany and Sweden and Finland, the dynamics of corresponding contacts with **Norway** are indicative: three rounds of negotiations took place in 2022, but none in 2023–2024 (only King Harald V visited Germany). What are the reasons for this?

The change of leadership, which took place almost simultaneously in Norway (October 2021) and Germany (December 2021), did not have any negative impact. During the meetings in 2022, Chancellor O. Scholz and Prime Minister J. Støre (both Social Democrats) demonstrated continuity in terms of the level of mutual trust and the scope of the negotiating agenda compared to A. Merkel and E. Solberg, respectively (Trunov, 2025).

The fact that Finland (since April 4, 2023) and Sweden (since March 7, 2024) were new members of NATO played a certain role; the established framework for cooperation with Norway within the Alliance remained essentially unchanged. It required only minor adjustments, which were carried out intensively in 2022 against the backdrop of the start of the Russian Federation's SMO and preparations for the accession of Oslo's two neighbors to the Alliance. During bilateral talks in Oslo on August 15, 2022 (on the sidelines of the N5+1 meeting) and at the Berlin Security Conference on November 30, 2022, O. Scholz and J. Støre specified their plans, particularly regarding military cooperation in northern Norway and the provision of assistance to Ukraine³⁴. Symbolically, not only Prime Minister J. Støre, but also NATO Secretary General J. Stoltenberg, a Norwegian who previously served as Prime Minister of the Kingdom, were invited to the Berlin Security Conference on November 30, 2022, a landmark event for the German leadership, held during Berlin's

³³ See, for example: Pressestatements von Bundeskanzler Scholz und dem Präsidenten der Republik Finnland, Stubb, am 8. Mai 2024 in Berlin. Bundeskanzleramt. URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/pressestatements-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-und-dem-praesidenten-der-republik-finnland-stubb-am-8-mai-2024-in-berlin-2281396> (accessed 10 June 2024).

³⁴ Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzler Scholz und dem Ministerpräsidenten des Königreichs Norwegen Støre am 30. November 2022 in Berlin. Bundeskanzleramt. URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-und-dem-ministerpraesidenten-des-koenigreichs-norwegen-stoere-am-30-november-2022-in-berlin-2147548> (accessed 10 June 2024).

declared Zeitenwende. Thus, the Berlin Conference was “Norwegianized” in terms of representation at the highest level. This fact clearly indicated Germany’s enormous interest in interstate cooperation and in using it as a basis to establish a strong position in the Arctic Ocean.

It has already been noted that Berlin began to perceive Stockholm as a strengthening leader in Northern Europe. At the same time, this did not diminish Norway’s strategic value for Germany: only by relying on cooperation with Norway, rather than its Scandinavian neighbor, Germany could secure strategic penetration into the Arctic Ocean. The priority of this goal was confirmed by the content and publication of three Arctic concept documents (2013, 2019, and 2024). Furthermore, Germany, especially in the context of its rejection of cheap Russian hydrocarbons, urgently needed gas supplies from Norway³⁵.

A significant reason for the noted decrease in the frequency of German-Norwegian high-level negotiations is Berlin’s lack of military capabilities. Consequently, Germany, which had begun to increase Bundeswehr activity in the Baltic Sea, found it difficult to simultaneously rapidly increase it in northern Norway and the adjacent waters. As a result, the actual growth rate of practical cooperation was lower than envisaged in the 2022 interstate plans.

Characteristics of military cooperation in Northern Europe

The rate at which the Bundeswehr increased its military personnel numbers and modernized its arsenal and equipment in the first half of the 2020s was slow (Table 1). Stockholm, which wanted to be the leading power in Northern Europe, built up its armed forces faster than Berlin, declaring in June 2022 its intention to create the largest conventional armed forces among European NATO member states as a whole.

Table 1

Armed forces of Germany and several Northern European countries (thousands of military personnel)³⁶

Country / year	2014	2017	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 ³⁷	2024
Germany	178.8	179.8	183.8	183.9	183.9	183.2	181.7	185.6
Norway	21.0	20.2	19.2	20.6	23.1	23.5	24.0	24.3
Finland	32.5	31.0	31.1	31.3	31.1	30.5	31.0	30.8
Sweden	14.7	15.9	19.1	20.1	21.1	20.9	21.5	23.1

Between 2014 and 2022, Sweden outpaced Germany in terms of military personnel growth, not only in relative terms (42% and about 3%, respectively), but also in absolute numbers (4,400 and 6,200 military personnel, respectively), as shown in Table 1. Contrary to plans from the late 2010s, no new formations had been created by mid-2025: for example, the ground forces did not

³⁵ Rede von Bundeskanzler Scholz anlässlich der Berlin Security Conference am 30. November 2022 in Berlin. Bundeskanzleramt. URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/rede-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-anlaesslich-der-berlin-security-conference-am-30-november-2022-2149770> (accessed 10 June 2024).

³⁶ Compiled by the author on the basis of: Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2024). Brussels, NATO, 2024. P. 13.

³⁷ The data for 2023 and 2024 are preliminary.

receive any new brigades or divisions. At the same time, Germany declared very extensive commitments to staffing forward-deployed forces and, in general, to the transition to the New NATO Force Model (NNFM).

The NNFM required the transfer of large numbers of troops, totaling over 800,000 personnel, to the Alliance's command; almost all of them were provided by the participating European countries, meaning that the US contribution in terms of troop numbers was minimal (Biscop, 2022), but remained decisive in the command and control of these forces. Forces within the NNFM were divided into three categories. The first (significantly more than 100,000 military personnel) and the second (at least 200,000 personnel) were supposed to achieve full combat readiness within 10 and 30 days, respectively. Experts classified FDF units deployed in the endangered area as belonging to the first category (Deni, 2024). Germany was the first among NATO member states to set out the details of its contribution to the first two components of the NNFM, which turned out to be quite large. This amounts to almost 35 thousand military personnel, over 200 aircraft and ships since 2025³⁸, taken from the Bundeswehr's most combat-ready forces. In general, the NNFM troops, especially the Allied Response Force (established on July 1, 2024, on the basis of the NATO Response Force, NRF), were capable of deploying to any endangered area, including the Scandinavian Peninsula. The Trident Juncture 18 exercises (October 2018) were aimed at demonstrating this, particularly the deployment of the Bundeswehr as part of the NRF (Trunov, 2024c). However, by the mid-2020s, absolute priority in the deployment of NNFM, particularly its first two most combat-capable categories, was given specifically to the Eastern European part of NATO's area of responsibility (from the Baltic states to Romania), while support for Northern Europe was to be provided on a residual basis. This pattern of deploying contingents in the forward part of NATO's area of responsibility largely applied to Germany, particularly its general-purpose forces. Among the partner states, Berlin paid the greatest attention to Lithuania in terms of increasing its military presence, positioning this as an investment in the security and defense of both Eastern and Northern European countries (providing strategic support to the latter from the south) (Trunov, 2024a).

Therefore, in terms of deploying new formations, the Bundeswehr's top priority is the reorganization of the BTG FDF in Lithuania into the Bundeswehr's 45th Tank Brigade (4,800 personnel³⁹), scheduled for completion in 2027. On the one hand, it is highly probable that Norwegian units will remain part of the multinational BTG as a component of the existing 2017 BTG (as of June 2022, the Royal Norwegian contingent consisted of nearly 190 soldiers and officers⁴⁰, equivalent to a reinforced battalion). In January 2025, Sweden deployed approximately 600 military personnel (a

³⁸ NATO als Grundlage für gemeinsame Sicherheit. Bundeskanzleramt. URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/scholz-empfaengt-rutte-2318720> (accessed 10 June 2024).

³⁹ The Bundeswehr in Lithuania: Major steps towards the German manoeuvre brigade. BMVg. 2025. URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/news/bundeswehr-lithuania> (accessed 10 June 2024).

⁴⁰ NATO's Forward Presence. URL: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/2206-factsheet_efp_en.pdf (accessed 10 June 2024).

tank battalion)⁴¹ as part of the NATO FDF multinational battlegroup in Latvia (with Canada as the leading contributor). Accordingly, the gradually expanding Bundeswehr formation in Lithuania will tactically interact with the Norwegian and Swedish contingents.

On the other hand, Germany has not indicated any plans to become one of the contributing nations to the FDF in Finnish Lapland at least until 2025. This formation will be deployed in 2026 to the south of the Norwegian county of Finnmark, which borders Russia, to closely cooperate with the troops stationed there and thereby cover the bases in Finnmark, Tromsø, and Nordland from the east. These facilities are the most valuable as strongholds for the multilateral strategic presence of NATO member countries in the Arctic, north of the Scandinavian Peninsula. It is planned that Sweden will assume the leading role in the functioning of the FDF battle group in Lapland (a cadre brigade capable of quickly deploying into a full-fledged formation), with Norway providing support (the participation of Anglo-Saxon powers is also possible)⁴². Taking into account that this formation is of great importance for the implementation of the multilateral plans of European NATO member states in the Arctic, including Germany itself, its absence from the list of contributing nations is noteworthy. The reason for this is a shortage of personnel, particularly in the ground forces, given the commitments already undertaken.

At the same time, Germany has overcome this fundamental difficulty in most areas of bilateral and multilateral military cooperation with Norway, Sweden, and Finland that are of particular importance to it.

In its interactions with these countries in the Baltic Sea, particularly with the two new NATO members, Germany in the mid-2020s began to shift the primary burden from frigates (the largest vessels in the German Navy, designed to ensure a presence at distant frontiers, especially in the ocean zone) to corvettes (smaller in size, used primarily in coastal waters). The naval composition of the German component at the BALTOPS naval maneuvers, which took place annually (usually in June) in the Baltic Sea, is indicative in this regard (Table 2). During these exercises, particularly from 2022 onwards, various measures were effectively being tested with a view to transforming the Baltic Sea into an “inland lake” of the North Atlantic Alliance. Operational coordination involved a large multinational naval force based on two NATO operational groups — the 1st Standing⁴³ NATO Maritime Group (SNMG 1) and the 1st Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group (SNMCMG 1).

⁴¹ Sweden Deploys Mechanized Battalion in Latvia Near Russian Border in Historic First for NATO. URL: <https://armyrecognition.com/news/army-news/2025/sweden-deploys-mechanized-battalion-in-latvia-near-russian-border-in-historic-first-for-nato> (accessed 10 June 2024).

⁴² Sweden Announces Ambition to Lead NATO Force in Finland. High North News. URL: <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/sweden-announces-ambition-lead-nato-force-finland> (accessed 10 June 2024).

⁴³ The term “standing” refers to the fact of its existence, not its composition: it was updated on a rotating basis every six months.

Table 2

Some characteristics of the BALTOPS exercises (2021–2025)

Year / Forces deployed	Number of ships and vessels	Number of personnel	Number of NATO member states	Naval contribution of Germany
2021 ⁴⁴	over 40	4 thousand	16	frigate, corvette
2022 ⁴⁵	over 45	7 thousand	16	frigate, corvette
2023 ⁴⁶	over 50	6 thousand	19	frigate
2024 ⁴⁷	over 50	9 thousand	20	2 corvettes
2025 ⁴⁸	over 50	9 thousand	17	2 corvettes

Germany played an active role in these maneuvers, contributing not only ships (usually two flagships), but also patrol boats, naval aircraft and sometimes marine units. In 2023, the Chancellor was aboard a German frigate, which at that time was serving as the flagship for SNMG 1. The exercises frequently finished in German ports (for example, in Kiel in 2023); in 2025, they began for the first time with the assembly of a combined task force of ships in Rostock.

Corvettes became the main class of surface ships that Germany deployed in the mid-2020s under the NATO flag in the Baltic Sea, not only during BALTOPS exercises, but also as part of SNMG 1 and SNMCMG 1. This decision should be considered rational: it allowed Germany to use frigates as long-range ships in the oceans, including in the seas of the Arctic Ocean, primarily in the Norwegian Sea; German submarines were also actively deployed in this area. At the same time, specifically in 2023–2024, the intensity of frigate use west and north of Norway temporarily declined. A limiting factor here was the increasing deployment of frigates in the waters bordering the Middle East, as well as the vast Indo-Pacific region (Trunov, 2024d).

This difficulty also limited the use of marine units from the only specialized battalion and paratroopers from the only airborne brigade in the Bundeswehr (1st Airborne Brigade) in northern Norway (Trunov, 2024d). The main burden of the Bundeswehr's deployment here was borne by the mountain riflemen of the 23rd Mountain Infantry Brigade, for whom, as of the mid-2020s, military training activities in the counties of Troms and Finnmark constituted their primary foreign service. The primary focus of the 23rd Mountain Infantry Brigade's deployment was participation in the Cold Response exercises, which since 2024 have become known as Nordic Response, taking place in the northern territories of not only Norway, but also Sweden and Finland. Cold Response/Nordic Response maneuvers were held every two years (2020, 2022, 2024). At the same

⁴⁴ BALTOPS 2021 hat begonnen. BMVg. URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/marine/aktuelles/baltops-2021-begonnen-5091832> (accessed 10 June 2024).

⁴⁵ BALTOPS 2022: US und NATO-Großübung in der Ostsee. BMVg. URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/marine/aktuelles/baltops-2022-us-nato-grossuebung-ostsee-5441864> (accessed 10 June 2024).

⁴⁶ BALTOPS 23: Fazit und wichtigste Teilübungen. BMVg. URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/marine/aktuelles/baltops-23-fazit-5639390> (accessed 10 June 2024).

⁴⁷ Unter Nachbarn: Deutsche Korvetten üben in der Ostsee. BMVg. URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/marine/aktuelles/baltops-2024-deutsche-korvetten-ostsee-5809050> (accessed 10 June 2024).

⁴⁸ Präsenz zeigen und abschrecken — das Marinemanöver BALTOPS hat begonnen. BMVg. URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/marine/aktuelles/start-marinemanoever-baltops-5952850> (accessed 10 June 2024).

time, the Bundeswehr's involvement in the Viking exercises was rather limited⁴⁹. Their scale and strategic value were less than in the case of Cold Response/Nordic Response. The fact that Germany deployed contingents (usually between 150 and 400 military personnel) (Trunov, 2025) to northern Norway every two years, rather than annually, once again reflected the limitations of its capabilities. Nevertheless, in 2020–2024, units from all military battalions of the 23rd Mountain Infantry Brigade gained operational experience in the subarctic part of the Scandinavian Mountains. In 2022, Germany and Norway practiced the deployment of a joint tactical group (including ground forces, air force, navy, and support forces) of 1,200 personnel in the northern Norway⁵⁰.

In Finland in the mid-2020s, Germany used ground-based air defense systems⁵¹ and fighter aircraft during multilateral exercises. For example, in 2023, the Luftwaffe's 31st Air Wing once again deployed 10 Eurofighter aircraft to take part in the Arctic Challenge maneuvers⁵².

Overall, in the mid-2020s, Germany sought to make effective use of a number of general-purpose force components (primarily corvettes in the Baltic Sea, submarines in the Norwegian Sea) in the three northern European countries and adjacent waters, primarily relying on contingents from the Crisis Response Forces (CRF). Unlike the general-purpose forces, the CRF were intended to operate at a considerable distance from Germany, autonomously, and usually in small detachments (up to several hundred personnel). The CRFs were generally not deployed as part of the NNFM, meaning they remained under German national command only. In Northern Europe, this was manifested in the use of ground units from the 23rd Mountain Infantry Brigade, fighters from the 31st Air Wing, and ships from the 2nd and 4th Frigate Squadrons. Geographically, they were deployed primarily in northern Norway and Finland, and in the Norwegian Sea; in other words, they served as the military components of Germany's strategic penetration into the Arctic.

In the short term, and particularly in the medium term, an increase in the deployment of these army, air force, and navy units is expected. The area of operation for the latter is highly likely to extend to the Barents Sea. From a functional perspective, a significant deepening of cooperation between the German and Norwegian armed forces in the field of submarine fleets is also to be expected. The preconditions for this have been created by the Kingdom's decision to purchase four German-built Type 212CD submarines (deliveries are scheduled to begin in 2029 and be completed in 2035). From 2032, advanced submarines of this type are expected to enter service with the Bundeswehr, meaning that the two countries' submarine fleets will be unified. This will enable

⁴⁹ Joint Viking 2025: 10,000 Soldiers From 9 Nations Exercise Defending Northern Norway. High North News. URL: <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/joint-viking-2025-10000-soldiers-9-nations-exercise-defending-northern-norway> (accessed 10 June 2024).

⁵⁰ Rede von Bundeskanzler Scholz anlässlich der Berlin Security Conference.

⁵¹ Binationale Luftverteidigungsübung bei NATONorth Atlantic Treaty Organization-Mitglied Finnland. BMVg. URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/luftwaffe/aktuelles/binationale-luftverteidigungsuebung-nato-mitglied-finnland-5785650> (accessed 10 June 2024).

⁵² Arctic Challenge Exercise 2023 — Im Norden wird gemeinsam trainiert. BMVg. URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/luftwaffe/aktuelles/arctic-challenge-exercise-2023-im-norden-wird-trainiert-5630136> (accessed 10 June 2024).

them to consider the creation of a joint submarine group for deployment in the Norwegian Sea or, more likely, the Barents Sea (Trunov, 2025).

The development of cooperation, including in the military-technical sphere, is facilitated by a significant increase in relevant budgets (Table 3). According to data for 2024, Germany's annual military expenditure amounted to nearly 100 billion dollars, placing Berlin second only to the White House and ahead of London. Norway and Sweden are each estimated to have exceeded the 10 billion dollars mark by 2024.

Table 3

Military expenditures of Germany and several Northern European countries (million dollars)⁵³

Country / Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 ⁵⁴	2024
Germany	52 549	58 652	62 054	61 405	73 138	97 686
Norway	7 536	7 228	8 438	8 694	8 799	10 606
Finland	3 900	4 156	4 145	4 726	6 266	7 308
Sweden	5 560	5 984	9 071	8 562	9 848	13 428

Conclusion

Germany's foreign policy towards the three Northern European states discussed above is essentially guided by the principles of neo-realism (structural realism): expanding or extending its strategic influence and presence while demonstrating consistent consideration for the concerns and interests of its partners' political establishments. Thus, the views of the official authorities in Helsinki and Stockholm were reflected in Germany's gradually emerging *de facto*, and since 2022, formal, support for Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO. Taking advantage of this success, in 2023–2025, Berlin attempted to increase the scope of its cooperation with Sweden and to reach a qualitatively new level of trust with Finland. In order to achieve these goals, Germany considered it possible to temporarily reduce the intensity of its contacts with Norway, assessing relations with that country as well-established, given the effectiveness of the mechanisms for inter-state cooperation within NATO.

In the mid-2020s, the N5+1 format became the most important negotiating platform for Germany in its system of contacts with its Northern European partners. The name of the format, as well as the content of the agenda, indicated significant support for Germany's plans to increase its strategic influence and presence in various parts of the region.

Germany's long-term focus in the region will remain binary, centered on cooperation with two key partners simultaneously — Stockholm and Oslo; cooperation with Finland will be significantly less extensive.

Cooperation with Sweden, which Berlin *de facto* regards as an emerging leading power in Northern Europe, is valuable for Germany in the following respects: joint efforts to transform the Baltic Sea into a NATO "inland lake" and the deployment of Swedish military forces in northern Fin-

⁵³ Compiled by the author on the basis of: Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2024). Brussels, NATO, 2024. P. 9.

⁵⁴ The data for 2023 and 2024 are preliminary.

land to provide ground support for the system of bases in northern Norway (in Finnmark and Tromsø), from which strategic penetration into the Arctic is being carried out. Germany and Sweden will strive to ensure interoperability between the Bundeswehr brigade in Lithuania, the Swedish contingents in Latvia and Finland (as components of the Alliance's unified chain of FDF formations), the naval contingents within the standing groups (SNMG 1, SNMCMG 1), and special missions (primarily Baltic Sentry) in the Baltic Sea. German-Swedish cooperation will be significant, given that each side is expected to have approximately 5,000–7,000 military personnel in these advanced NATO member states and in the Baltic by the end of the 2020s.

However, cooperation with Norway is even more valuable for Germany, as it enables the Bundeswehr to establish a strategic presence in the Arctic Ocean that extends northwards (towards the Barents Sea). Publication of Germany's three Arctic strategies (2013; 2019; 2024) and their content highlight the particular importance of this task.

Overall, Bundeswehr contingents deployed in the Arctic region (in particular) and in the Baltic Sea area (to a lesser extent) significantly enhance the capabilities of the armed forces of Norway, Sweden, and Finland. It should also be taken into account that the value (and complexity) of deploying the same formation in the Far North is much greater than in any other region with milder natural and climatic conditions. Furthermore, the strength of the integrated potential exceeds the sum of the capabilities of its individual components. For example, in terms of frigates, submarines, mountain infantry, and support units, the Bundeswehr significantly increases the capabilities of Norwegian forces in the north of the country and in the Norwegian and Barents Seas.

By deploying the Bundeswehr geographically broadly and in various forms, in cooperation with Norway, Sweden, and Finland, Germany is thereby establishing the framework for a significant increase in trade and economic activity in the Arctic. This objective has consistently been a particular priority for Berlin, as set out in its Arctic strategies (2013; 2019; 2024). Another factor is no less important: Germany presents its military activity as a valuable practical addition to the resources of the two Scandinavian countries (primarily) and Finland, which should improve the effectiveness of "containment" of Russia in the Arctic and the Baltic Sea, contributing to winning the "race for capabilities" with the Russian Federation in both these areas.

Therefore, the factor of the Bundeswehr's growing presence in terms of both scale and forms of deployment in Scandinavia and the Baltic region should be taken into account in the organizational and staffing structure of the Leningrad Military District and Russia's Northern and Baltic Fleets. At the same time, the corresponding changes to their organizational and staffing structures may not be necessarily symmetrical; they could also be asymmetrical, linked to the technical and technological capabilities of advanced weapons systems. The only way to achieve security in the regions under consideration is through such an approach, particularly in the Arctic, where Germany, a non-Arctic state, is demonstrating offensive activity.

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