

From burden-sharing to signalling: Nordic naval contributions and small-state agency in European maritime security

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Abstract: This research paper explores how small states utilise naval contributions to navigate a shifting European security landscape. By examining the Scandinavian cases of Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, it analyses their participation in maritime operations within the European Union's (EU) Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), NATO, and the United States (US)-led coalitions. While the existing literature has examined Nordic security and defence policies and maritime traditions, this study offers a comparative, maritime-centric perspective on how these states implement naval engagement across overlapping institutional frameworks. It proposes that Nordic naval contributions are best seen as strategic tools for alignment, signalling their positions within competing security frameworks rather than merely sharing burdens. To explore these dynamics, it characterises naval contributions along two dimensions: their functional roles, covering operational, institutional, and symbolic dimensions, and their alignment strategies, involving initiatives from the EU, NATO, or the US. Using empirical evidence from maritime security operations such as Atalanta, Sophia, Irini, Aspides, NATO's Standing Maritime Groups, and US missions, the analysis reveals that variation in contributions mirrors different approaches to managing dependence and enhancing agency. While Denmark is a "super-Atlanticist" and Norway concentrates on Atlantic frameworks, Finland and Sweden exhibit more hybrid trajectories shaped by their evolving relations with NATO following their accession in 2023 and 2024, respectively.

Keywords: Common Security and Defence Policy, European Union, NATO, naval missions, Nordic security, maritime security operations

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Introduction

This article examines the contributions of the Scandinavian naval forces of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden to international maritime security operations over the last three decades, with a particular focus on their engagement in the European Union's (EU) Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and, additionally, in NATO's standing naval groups and United States (US)-led coalitions. By analysing these states' naval strategies, this research highlights how small and medium-sized powers adapt to shifting security environments, resource limitations, and alliance obligations to remain somewhat active maritime actors. A premise must be made at this stage: Iceland has been excluded from this analysis due to its absence of both EU membership and participation in the CSDP naval missions, which are the core focus of this article. The country essentially has a Coast Guard that is limited in scale and capability, with three active patrol vessels, and relies primarily on NATO's collective defence arrangements, making it incomparable to the other Nordic states examined here. Existing scholarly work has examined how small states navigate international security through multilateralism, targeted niche capabilities, and reliance on larger allies. Some studies on small-state security argue that limited material power encourages either bandwagoning with extraordinary powers or burden-sharing within alliances. Others instead emphasise the role of "strategic cultures" in shaping states' defence postures, particularly in Northern Europe. Nordic security has received

growing attention in the literature, with analyses of neutrality traditions, “Nordicness” as a normative orientation, and the transformation of post-Cold War defence policies. Over the last three years, researchers have focused on the extent to which the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 accelerated Scandinavian military integration and reshaped their external commitments. Yet, within the existing scholarship, the naval dimension of these transformations, especially in CSDP maritime security operations, remains largely undeveloped, with most works privileging land-based or air-power perspectives. Although Nordic maritime history has been examined in existing literature, this article offers a comparative, maritime-focused analysis of naval contributions within EU, NATO, and US-led frameworks, an aspect that remains underexplored in current scholarship. Instead of proposing an entirely new research agenda, the article builds on existing debates about small-state security and strategic culture by emphasising the maritime dimension and systematically comparing how the four Scandinavian states implement their naval engagement across different institutional contexts.

Against this backdrop, the central puzzle guiding this research is why and how small Nordic states, with their limited naval assets, have nonetheless chosen to engage in multinational maritime operations, and what these circumstances can reveal about the balance between sovereignty and solidarity. Precisely, the article asks whether their naval strategies represent pragmatic burden-sharing, symbolic diplomacy, or genuine operational integration. It is posited that Nordic naval contributions are best understood as strategic tools for signalling alignment, through which small states communicate their position within overlapping institutional frameworks, including the EU, NATO, and US-led coalitions (Le Mière, 2014; Rowlands, 2018). Although material limitations restrict the scale and sustainability of their deployments, variations across the four cases reflect different strategies for maximising their signalling within the ever-evolving European security landscape. To capture these dynamics, this study conceptualises naval contributions along two analytical dimensions. Firstly, they are regarded as the functional role of deployments, distinguishing between operational contributions, such as ships, patrols, and interdictions; institutional contributions, such as secondments to mission headquarters; and symbolic contributions, such as diplomatic signalling in supranational contexts (Parente, 2025a). Secondly, naval contributions include the alignment logic that underpins them, differentiating between EU-centred, NATO-centred, and hybrid forms of engagement (Parente, 2025b). This framework enables a systematic comparison of how small states utilise maritime deployments as strategic tools to signal preferences and shape their international stance. On these premises, the concept of “contribution” is better understood as including operational assets, such as ships, aircraft, and deployed personnel, along with institutional roles, including participation in operational headquarters and command structures, and ultimately, political signalling, reflected in decisions to participate in, abstain from, or prioritise specific missions.

Methodologically, the article employs a comparative case study approach across four states over the past three decades. It draws on primary sources, such as government reports, operational records, and elite interviews, alongside secondary sources such as scholarly works and policy papers, to trace patterns of continuity or, alternatively, change. The comparative dimension enables the identification of both convergences and divergences among the Scandinavian navies, thereby situating them within broader debates on small-state security and EU maritime policy, two ever-timely fields of existing literature.

This article will proceed as follows. The first section examines previous scholarly works on the security and defence policies of Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, as well as their strategic cultures, participation in international military operations, and contributions to the EU and NATO's missions. The "Literature review" section is essential to frame this piece within the nascent body of literature on the roles, impacts, and contributions of the Scandinavian countries in the CSDP and American-led naval missions over the last twenty years. Such an approach is methodologically essential, given that a state's contributions to maritime security operations cannot be understood in isolation from its strategic culture, threat perceptions, and defence policy institutional priorities.

Subsequently, the second section will delve into maritime security operations, underscoring their significance for trade, sovereignty, and regional stability. Case studies reveal varying levels of engagement in EU missions, such as Operation Atalanta, NATO initiatives and the Combined Maritime Forces, shaped by each state's resources, geopolitical imperatives, and institutional affiliations. Consequently, the article shows that Nordic naval efforts focus less on increasing military power and more on strategically positioning small states within competing frameworks through careful signalling. The third and final section draws the relevant conclusions to address the broader implications for Scandinavian security and defence policies, small states' naval diplomacy and the EU's maritime security policies.

Literature review

This section reviews the existing scholarship on Scandinavian security and defence policies, with a particular focus on the historical evolution of neutrality, alliance commitments, and strategic cultures in Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark. It also traces how these states have adjusted their defence priorities in response to external threats, domestic political dynamics, and the pressures of international institutions.

Sweden has been neutral for over fifty years, and this military non-alignment has essentially underpinned its security and defence policies (Petersson, 2018a). Swedish neutrality was essentially a third way, separate from the two Blocs, literally aiming for a “non-alignment in peacetime to remain neutral in times of war”.¹ Neutrality was employed as a “shelter” to potentially avoid a likely war that could have occurred in the country's neighbourhood (Bjereld & Möller, 2015). To further mitigate this risk, during the Cold War period, the armed forces were primarily composed of conscripted personnel, serving to defend the country and thus being known as the “*Folkförsvaret*”, literally translating as the “People's Defence” (Åselius, 2005). The end of that phase implied a transformation of the country's armed forces, shifting from a focus on territorial defence, characterised by a whole-of-society approach, to a modern and flexible force rapidly deployed in international missions (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2025; Andersson, 2007). The new operational priorities primarily involved participation in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations (Andersson, 2018). No longer preoccupied by the then-Soviet threat, Sweden demonstrated its commitment to promoting liberal values, including peace, human rights, and freedom, in overseas contexts (Wyss, 2011). Academics referred to it as “Nordicness”, a recurring theme in the literature on Scandinavian security and defence policies and strategic cultures (Brommesson, 2018). The country also exhibited a relevant degree of “Europeanisation” of its interests and contributions and, in the context of this research article, can be considered as the most enthusiastic supporter of the EU's CSDP, particularly in the realms of crisis management and civilian missions (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2015; Brommesson, 2015). However, after three decades of international engagement in peacekeeping and conflict-resolution missions, the wars at European borders have changed Sweden's security and defence realities in recent years (Andersson, 2018). The 2014 annexation of Crimea and commencement of hostilities in Ukraine demonstrated that the Russian Federation had interests in applying military power to fulfil its geopolitical imperatives (Putin, 2014). Those developments were the turning points for Sweden and its decision-makers, prompting them to rethink their security and defence policies and leading to the most significant military investment in the history of any Scandinavian country, with a 45% increase in military expenditures (Swedish Armed Forces, 2020, 4-5; Ekengren, 2018). Such a decision was in line with the so-called “Hultqvist doctrine”, named after the then-Minister of Defence, according to which Sweden needed to develop more robust national defence capabilities to deter aggression, expand its international agreements, and take strict positions against Russia through greater cooperation with neighbouring countries (Wieslander, 2019; Wieslander, 2022). Subsequently, the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 catalysed the decisive shift away, for

¹ The exact wording in Swedish reads as follows: “*alliansfrihet i fred, syftande till neutralitet i krig*”.

Sweden, from traditional neutrality policies, thus accelerating its alignment with NATO's multilateral security framework. Recently, some commentators have argued that this moment was the “tipping point” of a long journey, favouring a remarkable change in the country’s actorness in this realm (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2025). While the “Hultqvist doctrine” essentially rejected any binding security commitment, like those of NATO (Wieslander, 2022), the stakes were too vital for the country’s survival to be disregarded to the point that the Minister himself announced the end of his own policy (Socialdemokraterna, 2022). Ultimately, Sweden eventually joined NATO on 7 March 2024 (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024).

On another note, Finnish strategic culture is fundamentally shaped by its geopolitical position and historical experience, particularly its conflicts with the Soviet Union during the Second World War. This historical memory has created a “small state realism” that prioritises national survival and territorial defence (Seppo & Forsberg 2013). It is widely acknowledged that Finnish defence policies were historically cautious in the face of the then-Soviet and current Russian aggressiveness (Brommesson, 2022). This behaviour led to the creation of the term “Finlandization”, which refers to a country adjusting its defence and foreign policies in response to a great power’s will (Juntunen, 2017). As much as Sweden, the country has also remained neutral throughout its entire Cold War and post-Cold War periods, pursuing a policy named “Nordicness” to ensure global peace and stability (Ojanen and Raunio, 2018). In this instance, the UN served as its primary platform for international cooperation with like-minded partners (Ojanen and Raunio, 2018).

The end of the Cold War marked a significant transition in Finnish security and defence policies. By joining the EU in 1995, policymakers viewed this moment as a potential replacement of military neutrality with a framework for international engagement (Aunesluoma & Rainio-Niemi 2016). However, this transformation was more gradual than often assumed, with Finnish leaders initially seeking to strengthen rather than abandon neutrality, only reluctantly narrowing it to military non-alignment to meet the requirements of EU membership. Post-Cold War Finnish defence policy exhibits notable continuity alongside change. After initially abandoning territorial defence in favour of international crisis management operations in the 1990s and 2000s, including deployments to the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Libya, the country has refocused on territorial defence since 2014 in response to increased Russian aggression (Andersson, 2018). Finland has maintained national conscription and retained territorial defence as its primary military focus, viewing international crisis management as secondary despite increased participation in NATO and EU operations (Andersson, 2018). This trajectory eventually culminated in Finland’s application for NATO membership in May 2022 and its subsequent accession in April 2023, which was regarded as a watershed move prompted by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the heightened vulnerability of its long eastern border (Arter, 2023; Ålander & Pihlajamaa, 2025; Pesu & Iso-Markku, 2024). The decision reflected the broad political consensus that only NATO’s collective defence commitments could credibly guarantee its national security (Forsberg, 2024).

In the Scandinavian context, Finland and Norway illustrate both the convergences and divergences of small-state strategic cultures, shaped by their proximity to Russia but differentiated by distinct preferences and policies. In fact, as much as Finland and Sweden, Norwegian strategic culture is shaped by several enduring features, including, among others, a long coastline, the Arctic exposure, its shared borders with Russia, a small-state status, a strong societal consensus on external threats, and a commitment to multilateralism (Wither, 2020). However, unlike its regional neighbours, Norway has historically devoted considerable attention to its naval forces, often regarded as one of the strongest small navies on the continent (Strømmen, 2020). Since 1949, Norway has considered NATO its primary military partner, following its abandonment of neutrality after World War II (Ekengren, 2022). During the Cold War, Norwegian defence policy emphasised the “*Heimevernet*”, literally the “People’s defence”, and national survival, with the armed forces seen as part of national identity and societal infrastructure (Græger & Leira, 2005). Throughout the Cold War era, Norway strategically structured its military forces to defend two critical geographic zones against the Soviet threat: the Arctic High North, above the 66th parallel, and the Baltic Sea (Pettersson,

2018b). Similar to its regional neighbours examined here, the country has gradually shifted its posture since 1990, placing greater emphasis on international operations, crisis management, and interoperability with NATO allies (Kronvall & Petersson, 2016). In the post-Cold War period, Norwegian security and defence policies have thus combined firm national defence commitments with active participation in NATO-led missions abroad, reflecting a dual focus on deterrence and international engagement (Græger, 2018). This balancing act has fostered a pragmatic strategic culture that underscores the nation's role as both a frontline state in the High North and a contributor to global security governance (Ekengren, 2022). Overall, Norwegian defence policy illustrates how small states can leverage alliance structures to mitigate vulnerabilities while preserving national autonomy in strategic decision-making.

The Danish case is distinctive from the others examined so far, given a more pronounced “warfighting” connotation in the realm of security and defence policies (Petersson, 2018b). After pursuing the so-called Danish doctrine of “active internationalism” through UN peacekeeping missions during the Cold War period (Larsen, 2020, p. 474), the country has become increasingly assertive in its overseas missions (Mouritzen, 2007). The evolution from a “civilian” to a “strategic” actor implied a more recurring usage of military force in international contexts (Rynning, 2003; Rasmussen, 2005). Scholars have written about Denmark's military “activism”, even though this concept has not been defined (Pedersen & Ringsmose, 2017; Rynning, 2013). A crucial example of this “activism” is undoubtedly the country's controversial participation in the Iraq War between 2003 and 2007 (Mariager & Wivel, 2021). Together with Poland and the United Kingdom, Denmark was one of three EU member states that participated militarily in the invasion of Iraq (Mouritzen, 2006). With no immediate threats to Danish security, the participation in this mission was widely criticised at the national level (Michalski, 2022). A few years later, a parliamentary report concluded that the decisions to go to war, among others, in Iraq should have been understood in the Danish willingness to demonstrate “loyalty” to the US, thus supporting the existence of a “super Atlanticist” security and defence policy (Mouritzen, 2007). This controversial participation eventually paid off, as it improved the country's standing in Washington, DC (Wivel, 2013). The Prime Minister who backed it, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, subsequently became NATO's twelfth Secretary General, the first Scandinavian, six years later (Pedersen, 2018).

While there is little doubt that the country has preferred engagements in American-led initiatives, previous scholarly work suggests that the defence “opt-out” has imposed limitations on the Danish contribution to the EU's CSDP (Olsen & Pilegaard, 2005). While the Parliament approved the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, the subsequent referendum was rejected by voters by a slight majority. In rescuing the Treaty, the EU offered an “opt-out” policy from several policy areas, including security and defence. This self-imposed clause has limited Denmark's actual contribution to the CSDP in practice, as the country could not participate in decision-making or the effective deployment of forces (Manners, 2013). However, it should also be noted that the country has participated in all the EU's civilian missions between 2003 and 2020, as these missions had no military implications under the “opt-out” (Butler, 2020). The situation dramatically changed after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. As in the cases of Finland and Sweden, which both renounced their policies of military neutrality, Danish decision-makers carefully reflected on the ever-growing threat posed by Russia (Migliorati, 2024; Theussen, 2023). Indeed, the beginning of hostilities in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 also impacted Danish security and defence policies, as Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced that cross-party support for a referendum on the CSDP had emerged (Regeringen, 2022). The referendum was eventually held on 1 June 2022, and over two-thirds of voters supported the removal of the “opt-out” clause (Danmarks Statistik, 2022). After almost thirty years, Denmark finally managed to get into the CSDP's decision-making structures. Ultimately, taken together, the Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish case studies have the potential to reveal how and why Scandinavian states have adapted their strategic cultures to evolving threats and alliance dynamics, setting the stage for a detailed examination of their actual contributions to multinational naval operations.

Maritime security operations of the Scandinavian navies

The following section examines Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway through a comparative lens, not as isolated case studies, to highlight how differences in their naval contributions reflect broader strategies of alignment, institutional preferences, and strategic signalling. This comparative approach possesses the potential to move beyond descriptive variation and identify patterns in how small states use their naval forces to navigate a changing European security environment.

Naval deployments have been a crucial instrument for small and medium-sized European states to demonstrate solidarity, test operational readiness, and project limited but meaningful power beyond their territorial waters. Participation in maritime security operations under the EU's CSDP, NATO frameworks, and US-led coalitions has provided states such as Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway with opportunities to balance sovereignty concerns with the imperatives of international cooperation. Examining these missions also highlights the different national preferences, ranging from selective expeditionary engagements to a focus on regional security in the Baltic and North Seas. Before discussing these countries' contributions to European maritime security, it is essential to reflect on their actual strength and capabilities at the time of writing. As of October 2025, Norway has the most significant naval force, in terms of personnel (4,600, of which 2,250 are conscripts), among the four nations, and its capabilities range from six submarines to four frigates, as well as thirteen patrol and four mine countermeasures vessels (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025). Conversely, Denmark has only 2,250 naval personnel and has three destroyers, two frigates, twelve patrol and coastal combatants, and four mine countermeasures (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025). Home to 3,150 personnel, Finland possesses a balanced fleet for a small navy, made of twenty patrol and coastal combatants, eight mine warfare, and fifty-nine landing craft for amphibious purposes, while Sweden has four submarines, 154 patrol and coastal combatants, six landing craft, and four mine countermeasures (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025). These quantitative differences underscore how each country can potentially approach international naval missions. While Norway fields the most capable blue-water fleet, Denmark and Sweden rely on specialised assets, and Finland prioritises coastal defence with selective overseas deployments.

As of September 2025, Sweden has deployed its personnel to operationally participate in two of the CSDP's naval missions to date, namely *Atalanta* in the Horn of Africa and *Aspides* in the Red Sea. Firstly, between May 2009 and the Spring of 2018, the Swedish Navy conducted five separate operational deployments to EUNAVFOR Operation *Atalanta*, contributing to the EU counter-piracy mission off the coast of Somalia (Swedish Armed Forces, nd). The most relevant component of these deployments was the bilateral cooperation with the Royal Dutch Navy for a trimester in 2015, during which the latter commanded the flagship at sea (Harriman & Zetterlund, 2015). In terms of hull numbers, this joint participation involved two assault craft, two helicopters, and several Swedish mariners aboard the Dutch Navy's "Johan de Witt" vessel (Harriman & Zetterlund, 2015). Secondly, six years after its last operational contribution, the Swedish Navy participated in the EU's latest mission, Operation *Aspides* in the Red Sea, once again on board a Dutch ship. Similar to the 2011 incident involving twelve Armed Forces of Malta personnel, the Netherlands signed a bilateral "Memorandum of understanding" with Sweden to ensure the deployment of a team of twenty-five military doctors aboard the Dutch frigate "Karel Doorman" (Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2024). However, the frigate could not reach the Red Sea within the planned timeframe because the Dutch Navy also experienced technical difficulties in the initial phases of its second deployment, which forced the frigate to remain in Crete, Greece, for approximately two weeks for maintenance (Marineschepen.NL, 2024). Once the weaponry issues were fixed, the "Doorman" frigate departed for the area of operation on 10 May 2024 and remained there until late October 2024 (Dutch Ministry of Defence, 2024). In contrast to these participations, Sweden has never operationally contributed, either with ships, aircraft, or personnel deployed aboard other nations' vessels, to the two other

maritime security operations launched in the CSDP framework, Sophia and Irini (Swedish Defence Commission, 2020).

Instead of these EU deployments, the country opted for bilateral and trilateral missions in the North Sea with Denmark, Finland, or Norway. For instance, in 2023, the Swedish-Finnish Naval Task Group reached its full operational capacity in the Baltic Sea (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024). Consequently, this cooperation reflects the country's current defence policy priorities, which are essentially focused on its immediate neighbour, given the growing Russian aggressiveness. Overall, the Swedish naval contributions show a pattern of selective European alignment, using operational deployments to reinforce its long-standing support for the EU's CSDP while maintaining flexibility in the scale and scope of engagement. Instead of sustained force projection, the country's participation reflects a cautious approach that combines operational involvement with symbolic signalling, especially during moments of strategic transition.

The Swedish and Finnish case studies share striking similarities, not least their gradual transition from civilian-led contributions in the CSDP to more active operational roles, and their recent full integration into NATO's naval structures. The Finnish Navy participated in Operation Atalanta and Operation Sophia on several occasions. On the one hand, the Navy deployed the "Pohjanmaa" multi-role corvette in 2011 and an autonomous vessel protection detachment in the following year in the Horn of Africa (Finnish Defence Forces, 2012). However, at the end of 2012, the country ceased making any operational contribution to the mission, having deployed slightly more than 200 military personnel over the previous five years, both at the operational and strategic levels (Finnish Defence Forces, 2012). On the other hand, Finland also contributed operationally to EUNAVFOR MED "Sophia" during its first year of activity. Between June 2015 and October 2016, the Finnish Navy participated in three quarterly rotations to Operation Sophia, with exclusive boarding tasks for boats suspected of smuggling migrants. A couple of officers were then deployed to the OHQ in Rome until the mission ceased (Finnish Defence Forces, 2016). Instead, as of October 2025, the country has never operationally participated in the EU's third naval mission, Operation Irini, but has sent a few military officers to the headquarters in Rome on an annual basis (Operation Irini, 2024). As in the case of Operation Irini, Finland has contributed to the CSDP's latest mission, Aspides, by deploying three officers on a rotating basis over twelve months to the operational headquarters in Larissa, Greece (Finnish Defence Forces, 2024a). The country has also committed to sending two officers to the operational headquarters of the Combined Maritime Forces in Manama, Bahrain, to support Operation Prosperity Guardian, which is also addressing the Houthis' attacks against commercial shipping companies in the Red Sea (YLE, 2024).

While the Finnish government has decided not to pursue operational involvement in overseas missions, at least within the EU's frameworks, the Finnish Navy's operational preferences are currently centred on the North Sea and the Baltic Sea, where the bulk of its activities have taken place. With a modern fleet, Finland has successfully cooperated with regional counterparts in overseeing, patrolling, and protecting its sovereignty (Finnish Government, 2021, 32). The interoperability with Norway and Sweden primarily involved the Nordic Defence Cooperation, which included strategic planning, military education and training, and operational practices (Saxi, 2019). Since joining NATO in April 2023, Finland has shifted from EU-led naval operations toward alliance-based cooperation, steadily expanding its maritime role. A key focus has been participation in NATO's standing naval groups, including the Standing NATO Maritime Group One (SNMG1) and the Mine Countermeasures Group One (SNMCMG1). These deployments underscore Finland's growing capacity and willingness to enhance collective deterrence, particularly in the Baltic and North Atlantic regions. Beyond permanent missions, joint exercises like BALTOPS and the Baltic Sentry initiative have become central to its integration and readiness (Finnish Defence Forces, 2024b). Though modest, Finnish contributions emphasise mine countermeasures, surveillance, patrols, and coastal defence. This evolution illustrates how smaller states can enhance security through targeted commitments, regional cooperation, and alliance-based deterrence strategies. In summary, Finland's trajectory demonstrates a cautious, gradual approach to naval engagement, with

limited operational contributions complemented by a greater focus on institutional involvement and regional cooperation. Its recent shift towards NATO frameworks highlights a broader realignment where maritime contributions increasingly aim to strengthen alliance integration and deterrence in the Baltic region.

While Finland has only recently redirected its naval posture toward NATO integration, the Danish trajectory reveals a longer tradition of maritime activism rooted in transatlantic commitments. The country's first naval deployment dates to the first year after the Fall of the Berlin Wall. Precisely, in 1990, Denmark deployed its corvette "Olfert Fischer" in the Gulf War, marking the country's first overseas naval contribution. Four ships also participated in NATO's Operation Sharp Guard between 1992 and 1996, enforcing the maritime embargo over the former Yugoslavia in the Adriatic Sea (Mariager and Wivel, 2020).

Conversely, Denmark has never been fully supportive of the European security and defence policies. The failed attempts to adopt the Maastricht Treaty led the Danish establishment to invoke the country's "opt-out" clause, which eventually allowed the 1993 Treaty to be approved with several restrictions (Butler, 2020). Between 1993 and 2023, Denmark did not participate in any strictly military operations or planning, due to the limits imposed on non-fully fledged members of the CSDP framework. However, the country contributed with its brightest consultants and strategic planners to tackle piracy in Operation Atalanta from a civilian standpoint (Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011). Commentators suggested that Denmark became a frontrunner in the fight against piracy after Somali pirates hijacked the Danish-flagged commercial freighter "Danica White" (Smed & Wivel, 2017). In the year following the operational launch, the Danish Navy contributed its only asset to date to any CSDP's missions at sea, providing a logistical and support unit for a trimester (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2009). Since then, the country has sent various military officers to the operational headquarters of the missions in Northwood and Rome to demonstrate solidarity with the EU's allies. Overall, Denmark has deployed a few naval assets to counter Somali piracy, and since 2015, it has expanded its operational focus to the Gulf of Guinea, as demonstrated by the 2021 incident in which the frigate "Esbern Snare" engaged suspected pirates (Reuters, 2021). Unlike larger naval powers, the Danish selective deployments emphasise specialised capabilities, such as boarding teams and intelligence-driven interdiction, aligning with its broader defence policy through targeted, high-impact engagements. Such missions also serve diplomatic aims, reinforcing the country's role as a reliable security partner despite its "opt-out" clause from specific EU defence policies (Larsen & Nissen, 2018). The 2022 referendum ultimately revoked the 1993 "opt-out" clause, thereby allowing the country to participate militarily in CSDP missions. This marked a turning point, bridging decades of selective involvement with a renewed commitment to shared European defence responsibilities. Yet, it should be noted that, as of October 2025, Denmark has not contributed operationally to any CSDP's naval mission.

On the contrary, in recent years, the country has been actively involved in safeguarding maritime security in diplomatic forums. For instance, it should be remembered that Denmark signed a joint statement with four other EU member states and some other states on 3 January 2024 to condemn the Houthi attacks and arguing that "they will bear the responsibility of the consequences should they continue to threaten lives, the global economy, and free flow of commerce in the region's critical waterways" (White House, 2024). This statement eventually facilitated the set-up of the legal provisions by the UN Security Council (2024) in Resolution 2722, adopted seven days later, on 10 January 2024, that called for international responses to the ongoing threat to freedom of navigation. The Danish contribution to freedom of navigation in the Red Sea did not rely solely on diplomatic measures but also involved deploying its naval forces. The country deployed one frigate in December 2023 as part of the US-commanded Operation Prosperity Guardian, operating under the Combined Maritime Forces' institutional aegis. Eventually, the Parliament approved the political proposal to send a frigate to the area of operation in January 2024 (The Jerusalem Post, 2024). This deployment should be understood in the context of the country's traditional hesitancy towards the EU's CSDP and, even more importantly, its preference for American-initiated missions. To sum up, Denmark's naval

deployments are best understood as expressions of a consistent Atlanticist alignment, in which operational contributions to NATO and US-led missions serve both strategic and political purposes to reinforce its position as a proactive alliance partner.

In contrast to Denmark's EU-related constraints, Norway's position outside the Union altogether meant that its naval contributions were primarily channelled through NATO and coalition frameworks, with limited involvement in CSDP operations (Bosilca & Riddervold, 2021). Its participation in those missions could have occurred only through the status of a third country possessing no decision-making or commanding duties (Tardy, 2014). This instance explains why the Norwegian Navy has participated only once in those naval missions since 2008. The "Fridtjof Nansen" frigate was the first non-EU asset deployed in the EU's maritime missions for a trimester in 2009 (Operation Atalanta, 2021). When asked to reflect on the rationale behind this operational contribution, the then-Minister of Defence, Anne-Grete Strøm-Erichsen, argued that the deployment was "strategic" as the EU was increasing its foreign policy actorness and Norway wanted to play a role in that endeavour in 2009 (Bruxelles2, 2009). This remark is essentially coherent with one of the few scholarly works on the reasons why non-EU member states decided to contribute to the operational sides of the CSDP (Barbé et al., 2010). In practical terms, the "Fridtjof Nansen" frigate was assigned escort duties for World Food Programme shipments, as well as surveillance and deterrence patrols off the Somali coast (Interviews 1-2). Norwegian officers also contributed to intelligence sharing and operational planning in close coordination with the EU's Operational Headquarters, located in Northwood, on the outskirts of London (Interviews 1-2). This short deployment was beneficial for both the EU and Norway (Interviews 1-2). On the one hand, the EU benefited from Norway's assets and personnel, as the CSDP's missions often struggle to retain sufficient staffing to run (Interviews 1-2).

On the other hand, Norway demonstrated solidarity and had the opportunity to test interoperability with EU partners while reinforcing its reputation as a reliable maritime security actor capable of operating beyond NATO structures. Numerically, previous literature suggests that the country has been among the most supportive non-member states of the CSDP (Hillion, 2019, p. 32; Svendsen, 2022, pp. 40-43). Yet, the global contribution of third countries to the CSDP's military operations has been limited to date, due to political sensitivities and the practical considerations underlying them (Törö, 2010, p. 332). Non-EU member states literally have no say regarding the decision-making process, potentially leading to a mission (Dobrescu, 2023). On the contrary, it should be noted that the member states must invite these states to participate in a mission, and such an invitation occurs only after the drafting of the "Concept of operations" and "Operational plan" is completed (Tardy, 2014). On these premises, Norway had no chance to participate in either EUNAVFOR MED "Sophia" or in "Irin", as the member states never agreed upon any potential invitation to third countries.

In addition to its operational participation in Operation Atalanta, the country's seagoing agency was deployed twice in the Horn of Africa under NATO auspices as part of Operation Ocean Shield between 2012 and 2014 (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d., p. 17). During these deployments, Norwegian frigates conducted escort missions for commercial convoys and contributed maritime patrol aircraft to enhance situational awareness (Royal House of Norway, 2013). The Norwegian Navy has also maintained consistent participation in Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 1 (SNMCMG1), the Alliance's permanent flotilla conducting mine-clearance operations across the North Atlantic. This NATO force operated under strategic command from Northwood, UK, with Norway contributing specialised capabilities to these critical maritime security missions. By deploying an average of one asset yearly, a mine warfare capability, Norway has been trying to deter, to the best of its possibilities, the growing Russian threat in the extensive area of operation after the first war of aggression against Ukraine in 2014. In this vein, after the second invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Norwegian decision-makers opted to deploy landing platforms, maritime patrol aircraft, and helicopters in the Baltic Sea as part of Standing NATO Maritime Group 1 (SNMG1). In conclusion, between 2023 and 2024, Norway intensified its naval

presence in the High North and the Baltic, deploying frigates and maritime patrol aircraft to support NATO's enhanced vigilance activities, such as SNMCMG1 and SNMG1 (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023-2025). Overall, the Norwegian pattern of engagement emphasises an alliance-based specialisation strategy, whereby limited but targeted contributions, particularly in mine warfare and surveillance, are utilised to enhance strategic relevance within NATO. Its brief participation in EU operations further underscores the symbolic significance of naval deployments as a way of signalling political alignment beyond formal institutional membership.

To summarise the findings of this section, Table 1 shows the main patterns of the Scandinavian naval engagement and provides a structured overview of how each country combines operational contributions with broader strategic signalling across different institutional frameworks.

Table 1: Comparative patterns of Nordic naval contributions and alignment strategies, 2008-2025.

Country	Framework of engagement	Type of contribution	Alignment logic	Illustrative example
Sweden	European Union and NATO (post-2024) initiatives	Operational and symbolic	From Europeanist to hybrid	Deployments in Operation Atalanta
Finland	European Union and NATO (post-2023) initiatives	Limited both institutionally and operationally	From cautious to NATO integration	Boarding teams in Operation Sophia and deployment in the SNMG1
Denmark	NATO and United States-led initiatives	Operational and political signalling	Atlanticist	Operation Prosperity Guardian Prosperity Guardian and deployments in the Gulf of Guinea
Norway	NATO (primary) and European Union (occasionally)	Operational participation focused on niche aspects and symbolic	Alliance-dependent	Operation Atalanta in 2009 and SNMCMG1

Conclusion

This article has examined how the evolution of Nordic participation in international naval missions from the early 2000s to 2025 can offer a unique perspective on how small European states navigate the dual pressures of sovereignty preservation and international cooperation. Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway have each followed distinct paths in shaping their maritime engagement. Yet, their trajectories reveal both divergence and convergence as they respond to shifting geopolitical realities, resource constraints, and alliance commitments. By considering their distinct developments, these cases underscore the role of naval forces as tools of statecraft, employed to pursue national interests and enhance a country's credibility in international affairs.

Each of the four Scandinavian states entered the twenty-first century with distinct institutional statuses and strategic cultures. Norway remained outside the European Union, relying heavily on NATO for its security. Denmark was a full EU member, though restricted by its defence "opt-out," which prevented participation in the military aspects of the CSDP until 2022. Sweden and Finland, both officially non-aligned, engaged selectively in EU missions but remained cautious about sustained overseas deployments, preferring to contribute through civilian roles or headquarters staff. Despite these different starting points, the challenges faced by all four states were remarkably similar. Piracy in the Gulf of Aden, instability in North Africa, hybrid threats in Europe's northern seas, and Houthi attacks on freedom of navigation in the Red Sea underscored the vulnerability of maritime

trade routes and critical infrastructure. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, followed by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, dramatically changed the regional security landscape, prompting the Nordic states to reassess long-held assumptions about defence posture and alliance membership.

Sweden and Finland illustrate the gradual evolution from selective, EU-based engagement to full NATO membership and integration into allied maritime structures. Both countries participated in EUNAVFOR Operation Atalanta, contributing vessels, helicopters, and personnel to support counter-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia. On the one hand, Sweden's five separate deployments between 2009 and 2018, including its cooperation with the Royal Dutch Navy, represented a significant commitment for a state with traditionally limited expeditionary capabilities. The Finnish contributions were shorter in time and more narrowly defined, with the deployment of the "Pohjanmaa" corvette and protection detachments, but still marked a vital foray into the CSDP's naval missions. However, neither country operationally participated in Operation Sophia, beyond Finland's limited early involvement, or Operation Irini, which was deemed too irrelevant to their security and defence policies. Instead, both Sweden and Finland opted to send their personnel to the missions' operational headquarters located in Rome.

The Danish experience stands apart as it has been shaped by decades of institutional ambivalence. The Maastricht Treaty "opt-out" of 1993 restricted its military role in CSDP operations, effectively pushing the country toward NATO and American-led coalitions. This Atlanticist orientation was manifested in consistent contributions to NATO's standing naval groups and to the Combined Maritime Forces' maritime security initiatives. Danish participation in Operation Prosperity Guardian in the Red Sea from 2023 to 2024 further underscored Copenhagen's preference for American-led missions. Simultaneously, the country sought to demonstrate solidarity with EU partners in civilian dimensions of CSDP operations, contributing expertise and planners to Atalanta and Althea. Its limited operational deployment of a logistics vessel to Atalanta reflected both the constraints of the "opt-out" and the urgency created by Somali piracy, particularly after the hijacking of the Danish-flagged "Danica White". The revocation of the "opt-out" in the 2022 referendum eventually marked a turning point. Even though the country can now fully participate in the CSDP's missions, evidence suggests that it will continue to prioritise NATO and coalition operations. This reinforces the characterisation of Denmark as "super-Atlanticist" drawn in the literature review.

On another note, Norway, as a non-EU member state, has participated only once in a CSDP naval mission, deploying the Fridtjof Nansen frigate to Operation Atalanta in 2009. As the first-ever deployment by a non-EU member state, this was primarily regarded as a symbolic move, designed to signal support for the EU's growing foreign policy role (Tardy, 2014). Most of Norway's contributions have occurred through NATO, notably in Operation Ocean Shield in the Horn of Africa and the Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group One. Its deployments to Ocean Shield, including frigates and maritime patrol aircraft, were praised for enhancing coordination between NATO and regional actors. In the Baltic Sea and North Atlantic, Norway has steadily contributed to SNMG1 and SNMCMG1, deploying at least one asset annually, with a focus on countermine warfare and surveillance. Overall, Norway's case illustrates how a non-EU country can leverage NATO frameworks to maintain a strong maritime presence while utilising selective CSDP participation to underscore its political alignment with European partners.

In conclusion, the Nordic case studies provide several broader insights into small-state naval participation in international security. Naval deployments serve as flexible tools of foreign policy, allowing nations to adjust their involvement based on available resources, risk appetite, and alliance expectations. At the same time, Nordic countries have consistently leveraged multinational frameworks to improve their security while retaining political control over their contributions. Patterns of convergence are often driven by crises, as demonstrated by responses to piracy and Russian aggression, which have acted as pivotal moments in shaping the maritime engagements of the four countries examined in this study.

Despite these shared dynamics, important differences persist. Denmark continues to prioritise its Atlanticist commitments, while Sweden and Finland are still adjusting to their recently acquired

obligations as NATO members. Norway, for its part, retains a distinctive position outside the EU while remaining closely aligned with European partners. These nuances suggest that, while convergence appears evident, diversity of approach remains a defining feature of Nordic naval strategy. More broadly, the Nordic experience reflects a profound transformation in their maritime engagement. What began as cautious, selective, and often civilian-led contributions to EU missions has evolved into a somewhat more active, structured, and increasingly integrated participation in NATO maritime operations. Recent developments, including Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO, Denmark's removal of its EU "opt-out" policy, and Norway's continued commitment to NATO, have collectively reshaped the maritime security landscape of Northern Europe. Although their contributions remain modest in scale compared to larger naval forces, they are highly targeted, strategically relevant, and carry significant signalling value.

Ultimately, the comparison presented in this article shows that variation in Scandinavian naval contributions is driven by, on the one hand, material capabilities and geographical exposure, and, on the other, diverging strategies in global affairs. Impressively, small states use naval deployments to navigate between overlapping institutional frameworks, ultimately leveraging limited assets to maximise political visibility, alliance credibility, and strategic autonomy. In this respect, naval contributions should be viewed as multifaceted tools serving diplomatic, economic, and operational purposes. While larger naval forces may emphasise sustained force projection, smaller navies such as those of Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway instead rely on flexible, symbolic, and target-specific deployments that enable them to balance sovereignty concerns with the demands of international cooperation. Overall, the Nordic case studies demonstrate how small and medium-sized states can exert agency in the constantly evolving European security order by strategically utilising those limitations. Their naval activities show that even modest contributions can significantly influence alignment patterns, strengthen partnerships, and signal strategic intent in the maritime domain. This suggests that future scholarly debates on European defence integration should also pay greater attention to the strategic use of naval contributions as instruments of alignment or, otherwise, misalignment by small and medium-sized states.

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