

NORDIC COOPERATION ON CIVIL EMERGENCIES

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SUBJECT: THE IMPORTANCE OF SECURITY COOPERATION AMONST THE NORDIC STATES: THE 'HAGA' PROCESS

SIGNIFICANCE: The five Nordic countries have raised the political profile of their cooperation in non-warlike emergencies such as major accidents, natural disasters, pandemics and cyber-attacks. In April 2009, the five responsible ministers signed a ground-breaking agreement at Haga, near Stockholm, aiming at a 'boundary-free' approach to handling major civil crises. This agenda was updated with a new 'Haga II' declaration in 2013.

ANALYSIS: The Nordics' cooperation in this 'softer' realm of security has received less publicity than their 'hard' defence collaboration on operations and arms deals. But the 'Haga' process more fully involves all five Nordic states (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden), and finds a strong political base in the new Nordic 'solidarity' declaration made in 2011. The main questions over its success concern (i) the politicians' ability to inspire bottom-up progress, and (ii) the question of how much added value five small states' cooperation really brings in face of disasters that could challenge all Europe.



The history

The Nordic countries have developed a many-sided cooperation structure since the 1950s. In cold war times, the Nordic institutions steered clear of discussing defence and security. However, practical contacts across Nordic frontiers between police and local authorities were possible and helpful. Since 1989 a formal cooperation agreement – NORDRED – has existed among civil emergency rescue services, gradually extending to all five states.

Nordic defence cooperation became steadily more open and intense from the early 1990s. Today, all five countries belong to the 'NORDEFECO' structure covering joint training, operations, and arms procurement among others. The constraints on defence budgets are pushing towards standardization and pooling of resources. Working together also helps the Nordics make a good showing in broader European and global frameworks.

The five states have also sharpened their focus on non-warlike (civil) emergencies. Hard lessons were learned from events like the Indian Ocean tsunami, Icelandic volcanic eruptions, and the Breivik terrorist incident. Nordic citizens demand efficient protection from such hazards, and not just from a military attack that may never come.

Haga I

In 2008, spurred also by the economic crash, the Nordic governments began planning to raise their civil emergency cooperation to a higher level. They were encouraged by the independent report on Nordic security cooperation presented in February 2009 by Thorvald Stoltenberg, which recommended among other things that the Nordics give each other the equivalent of a mutual defence guarantee in the civil sphere. This was done with 'solidarity' declaration adopted by Nordic Foreign Ministers in April 2011, which gave cyber-attacks as an example of threats needing the closest cooperation. Other Stoltenberg ideas still being followed up include a greater focus on cooperation in the Arctic, and more joint training for leading civil emergency operators.

In April 2009, Swedish Defence Minister Sven Tolgfors summoned a meeting at Haga Palace near Stockholm between the five ministers responsible for civil emergencies and for societal security more generally. These are the ministers of justice/interior in Finland, Iceland and Norway and the defence minister in Denmark, each supported by an executive agency or operational department.

The declaration from this 'Haga I' meeting called for initially exploring six areas of common interest: rescue services, exercises and training, response to CBRN* emergencies, crisis communication with the populace, the use of volunteers, and civil protection-related research and development. The directors-general of the five executive agencies were to work on these and the ministers themselves would continue meeting twice yearly.

*Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear

Haga II

The next ministerial meetings noted progress on some of the Haga I items and added new focus areas, such as fire prevention and cooperation in the various uses of air-lift. By 2012, however, there was consensus on the need to boost performance with a new high-level statement. The Haga II declaration was made in June 2013 when Sweden once more hosted the gathering.

Haga II calls for two new projects to be pursued under the incoming Norwegian Chair, both more ambitious than hitherto. The first is an overall audit of the effectiveness of civil security cooperation. Secondly, possible obstacles to intra-Nordic 'host nation support' (that is, the status of Nordic personnel who might cross to another country to help in emergencies) will be studied – which means addressing legal and systemic differences more openly than before.

Evaluation: (i) The small state angle

The Nordics are small states and need protection for their 'hard' defence. It is not always equally clear why such states should seek help for civil emergency tasks. Localized events may actually be easier to handle with a small population and short lines of communication. But limited resources and limited human expertise are more of a challenge when facing major transnational threats like pandemics and climate change, or new ones like terrorism in societies that have no history of it. For Iceland, as an example, the expected opening-up of the Arctic poses clear problems: it has formal responsibility for search & rescue and shipping safety in a vast marine area, but minimal resources to cope with risks of expanding traffic.

(ii) The Nordic case

The five Nordics should find it relatively easy to help each other, given their many political, social and cultural similarities. Growing cross-border integration and shared infra-structures in areas like the Øresund region add to this logic. Their new efforts in the Haga context have also, however, highlighted some problems:

- As seen, each country places responsibility in a different ministry. Some of these may lack the prestige to enforce effective civil security across the whole field of government.
- Practical cooperation has to come from the bottom up; and the respective agencies have so far not always hurried to implement top-down decisions. Operators may have different priorities from ministers, and each national agency has its own headaches, including ongoing changes in national systems.
- Even when combined, the civil security resources of these five states have clear limits of size, experience and expertise – notably in terrorism, organized crime and large-scale migration).

- Since many serious Arctic, North European or Baltic disasters would affect wider areas, it is vital also to cooperate in larger regional frameworks. All five Nordics (including Iceland and Norway as European Economic Area members) work with the European Union's civil security and disaster relief systems, and are bound by relevant EEA-wide regulations. Nordic cooperation cannot replace and should not distract from these larger relationships. At best, it should make sure the Nordics pull their due weight within them.

Conclusions

- The 'Haga' cooperation is a timely and perhaps overdue response to the Nordic countries' shared exposure to civil emergencies and the need for efficient use of limited resources.
- It is too early to judge its practical impact, which depends crucially on lower-level compliance. The searching reviews commissioned by Haga II may be helpful in pinpointing obstacles.
- As a cluster of small states, the Nordics need to focus also on wider international frameworks for civil security cooperation: what they should put in to them, but also what they can learn and gain.

Keywords: Nordic cooperation, non-military security, civil emergencies, solidarity clause, Arctic, Baltic

Further reading

All major Haga texts are available at this Swedish web-page: <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/12906>

The Stoltenberg Report is at: http://www.mfa.is/media/Frettatilkygning/Nordic_report.pdf

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