

# Defense and Deterrence on NATO's Northern Flank

## Strengthening the U.S. Marine Corps' Role in Europe

Zsofia Budai

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**Abstract:** Current North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) efforts to address security threats in the alliance's northern flank are insufficient in light of Russia's aggressive actions and military buildup near the European border. The U.S. Marine Corps is uniquely suited to deterrence and defense in this region due to its doctrine, capabilities, and strong historical relationship with Norway. To strengthen the security situation in this key geostrategic area, the Marine Corps should expand its rotational presence in Norway, deploy a rotational force to Iceland, increase its participation in European training and exercises, and maintain high standards of cold weather preparedness.

**Keywords:** Norway, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, Russia, High North, Arctic, rotational forces, prepositioning program, Marine Rotational Force-Europe, MRF-E, Marine Corps Prepositioning Program-Norway, MCPP-N

In early October 2018, the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (24th MEU), embarked aboard the Iwo Jima Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) and set sail from North Carolina toward Iceland and Norway to take part in Trident

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Zsofia Budai joined the Foreign Service, U.S. Department of State, in 2010 after completing a BS in foreign service and an MA in Russian and East European studies at Georgetown University. She has served at the U.S. Embassy Moscow, Russia (2010–12); the U.S. Consulate General in Karachi, Pakistan (2013–14); and the U.S. Mission to NATO in Brussels, Belgium (2015–18), before returning to Moscow for her current assignment. This article was part of the requirements for her master of military studies program at Marine Corps University's Command and Staff College, from which she graduated in June 2019. The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not represent the official position of the U.S. Department of State.

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Juncture 2018, the largest exercise that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had held in decades.<sup>1</sup> With approximately 50,000 participants from all 29 NATO members—plus partners Sweden and Finland—Trident Juncture offered a unique opportunity for the alliance to rehearse the defense of its territory on the frigid waters and over the icy terrain that characterizes northern Europe. Since Marines from II Marine Expeditionary Force (II MEF) constituted the bulk of the 14,000 U.S. servicemembers participating in the exercise, the spotlight on them was especially strong: How would America’s rapid response force demonstrate its ability to come to the aid of European allies in the event of a crisis?<sup>2</sup> Despite some weather-related setbacks (in the United States, not Norway), the Marine Corps put in an impressive performance; by sending such a large number of troops, equipment, and vehicles to the exercise, II MEF proved how seriously it would take any aggression directed toward NATO.

The threat of such aggression is very real; the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) identifies Russia and China as the central challengers not just to U.S. prosperity and security but also to the prosperity and security of American allies and partners.<sup>3</sup> Russia’s great power aspirations and disregard for international law and institutions have become abundantly clear since 2014, as has the country’s focus on rebuilding its military strength and pursuing a doctrine of what some experts call “new generation warfare” or “hybrid warfare.”<sup>4</sup> In response, the U.S. military has recommitted itself to deterring—and, if necessary, defending against—Russian aggression in Europe, as well as slowly relearning some of the lessons built up in the Cold War but lost during the peace dividend that followed. The European Deterrence Initiative (EDI, formerly called the European Reassurance Initiative) has reflected these priorities by providing additional funding for U.S. rotational units, exercises, infrastructure improvements, and more, with \$6.5 billion approved for FY2019 and \$5.9 billion requested for FY2020.<sup>5</sup>

Like the other Services, the Marine Corps has recognized the need to adapt its tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs)—and possibly its force posture—in the face of the changing international security environment. As General Robert B. Neller, the 37th Commandant, testified before the Senate in April 2018, “The ascendant threats posed by revisionist powers and rogue states require change—we must become more lethal, resilient and as a consequence, a more capable deterrent.”<sup>6</sup> Heeding this directive, Marine Corps leaders have taken the initial steps to adapt and modernize the force, reevaluating how it can fight and win as part of a Joint Force against a near-peer adversary.<sup>7</sup> Although the bulk of the Marine Corps’ planning efforts have focused on the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) area of responsibility, the Service has not neglected the European theater; it has deployed forces to Norway on a rotational basis

since early 2017 and has increased its participation in various exercises, especially in northern Europe.

Nonetheless, the Marine Corps' efforts in this area are currently insufficient to address Russia's ongoing aggression and increasingly threatening behavior toward the United States and its allies. During the past decade, President Vladimir Putin has rebuilt the Russian military, enabling it to invade and seize parts of two neighboring nations.<sup>8</sup> He has also demonstrated Russia's ability to meddle in other countries' internal affairs, including in the 2016 U.S. elections.<sup>9</sup> Although U.S. and NATO leaders have taken substantial steps to reinforce the alliance's eastern flank, especially in the Baltic region, they have not paid enough attention to NATO's relatively unprotected north, which remains quite vulnerable. Strengthening the Marine Corps' presence in and familiarity with this region would significantly strengthen the security situation in Europe, thereby contributing to peace and stability in the entire Euro-Atlantic area.

To establish how and why the Marine Corps is best suited to defense and deterrence in Europe's northern flank as part of the Joint Force and within the NATO framework, it is important to examine the following: the contributions that the Marine Corps has made to European security since the 1970s through today; the security challenges that Russia poses to northern Europe and the possible points of friction; and the unique capabilities that the Marine Corps brings to deterrence and defense in Europe's High North.<sup>10</sup> By investing in increased Marine Corps personnel and capabilities in this region, the United States would be better positioned to maintain its geostrategic interests in the North Atlantic.

## **The Marine Corps in Europe: From the 1970s to Today**

The Marine Corps' contribution to planning for the defense of European allies dates back to the 1970s, when the Soviet Union's Cold War military buildup on the Kola Peninsula prompted policy makers within both NATO and the United States to look at options for the reinforcement of northern Europe. By this time, the Soviet Union had amassed much of its military capabilities in the north, including ballistic missile submarines, air defense systems, and two motorized rifle divisions permanently positioned on the Norwegian border.<sup>11</sup> Western experts warned that NATO's northern flank was vulnerable to Soviet exploitation, and a joint American-Norwegian study group was put together in the late 1970s to consider U.S. military options for the region.<sup>12</sup>

U.S. Marines had participated in NATO exercises in Norway as far back as 1964, but it was not until the mid-1970s that the 4th Marine Amphibious Brigade (4th MAB)—under the leadership of General Alfred M. Gray Jr., then a one-star—began to train seriously for a potential conflict by deploying 6,000 Marines to exercise in Norway and Denmark.<sup>13</sup> In 1978, Secretary of Defense

Harold Brown formally tasked the Department of the Navy with planning for “the rapid reinforcement of Norway with an air-lifted, brigade-sized force” and repositioned equipment within the country.<sup>14</sup> Secretary Brown recognized the existential threat the Soviet buildup posed for the entire North Atlantic alliance, and he and his military advisors saw the Marine Corps as the most appropriate Service for deterrence and defense in the Arctic. This was a very different mission for a Corps that had just recently spent a decade fighting insurgents in the jungles of Vietnam, but the lesson was clear: the international security environment had changed, and the Marine Corps would have to take on new responsibilities, to include contributing to NATO’s collective defense.

As a result, the United States and Norway signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in 1981 that codified the Marine Corps’ role in the defense of northern Europe, establishing that it could deploy a brigade if necessary and reposition heavy equipment and supplies “to facilitate the rapid transfer of the MAB in a conventional Alliance reinforcement of Norway.”<sup>15</sup> Its mission would be to defend airfields and provide forces for a naval campaign in the Norwegian Sea, ideally working together with British and Royal Netherlands Marine Corps, who regularly conducted winter training in Norway but had no similar bilateral agreements in place.<sup>16</sup> During the course of the 1980s, U.S. Marines focused on preparing for this new mission both at home and abroad, devoting considerable resources to maintaining readiness for cold weather operations should conflict arise in the High North. The Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center in California led the efforts to train Marines for winter warfare and outfit them with the right gear; 4th MAB (later called the 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade or 4th MEB) then put these skills to the test during its frequent exercises in Norway.<sup>17</sup> Although the Soviet Union collapsed 10 years after the MOU was signed, the Marine Corps had by then demonstrated that it could make a significant contribution to the defense of the NATO alliance by specializing in rapid response to crises and cold weather operations on land and in the littorals. As historian Colonel Joseph H. Alexander (Ret) wrote in 1984, “The Marines actively sought this task [to reinforce Norway] at a time of transition in roles and missions—a time of decreasing amphibious lift and increasing commitment to ‘rapid deployment’ tasks.”<sup>18</sup>

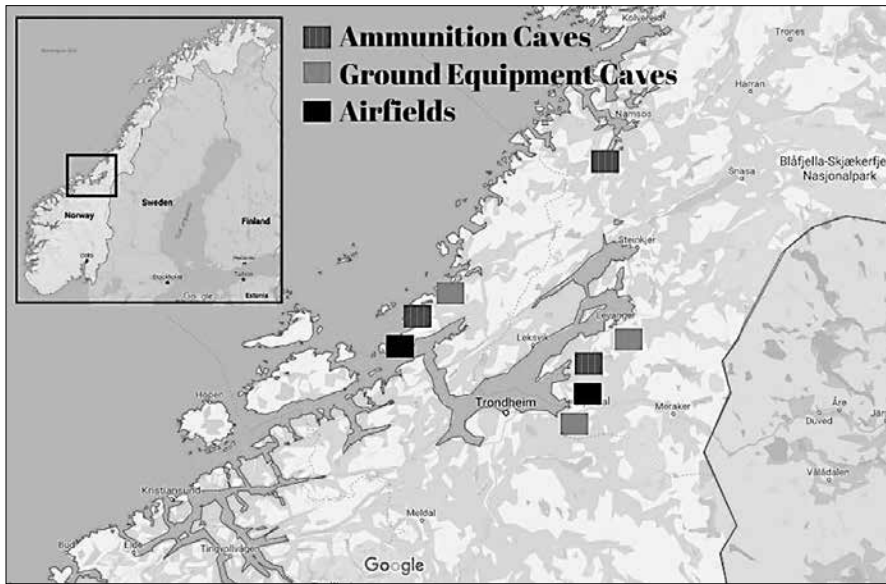
Concurrently, the Marine Corps was also working with the Navy to establish a Service component command in Europe. This came to fruition in 1980 with the creation of Headquarters, Fleet Marine Force, Europe, initially located in London and moved to Germany in 1993.<sup>19</sup> After the end of the Cold War, the command (renamed Marine Forces Europe, or MARFOREUR, in 1994) focused on facilitating counterinsurgency efforts in the Middle East, although Marines were also deployed to Europe in 1999 as part of the NATO bombing campaign and follow-up peacekeeping operations in Kosovo.<sup>20</sup> Since

2015, what is now MARFOREUR/AF stands as a two-star command overseeing 1,500 Marines and facilitating engagements throughout the European and African theaters.<sup>21</sup> Within this area of responsibility (AOR), the Marine Corps maintains the Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force-Crisis Response-Africa (SPMAGTF-CR-AF) in Spain and the Marine Rotational Force-Europe (MRF-E) in Norway; the Marine Corps ended the Black Sea Rotational Force (BSRF) in Romania in late 2018 after eight years in the region to focus on the High North.<sup>22</sup>

Although the Marine Corps' mission and priorities in Europe have evolved, its relationship with Norway has remained unbroken since the 1970s. Even after the Cold War, the Marine Corps continued to store prepositioned equipment there and maintained plans for the defense of northern Europe, despite questions about whether these measures were necessary since the Soviet threat had disappeared.<sup>23</sup> The 1981 MOU remained in force until 2005, when it was rewritten to focus exclusively on the prepositioning program, eliminating any specific references to how a brigade (or other unit) would deploy to Norway.<sup>24</sup> The stated goal of what was then formally christened the Marine Corps Prepositioning Program-Norway (MCPN) remained supporting the country's reinforcement; it specified that the host nation would assume responsibilities for equipment security and general maintenance through a cost-sharing agreement. Currently stored in six caves and two storage facilities in the Trøndelag region of central Norway, MCPN equipment and supplies can "support the stand-up of one or more MAGTFs conducting low to mid-intensity conflicts," according to the 2015 edition of the Marine Corps' *Prepositioning Programs Handbook*.<sup>25</sup>

Equally significant was the Marine Corps' decision to deploy a rotational force to Norway, beginning in January 2017 with about 300 Marines (increased to 700 in October 2018).<sup>26</sup> Then-MARFOREUR/AF commander Major General Niel E. Nelson explained that the deployment had a number of benefits: it strengthened U.S. commitment to European security, it provided fantastic cold weather training opportunities, and it allowed Marines to better mobilize in an emergency—the unstated emergency presumably caused by Russia. Since then, Norwegian and American officials have regularly praised MRF-E as an important initiative for both the Marine Corps and the host nation in an uncertain environment.<sup>27</sup> "We are very pleased with the rotation of the U.S. Marine Corps in Norway. This strengthens Norway, Norwegian troops, and it strengthens NATO. The security environment is more serious. One consequence is that we must strengthen security in the North Atlantic again," concluded Norwegian minister of defense Frank Bakke-Jensen in July 2018.<sup>28</sup> Currently, the 700 Marines from II MEF train in two locations during their six-month rotations: Trøndelag (with the Norwegian Home Guard) and Setermoen (with the Norwegian Army).

**Map 1.** Marine Corps Prepositioning Program-Norway storage locations



Map courtesy of the author, adapted by MCUP.

**Map 2.** Location of rotational Marine Corps units



Map courtesy of the author, adapted by MCUP.

In light of its renewed focus on northern Europe, how well positioned is the Marine Corps to deal with the challenges that Russia poses to transatlantic security? To answer that question, it is first necessary to examine Russia's current foreign policy ambitions and military capabilities, especially in the High North and Arctic region.

### **Russian Threats to European Security: Possible Friction Points in the High North**

The NDS's focus on great power competition acknowledges an important reality: "Russia seeks . . . to shatter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and change European and Middle East security and economic structures to its favor."<sup>29</sup> Since Putin's return to power in 2012, many of Moscow's concrete foreign policy objectives—both stated and implied—have been driven by a desire to undermine the West and break the transatlantic bond between Europe and the United States. In the past few years, the Kremlin has invested significant resources into modernizing the Russian armed forces and developing new capabilities; Russia's defense spending rose steadily until it dropped in 2017 due to a weaker economy.<sup>30</sup> Emboldened by Russia's advances in Ukraine and more confident in his country's military might, Putin seems willing to risk increased tensions with the West to keep the United States and its European allies off balance.

Official statements and publications from the Kremlin identify NATO as the top external threat to Russia's national security. Both its 2014 *Military Doctrine* and 2015 *National Security Strategy* criticize NATO expansion and what they call the build up of NATO forces near the Russian border; the latter also specifically establishes securing great power status as one of the country's long-term objectives.<sup>31</sup> Translating this doctrine into the operational and tactical levels, "almost everything that the Russian military has done in the recent past seems aimed at confronting and challenging NATO," noted U.S. Admiral James G. Foggo III, commander of NATO's Allied Joint Force Command Naples, and his coauthor, Alarik Fritz, in a recent paper.<sup>32</sup>

What does this mean for NATO's northern flank? Russia has demonstrated a strategic interest in the Arctic and the High North, and it has developed the corresponding capabilities to project power and threaten the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in the North Atlantic. Its Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command military district was stood up in 2014 specifically to focus on the northern areas; it is centered around the Northern Fleet, which a 2017 Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report assesses as Russia's most capable naval force.<sup>33</sup> General Valery V. Gerasimov, chief of the Russian General Staff, has stated that his objectives are to build up air and ground forces as well as air defense systems

within this command as part of a general policy emphasizing the importance of the Arctic.<sup>34</sup>

Both the United States and Norway have expressed concerns about Russian military buildup, activities, and exercises in this region. Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2018, Army General Curtis M. Scaparrotti, who served as U.S. European Command (EUCOM) commander and Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) until recently, admitted that Russia has a “qualitative advantage in Arctic operations” and that “we’re not keeping pace.”<sup>35</sup> Speaking at the May 2019 meeting of the Arctic Council, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo warned other members about the “pattern of aggressive Russian behavior here in the Arctic.” The Kremlin “claims to have built 475 new military sites, including bases north of the Arctic Circle, as well as 16 new deep-water ports,” he stated, adding that the United States is committed to countering this influence.<sup>36</sup>

The Norwegian Intelligence Service has also warned that “Russia has enhanced its ability to influence Norwegian on- and off-shore interests and activities, and current developments will also impact on Norway’s ability to conduct operations on and out of Norwegian territory.”<sup>37</sup> More specifically, “Mobile platforms and long-range precision-guided weapons enhance Russia’s ability to influence the sea and air axes into Norway. Critical Norwegian infrastructure—both civilian and military—is within reach of precision-guided Russian missile systems.”<sup>38</sup> Although Norway strives to maintain a cooperative relationship with Russia as a neighbor and economic partner, Norwegian diplomats and military officers are tracking these developments closely.<sup>39</sup> “Russian strategies for the Arctic still emphasize international cooperation. At the same time, we cannot rule out the possibility that Russia in a given situation will consider the use of military force to be a relevant tool, including in the High North,” states Brigadier General Lars S. Lervik, commander of Norway’s Brigade Nord.<sup>40</sup>

In light of the security situation and in line with its NATO obligations, Norway is making significant investments in its own military capabilities, including by purchasing Boeing P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft and 52 Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II fighter aircraft from the United States.<sup>41</sup> The Norwegian Army and Navy are also refocusing on the High North, with the former reestablishing units in the Finnmark region in northern Norway.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, Norway remains a small country with a relatively small military, and thus looks to not only NATO but also the United States as a guarantor of its security.<sup>43</sup> As a senior Norwegian diplomat admits, “Norway is reliant on outside support and allied reinforcement if the situation should require it.”<sup>44</sup> Given Norway’s strategic location but relative distance from the rest of NATO (it shares no land border with any NATO members), the country’s reinforcement



poses a critical challenge for its allies, including the United States. Although neither NATO nor Norway wants a conflict with Russia—the alliance is actively pursuing a dual-track approach of both deterrence/defense and dialogue with Moscow—the best way to prevent one is to be prepared to win one. As was the case during the Cold War, the U.S. commitment to Norwegian security benefits both nations by helping maintain peace and stability in the region.

### **U.S. Strategic Priority: Responding to Russian Aggression**

NATO has responded to the security challenges in Europe by undertaking the most significant reinforcement of the alliance’s collective defense since the end of the Cold War; the United States has played a leading role in this reinforcement. EUCOM’s 2018 posture statement emphasizes how its “focus has shifted from engagement and assurance to deterrence and defense” within its AOR; this has meant deploying additional Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps assets to maintain a credible deterrent force in Europe.<sup>45</sup> General Scaparrotti told the Senate in 2018,

Our highest strategic priority is to deter Russia from engaging in further aggression and exercising malign influence over our allies and partners . . . we are working to create a combat-credible posture in Europe that will underpin our deterrence. We are updating our operational plans to provide military response options to defend our European allies against Russian aggression.<sup>46</sup>

A year later, General Scaparrotti warned that “while the United States maintains global military superiority over Russia, evolving Russian capabilities threaten to erode our competitive military advantage, challenge our ability to operate uncontested in all domains, and diminish our ability to deter Russian aggression.”<sup>47</sup> General Tod Wolters, who took command of EUCOM in early May 2019, agreed with this assessment in his own Senate confirmation hearing, stressing that “detering Russian aggression and supporting NATO’s defense of the Euro-Atlantic area remain the most significant challenges facing USEUCOM.”<sup>48</sup>

In practice, this has resulted in EUCOM augmenting both NATO’s and individual nations’ military capabilities through the five lines of effort identified in the EDI: increased presence, exercises and training, enhanced prepositioning, improved infrastructure, and building partnership capacity. The Department of Defense (DOD) has asked for—and Congress has approved—substantial increases in EDI funding during the past few years (from less than \$1 billion in FY2015 to \$6.5 billion in FY2019), although the FY2020 request dropped slightly to \$5.9 billion.<sup>49</sup> The Marine Corps has consistently received the small-

est portion of EDI, in line with its (thus far) fairly limited presence in Europe; this can and should be reconsidered in the future. Although all Services benefit from the money allocated for general projects such as theater-wide joint reception, staging, onward movement, and integration enhancements, the bulk of the funding allocated specifically for the Marine Corps is directed toward the following (FY2019 figures):

- Marine Corps rotational force support (\$29.0 million): This allows rotational forces to “increase the scope and size of engagements with NATO allies and partners”; it also funds U.S.-based Marines deploying more frequently for exercises and engagements in Europe.
- Marine Corps enhanced prepositioning (\$7.3 million): This allows for increasing and improving the equipment included in MCPP-N.<sup>50</sup>

Before evaluating the enhanced role that the Marine Corps should take on within the EUCOM AOR, the Service’s mission, capabilities, and unique history must be taken into consideration. “The course of the Marine Corps through the twentieth century was charted by a desire to be a useful contributor to national defense, and the Corps regularly adapted its mission and organization to the exigency of the day,” argues Major Ian T. Brown in his recent book on the history of maneuver warfare.<sup>51</sup> It is essential for this adaptation to continue through the present, especially as U.S. troops pull out of the Middle East and Afghanistan, freeing them up to train and deploy elsewhere, per the priorities identified in the NDS.<sup>52</sup>

## **A Stronger Role for the Marine Corps in Europe**

The Marine Corps’ current doctrine and capabilities—combined with its historical relationship with Norway—render it uniquely suited for defense and deterrence in the High North; the leadership of the Marine Corps and the Joint Force should reinforce this as the Corps’ primary mission in Europe. Above all, the presence of rotational forces in Norway and the continuation of the prepositioning program send a strong signal of U.S. commitment, indicating that Washington is serious about deterring aggression in the region and coming to the defense of allies if deterrence fails. While it is impossible to measure the extent to which deterrence works—adversaries are certainly not going to admit to changes in strategy or tactics due to certain U.S. or NATO actions—maintaining a persistent presence in Norway sends a clear message about the Marine Corps’ willingness and ability to act in the event of a crisis, helping ensure that such a crisis does not break out or escalate even if it does.

Nonetheless, the security situation in Europe remains precarious. As Russia continues its military buildup in the Arctic, the northern flank remains especially vulnerable without a lack of adequate investment in its defense. When

it comes to ground forces within the broader European context, the focus of the U.S. military has been on Eastern Europe; since 2017, the U.S. Army has deployed rotational armored, combat aviation, and sustainment brigades to the region.<sup>53</sup> It has also taken the helm of one of the four multinational battle-groups that make up NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Poland and the Baltic states. Overall, NATO has deployed four battalions in the Baltic Sea region, but none in Norway or the High North; as a result, the U.S. Army and NATO forces provide a level of deterrence in Eastern Europe that northern Europe lacks. Indeed, with the Army having committed so many resources to protecting NATO's eastern flank, the Marine Corps is well-positioned to be the Service to protect the north. If this sounds reminiscent of the U.S. strategy during the latter part of the Cold War, that is because it is, but history offers many useful lessons and the fact that Marine Corps' relationship with Norway is already strong also provides an advantage. Operations in Norway give the Corps an opportunity to continue honing a very specific mission and for Marines to develop a very specific set of skills: namely, operating in uniquely challenging, extremely cold weather environments.

"We haven't been in the cold weather business for a while," General Neller acknowledged in early 2018, adding that the return of great power competition necessitates that Marines regain the skills they have lost in this area if they are to conduct successful operations worldwide.<sup>54</sup> The loss of institutional knowledge leaves the Service unprepared to tackle global conflicts, and the Commandant has thus renewed his focus on cold weather training and exercises, starting in the United States.<sup>55</sup> The *Marine Corps Task List* (MCTL) emphasizes the need "to conduct combat operations as a component of a MAGTF or other task force in mountainous, high altitude, and cold weather environments," arguing that such operations "require specialized warfighting doctrine, training, and equipment."<sup>56</sup> The focus on Norway thus fits into the Commandant's greater vision of a Marine Corps that is trained to fight in the extreme conditions that characterize the High North.

The Marine Corps prides itself on being the nation's rapid reaction force; deploying to reinforce Norway and the High North in a crisis scenario would be consistent with its doctrine.<sup>57</sup> The MAGTF's ability to deploy anywhere in the world with minimal preparation and sustain itself for up to 60 days renders the Marine Corps uniquely capable of responding to crises before they erupt into large-scale conflicts. In light of Russia's adoption of so-called new generation warfare (which includes gray zone activities and hybrid tactics), a full-scale conventional war in Europe is highly unlikely; the more probable scenario would initially involve smaller-scale disturbances or disruptions that Russia could then escalate if it so chose.<sup>58</sup> Given its doctrine and training, the Marine Corps would be the most appropriate U.S. military force to respond

**Figure 1.** Gen Robert B. Neller speaks with Norwegian soldiers in Setermoen, 2017



*Official U.S. Marine Corps photo, courtesy Cpl Samantha Braun.*

to such crises to control the situation, seize the initiative, and deescalate if possible.

However, all of this requires some key changes within the Marine Corps' approach to the EUCOM AOR to provide effective deterrence and defense. Namely, the Marine Corps must increase the presence of rotational forces in the region, as well as its preparedness for cold weather operations and interoperability with key NATO allies and partners. This not only adheres to the NDS's focus on great power competition and stronger alliances, but it also falls in line with the strategy's call for dynamic force employment (DFE), which "prioritize[s] maintaining the capacity and capabilities for major combat, while providing options for proactive and scalable employment of the Joint Force."<sup>59</sup> Indeed, EUCOM commander General Tod Wolters recently highlighted this concept as part of his prepared testimony before the Senate, stating that dynamic force employment

complements USEUCOM's permanent, forward-stationed forces; balancing the two is an effective way to increase combat capability while minimizing costs. . . . DFE provides episodic presence of additional, rapidly-deployable forces that bolster USEUCOM's combat capability, operational flexibility and deterrent posture. These limited-duration deployments allow a more balanced global force posture while increasing readiness and interoperability.<sup>60</sup>

Russia's aggressive actions and military buildup near NATO's borders are likely to continue during the course of the next decade. As Secretary of State Pompeo stated recently, the Arctic "has become an arena for power and for competition," all the more so because reductions in sea ice are opening new passageways that Russia hopes to control in both the short and long term.<sup>61</sup> With the vulnerabilities that still exist on the northern flank—which could ultimately threaten stability in the larger North Atlantic area—a relatively small increase in the U.S. Marine Corps presence in Norway (as well as in Iceland) would be a cost-effective way to improve the security situation in the region. Accordingly, a more robust role for the Marine Corps should include four essential elements, which are outlined below.

### **Element #1: Increase Size of Rotational Force in Norway**

The Marine Corps should further increase the size and strength of the rotational unit in Norway; it should deploy all elements of a MAGTF—command, ground, aviation, and logistics—to provide for more effective training based on real-life combat scenarios. Maintaining an infantry battalion (as is the current case) is valuable, but the key to the Marine Corps' success lies in the MAGTF; if a crisis were to occur, having a MAGTF in theater would allow for a much faster and more effective response, as that particular unit would already be well integrated with host nation and other NATO forces. Furthermore, the challenges posed by the harsh climate and topography require that all elements of a MAGTF train and acclimate prior to any major operation; this is especially critical for aviation, as operating and maintaining aircraft in such conditions requires prior experience doing so. A larger unit could also make better use of the equipment and vehicles stored in the MCPP-N locations, which are only occasionally pulled out for certain exercises and training scenarios. Given the significant investment that both the United States and Norwegian governments have already made in this program, deploying more Marines to the region would ensure a better return on this investment.

Of course, further increasing the size of MRF-E would require an affirmative decision by the Norwegian government, which has extended the mission (in its current state) for the next five years and will reevaluate its future in 2022.<sup>62</sup> Norwegian diplomats stress that, although there is broad political support for the rotational force, expanding it is not currently on the agenda.<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, changes in the security situation in the Arctic, as well as indications from the Marine Corps about its willingness to take on a larger mission, could quickly change the political calculus. Furthermore, as the various MRF-E rotations build positive relations with their host communities and continue to prove their value to the Norwegian Armed Forces, they pave the way for building even more public support for such a decision. Norway's Brigadier General

**Figure 2.** Marine Rotational Force-Europe hikes with a combat load during Exercise White Ulfberht in Setermoen, Norway, 14 January 2019



*Official U.S. Marine Corps photo, courtesy Cpl Ashley McLaughlin.*

Lervik supports expanding MRF-E to include artillery, as well as fixed-wing and rotary-wing aviation, to “increase both the deterrence and interoperability effects.”<sup>64</sup>

### **Element #2: Deploy a Rotational Force to Iceland**

If the Marine Corps is truly committed to securing NATO’s northern flank, it must think beyond Norway and consider other places its presence would be beneficial for deterrence and defense, as well as for effective cold weather training. A possible option would be to deploy a small rotational force to Iceland, a NATO member that maintains no standing military but has had a strong relationship with U.S. armed forces in the past. In fact, the 1951 bilateral defense agreement stipulates that the United States should “make arrangements regarding the defense of Iceland” is still in force.<sup>65</sup> Despite leaving the country in 2006, the U.S. Navy recently returned to Iceland; it is upgrading Naval Air Station Keflavik and deploying P-8 Poseidon aircraft for maritime surveillance and patrolling.<sup>66</sup> Given Iceland’s geostrategic location and the critical role it would play in the defense of North Atlantic SLOCs, the Marine Corps should consider contributing to a Joint Force effort to strengthen the nation’s security posture.

With the Navy having already laid the initial groundwork for a larger U.S. military presence, the Marine Corps could contribute a small rotational force

to train with the Icelandic Police and provide additional proof of the U.S. commitment to the North Atlantic. In fact, Marines from 24th MEU gained some familiarity with Iceland during Trident Juncture 18; they rehearsed an airborne assault to secure key airfields and infrastructure before moving on to Norway for the main phase of the exercise.<sup>67</sup> Iceland offers a climate and topography similar to that of Norway, thus Marines would also gain valuable cold weather experience while building relationships with another NATO ally.

### **Element #3: Participate in More Training Opportunities and Exercises in Europe**

In the past few years, the Marine Corps has gradually increased its level of participation in NATO and national exercises in Europe; it should continue to prioritize these opportunities to forge relationships and strengthen interoperability with allied nations.<sup>68</sup> Exercises on the scale of Trident Juncture will be rare, but NATO members maintain a robust, year-round schedule of smaller exercises that would still benefit (and benefit from) Marines. These include winter exercises in Norway, Poland, and the Baltic region for cold weather training, as well as the annual maritime exercise BALTOPS. BALTOPS is especially valuable from the perspective of naval integration, as it combines air, maritime, ground, and amphibious operations to secure the Baltic Sea. In recent years, Marines from 26th MEU have participated. As Marine Corps commanders consider future MEU and MEB deployments, they should include engagements in the High North as critical components of their plans.

NATO partners Sweden and Finland have also stepped up their national exercise schedule in response to Russian aggression in the region; Marines took part in Aurora in 2017 (Sweden) and Arrow in 2018 and 2019 (Finland). Despite the fact that they are not NATO members, these two countries work closely with the alliance and share Norway's climate and topography, as well as some of Norway's security concerns. If the Marine Corps is to improve its ability to operate in the High North, building relationships with Sweden and Finland should be a key part of its strategy. Exercises (along with rotational deployments, as mentioned above) are still more cost-effective than permanently basing Marines in Europe; they also strengthen deterrence by demonstrating that the Marine Corps' ability to reinforce NATO's northern flank has not atrophied.

### **Element #4: Maintain High Standards of Cold Weather Preparedness in the United States**

As discussed earlier, the Marine Corps' focus on Norway fits within the larger effort to strengthen cold weather training and readiness within the Service. In addition to the rotational forces and military engagements in Europe, II MEF

**Figure 3.** Marine Corps Prepositioning Program-Norway vehicles for an exercise in Norway



*Official U.S. Marine Corps photo, courtesy 2dLt Brett Lazaroff.*

should continue to spearhead the Marine Corps' efforts to maintain the appropriate standards of cold weather preparedness, which is a key priority for the Commandant. This starts at home, with training at the Mountain Warfare Training Center and at other military facilities in states such as Wisconsin and Alaska. It also requires investment into the right clothing, equipment, vehicles, and gear, some of which is still quite inadequate for extended use in harsh environments.

II MEF deputy commander Major General Stephen M. Neary emphasizes that the Marine Corps must be trained and equipped to conduct cold weather operations: "We're having a dialogue at the senior levels to make sure that we have that capability."<sup>69</sup> Of course, it is neither realistic nor necessary to train every Marine in II MEF for this, but the Marine Corps should consider which units are the most likely to deploy to cold regions and invest in the appropriate training for them. The difficulties of operating in a cold weather environment are well-documented, and II MEF cannot afford to get caught unprepared for such operations.

### **Lessons Learned: How European Deployments and Exercises Strengthen Both Marine Corps and Host Nation Capabilities**

American and Norwegian officers and diplomats agree on the value of maintaining a rotational force in Europe and deploying Marines to train and exercise in theater, pointing to how these initiatives benefit Norway, the United States, and NATO as a whole. Norway's Brigadier General Lervik argues that the lev-



**Figure 4.** Marines participate in a snowmobile course in Norway



*Official U.S. Marine Corps photo, courtesy Cpl Elijah J. Abernathy.*

el of interoperability achieved between the Marine Corps and the Norwegian Armed Forces would be impossible without a rotational force on the ground. Marines and Norwegian soldiers train closely together, allowing them to establish common TTPs and maintain technical interoperability in areas such as logistics and communications.<sup>70</sup> II MEF's Major General Neary agrees that MRF-E provides invaluable training for Marines, not least of all because it gives them an opportunity to build relationships with the host nation military and government. Essentially, it is an investment in the relationship so "they know that in a time of crisis they can count on us, and vice versa" because "you can't surge trust during a crisis."<sup>71</sup>

The deployment of the rotational force has strengthened both the Marine Corps and the Norwegian armed forces. As a Norwegian diplomat explains, "to train with a group of people like the U.S. Marine Corps—they are very well trained, they have high standards, they are well-organized, they have good equipment—makes us better too."<sup>72</sup> Major General Neary points to Norwegians' familiarity with and proficiency in cold weather operations as a major benefit for the Marines who work with them and learn from them.<sup>73</sup>

It is important to note that U.S. Marines are not the only ones who see the immense value of strengthening deterrence in NATO's north and training in Norway; both British and Dutch Royal Marines have long-established relationships with the country as well. Indeed, Gavin Williamson, who served

**Figure 5.** Marines and Norwegian Army soldiers during Exercise White Ulfberht

Official U.S. Marine Corps photo, courtesy Cpl Ashley McLaughlin.

as the British defense secretary until May 2019, detailed his country's new Defense Arctic Strategy, which commits one thousand Royal Marines to train in Norway each year, for a minimum of 10 years.<sup>74</sup> The United Kingdom and the Netherlands are also making significant contributions to NATO's northern flank, recognizing that the region's vulnerability and strategic importance call for a stronger response. Through MRF-E, the Marine Corps is establishing closer relationships and building interoperability with other forces as well, creating the basis for an allied response to a potential security crisis. This cooperation between the United States, British, and Dutch Marines in Norway is one of NATO's greatest combination of amphibious and ground combat capabilities and a valuable force multiplier to each contributing nation and the alliance as a whole.

## Conclusion

Speaking at NATO headquarters in Brussels in June 2019, then-Acting Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper reconfirmed the U.S. commitment to its allies: "Whatever the form of Russian aggression, the United States will continue to lead NATO to adapt its deterrence and defense posture. . . . Our security guarantees have been the bedrock of European security for [70 years]. Those guarantees remain."<sup>75</sup> Both the *National Security Strategy* and the *National Defense Strategy* identify Russia as the greatest threat to transatlantic unity and

security, clearly setting the top strategic priority for the U.S. military in Europe. EUCOM has put much of the additional funding provided by EDI during the past five years toward a significant reinforcement of American capabilities in the east, following NATO's lead. At the same time, the Marine Corps has deployed rotational units to Norway to mitigate some of the vulnerabilities on the northern flank, but this does not go far enough in addressing the serious security challenges that remain in the region in light of Russia's renewed focus on the Arctic. Indeed, the magnitude of the security challenges in the region demand that the Marine Corps invest more resources in this area. Increasing the size of MRF-E to include all MAGTF elements, deploying a small rotational force to Iceland, participating in more European exercises, and ensuring that II MEF units are prepared for cold weather operations would go a long way toward demonstrating that the United States is serious about the defense of NATO's northern flank in cooperation with other NATO Allies—and has the ability to carry out this defense if necessary. Effective deterrence is about demonstrating both the capability and the will to come to the aid of NATO allies, as General Scaparrotti pointed out in his testimony.<sup>76</sup>

Discussions about how the Marine Corps can and should contribute to European security are certainly reminiscent of similar debates from the 1970s–80s, when the Department of Defense ultimately decided that the 4th MAB would be responsible for the reinforcement of Norway in the event of a conflict with the Soviet Union. Fortunately, the historical ties between the Marine Corps and the Norwegian armed forces have established the basis for their continued cooperation in the face of Russia's increasingly aggressive foreign policy and military activities. Although the bulk of the Marine Corps' attention and resources are being devoted to the Pacific, it cannot and should not ignore the security threats to NATO allies. Ensuring stability in Europe and deterring a conflict with Russia requires that the entire Joint Force maintain a high level of readiness in theater. Major General Neary argues that Russia is “an opportunistic adversary,” looking to exploit any possible weakness in the U.S. force posture in Europe. “If Marines are to be the crisis response force for America, we can't just be Pacific focused—we must be global,” he maintains.<sup>77</sup>

During the course of its history, the Marine Corps has been forced to adapt to the changing threat environment, often having to prove its continued relevance and significance along the way. The renewed focus on great power competition offers Marines both a challenge and an opportunity: they must relearn how to fight in cold weather environments, preparing to defend against a sophisticated, near-peer adversary by working with host nations and other forces. Nonetheless, the Marine Corps has proven time and again that it lives up to its reputation as a flexible, adaptable, and cost-effective rapid response force, one that is critical to preventing tensions from escalating into a larger conflict.

As the entire Joint Force prepares to take on an increasingly complex security situation shaped by Russia's global aspirations, the Marine Corps will have an essential role to play in maintaining stability on NATO's northern flank.

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