

Norway's New Air Base, Part of the Strategic Encirclement of Russia

The Militarization of Scandinavia. Massive Cost Overruns for New Norwegian Air Base, Total Costs May Reach at Least \$5 Billion

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The Norwegian air force is in the process of redeploying the operational centre of its forces. Earlier, during the cold war, the main air bases were located in northern towns, such as Bodø and Andenes. The new main air base will be located at Ørland, situated 500 kilometres further south, in the middle of this long country, at the entrance of the [Trondheim-fjord](#).

The area around this fjord has been subject to heavy US interest. Since January, a deployment of US marines has been stationed close by, in Værnes, formally on a 'rotational' basis. This force is set to double in size, now to 650 marines. [The Marine Corps](#) is enthusiastic about their new base, and hope to make it into a major hub for their forces in Europe. Amongst other things, this area offers easy access roads to Sweden, where these forces will participate in a major military exercises this coming September.

For planners in Washington, the Scandinavian peninsula is obviously regarded as a strategically important area, and they give it attention. They envision this base area to be part of the strategic encirclement of Russia. Especially important is the enhancement of ABM-systems that are being built all around the Russian borders. Both Denmark and Norway are contributing seaborne parts to the US ABM-shield, based on frigates. Another place the US would really like to build a base is the Swedish island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea, [as described](#) by this author earlier.



Marines on May 8, 2017, walk away from the entrance of Frigaard Cave, where the service stores hundreds of vehicles and other gear as part of Marine Corps Prepositioning Program-Norway. (Source: Hope Hodge Seck/[Military.com](#))

These forces are a part of the drive to militarize the Scandinavian peninsula. One major objective is to get Sweden (and Finland) to join NATO. Since this cannot be done easily without a referendum (which they might lose), the Swedish and NATO military leadership hope to integrate Sweden and Finland in NATO-structures to such an extent that the line between formal neutrality and membership in the alliance will not be discernible. Sweden recently said it wishes to join a British-led "Joint Expeditionary Force", making Swedish participation in a general European war all but inevitable.



Places mentioned in the text: Evenes to the north; Ørland furthest west; Verdalen a bit to the right of Ørland; Gotland to the south. (Source: [Midt i fleisen](#))

In May, Ørland was host for the biennial military exercise “Arctic Challenge Exercise 2017”, [where](#) over 100 planes from 12 nations participated, including fighter jets, transport aircrafts, tankers, AWACS, helicopters and aircrafts for electronic warfare. [ACE](#) “provides the participants a great opportunity to plan and engage in a big scenario exercise close to the reality”. This year, for the first time, a US bomber plane of the model B-52H participated. This only illustrates that nuclear forces will be an integral part of any future war. Influential Norwegian officers have also [mooted the idea](#) that Norwegian forces should rely more on nuclear weapons in the future, which ties in neatly with the purchase of the F-35s.

The area offers several other advantages. It can easily be resupplied from the Atlantic Ocean by sea or air, as it offers excellent harbours, access to blue water, and several developed airfields. As a historical aside, the area’s convenient strategic location was noted by the Germans navy during the occupation, 1940-45. Albert Speer planned to build a major city and naval base, “[Nordstern](#)”, on the south side of the fjord, but the plan never got off the drawing board, since the changing fortunes of war made construction unrealistic.

“Time is on their side”

One of the main reasons for the expansion of the base is that Norway bought 56 planes of

the type “F-35 Lightning” from Lockheed Martin. The deal was [originally](#) announced to cost NOK 18 billion kroner, but it quickly became clear the the real cost in fact was NOK 62.7 billion (\$ 7.5 billion). The official cost estimates were NOK 248 billion (\$ 29 billion) “over their lifetime.”

Not calculated in this price, or well hidden from scrutiny, was the need to build a new airbase to accommodate these planes. Ørland was chosen in 2012, with the original price tag of NOK 5 billion, although this sum was disputed by some experts as too optimistic. The older base in Bodø was seen as too difficult to expand, (but maybe Washington had a say in this decision as well). By 2014, the price had doubled, to close to NOK 11 billion (\$ 1.3 billion). By April 2016, it was clear that the costs would be NOK 18 billion (\$ 2.1 billion). According [to independent expert Cato Monrad](#), the costs may well be “over NOK 25 billion (\$3 billion), and this is just the start”. He writes:

First things first: One already knows in advance the Parliament never would approve an investment of NOK 40 billion (\$ 4.7 billion) when there exists a better alternative. So then one needs a plan...

To reach a political objective that doesn't make sense economically [...] the cost overrun in the project is explained, or explained away, in many different ways: unexpected expenses, a changed security situation, stricter environmental rules, new NATO-demands, etc. One favourite sentence much used is: ‘the minister did not then have information about increased costs, and can therefore not be held responsible for the overruns’. In addition, time is on the Defence Ministry's side.

The Defence Ministry strenuously denies these charges, saying the costs were already known to Parliament when the decision was made.

Of course, cynics might say that freely spending from the [sovereign wealth fund](#) with an estimated value of 1 trillion dollars helps to smooth over these cost overruns and make them less of a political issue.

AEGIS ashore or not, “this is not a missile shield”

The location is also generally out of range of the Russian Iskander missile (range: 500 kilometres), but missiles strikes against the air base are no doubt a worry for planners. The location might give them hope of enough reaction time against incoming missiles in case of war. At least this seems to be the official reasoning.

The Norwegian defence forces regard Ørland as one of the most natural places for deployment of a recently announced new long range air defence missiles. Another natural location is Evenes, another air base 500 kilometres to the north, next to another major forward deployment area for US forces and a heavily militarized area.

[The Norwegian defence chief](#) Haakon Bruun-Hanssen says



Haakon Bruun-Hanssen, Chief of Defence of Norway (Source: NATO)

“this is not a missile shield. We are talking about air defences to protect our bases, which are important for all air operations. They will also protect these same areas which are important to receive allied support.”

Researcher Ståle Henriksen at the government research agency NUPI is excited about which system which will be chosen.

“The most provoking system for the Russians would be a system that is able to shoot down their strategic missiles in the launch phase on their way to the US. This could be the air defence system AEGIS, but only long range missiles, and not of the type that already exists on the frigates.”

The frigates in question have the system AGEGIS afloat.

To sum up, Norwegian forces seem to suffer from the same problem with procurement bloat as US forces, where seemingly generous funding does not deliver the wanted operational ability. Cost overruns, bad planning and acquisitions based on both national and international politics and lobbying are perennial problems in the defence sector.

The land forces have tied up their resources in rapid response units with anything but territorial defence missions. Since May this year, some of the forces are stationed Lithuania as part of a NATO multinational force under German command. The most recent adventure is officially to train and support groups of Syrian opposition fighters near the Syrian town of al-Tanf.

The air force have chosen to put all their eggs in one basket with the acquisition of these new still unproven F-35 5th generation fighters.

The result is a forced reliance on US expeditionary forces. Since Norwegian and NATO forces become more operationally interdependent, it will be harder and harder to deny future US requests. Theoretically this might even include being pressured into a more assertive nuclear posture.

(All sums quoted in the article use June 2017 exchange rates, and might not reflect the cost at the time.)

Terje Maloy is a Norwegian/Australian translator and blogger.

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