

Norway's relationship with Russia: The principle of balance between deterrence and reassurance

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Norway has a smaller population than Russia, a smaller territory, less military equipment, and no nuclear weapons. Yet, the country has

managed to avoid war with its neighbor to the east.

Perhaps part of the reason lies in a political strategy that Norway, more or less consciously, has followed since the aftermath of World War II: a balance between deterrence and reassurance.

Associate professor of history, James Cameron at the University of Oslo, argues that this strategy still holds true to a large extent, even though Norway's relationship with Russia has deteriorated in recent years.

However, finding the right balance can be challenging, he points out.

"We can draw valuable lessons from Norway's experiences during the Cold War," says Cameron, who recently published an [article](#) on the topic in the *Journal of Strategic Studies*.

The article is part of a special issue on [security policy](#) in the Nordic region, which will be published in its entirety later this year.

Ideas that became guiding principles for security policy

It was the Norwegian political scientist and Labor Party politician Johan Jørgen Holst who, in 1967, created a [theoretical framework](#) for Norway's policy towards the Soviet Union.

To some extent, the policy was already established, but Holst, then 30 years old, introduced the concepts of deterrence and reassurance: he wrote that Norway, on the one hand, would deter the Soviet Union through its membership in NATO and close ties to the United States.

On the other hand, the country aimed to reassure Moscow that Norway

would not become a base for a NATO attack. Norway declined to base NATO troops and [nuclear weapons](#) on its territory in peacetime. The country also refused NATO exercises near the border of the Soviet Union, as well as maritime and military air activities.

With such restrictions, Norway stood apart from many other countries, Cameron explains.

7,000 nuclear weapons, but not a single one in Norway

"At the end of the 1960s, a total of 7,000 American nuclear weapons were deployed across Western Europe, but not a single one in Norway. Holst questioned how such a policy could be explained, and that's how he developed his theories," Cameron explains.

Looking back, it is often difficult to grasp the fundamental significance of such a theoretical contribution, Cameron believes.

"Today, we take these concepts for granted. However, when an understanding evolves to become something self-evident and a foundation for security policy for many years to come, it says something about how important it may have been."

"All along, Norwegian policy has been about finding the right balance between deterrence and reassurance," he adds.

Both a scientist and a politician

Johan Jørgen Holst was a scientist. He spent several years at prestigious universities in the U.S. at a time when researchers like economist Thomas C. Schelling were developing their game-theoretical ideas about nuclear weapons.

At the same time, Holst was a Norwegian politician. He would become both Minister of Defense and Minister of Foreign Affairs and was instrumental in the Oslo Accords in the Middle East in 1993. He passed away from illness in January 1994.

Cameron believes that this mix—coming from and remaining loyal to a small country, while being exposed to intellectual thinkers in a superpower—provided Holst with a unique starting point.

"In the 1960s, many were talking and writing about nuclear weapons strategies and stability. But what if you're not a superpower? How do you explain your position in a major conflict, and how do you develop a strategy? Others wrote about this as well, but Holst's theories stood out," Cameron explains.

We can learn from past failures

Since the 1960s, Norway and the West have had both a cold and a warmer relationship with the Soviet Union and Russia. A development that seemed to be heading towards friendship in the 1990s would once again deteriorate, especially when Russia initiated a full-scale invasion against Ukraine in 2022.

Cameron believes that today we can learn something from the experiences of the Cold War: from Holst's own bitter experiences.

During the transition between the 1970s and 80s, the relationship between the West and the Soviet Union was poor. At the same time, Norway, especially the Labor Party, strongly desired to maintain a policy of reassurance towards the Soviet Union.

At this time, Holst was a state secretary, first in the Ministry of Defense, and then in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"He tried to maintain a good relationship with the U.S. and initially succeeded," Cameron says.

Did not want nuclear weapons in the Nordic region

Holst was instrumental in securing Norwegian support for NATO's decision to deploy a new generation of nuclear weapons to Europe. A debate about the deployment of American military equipment in Norway ended with the understanding that it was acceptable if the equipment was placed in Trøndelag, not in Northern Norway. This solely applied to conventional weapons and not systems capable of delivering nuclear weapons.

But then things escalated. In his New Year's speech in 1981, then-Prime Minister Odvar Nordli announced his support for the establishment of a Nordic nuclear-weapon-free zone, an idea Finland had advocated for earlier.

"The timing was terrible. The Soviet Union was in the process of deploying a new generation of nuclear weapons, which NATO was trying to balance out. Most allies saw Norway's new position as an obstacle," says Cameron.

Holst tried for a long time to find a solution. But when a delegation, including Foreign Minister Knut Olav Frydenlund, traveled to the U.S., they were told by one of the U.S. secretaries that if Norway joined a nuclear-weapon-free zone, he would not recommend President Reagan to protect Norway in case of war.

The greatest chance for success

Norway eventually had to scale down its efforts. There are no nuclear

weapons in the Nordic region today, but there is also no international agreement prohibiting other countries from deploying their nuclear weapons in the region.

This became Holst's first unsuccessful attempt to find a mutually agreed Norwegian-American balance between deterrence and reassurance, according to Cameron.

The researcher believes that we can learn something from this example today.

"I believe it is possible to maintain a certain level of reassurance even when the relationship between East and West is poor," he says, and continues:

"But perhaps the best way to do so when the relationship is deteriorating is not to initiate completely new initiatives for reassurance that appear detached from the rest of the allies' policies. You have a greater chance of success if you take deterrent actions and downplay them using reassuring elements," he says.

This is what Holst and his contemporaries did when they accepted the deployment of American [military equipment](#) in Norway—but no further north than Trøndelag. Holst managed to convince the Americans that Trøndelag was a good location, also for the Americans themselves.

Is Russia really reassured?

Times change, and so do politics. Nuclear weapons are currently a less important part of NATO's military strategies than they were before, partly because NATO's collective conventional forces are now more balanced against the Russian threat. New technologies have also become more important, according to Cameron.

Questions have been raised regarding how Russia perceives Norway's security policy. "The fact that Norway, at its own discretion, signals and practices both deterrence and reassurance does not mean that Russia perceives it that way," wrote NUPI researcher Julie Wilhelmsen in 2022.

In his article, Cameron writes that historically, the reassuring measures may not have primarily reassured Moscow, but they have been just as important in maintaining domestic support for increased deterrence.

"Therefore, I believe that reassurance will continue to be important in Norwegian politics, even if the primary benefit may be to secure domestic consent for increased deterrence," he says.

More information: James Cameron, Deterrence, reassurance and strategic stability: The enduring relevance of Johan Jørgen Holst, *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2024.2321135](https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2024.2321135)

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