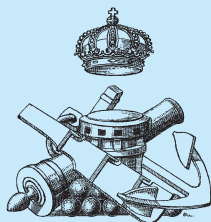


*The Northern Naval Capability Cooperation –  
A breakthrough for the European  
Defence Industry?*

*By Michiel Hijmans*



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## The Honorary Fellow MICHIEL HIJMANS

*Michiel Hijmans, ret commodore Royal Netherlands Navy, currently works for the Institute for International Relations (think-tank) Clingendael. He is also co-owner and senior trainer of the Leadership company LiDRS. Furthermore he is a senior consultant for Terma and SHDefence (DK). For the Ministry of Defense he teaches foreign students at the Netherlands Defence Academy.*

### ***The Northern Naval Capability Cooperation – A breakthrough for the European Defence Industry?***

***The European countries have to strengthen their defence capabilities in view of the various existing and emerging crises and corresponding threats. After many years of reducing defence capabilities, the time has come to step up the efforts to realise a forceful and flexible defence capability that is capable to counter new threats. To achieve this, countries have to join their efforts and utilise the power of cooperation.***

The European Union, more in particular the European Commission, has started several initiatives in this respect, eventually resulting in the European Defence Fund (EDF). The EDF supports companies in the EU members to develop competitive and collaborative defence projects that will deliver innovative and interoperable defence technologies and equipment. It offers support and advice to participants throughout the entire cycle of research and development.

Its main goals are:

1. To promote cooperation between companies, including SMEs and research actors throughout the Union.
2. To boost defence capability development through investments.
3. To help EU companies develop cutting-edge and interoperable defence technologies and equipment.

The EDF has a large budget of nearly €8 billion for 2021-2027, 1/3 rd allocated for defence research and 2/3 rd for collaborative capability development projects that complement national contributions. Although the EDF is open for all EU Member States, we see that most of the funding goes to the more southern European Countries, especially France, Spain and Italy benefit by far the most. A good reason to explore other initiatives.

Despite commonalities in the required defence capabilities, each country is developing their own naval systems and ships. This leads to high cost of development, acquisition and maintenance of naval systems and ships. It limits also interoperability and interchangeability, resulting in a less effective and sustainable operational performance. Started by a Netherlands initiative, six Northern European countries, Denmark, Germany, Finland, The Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, recognised the commonalities in their operational areas and required capabilities. They decided to utilise the potential of cooperation by exploring possibilities to joint development, production and maintenance of naval assets.

A second incentive to cooperate is to strengthen the maritime industry base in the Northern countries. The international defence market is still characterised by fragmentation, often closed (national) markets and the lack of a level playing field. To ensure and maintain operational capabilities to counter a variety of threats, the Northern countries rely on a strong and robust industry base. Cooperation will contribute to strengthening the national industry base in the individual countries, while improving the joint market position.

In 2022 they started with the Northern Naval Shipbuilding Cooperation (NNSC), but soon it was recognized that the cooperation should be broadened and 2023 the six countries explored the various options for extensive cooperation and established working groups on the first three selected topics of interest: seabed security, modular design and innovative propulsion. On 7 December 2023 the cooperation was formalised with the signing of a MOU on Northern Naval Capability Cooperation.

Identified areas of potential cooperation include, but are not limited to maritime/naval capabilities for Arctic operations; maritime/naval capabilities for blue-water and brown-water operations; maritime/naval surveillance capabilities; maritime/naval unmanned systems; lean manned concepts, naval combat systems, sensors and weapons, ship engineering systems, maritime sustainability, information and communication technology; high energy laser; high power electromagnetics and low life cycle cost concepts.

A first achievement is the formal opening of a Seabed Security Experimentation Centre (SeaSEC) on 7 December 2023 in Scheveningen, The Netherlands. The aim of SeaSEC is to assess the capabilities of existing surface and underwater equipment for use in improving the underwater situational awareness of threats to the seabed infrastructure in the North Sea and the Baltic. In the first experimentation session the capabilities of four systems were demonstrated. Furthermore, a joint Data Representation System has been provided by the Netherlands. The experimentation centre will be mobile, and as a follow on experiments will be performed also in Sweden and Germany.

The next step in strengthening the cooperation is to produce tangible results in the short term on selected topics, facilitated by a goal-oriented governance structure and actively supported by government and industries, especially by the Ministries of Economic Affairs and Defence, and the navies themselves, including their planning and procurement organizations. In parallel the governments and industries expressed the need to strengthen the joint RD&I base in selected areas on the medium to long term, involving the knowledge institutes and academia in the participating countries. This is the only way to achieve success for this cooperation.



*Picture: The formal beginning of the Netherlands Nordic Capability Cooperation by collectively pressing the start button. Third from right in the picture is the Swedish officer Captain (N) Per Öhrstedt, currently in a position at the Swedish Defence Materiel Administration (FMV). Captain Öhrstedt is also a fellow of KÖMS.*

Unfortunately a huge opportunity for NNCC was recently missed, by awarding the replacement of the Netherlands submarines to France. Saab Kockums was in the race together with the Netherlands Naval Shipyard Damen, but they couldn't compete against the extreme low price that was offered by the French. Another proof that there is no level playing field for defence industries in Europe.

Despite this latest development, the NNCC should continue to move fast forward within the afore mentioned areas of interest. A lot still needs to be done, but it can and must be done: what divides us makes news headlines, what unites us makes progress!



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**Editor-in-chief: Captain (N) Bo Rask**

**Editors address: c/o Rask, Kungl. Örlogsmannasällskapet**

**Teatergatan 3 1 tr. 111 48 STOCKHOLM,**

**SWEDEN**

**Telephone: +46 76 632 3883, E-mail: [editor@koms.se](mailto:editor@koms.se)**

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**Address for the Royal Swedish Society of Naval Sciences:**

**Kungl. Örlogsmannasällskapet, Teatergatan 3; 1 tr,**

**S- 111 48 STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN**

**Telephone: + 46 70 299 7095, E-mail: [secretary@koms.se](mailto:secretary@koms.se)**

**Address for the Society's library:**

**Kungl. Örlogsmannasällskapets bibliotek, Amiralitetstorget 7,**

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