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Regional Cooperation of the Nordic Countries Past, Present and Future Challenges

AEI Occasional Paper 27

H.E. Nicolai Ruge

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Regional Cooperation of the Nordic Countries Past, Present and Future Challenges

H.E. Nicolai Ruge

First of all, I would like to thank University of Malaya and the Asia-Europe Institute for having invited me to speak on Nordic cooperation and the Nordic region here today. I consider it an honour. I do believe that the Asia-Europe Institute plays a valuable role in enhancing Asia-Europe relations. It does so by deepening the mutual understanding of the cultures, history, politics and institutions, as well as economic, business and legal practices of Asia and Europe.

I hope that my talk here today will offer some insights on the historic and present regional cooperation among the group of countries in the far North of Europe. Which may not be the part of Europe that Malaysians tend to know the most about. I will start by giving a short historical introduction, followed by some thoughts on the importance of common values among the Nordic countries and how the Nordic welfare state is a product of those values. I will then give a brief introduction to the Nordic cooperation as institutionalised in the Nordic Council with some examples of how it has facilitated practical cooperation and, finally, I will say a bit about the challenges that the Nordic cooperation is facing in the 21st century. My talk will be supported by a few slides and I will afterwards show a short video called The Nordic Perspective, because – as the saying goes – *“one picture can say more than a thousand words”*.

[Intro – historical background]

What we today know as Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland, together with the two semi- autonomous territories in the North Atlantic Ocean, Greenland and Faroe Islands, as well as the Åland Islands in between Sweden and Finland, constitute what we today refer to as the Nordic countries.

In particular Denmark, Norway and Sweden have always been closely connected due to the geographic proximity and they share a long history. As elsewhere in the world, back in history, waterways connected more than they separated. So also in Northern Europe, it was the waterways that held the countries together throughout history.

It was as nations of seafarers that the Northern Europe came into contact with the rest of Europe in a big way, when they during the Viking era ravaged, traded with and settled in many parts of Europe. Those familiar with British history may know that many cities in nowadays UK and Ireland was founded by Vikings, York being one example. But the Vikings also went eastwards up the rivers of what is now Russia and

down along the coast of continental Europe to, among others, Bretagne in France. In the Northern Atlantic Ocean, the territories of Iceland, Faroe Islands and Greenland were colonised by the Vikings and gradually became an integral part of the Nordic Region.

After conversion to Christianity from traditional religious beliefs connected to Norse mythology, three northern kingdoms emerged in the 11th century, namely Denmark, Norway and a modern-day Finland was gradually incorporated into the kingdom of Sweden in the 12th and 13th centuries. Only then did what we today call the Nordic Region established itself as a political force to be reckoned with in Europe.

For a brief period in the 14th century, Norway, Sweden and Denmark were ruled over by the same king. Politically, the three kingdoms have always been closely interwoven – the royal families intermarried, entered into alliances and fought each other in numerous wars.

From the late 14th until the early 16th century, the whole region was united as the Kalmar Union. A loose union, in which each kingdom retained its own laws and was ruled by its native elite. Despite all its flaws it was a significant first attempt at a voluntary union among the Nordic countries. For more than 120 years, Sweden, Norway and Denmark were committed to act as a single state in foreign affairs and aid each other in times of war as well as take steps to further trade among themselves. Quite remarkably: More than five hundred years before NATO and the EU, the Nordic countries realized that together we stand stronger.

However, although the Kalmar Union brought peace to the Nordic Region for a while, it was not a durable political construction. The Kalmar Union fell apart, and two new states emerged; the united Kingdom of Denmark and Norway, under Danish supremacy, and on the other hand, Sweden. The rivalry over trade and political influence was intense and they each did their best to crush each other in numerous wars to become the dominant power in the region. The territories of Iceland and the Faroe Islands fell under the Danish crown, while Finland remained part of the kingdom of Sweden.

During a war in the 17th century, Denmark–Norway was forced to cede large territories to Sweden. Subsequently, in what is known as The Great Nordic War from 1700 to 1721, Sweden lost most of its territories outside the old Swedish borders, including Finland, which came to belong to Russia. In turn, as part of the Napoleonic Wars, in 1814 Denmark lost Norway to Sweden, but managed through skillful diplomacy to keep the territories of Iceland, Faroe Islands and Greenland.

The Norwegian–Swedish union survived until the inevitable Norwegian wish for independence grew too strong to suppress. Sweden accepted to negotiate a peaceful dissolution of the union, and Norway finally gained independence from Sweden in 1905. A similar strong sense of nationalism developed in Iceland, which gradually,

through peaceful means, managed to acquire greater autonomy from Denmark. The Nordic region managed by and large to avoid being drawn into the First World War, but they were turbulent years for all of Europe. Finland seceded from Russia during the Russian Revolution in 1917, Iceland gained full independence in 1918 and the Åland Islands was granted autonomy in 1922.

Among the points to take away from this speed-introduction to the history of the Nordic countries is that the region certainly has not always been the region of peace and stability it is today. The Nordic Region has since the emergence of embryonic nation states a thousand years ago, had its borders redrawn again and again. At the same time as it remained as closely bound together in destiny as ever. Besides cultural bonds, the economic cooperation was strengthened very tangibly with the establishment of the Currency Union of Denmark, Sweden and Norway, which lasted from 1873 until the outbreak of the First World War. The common currency adopted was the krone, which means “crown” in English. It was the Euro of its day and although no longer being pegged to each other, the three countries currencies are still one hundred years later known as “krone” as neither Denmark nor Sweden has yet adopted the Euro.

Another key take-away from this historical intro is that after centuries of bitter wars, the struggles over national identity and independence ended with independence being gained through peaceful means. The Nordic countries have not been at war with each other since the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. They have in other words now been at peace with each other for 200 years, which – unfortunately – is a remarkable achievement and one which differentiate the region from just about every other part of the world. It is also telling of the low level of violence that has epitomized Nordic political culture in recent centuries. Which bring me to say something about common values.

[Common values]

The Nordic cooperation is based on a deep-rooted, shared set of values evolving around respect for the individual citizen in society. Today, we know these values as democratic influence, individual freedom, social equality, gender equality and a society based on rule of law.

The Nordic countries have a long democratic tradition. In the 18th century, the aristocracies of Denmark, Sweden and Norway replaced absolute monarchy with the first steps towards democratic representation. Initially only for men of certain wealth and high age, but the influence of libertarian movements and revolutionary events in Europe pushed from an early stage the emerging democracies to continue to evolve and mature. Later, more home-grown movements for social justice drove the development. In particular peasant cooperative movements, but also later as the countries slowly industrialised, the labour unions, the civil rights movements and

women's rights movements can be accredited for having shaped today's Nordic countries into mature democracies, with a high degree of public participation in elections and decision-making at the municipal, local and national level.

Norway saw its first constitution as early as 1814, when it separated from Denmark, which brought about significant enfranchisement for adult males, and strengthened the role of the parliament. In Denmark, peaceful political pressure led the King to voluntarily give up his absolute powers in 1849 and introduce the country's first democratic constitution. Sweden saw its first elected parliament in 1866, whereas in Finland it took until 1907.

Despite having been gently pushed from power, the royal houses in Denmark, Norway and Sweden have survived as a historic relic with the reigning King or Queen serving as the formal Head of State. Finland and Iceland, who have never had their own royal house, have instead opted for presidents elected by popular vote.

Considering that today, 8 March, is the International Women's Day I am particularly pleased to note how the women's right movement was successful in pushing for the Nordic countries to be among the first in the world to allow women to vote and stand for national parliament. Finland was first in 1907, followed by Norway in 1913, Denmark and Iceland in 1915, and Sweden in 1919. The percentage of women in parliament is among the highest in the world. Except from Sweden, all Nordic countries have had women as either prime ministers or as elected presidents.

It didn't take long before the political interests of vested economic interests in society, such as large landholders, small farmers, craftsmen, traders and factory works began to express themselves in the form of political parties. Since the early 19th century, the political systems in the Nordic countries have been very similar structured, multi-party parliamentary democracies.

The high degree of political accountability, clear separation of powers and high level of education, has over time translated into strong institutions. Combined with a free press, this has in turn been a key factor in virtually eliminating corruption from the Nordic countries. Today, it is considered self-evident that corruption should not be tolerated and the detection of the slightest abuse of entrusted public power or corruption among private business entities is met with public disgust and harsh punishments.

We like to think of social trust as a value in itself, even though it is of course a product of moral values and ethics imbedded and passed on through the educational system and religious institutions, combined with strong, reliable public institutions such as the judiciary and police.

Surveys show that people in the Nordic countries don't just trust their family and friends, but also people they don't know. A good example of this – which is often pointed out by foreigners – is how mothers happily leave their babies in the pram on

the pavement, while going in-door for shopping groceries or having a cup of coffee in a café. The same surveys show that globally, only one in four people believe, that they can generally trust other people, whereas in the Nordic countries, that number is three in four, which is a world record. High level of trust leads to more and better opportunities for cooperation and also leads to better and stronger civil societies.

Equal opportunity in the educational system and on the job market, regardless of gender, ethnicity or parents' social status, is another essential Nordic common value. Equality and fairness. Social mobility and gender equality combined with income redistribution through a progressive tax system, has led the Nordic countries to have some of the lowest levels of inequality in the world, measured by the so-called Gini-coefficient.

According to the UN World Happiness Report, it is the combination of such factors as individual freedom, social trust, social and personal security, wealth, gender equality, democratic influence, a good work-life balance, and a strong civil society that explain why the Nordic countries are among the happiest in the world. Even though economic wealth is important for people to be happy, repeated studies show that these other, less material, factors are just as important.

[The Nordic welfare state]

The Nordic welfare state is a clear product of our common values. It obviously did not materialise overnight, but evolved over almost 100 years. Each Nordic country developed quite similar welfare models, but all under a set of specific, historical, cultural and economic circumstances, albeit all with quite homogeneous populations and shared values. More than any other social force for change, it was the labour movement and its political expression in the form of the social democratic parties that sowed the seeds of what later became the Nordic welfare state we know today.

Essentially, the Nordic welfare state is characterized by universal access to health care and education, social benefits and a state-guaranteed pension, financed through a high level of direct and indirect taxation. Social security from cradle to grave, so to speak.

We do pay high taxes. The Nordic countries top the list of countries in the world that pay the most income tax in the world. But the taxpayers do get something in return, they get value for money. Fundamentally, the State works. It delivers quality health and education, and those entitled to social benefits receive them as per their entitlement. So while there is certainly a political platform to stand on for those who advocate lower taxes, it has evidently not been popular enough for the welfare state to be dismantled.

That is not to say that the welfare state has not been in need of trimming and adjustment. Probably the single most important factor that has forced a selective scaling-back of the welfare state is demography. As all other developed countries, the Nordic countries also have to adjust to having a relatively smaller proportion of the population in the working age. So the relatively fewer people on the labour market, paying income tax, and at the same time a relatively larger proportion of the population receiving various form of public pension and other kinds of social transfers, has necessitated changes. The retirement age has for instance been increased while certain social benefits have been reduced.

The welfare state, however, remain coveted because it is generally considered to provide that fundamental basis in society that is indispensable for generating continued equitable social development and economic growth. A well-educated population, a strong civil society, stable democratic traditions and an effective regulatory framework, has led to the creation of what many international economic observers consider one of the biggest intangible benefits of the welfare state; an extensive social capital. That social capital is described as the glue that makes society work by reducing conflict and friction in society. It should not, however, be mistaken for general political consensus, since political differences and debates can be as heated as anywhere in the world.

In all of the Nordic countries, the state and the public sector have played important roles in the economic sphere, but primarily through investment in infrastructure, education and research, as well as in terms of providing social welfare. The state has only to a limited extend been directly involved in production and manufacturing, and those government-linked companies that are left are all run on private sector, commercial terms.

You can say that the Nordic countries today are a peculiar combination of competitive capitalism and social welfare state. It has been described by economists as a bumblebee, which refers to the anecdote that a bumblebee's body is too big compared to the size of its wings, and therefore it should not be able to fly – yet it does. Likewise, the Nordic welfare state should be too heavy with taxes and public spending to be economically competitive – yet we continue to be among the most competitive and prosperous countries.

One example of what makes the bumblebee fly is the Danish so-called flexicurity model. A term that was first coined in the 1990s and which combines the words “flexibility” and “security”. It refers to a system, where there is a high degree of labor market flexibility, meaning that it is easy for employers to hire and fire employees, at the same time as there is a high degree of security for employees, meaning access to generous unemployment benefits and help to re-enter the labor market.

Many laissez-faire economists have said that the Nordic welfare model has outlived its usefulness – that it can't cope with global competition that the tax burden is too high and that companies and the wealthy would be fleeing abroad. But the fact is that the Nordic countries are among the top 25 richest countries per capita in the world. And regarding business environment, they are in top-10 of the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index and the World Economic Forum's Competitiveness Index.

[The Nordic Council]

Let me now turn to some specifics on Nordic cooperation.

After the Second World War, Europe was in turmoil and the politicians of the time strived for stronger international co-operation. This was the time when the United Nations was established, the Council of Europe was created and the first steps were taken towards what since became the European Union. Discussions on closer Nordic cooperation also intensified and in the 1952 the Nordic Council was founded as a forum for permanent cooperation among the parliaments of the Nordic countries. Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden initially formed the Council. Finland joined a few years later and, later again, the Faroe Islands, Åland and Greenland joined as they gained autonomy.

Nordic citizens seem to appreciate Nordic cooperation a bit like motherhood and apple pie; everyone is for it. And there is no doubt that when the Nordic countries are able to cooperate as closely as they do, a lot has to do with the common values I touched upon earlier.

The key institution, however, which drives Nordic cooperation, is the Nordic Council. The objective of the Nordic Council is to promote deeper and closer cooperation among the Nordic countries within the limits set by the individual member states' existing political, economic and security allegiances.

The Council, which is formally known as the Nordic Committee for Cooperation, consists of 87 members of national parliaments and are nominated by their party group. Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden each have 20 members. Of these, two of the Danish representatives are from the Faroe Islands and two are from Greenland, while Finland has two representatives from Åland and Iceland has seven members

The Nordic Council of Ministers was founded in 1971 and actually consists of several individual councils of ministers. Nordic ministers for specific policy areas meet in their respective council of ministers a couple of times a year. There are currently 10 constellations of councils of ministers for specific policy areas. Each country also have a dedicated Minister for Nordic Cooperation, which in Malaysia would be same as having a single overall Minister for ASEAN Cooperation. Decisions taken in any councils of ministers are by consensus.

To make the work of the Nordic Council more transparent, the three very similar Scandinavian languages of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish are the official working languages. For meetings of the Nordic Council and Council of Ministers, interpretation is offered for Finnish and Icelandic, which are distinctly different languages.

The Nordic Council is run by a Presidium, which comes together at two annual meetings – the Ordinary Session and the Theme Session, at which the Nordic politicians make decisions on issues that they call on the Nordic governments to implement. Some of the policy areas, which the Nordic council strive to promote cooperation within are health and welfare, education and research, climate change, green growth, combating of human trafficking, gender equality, freedom of movement and the labor market.

However, as mentioned, even cooperation within these policy areas have to be based on consensus and respect the limits set by the individual member states' existing political, economic and security allegiances. While Nordic ministers for defense and foreign affairs also meet regularly, foreign policy was never part of the remit and those meetings take place outside of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

When it comes to the Nordic countries' cooperation with Europe and the wider world, they have chosen what for outsiders may appear as surprisingly different allegiances.

In terms of defense and security, an attempt was made immediately after the Second World War to create a Nordic Defense Union. But the geopolitical interest varied too much and therefore Denmark, Iceland and Norway decided to join NATO as founding members in 1949, while Sweden and Finland opted to remain neutral

Likewise, when it comes to economic cooperation, Denmark, Finland and Sweden are members of the EU, while Norway and Iceland have chosen to stay outside. Although it must be added that through their membership of the European Free Trade Association, EFTA, they are – to all intent and purposes – as close to membership as one can get without actually joining the EU. Of the three EU members, however, Finland is the only country which is part of the Eurozone.

This patchwork of regional alliances and memberships has created challenges in the past. But the economic, political and security developments in Europe of the recent 10-15 years has reduced the differences – the patchwork is slowing becoming less pronounced and, as a consequence, the Nordic countries have become even more closely linked in recent decades.

[Nordic Co-operation]

The inter-parliamentary and inter-governmental partnerships, in the form of the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers, have in many ways been particularly effective in promoting freedom of movement in the Region and strengthened the sense of affinity among the countries and their people. The most tangible expression of this is the Nordic Passport Union, which allows citizens of the Nordic countries to travel and reside in another Nordic country without any travel documentation or a residence permit. Essentially Nordic citizens are treated like local citizens in all the countries, at least for travel and residence purposes.

Trade between the Nordic countries has always been extensive. Nowadays, with minimal non-trade barriers, with a Passport Union and with similar institutional environments as well as cultural and linguistic proximity, it is no surprise that the region is simply considered an extended home market.

For the same reasons, Nordic businesses are deeply integrated through cross-border acquisitions and mergers. One such example is the Nordic banking group Nordea. Nordea is the result of the successive mergers and acquisitions of Finnish, Danish, Norwegian and Swedish banks and is now the largest financial services group in the region. Another is Arla, one of the world's largest dairy companies, which is a cooperative owned primarily by Danish and Swedish farmers. And there is of course the part-government owned joint Scandinavian Airlines System, SAS, the official flag-carrier of Denmark, Norway and Sweden and the largest airline in the region.

Another policy area where the Nordic countries share perspective and passion is on the importance of sustainable development. The Nordic Council has helped push the agenda to the extent where the countries now have some of the world's most ambitious environment, energy and climate policies. Significantly, the Nordic countries were among the first to decouple economy growth from growth in energy consumption. Through a mix of carrots (in the form of subsidies) and sticks (in the form of taxes) and a stringent enforcement of the "polluter pays" principle, it was possible from 1990 to 2010 grow the collective GDP by 55%, while energy consumption stagnated and CO2 emissions fell by 9%. This led the International Energy Agency, IEA, to pronounce that the Nordics are now where it wants the world to be in 2040. At COP21, the Nordic Council presented a Joint Nordic Statement in support of an ambitious, binding agreement.

A more tangible example of Nordic cooperation moving the region towards a green growth path is the joint Nordic electricity market. In 1915, pioneers in Sweden and Denmark established the first power cable between the two countries. This was a good first step. But it took another 80 years before the creation of a joint Nordic electricity market gained speed when in the 1990s steps were taken among the Nordic countries to liberalize their respective national electricity markets.

The turning point came when the Nordic Council of Ministers in 1995 was able to agree on the Louisiana Declaration, describing its vision of a free and open electricity market with efficient trade between closely integrated neighbors.

Today, a full century after the first cross-border power cable was laid out, the power grids in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland are closely interconnected, and effectively maintains the balance between power generation and consumption in the region. Major linkages have also been established to connect the region to its European neighbors, such as the Baltic States, Germany, Poland and the Netherlands.

These connections enable the countries to trade wholesale power on a daily basis to ensure a balanced and cost-efficient production. The energy exchange has played an important role in the successful expansion and integration of intermittent renewable energy sources, in particular hydro, wind and solar power. Denmark, for instance, is a large producer of wind power and exports wind energy to Sweden and Norway during off-peak hours, while the availability of more stable hydropower from Sweden and Norway allows Denmark to import hydropower during peak load times and reduce the consumption of coal and other fossil fuels.

[Challenges]

Finally, let me finish off with a few thoughts on what may lie ahead for the Nordic cooperation.

The Nordic region has captured the imagination in new ways in recent years. As Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden regularly appear at the top of international rankings – whether of prosperity, transparency, education, business friendliness, gender equality, peace or even general happiness – the Nordic countries have re-emerged as potential models, with best practices to share. The comparative success of the Nordic countries during the latest global financial crisis has testified to the strength of the Nordic welfare state. The British magazine “The Economist” dedicated an entire issue to the Nordic countries with the title “The Next Super Model”.

Also within the Nordic region itself, Nordic cooperation has returned to the agenda after a couple of decades in the shadow of the European project. Leading Nordic politicians have rediscovered the “Nordic brand”, so to speak, which they want to utilize in global arenas. And there seems to be an increased will to present a united Nordic front to the outside world. To some extent also, this Nordic renaissance has translated into new initiatives of Nordic cooperation.

At the same time, however, there are also significant signs pointing towards a continuous decline of Nordic cooperation, at least in the form it has traditionally had. Ironically, because of the uncertain geopolitical situation on the eastern doorsteps of the Nordic countries, it is flourishing in the area of defence policy, but waning in such traditional key areas as welfare, freedom of movement, law and culture. There is no doubt that the consensus based official Nordic cooperation of the Nordic Council and Nordic Council of Ministers has been overtaken by the EU in terms of political and juridical relevance, also for the two non EU-members Norway and Iceland.

So with a renaissance of the Nordic brand, on the one hand, and a decline of effective Nordic cooperation on the other, it seems that Nordic cooperation is at a crossroad.

From an international relations perspective the Nordics are typically held up as something of a mystery on which mainstream realist interpretations fail to apply. It has been described as an “international society” based not on coercion or rational calculation of self-interest, but rather on normative values and an inherent belief in the legitimacy of the Nordic project. The Nordic region is probably unique, not by virtue of its high political institutions or formal agreements, but rather by virtue of its bottom-up character and the infinite number of informal links that exist among the countries, often at a personal level, between individual politicians, bureaucrats, academics, business people, students, civic movements and ordinary citizens. An observation that is also interesting in light of the emphasis the ASEAN member states is increasingly putting on trying to promote an “ASEAN identity”.

Nordic cooperation is as much represented by what is carried out among government, as what takes place in the cobweb of connections among citizens. So while international cooperation is usually practiced by formal procedures and by national delegations meeting to negotiate on behalf of those they represent, Nordic cooperation is to a large extent based on informal networking, experience sharing and joint action by the actors themselves. What the many formal Nordic Council meetings have also produced – besides formal decisions – has been a sort of “transnational bureaucracy” that has helped to shape and harmonize the political agendas in the Nordic countries even though the formal powers of the institutions have been rather weak. Nordic cooperation can in that respect be characterised as “transnational”, not merely “international”.

There was nothing predetermined in the making of the Nordic region. The Nordic countries became similar through shared historical experiences and cooperation and it could have looked very different if other choices had been made. The Nordic region as a distinct region and the particular features associated with Nordic cooperation are not given once and for all. They are political constructs and can and will be reinvented and reshaped in the future for political convenience.

[Closing remarks]

In sum, I find it most likely that the continued deepening of the integration within EU will continue to weaken the political relevance of the consensus based official Nordic cooperation. But as I have tried to explain, that doesn't necessarily render Nordic cooperation irrelevant. The future of Nordic cooperation may simply to a larger extent lie outside the formal institutions of the Nordic Council and be characterised by "transnational" cooperation, rather than "international".

The long, shared history in general, but in particular the past 200 years of peaceful coexistence and the past 60 years of ever closer formal integration, based on common fundamental values that infuse the prevailing Nordic welfare states – that shared historical, cultural, social and political heritage have put down some very deep roots. Formal Nordic cooperation may meander and diffuse in ways that are difficult to predict, in order to accommodate the wider European integration process, but the shared Nordic identity, the Nordic "brand" if you will, is not likely to lose its popular appeal anytime soon. With these words I hope to have given you at least a bit of a sense of what lies up there towards the north of Europe. I have tried not to burden you with too many dry words and numbers. But in case I have, I would now like to liven up the presentation by showing a short video produced by the Nordic

Council, which I hope will add some visual impressions of the Nordic region and cooperation.

Thank you. Terima kasih.

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