NORDIC STATES AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION:  
THE “ME” REGION?  
Summary of remarks by Alyson JK Bailes, Faculty of Political Science, University of Iceland  
At the History Congress (Söguþing), 10 June 2012 in Reykjavik

My title is rather provocatively chosen to reflect the phrase ‘the Me generation’. It reflects my aim to discuss how far the factor of national identity can be – and perhaps needs to be - used to explain the Nordic region’s varied and ambivalent engagement with European integration in the late 20th and 21st centuries.

First however I would like to offer some comparison between the attitudes of the five Nordic states and of Britain – which shares with them an above-average level of Euro-scepticism in public opinion. All these nations belong to Europe’s Western and Northern periphery: and since practically all historic threats to them have come from the East and South, they can only realistically hope for powers further West to come to their rescue. That gives them an existential stake in relations with the USA which, at least, qualifies the value they can see in purely European cooperation. Geographical position also makes all of them maritime powers to some extent (in Sweden and Finland’s case, in the Baltic setting) – and geopolitical theory tells us that such powers tend to be flexible, mobile and liberal, hence not happy about being tied down in static continental systems. Among shared internal characteristics one may mention the early definition and importance of national laws and representative institutions, which all these countries have an instinct to defend against the imposition of alien standards.

Britain and the Nordics can also experience a kind of national pride denied to many other Europeans, as they have either been consistent war-winners, or powers ‘re-born’ after a former aggressive phase (like Sweden), or ‘victims’ who only recently gained/regained full sovereignty. They thus have no prima facie reason to fear, or try to temper, nationalism as such. Finally, though this is a bit of a cliche, their shared Protestant tradition is relevant in any of them can see in purely European cooperation. Geographical position also makes all of them maritime powers to some extent (in Sweden and Finland’s case, in the Baltic setting) – and geopolitical theory tells us that such powers tend to be flexible, mobile and liberal, hence not happy about being tied down in static continental systems. Among shared internal characteristics one may mention the early definition and importance of national laws and representative institutions, which all these countries have an instinct to defend against the imposition of alien standards.

Coming down to current facts, Britain is in fact the most integrated of all six states as it belongs fully to both the EU and NATO, refraining only from EMU and Schengen. Denmark is in Schengen but has a wider range of other EU opt-outs, while the Faroes and Greenland made use of their option to stay out of the EU entirely. All the other Nordic states are outside either NATO or the EU, and Sweden has decided against EMU as well. This makes Norden an unusual region of Europe, especially considering that it is made up of ‘small’ states (none bigger than 10 million in population). The great majority of other European ‘smalls’ have rushed into the double shelter of NATO and the EU – or are still trying to do so – at the first available moment, seeing this actually as a safeguard for their identity as well as survival.
There is another shade of difference between the British and Nordic position which is less often pointed out. The Nordics have been enthusiastic creators of and joiners in neighbourhood (or ‘sub-regional’) cooperative groupings, ranging from Nordic cooperation itself with its West Nordic and Nordic-Baltic offshoots, through the Arctic Council, Barents Euro-Arctic Council and Council of Baltic Sea States, to Finland’s initiative in creating the Northern Dimension of the EU. The UK takes part in the ND simply by virtue of being in the EU, and is an ‘observer’ in a couple of the others, but has no sub-regional network in its own area. This behaviour by the Nordics does not contradict what has been said about their cautious and divergent approaches to integration, since these local groups all have a very ‘soft’ kind of governance with no legal obligations, no common defence duties, no large funded programmes for common management of sectors, and so on. Further, the Nordic states seem to see such ‘softer’ cooperation – tending as it does to reaffirm and enrich national identities rather than transforming them – as an end in itself, and sometimes even as an alternative to the wider European enterprise. The Baltics, and other states gaining their freedom after 1989, by contrast agreed to work in sub-regional groups only after being assured that this would not obstruct and might even speed up their entry to the firmer frameworks of NATO and the EU.

Once we are talking about differences between the British and Nordic cases, other points could of course be made in the strategic context. Opinion polls confirm very different attitudes to the use of force, with over half the Brits supporting the notion of a ‘just war’ while typically less than half of Nordics would. Britain and the Nordic states have all moved towards new comprehensive definitions of security, where non-military threats and challenges loom larger alongside traditional military ones, but the balance within their agendas is different. The UK puts more stress on new forms of intentional violence, notably terrorism, while the Nordics have been mercifully free (in modern times) of non-state violence and civil conflict and tend to place environmental, economic and social concerns further up the priority list instead. Denmark is the partial exception as it has had more direct problems with radical Islam and also, at least on its metropolitan territory, shares a more mainstream ‘continental’ security environment.

Turning now more specifically to the Nordics, I would like to end by probing how far their reluctance towards integration can be explained by ‘realist’ imperatives, or how far subjective factors – including their own constructions of their identities – need to be brought into the picture. More succinctly, do they really have no choice in staying as separate as they are, or do they just claim and believe they do not? For greater precision, I will look separately at the limitations of local integration between the five Nordic states, and at their limited engagement in the European (EU/NATO) level of integration.

There is a strong *prima facie* argument that seeking a closer regional defence union, of the kind seriously discussed in 1945-9, could never bring net security benefits to Norden. The geostrategic challenge that these five small states face from the East dwarfs even their aggregate strengths. On the other side of the balance, carrying Western defence Eastward to the Finnish-Soviet or Finnish-Russian border could be provocative and destabilizing; while the ‘Nordic balance’ actually achieved in the
Cold War (NATO coming no further East than Norway, Sweden and Finland non-allied) brought regional peace with a relatively low level of tension.

Then there is the argument that the five states’ strategic needs, priorities and outlooks do not actually coincide as well as outsiders may think. In terms of basic orientation, it has been said that ‘Norway looked West to the British Isles, Sweden looked east to Finland and the Eastern Baltic, while Denmark expanded...in northern Germany and along the Baltic coast’ – and this quotation is about the 11th century, before the nations even had clearly distinguishable languages! One could cite many other basic differences in the factors shaping security strategy and culture, starting with the range of economic profiles from Iceland’s and North Norway’s dependence on primary products plus tourism to Sweden’s highly industrialized structure. The natural environments and the risks and types of disasters going with them are very different from southern Denmark to northern Finland, and only Iceland has volcanoes. Internal dynamics are also varied, with Norway’s regional diversity and oppositional cultures at one end of the spectrum, and Finland’s strong central discipline at the other – while Iceland has only very recently seen the need to have an explicit and comprehensive security policy at all.

Yet I suspect this is still not the whole story, given that other groups of countries in Europe have interpreted their own strategic diversity as complementarity. The Cold War is more than 20 years behind us now and even with today’s doubts about Russia, there is surely much more Nordic room for manoeuvre – room that has been only very slowly and cautiously explored. I believe another part of the truth can be summed up in the statement that the Nordics ‘neither fear nor love each other enough’ to create a close-knit regional bloc. They have not fought each other since the 18th century, unlike France and Germany (or other European pairs) who saw an intimate union after 1945 as the only way to stop each other from ever fighting again. Yet the lingering resentments from earlier wars and ‘colonial’ periods, and the ways that these affected the construction of modern Nordic identities, are at least strong enough to undermine Nordic mutual ‘love’ - in the sense of a natural sympathy and solidarity motivating real sacrifices for the neighbour’s sake. To focus on just one effect: Sweden seems to me as reluctant to take on the protective duties of a natural regional leader, as the other four would be to accept Sweden in that role!

As for the Nordics’ varied and selective approach to binding Europe-wide integration, one could again cite the ‘Nordic balance’ rationale. A far-flung, sparsely populated periphery whose fate depends in practice on deterrence between two super-powers may find that a certain looseness and variety in local statuses helps to draw in the help of ‘big friends’ – aiming to fill a security vacuum – as well as to avoid provoking ‘big bullies’. A further notion I find relevant here is that of limited liability: small and existentially challenged as the Nordics are, it may be in their objective interest to avoid committing themselves too much to help other Europeans, even in their own ‘near abroad’. Much has been heard for instance in recent weeks about Finnish disinclination to bail out improvident Southerners. In the 1990s, the Nordics were appalled by suggestions that they should provide strategic shelter for the newly liberated Baltic States; and when Sweden gave the latter military equipment, the

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1 David Ditchburn, Simon McClean and Angus Mackay (eds), Atlas of Medieval Europe (Second edition), London: Routledge, 2007, p 95
purpose was not to build an alliance with them but to help them enter NATO and thus dispose of the problem as soon as possible.

Once again, however, I think that subjective or constructed considerations of identity may offer even more fundamental explanations. One aspect is the high value placed by Nordic populations on ideas of sovereignty and national particularity, which weigh heavier in the balance than they might elsewhere – perhaps even in the UK! – when compared with the safety offered by states huddling together. A rough confirmation of this hypothesis is that Finland has actually gone furthest in EU-type political and economic integration, surrendering the necessary national freedoms and focussing rather on influencing from within the system, to deal with the very obvious Eastern challenge to its identity and freedom of action. The new President of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, has logically enough said that he would like the EU to transmute into a defence alliance one day. By contrast Norway and Iceland, lying furthest West, are also the states that have held out longest against the EU. Denmark’s Maastricht opt-outs clearly identified the areas of sovereignty Denmark felt it could not cede while preserving its identity – but note that none of them was crucial in the realist sense for its survival.

Last but not least, we may recall the earlier point about Nordics being comfortable about nationalism. A high proportion of the Europeans belonging or applying to the EU and NATO, including even some of the smallest states concerned, have things in their past that they are ashamed of and want to bury for ever: hence the appeal of binding themselves into a - hopefully irreversible - ‘European’ identity. This syndrome has been described as the voluntary putting-on of ‘golden chains’, and it applies just as much to Hungary recently or Serbia in future as it did to the 20th-century Axis powers. None of the Nordic states even comes near to thinking it might apply to them.

So, I would argue, we have here a region of Europe where the ‘me’ factor of identity is at the very least an important additive to realist constraints in driving states’ strategies: perhaps above all in cases where these strategies are not (yet) consciously, clearly, or honestly formulated. At the same time and with all due recognition of shared Nordic customs and values, it is a region of remarkably divided and varied identities – an assembly, as it were, of ‘mini-me’s’. The final irony is that for those who know Norden, none of the five identities is in itself particularly unitary or free of contradictions. Norway was long ago called the land both of the troll and the missionary, and I have heard Sweden called, in imitation, a combination of the Junker (= aristocratic Prussian officer) and the saint. For those who know the Kalevala, are we to see the soul of Finland in the solid, sensible Väinämöinen or the totally screwed-up Kullervo? And it would be interesting if anyone could come up with a similar pair of contradictions for Denmark or Iceland....