



The UK Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)

by Håkon Lunde Saxi

The UK and eight partner nations have developed a force capable of conducting a full-spectrum of operations. The JEF reinforces the close ties between this group of northern European states in order to meet the challenges of uncertain times.

Take aways

- **The JEF is a flexible and NATO-compatible national British contingency force incorporating contributions from eight smaller allies and partners.**
- **It was conceived as part of the UK's post-Iraq and post-Afghanistan strategic reset, to rebuild a contingency force and maintain relations with the smaller countries the British forces had operated in conjunction with.**
- **Initially focused mainly at operations outside Europe, the JEF has since 2014 also prepared for larger operations in the European theatre to re-assure allies and deter Russia.**

The UK plays a leading role in European security. Together with France, it is the premier military power in NATO Europe and the EU. While some critics have argued that the UK no longer [“punches above its weight”](#) and is [increasingly irrelevant in world affairs](#), most would agree that the country remains a key security and defence actor in the Euro-Atlantic area.

In NATO, only the US spends more on defence overall. The UK is the *only* member that simultaneously [spends 2 per cent of GDP on defence, invests 20 per cent or more](#) of defence expenditure on major equipment, and spends 0.7 per cent of GDP on development aid. The UK is one of only three nuclear powers in the Alliance – alongside the US and France – and its armed forces have a reputation for being well-equipped, experienced and highly professional.

CONTINUITY AFTER BREXIT

This will most likely remain the case for the foreseeable future. The UK is in the process of leaving the EU, which is scheduled to be completed by March 2019, but it wants to

remain a close friend and ally by building “[a deep and special partnership](#)” with the EU on trade, security and defence.

British leaders have stressed that while the UK may be leaving the EU, the country will not withdraw from the world nor [turn its back on European security](#). The British government has [used the phrase “Global Britain”](#) to describe its ambitions for a post-Brexit foreign policy, but this is [mainly a branding exercise](#). For the most part, the UK will seek continuity in its foreign, security and defence policy.

The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) is a concrete manifestation of the UK’s continuing commitment to transatlantic and European security in general and to Britain’s allies and partners in northern Europe in particular. It complements NATO and reinforces the UK’s existing relationships with a select group of European countries. It also complements, and in some ways resembles, the bilateral Anglo–French [Combined Joint Expeditionary Force \(CJEF\)](#), which predates the JEF.

The JEF partner nations include three “old” NATO allies (Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands), three “new” NATO allies (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), and two militarily non-aligned EU countries (Sweden and Finland). The common denominator among them is that all have strong diplomatic and military ties to the UK, their militaries having fought and trained regularly together in operations and exercises. These northern European states are regarded as “like-minded” countries with a shared understanding of risks and threats.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE JEF

Following the end of the Cold War, the UK adopted an expeditionary defence strategy, codified in the [1998 Strategic Defence Review](#). The strategy was underpinned by the conviction that it was better to “be prepared to go to the crisis, rather than have the crisis come to us”. At the heart of this strategy was the Joint Rapid Reaction Force (JRRF), a national contingency force able to quickly deploy to almost anywhere in the world.

The JRRF was dimensioned to enable the 210,000-strong British Armed Forces to deploy up to 30,000 troops in two concurrent operations.

During the UK’s simultaneous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the 2000s, the JRRF evaporated. For almost a decade, nearly all available British forces were continuously committed to ongoing operations. This resulted in considerable overstretch.

In 2009, the operational tempo began to drop as [the UK withdrew from Iraq](#). In 2012, a gradual [withdrawal and end of combat operations in Afghanistan](#) were announced, for completion by the end of 2014. In the [2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review](#), the British Government aspired to be “more selective” in the use of force in the future, end overstretch and “rebuild the strength and restore the capability of our Armed Forces”.

The JEF, [first publicly discussed in December 2012](#), was part of this post-Iraq and post-Afghanistan strategic reset. The UK would concentrate now on rebuilding a national contingency force. A major difference between the JRRF and the JEF was that the latter was to be [“international by design”](#). While the JEF *could* operate as a sovereign UK-only force, it would normally seek to incorporate forces from like-minded, willing and capable allies.

By incorporating other countries’ formations in the JEF, the UK would improve both the influence and combat power it could bring to bear in a crisis. The JEF was to be a very flexible and scalable force, somewhat smaller than the JRRF. British leaders commonly suggested a size of [“up to 10,000 troops”](#). The active strength of the British Armed Forces stood at 152,000 troops in 2017.

THE MISSION OF THE JEF

The JEF will be capable of the full spectrum of operations, from high-intensity war-fighting to deterrence missions and humanitarian assistance. The JEF is designed to complement NATO by enhancing the participating states’ ability to cooperate militarily in a crisis and thereby increase their contribu-



tion to transatlantic burden-sharing. While it adheres to NATO standards, it is institutionally agnostic. It can be deployed under the auspices of NATO, the UN, the EU, as a coalition of willing states, or as a sovereign British force.

Having been conceived and developed in the pre-Ukrainian crisis era, the JEF was initially [focused on dealing with situations in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf](#). Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and in keeping with new British and Alliance priorities, increased emphasis was placed on [larger operations in the European theatre](#).

The UK's [2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review](#) further underlined this shift by identifying Russian behaviour, intentions and capabilities as a key security challenge to the UK and its allies. Britain's commitment to NATO's collective defence and security was re-emphasised. Within a NATO framework, the JEF could be assigned to function as a component of an allied operation, but it could also be deployed as part of a non-NATO coalition force.

The JEF framework is both very flexible and scalable, allowing for very rapid political and military decision-making by a close-knit group of countries. While the September 2014 NATO Wales summit declaration stressed its ability to carry out [larger high intensity operations](#), the example most often cited as a model of how the JEF would operate is the smaller, British-led, 2014 non-combat operation to contain the Ebola virus epidemic in Sierra Leone.

While the JEF had not been formed at the time, the UK reached out to partner countries Norway, the Netherlands and Denmark, who respectively provided a transport aircraft, a support ship, and a virus disease treatment unit. The operation provides an example of how Britain and its JEF-partner nations furthered their common security by having the partner nations quickly decide to support a British-led action, mission or operation.

THE COMPOSITION OF THE JEF

The JEF is not a standing force, but a *force pool* consisting of high-readiness forces from nine different countries. It includes land, air and maritime forces, with most of the troops in the pool – around 80–90 per cent – being British. The UK is the framework nation, providing both the most rapidly deployable force elements and the command and control (C2) arrangements.

The JEF [force pool will inevitably vary over time](#). The Netherlands has said it will contribute naval and amphibious forces, Denmark a battalion, Norway air and maritime forces, and the Baltic States small company-sized land units. Joint exercises and training by the various JEF country forces are intended to improve interoperability, encourage doctrinal similarity and foster a shared mind-set.

However, while states commit forces to the JEF force pool, they still retain full sovereign authority over their forces. A key objective of the JEF framework is to make it easier and quicker to join a British-led operation, but partner nations still retain the option to decline.

The most likely command arrangement of the JEF in an active operation would be to deploy the Standing Joint Forces Headquarters (SJFHQ) based at Northwood, presently commanded by a two-star British general. SJFHQ can rapidly deploy abroad to command up to a division-sized JEF of approximately 10,000 troops. However, other command arrangements are also possible. The size and composition of the JEF will be highly mission-dependent.

PARTNER NATIONS' INTEREST IN THE JEF

By incorporating forces from the eight partner nations in the JEF, the UK reinforces its relations with these nations and bolsters its capacity to influence and bring military power to bear in a crisis. But what is in it for the partner nations?



The eight partner nations all enjoy very close diplomatic, economic and security relations with the UK, relations they all desire to maintain or strengthen. With the possible exception of the Netherlands, all are unequivocally small states. Unlike the UK, they do not aspire to be able to act autonomously, but only in concert with allies and partners.

They generally share the perception that the world has become less safe and more unpredictable over the past few years. In particular, Russia's illegal military intervention in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014 has had a profound and lasting impact on their perceptions of their security situation. Five JEF partner nations (Norway, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) share a land border with Russia, and two (Sweden and Denmark) are Baltic Sea states.

The JEF partners seek to counter these growing security challenges in three ways: 1) by increasing their national defence and security efforts; 2) by strengthening their ties with key allies and partner countries, such as the UK, and 3) by supporting multinational institutions. Norway can serve as a good example.

NORWAY'S INTEREST IN THE JEF

During the Cold War Norway worked hard to "[nail its most important allies to the defence of NATO's Northern Flank](#), seeking to get "[a hook in the nose](#)" of their militaries. Oslo's decision to join the JEF should be viewed, at least in part, as a continuation of this policy.

In its [2016 Long Term Defence Plan](#) and [2017 White Paper on foreign and security policy](#), Norway assigns clear priority to defence cooperation with a select group of allies deemed to be of particular relevance in terms of reinforcing Norway in a security crisis or armed conflict. These allies are the US, UK, Germany, France and the Netherlands. The UK JEF is clearly considered to be part of this context. As the [2015 Expert Commission on Norwegian Security and Defence Policy](#) put it: "The JEF can be relevant for early deployment to Norway during a crisis".

As Norwegian leaders stress, the NATO Alliance remains the bedrock of the country's

security. However, they are also aware that, in a crisis, decisions will have to be made swiftly, something they readily concede would be challenging for a "[consensus-based organisation such as NATO, with 29 member states](#)".

NATO's primary reinforcement formation, the brigade-sized Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), can only be deployed following a decision of the full 29-member North Atlantic Council. This could take time. During the intervention in Libya in March 2011, the most capable and willing allies – the US, UK and France – led the way. It took a whole week until NATO became involved.

Norway, a committed NATO member, supports efforts to adapt and streamline Alliance decision-making. Norway also cultivates alliances within the Alliance. Whether to deploy the JEF is a sovereign British decision, but one [which could be made very rapidly by the British Prime Minister or cabinet](#).

CAPABLE ALLIES AND LIKE-MINDED STATES

In any case, only a few Allies would be capable of lending rapid and effective military aid to Norway. The five key allies mentioned above account between them for more than [85 per cent of NATO military spending](#).

American, British, German and Dutch troops exercise and train regularly alongside Norwegian troops in Norway, especially in winter, and are therefore both interoperable and effectively able to operate in Norway's challenging topographic and climatic conditions. American, British and Dutch amphibious forces are of particular interest since they are among the few land forces that are capable of rapidly reinforcing NATO's northern flank in a crisis.

The UK and Norway, along with the US, are also preoccupied with [strengthening the maritime presence](#) and [revitalising the collective defence capacity](#) of the Alliance in the North Atlantic. The US, UK and Norway share a common awareness of the challenge posed by Russia's air and maritime forces in the region and are rebuilding a [North Atlantic maritime-surveillance network](#) to counter it.



Beyond its home region, Norway shares many of the UK's wider security priorities, including stabilising fragile and failing states in Europe's neighbourhood and preventing the erosion of the current international order.

For Norway, the JEF represents a group of willing and capable allies, but they are also seen as like-minded states. As the previous British defence secretary Sir Michael Fallon put it in 2017: "[This is a Force of Friends](#)". The JEF is intentionally designed as a vehicle for maintaining and reinforcing defence relationships within a [group of northern European countries](#) that have shared operational experiences and overlapping national security outlooks.

CONCLUSION

The UK remains – alongside France – NATO Europe's most capable military power. By integrating eight partner nations into its national contingency force, the UK seeks to bolster its international influence and military power.

The partner nations in turn seek to strengthen their security by deepening their ties with Britain and with one another. The JEF provides a flexible NATO-attuned framework allowing these countries' armed forces both to train regularly and rapidly undertake operations together.

Providing both political and military benefits to the participating countries, it represents a welcome example of British leadership. In a less secure and more unpredictable world, small European states – such as Norway – feel a growing need to stay close to their friends. The JEF is one instrument through which to achieve this. As former defence secretary Fallon put it when Sweden and Finland joined the JEF in June 2017: "[We help each other. \[You are\] not alone](#)".



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Top picture on the front page:

Picture shows a Beach Assault with Royal Marines and Royal Navy Personnel from 539 Assault Squadron during an exercise in Harstad, Norway.

Photo: PO Phot Donny Osmond

