



# Europe's "Joint Expeditionary Force": A Model for ASEAN?

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### SYNOPSIS

*In 2014, the countries of northern Europe created a "Joint Expeditionary Force" separate from, but supportive of, NATO. Specifically tasked to provide fast and effective responses and to take collective action below the traditional threshold of war, the force provides both lessons and warnings for maritime unilateralism in Southeast Asia.*

### COMMENTARY

On the face of it, comparing the "Joint Expeditionary Force" (JEF) and ASEAN seems extraordinarily inappropriate. The 10 nations of ASEAN are dealing with a very different strategic context than the 10 European nations that came together in the JEF 11 years ago. Unlike their Southeast Asian counterparts, the Europeans have had to confront a revanchist power that considers itself to be engaged in an existential conflict with the West. Unlike Southeast Asia, Europe is disengaging itself economically from Russia, the local superpower, focusing on the harder end of the security spectrum and investing heavily in all aspects of defence.

### Common Strategic Uncertainties

But for all that, there are similarities too. Like ASEAN members, the Europeans have a variety of views about the imminence, scale and nature of the threat they face. Mediterranean countries tend to focus much more on illegal immigration. In the Baltic and the Arctic, on the other hand, the operational priorities and choices are much more concerned with the prospects of war. Like ASEAN members too, the Europeans are grappling with new uncertainties about the strategic reliability of the United States, and how to balance this against their bigger neighbour. Like them as well, individual European states accept that they cannot achieve their security goals on their own;

they must seek sanctuary in the company of the like-minded and pool their efforts accordingly.

The biggest crossover, however, is the fact that for both sets of nations the local big power seems to be fully aware of the costs and risks of overt warfare and is seeking to secure its aims by a mixture of political blandishment, economic inducement, and a determined campaign of grey zone tactics that straddle the middle ground between peace and war. For the Europeans, this is particularly significant because it highlights a potential operational gap between NATO (which has tended to focus on hard security) and the European Union (which focuses on the much softer end of the security spectrum). For ASEAN, the pursuit of maritime security is principally a matter of building trust and maintaining good order at sea rather than the defence of the collective maritime interest against a potential adversary. To the extent that the maritime members of ASEAN have done that, they did so individually rather than together. Accordingly, in Southeast Asia, many would argue that a collective response to grey zone pressure over shared maritime interests is less effective than it needs to be.

### The JEF Model

In Europe, the JEF attempts to meet this need, particularly in the Baltic, the North Atlantic and the Arctic. Formally, it is not part of NATO but a separate organisation of 10 of its members. It operates in parallel with NATO and indeed has assumed the remit of preparing the way for NATO operations. Its focus is on the “transition to war” period, but its avowed aim is to be able to take the actions needed to prevent any such war from happening by the evident capacity to defeat and so deter grey zone aggression. Poland and Germany have not opted into the JEF but all the other Baltic countries have. Norway, the Netherlands, Iceland and the United Kingdom have opted in as well and the latter acts as convenor and facilitator – or “framework nation” in NATO-speak. Simply because of their geographic position and shared history, JEF members of course start with a very great deal in common, as do the maritime members of ASEAN.



The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) fills an operational gap between NATO’s hard security focus and the European Union’s softer approach. *Image source: Lise Åserud / NTB via [Flickr](#).*

JEF members consider the “opt in” principle to be one of the organisation’s major strengths. To this extent, the JEF mirrors minilateral solutions such as the [Malacca Straits Patrol](#) and the [trilateral organisation established](#) to deal with instabilities in the Sulu Sea region. Even if only two of JEF’s members agree on a course of action, they can do so as JEF representatives. Because action does not depend on the consent of

all 32 NATO members, the JEF reaction to sudden developments will be much faster than NATO's. Its frequent gatherings and exercises, moreover, develop understanding, encourage interoperability and deepen integration.

Additionally, the JEF's relatively narrow operational focus on the Baltic and the Far North helps it develop a proactive rather than merely reactive approach to possible grey zone challenges. Accordingly, JEF members seek to agree policy for the maintenance, monitoring and protection of critical underwater infrastructure such as cables and pipelines, and to establish a legal and effective way forward for the interception and inspection of "dark fleet" vessels suspected of illicit activity, overt sanctions-busting or environmentally hazardous behaviour. By illuminating these ambiguous issues in advance, JEF hopes to deny the aggressor the operational advantage of surprise and the tactical initiative that goes with it.

These ongoing consultations produce a number of pre-planned – or at least pre-thought-about and broadly agreed – Joint Response Options (JROs) that will hopefully give the JEF greater control of events. The organisation activated one of its JROs last year in response to suspected maritime sabotage in the Baltic. The JRO might not quite fit the emerging situation but can be adjusted at very short notice. The process of formulating JROs, moreover, hopefully encourages serious and strategic thinking about such issues. In itself, this should enable rapid adaptability. Accordingly, the process is at least as important as the product. The JEF hopes to be what the Americans call a learning organisation. This approach underlines the crucial importance of being clear about ends, ways and means, and the greater dangers of merely hoping that an unacknowledged problem will go away.

The vehemence of Moscow's denunciations of the JEF as an apparent indication of the West's hostile intent can be taken as a back-handed indication of its deterrent effectiveness. But at the same time, critics might argue that the formation of such a force could precipitate rather than prevent conflict by seeming to encourage overly enthusiastic counters to perceived challenges. A [recent incident](#) in which Russia retaliated in response to an Estonian attempt to interdict one of its passing suspect tankers with a warning fly-past of fighter aircraft could be seen as illustrating the point. Likewise, there could be escalatory danger if the JEF were seen by the inherently suspicious as complicit in the recent series of [mysterious explosions in tankers after visiting Russian ports](#).

This concern is part of a debate among JEF members as to whether deterrence through denial by developing system resilience is enough. After all, some argue, grey zone operations are basically about inflicting hopefully disproportionate cost on the other side. Since it costs much more to harden, monitor and protect undersea cables than it does to attack them, a purely defensive response means ceding economic advantage as well as the operational initiative to the adversary, who can choose where and when to strike. To counter this, they argue for the capacity to retaliate in some form, in other words, to bolster deterrence with the prospect of punishment. Such, after all, is the working assumption of the European Union in its approach to economic statecraft and the steady ratcheting up of its sanctions campaign. In Moscow, there is now a reluctant acceptance that such sanctions are doing major and long-term damage to Russia's economy. Grey zone operations at sea might well be a

competition in risk-taking but applying such a robust economic approach to operations at sea would clearly have its escalatory dangers.

## **Lessons and Limitations for ASEAN**

This debate in Europe about the balance to be struck between resilience and retaliation, between defensive or offensive/defensive responses to grey zone aggression, is an ongoing one yet to be fully resolved. Even so, for all the importance attached to their South China Sea claims, those ASEAN states engaged in prosecuting them could well regard the JEF's level of resolute response as inappropriate for their situations, especially given their much greater disadvantage in the correlation of force with their big neighbour and the likely growth of their economic engagement with it.

A second major reason for caution in relating JEF methods to ASEAN situations derives from the critical fact that the states maintaining claims to parts of the South China Sea are in dispute with each other as well as with China. For them sufficiently to resolve, or at least put aside, these differences in order to deliver an effective collective response to grey zone challenges, would be politically, economically and culturally very difficult. Nonetheless, there are distinct moves in this direction, such as the recent move for Vietnam and Indonesia to harmonise their EEZ (exclusive economic zone) claims. Moreover, it could be argued that any such adjustments would be nothing like as momentous as the decisions taken by Finland and Sweden to abandon their tradition of neutrality by not only joining but taking a leading role in both NATO and the JEF. In the case of Sweden, this involved breaking a principle that had governed its foreign policy for several hundred years. Darkening horizons, and the ability to see them for what they are, can indeed transform long-held assumptions. So, while an ASEAN version of the JEF does not appear likely at the moment, its time may yet come.

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