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NORDIC CO-OPERATION IN JAPAN: TOWARDS FOREIGN POLICY COLLABORATION?

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Abstract. In 2019, the prime ministers of the Nordic countries announced their joint vision of leading the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030. While public opinion on EU integration has been divided in the Nordic countries, there is broad support for closer intra-Nordic collaboration. The paper asks whether this new vision is likely to lead to closer collaboration on the foreign policy front. To answer, trends in Nordic policies and strategies towards the wider world are studied and three joint initiatives centred on Japan are analysed to see how some of these policies have played out in practice. On the one hand, the cases demonstrate a variety of processes and formats for Nordic collaboration. On the other hand, they demonstrate how well Nordic collaboration can work in a remote, yet strategic market like Japan, not only as an abstract idea, but also in practice.

Keywords: Nordic integration, Nordic co-operation, foreign policy, Japan, Osaka Expo 1970, Scandinavian Pavilion, Nordic 5+1, Nordic Innovation House Tokyo

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1. Introduction: Nordic co-operation and (harmonised?) foreign policy

In 2010, Swedish historian Gunnar Wetterberg caused quite a stir when he published a proposal for a United Nordic Federation during the annual Nordic Council Session, where Nordic parliamentarians discuss current issues with the prime ministers and other ministers of the Nordic countries. His bold proposal caught the attention of Nordic politicians and the media alike, to the extent that the following year, the Nordic Council and Nordic Council of Ministers published an expanded version of Wetterberg's vision in their yearbook reflecting on 2010. The back cover introduces the work with the following proclamation: "The Nordic region 2030: The five Nordic countries have formed a federal political entity – The United Nordic Federation" (Wetterberg 2010). Detailing his vision, Wetterberg claimed: "The first arena in which an integrated Region would make a major impact would be foreign and security policy" (2010: 36). The Nordic Council and Nordic Council of Ministers (hereafter NC and NCM) did not in any way commit to the federation proposal, nor to specific parts of it, but it is interesting that they chose to devote their yearbook to Wetterberg's nearly 80-page-long proposal. Two important reports from the same period, the so-called "Stoltenberg Report" (Stoltenberg 2009) and *Nordic communities: a vision for the future* (Strang 2012), did not go as far as Wetterberg's federation idea but share his emphasis on strengthening Nordic collaboration within the field of foreign and security policy.[1]

Almost a decade later, in August 2019, the Nordic prime ministers stated their vision for the region, declaring that "the Nordic Region will be the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030" ("The Nordic region …" n.d.). The action plan for 2021–2024 that was subsequently published by the NCM in 2020 focuses on cultivating a green, competitive and socially sustainable Nordic region (Nordic Council of Ministers 2020). The action plan does mention that the Nordic region should contribute to the Paris Agreement and Agenda 2030, but in general the plan seems more focused on internal issues and processes than on Nordic interaction with the rest of the world. In contrast to Wetterberg's 2030 vision, then, the currently adopted plan does not mention foreign policy or put much focus on international activities, at least not in the first four-year plan.

However, the focus on intra-regional integration does not mean that the Nordic countries have no cooperative agenda beyond their own borders; on the contrary, collaboration has been taking place in various ways both within and outside the official bodies for Nordic co-operation.[2] Looking specifically at the NCM and NC, they emphasise that while foreign and security policy does not fall under the former's remit, it is "an important part of the Nordic Council's activities" ("Nordic Council calls for …" 2021). The NCM has, however, been involved in 'softer issues', as

[1] A fourth report worth mentioning in this context is the more recent *Nordic Foreign and Security Policy 2020,* written by Björn Bjarnason (2020). The report was commissioned by the Nordic foreign ministers to make recommendations on how the Nordic countries might work more closely on foreign policy and defence.

[2] Note for example the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO), which was established in 2009 and is led by the Nordic ministers of defence, outside the NCM/NC framework.

seen in the two strategies for international branding of the Nordic region which it has published since 2015, with the aim to "showcase the Nordic region globally, and thereby increase the competitiveness and international influence of the Nordic countries" (Nordic Council of Ministers 2019: 9). In late 2017, the NC published its first international strategy, aimed at the period from 2018–2022. In the strategy paper, there is much emphasis on pan-Nordic synergies: "The fact that the Nordic countries have different attitudes to membership of various international alliances does not preclude far closer co-operation on international relations, defence, economics, security, culture, education, research, embassies, freedom of movement, integration, development aid and health" (Nordic Council 2017: 1).

Among the population of the Nordic region, there is also broad support for closer Nordic collaboration, both within the region and in the international arena. As part of a study commissioned by the NCM and NC in 2017, a survey found that over 90% of interviewed participants found Nordic collaboration 'important', and of those, 60% found collaboration 'very important'. In addition, 68% believed that "co-operation should be intensified further" ("Stronger together …" 2017). When the participants were asked to consider all the different areas where the Nordics could collaborate and choose the most important ones (multiple answers allowed), the most frequent answer was 'defence and security' (Andreasson and Stende 2017: 19). When asked about the main advantages of Nordic collaboration (multiple choice, max three answers), the second most frequent answer was that it gives the Nordic region a stronger voice in the world (Andreasson and Stende 2017: 19). The survey clearly demonstrates that the Nordic population sees great potential in Nordic collaboration when it comes to foreign policy and the global stage.

Growing interest in the Nordics and Nordic collaboration both within and outside the region has led some scholars and commentators to talk about a 'Nordic renaissance' (Haugevik and Sending 2020: 111) or the Nordics potentially being "on the verge of a Nordic *golden age*" (Strang 2013: 8, emphasis in original). Scholars have paid increasing attention to various Nordic developments, but of special interest for this paper are studies that deal specifically with the Nordic states' foreign policies (see for example Haugevik and Sending 2020, Marcussen 2018, Sverdrup 2016). In practice, however, scholars mostly examine the foreign policy of each Nordic state – comparing and contrasting them and ultimately concluding that they have much in common – rather than considering them as (potentially) single actors.[3] Regarding the Nordics and foreign policy in general, scholars Haugevik and Sending make the following observation:

> Given the five Nordic states' shared assessments of the international environment, their similar values, overlapping interests, good internal relations, and oft-repeated aspiration to collaborate more, both interest- and

[3] An interesting exception, and of particular relevance for this paper, is the book *China and Nordic Diplomacy* (Sverdrup-Thygeson et al. 2018), which deals with each Nordic state's relations with China in separate chapters but then concludes with a final chapter that discusses how the Nordics could engage in sub-regional diplomacy with China under the so-called 5+1 model. The final chapter by Sverdrup and Lanteigne (2018) will be referred to later in the paper.

> identity-driven theories of action would anticipate intensified cooperation (2020: 111).

Based on these commonalities, Haugevik and Sending pose the central question of why there is not "more organized Nordic foreign policy collaboration, for example in the form of a joint 'grand strategy' on core foreign policy" (ibid: 110) and argue that "foreign policy is a domain where shared societal and political traits do not make Nordic joint positions and action more likely" (ibid.: 111). This paper takes up Haugevik and Sending's inquiry, treating it like a research question and approaching it from a different perspective. That is, the paper does not analyse the individual foreign policy of each Nordic state but instead looks at cases where the Nordic countries have indeed presented a united Nordic front to the world and attempts to draw some conclusions from these examples. The paper will specifically focus on joint Nordic initiatives in Japan that relate to different areas of foreign policy, ranging from economic and cultural diplomacy to international security. The cases presented here are the following:

- The joint Nordic participation at the World Expo in Japan in 1970
- The Nordic-Japan (5+1) prime ministers' meetings in Bergen, Norway in 1997 and Reykjavik, Iceland in 1999
- The Nordic Innovation House in Tokyo, established in 2020

While these joint Nordic activities were all aimed at Japan, they varied in scope and nature and took place against different historical backgrounds in terms of international trends in the Nordic region and Japan, as well as the strength and extent of Nordic collaboration. [4] Because the initiatives have been subject to few academic studies, examining them means relying considerably on primary sources.[5] The main focus is on sources of Nordic origin, but fortunately, Japanese viewpoints often shine through. The cases have been selected to address and answer the following subset of research questions:

- What structural form has Nordic co-operation taken in Japan?
- To what extent can there be talk of foreign policy collaboration?
- What can we learn from these examples?

In a narrow sense, the questions are interesting for Nordic-Japanese relations. In a broader sense, they are of interest in the context of collaborative Nordic policymaking with an eye towards larger states and in relation to the theoretical discussion about foreign policy trends among intergovernmental and non-state entities.

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[4] Other forms of Nordic collaboration, for example the ongoing collaboration between the Nordic embassies in Japan, as well as later Nordic-Japan meetings will not be covered in this paper due to space limitations.

[5] Welcome exceptions are studies by Catharina Backer (2014) and Nikolas Glover (2013) on the 1970 Osaka Expo.

2. Definition of key concepts

Before looking at the three cases, a few key concepts should be discussed and clarified. Firstly, the term 'Nordic states' or 'Nordics' generally refers to Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, plus the autonomous regions of the Faroe Islands and Greenland (Denmark) and Åland (Sweden). This paper focuses on the first group, i.e. the five sovereign Nordic states. The Nordics have two main forums for official Nordic co-operation: the Nordic Council (NC), formed in 1952, and the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM), established in 1971. The former is the "official body for formal inter-parliamentary co-operation" and the latter is the "official body for inter-governmental co-operation" (as defined on norden.org/en). The last concept that is important to discuss is foreign policy. Traditionally, foreign policy has been understood to refer to the way in which states interact with other states. The world has changed, however, and it has become mainstream for scholars to acknowledge that international actors such as the European Union can form foreign policies (see for example Smith 1999, *The Making of European Foreign Policy: The Case of Eastern Europe* and Nuttall 2000, *European Foreign Policy*). The European Union does, indeed, formulate and implement its own foreign policy, regardless of what scholars may think (European foreign and security policy n.d.). An example of a definition that fits this new reality is that of Christopher Hill:

> Foreign policy is the sum of official external relations conducted by an independent actor (usually but not exclusively a state) in international relations. The phrase "an *independent actor*" enables the inclusion of non-state entities such as the European Union, or Hezbollah; *external relations* are "*official*" to allow the inclusion of outputs from all parts of the governing mechanisms of the state or enterprise (that is, not just the foreign ministry) while also maintaining parsimony with respect to the vast number of international transactions now being conducted […] (Hill 2016: 4, emphasis in original).

This definition does not confine foreign policy actors to ministries for foreign affairs and embassies; on the contrary, it includes a wide range of state and para-state actors. Regarding the intricate relationship between 'external relations' and foreign policy, Hill stresses that the latter seeks to coordinate and to "establish priorities between competing interests with an external dimension" (2016: 6). Further, Hill defines possible foreign policy instruments in four broad categories: the diplomatic, the military, the economic and the cultural, while stressing that they are "almost always used either in combination or with some potential synergy held in reserve" (2016: 138). It should be noted that there are many different views on foreign policy and how to define it. Based on Hill's definition, however, this paper works with the assumption that the three cases presented in the paper fall under the umbrella of foreign policy and foreign affairs.

3. Joint Nordic participation at the 1970 World Expo in Japan

After World War II, three major events in Japan were promoted as signs that Japan had "re-entered international society as a full member in good standing" (Gordon 2020: 273). The three events were the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, the Japan World Exposition Osaka (Osaka Expo) in 1970 and the Winter Olympics in Sapporo in 1972. By 1968, Japan was a rising economic power and had become the second-largest economy in the world, after the United States. Both the Tokyo Olympics and the Osaka Expo were the first events of their kind to be held in Asia. The Tokyo Olympics had been a great success, and Japan's ambitions for the Osaka Expo were enormous. As Hirano (2016) has pointed out, Japan aimed to finally join the 'rich country club' by carrying out a successful Expo following the 1964 Tokyo Olympics: "The Osaka EXPO was a national project that Japan had to make successful at all costs" (ibid.: 104-105). The aim was to host the largest Expo ever, and it obviously mattered to the Japanese government how many countries would participate – and which ones. When preparations and construction work for the Expo reached their peak in 1969, as many as 220,000 people were employed in connection with the project, and huge investments were made to improve infrastructure, such as roads and railways (Hashizume 2020). The Expo was scheduled for a six-month period from 15 March to 13 September 1970, and the overall theme of the event was "Progress and Harmony for Mankind".

Despite the grand scale of the event and high expectations surrounding it, the Nordic countries were initially reluctant to join the Osaka Expo. Two key reports on Nordic participation at the Expo give good insight into the main discussions and issues that came up in connection with the event. The first was prepared for a Nordic press conference prior to the Expo's opening and the other is a detailed report from the General Commissioner after the event. The reports reveal that the Nordic business community had developed a negative view of the world expositions since their focus had increasingly shifted from exhibiting actual products to working with concepts and ideas. Also, it had been only three years since the last world exposition in Montreal ("Bakgrunnsstoff" 1970: 4). In fact, the Nordic governments were planning to cooperate in a 'negative sense', i.e. agreeing to decline to participate together, as it was "considered too expensive to design, produce and set up a pavilion in Japan" (Glover 2013: 224).

However, there was considerable private interest in joining the Osaka Expo, and SAS Catering (part of Scandinavian Airlines System, SAS) was the first party to commit, followed by the three Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway and Sweden). For a while it looked like only these three countries would participate, but when the Nordic Council held its annual session in 1968, it expressed great regret over this development and made a formal recommendation that the Nordic governments should ensure joint Nordic participation in the Osaka Expo ("Tillaggsförslag" 1968). Leading up to the Osaka Expo, the Japanese side also put considerable pressure on the Nordic countries to participate. The Japanese Foreign Minister at the time, Takeo Miki, even summoned the Swedish, Finnish and Norwegian ambassadors (after a

separate meeting with the Danish ambassador) to a meeting in 1967 to communicate 'his personal wish' that the Nordic countries would find a way of joining the Osaka Expo (Backer 2014: 72). Eventually, all five Nordic states became represented in an official joint pavilion, a decision that was both economically and politically motivated. On the one hand, it came down to a question of international presence, whether or not to participate in this international forum. On the other, it was a question of business policy, whether to create goodwill in Japan by participating, or potentially hurt export, air services and shipping interests by not participating ("Bakgrunnsstoff" 1970).

In 1967, the Nordic countries had participated in the world exposition in Montreal, hosting a joint pavilion that contained a "collective presentation of the Nordic region" and five distinctive country exhibitions (Glover 2013: 223). This time, however, the Nordics were going to participate with one pavilion, officially named the "Scandinavian Pavilion", which would house a single joint exhibition. The theme of the pavilion, "Environment Protection in Industrialised Society", was suggested by Sweden ("Bakgrunnsstoff" 1970: 6). This was in harmony with the Expo's theme and growing environmental awareness around the world; the Council of Europe, for instance, declared that 1970 was European Conservation Year. But the theme was also very fitting for Sweden, which, at the time, was preparing for the ground-breaking 1972 United Nations Conference on the Environment (the so-called Stockholm Conference). The theme and the process were not without controversy, however, as the Norwegians and Danes felt that Sweden had forced through the environmental theme (Glover 2013: 234-235). Eventually, the exhibition was organised into two halves, each demonstrating pros and cons (or benefits and sacrifices) of industrial development as experienced by the Nordic countries. The pavilion organisers expected to "score a double point with their fully integrated joint exhibition exactly on this theme, as it gives a practical example of collaboration across borders in relation to exactly [environmental] problems, which only can be solved through international collaboration" ("Bakgrunnsstoff" 1970: 5-6, own translation).

At world expositions, countries of the world compete for attention, and the Osaka Expo was no exception. For example, the United States devoted the largest of its many exhibition areas to "American accomplishments in space exploration – with emphasis on the Apollo 11 lunar mission which successfully placed the first men on the moon on July 20, 1969". The space components on display in the United States Pavilion ranged from objects such as the actual Apollo 8 Command Module to a sample of moon rock (United States Information Agency, n.d.: 16-21). In terms of cultural programmes, the United States brought the New York Symphony Orchestra, while the Soviet Union brought the Bolshoi Opera (Pálmadóttir 1970: 13). It was clear to the Nordic organisers and media at home that even as a united front, the Nordics would have a hard time competing with the superpowers for visitors' attention. For example, an article in the Icelandic newspaper *Alþýðublaðið* on the day after the opening of the Osaka Expo mentions that on their own, none of the Nordic countries would have a chance of being noticed in competition with the major powers, but that together they would hopefully 'not completely drown' among the almost 120

national and corporate Expo pavilions ("Norðurlandaskálinn …" 1970: 4).

Another reason the Nordics felt they had to make a good impression was a study that Sweden had commissioned in 1967 that showed the Japanese did not think particularly highly of the technical and industrial sector in Sweden. It was an opinion that the organisers assumed applied to the whole Nordic region ("Generalkommissariens …" 1971: 7). As a result, there was great emphasis on applying the latest technology for lighting, displays and sound in designing the exhibition. When the pavilion opened, however, it became apparent that the exhibition design was not as effective as intended; visitors were rushing through the pavilion in just a couple of minutes, likely without absorbing much of the exhibits' environmental message. After important adjustments, flow through the exhibition was improved and visitors spent more time in the pavilion. However, news of these initial problems made its way back home, and press coverage in the Nordic media tended to be negative (ibid.: 19). Also, Nordic visitors were expecting more traditional 'country presentations' in the pavilion, and they tended to have critical views of the exhibition (ibid.: 24).

Among the Japanese, on the other hand, the pavilion was quite a success. It received an estimated 1.8 million visitors, and more importantly, the media felt that the Nordics had made an important contribution to the Expo with their theme. The pavilion also received considerable press coverage in quantitative terms (ibid.: 18). Half a century later, Expo experts in Japan commonly mention the Scandinavian Pavilion as one of the highlights of the event (Hirano 2016; Hashizume 2020). For example, in his coverage of 'unique European pavilions', in which he highlights five pavilions, Hirano says of the Scandinavian Pavilion:

> The Scandinavian Pavilion was markedly different from other pavilions. The Scandinavian Pavilion was marked with a "plus (+)" and "minus (–)" sign at the entrance, signalling that industrialisation comes with both positive and negative influences. The floor of the exhibition was divided into two distinctive areas: one that showed the positive aspects of industrialisation, and the other that showed the negative aspects of the industrial revolution. The theme of the Scandinavian Pavilion was "environmental protection in industrialised society". Although some other countries had a similar message concerning environmental issues, they tended to emphasise that science and technology can solve all our global problems, including that of the environment. The Scandinavian Pavilion was unique in that it paid equal attention to positive and negative aspects of industrialisation and did not advocate for science as the solution to all global issues (2016: 114, own translation).

It is also important to keep in mind that the Scandinavian Pavilion was one of only two joint pavilions, the other being the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD), representing Turkey, Pakistan and Iran (Hirano 2017). Among the 78 countries that participated in the Osaka Expo, the Scandinavian Pavilion was quite the exception in this regard, in some ways more resembling the intergovernmental UN and European Community pavilions. The Osaka Expo itself surpassed the

expectations of its ambitious hosts; more countries participated than at any other expo up to that point in the history of world expositions, and the total number of visitors (64,218,770 people over a six-month period) was also a record not broken until the 2010 Shanghai Expo (Barboza 2010). Lastly, the Osaka Expo was a large television event, with broad radio and TV coverage of all participant countries by Japan's Broadcasting Corporation, better known as NHK ("Generalkommissariens …" 1971: 19). One can assume, therefore, that the image of the Nordics as friendly neighbours and important actors on the global environmental agenda became well established in Japan at the time. Not until these positive results in Japan had become known at home did the press coverage in the Nordic countries turn positive ("Generalkommissariens …" 1971: 14).

The Expo collaboration came about in a period when Nordic governmental co-operation activities were generally considered 'sidelined, weak and uncoordinated' (Nordiska Rådet 1973: 26, as quoted in Etzold 2020). The key reports referenced in this section made no attempts to hide the fact that the reason for joint participation was not just the countries' general close collaboration, but also economic necessity ("Bakgrunnsstoff" 1970: 4). In fact, Glover (2013: 227) has described the decision-making process leading to the Osaka Expo as "first and foremost a process set in train by representatives of the Swedish business sector", rather than being initiated as an intergovernmental process. The Nordic Council had little to do with the execution of the project itself but used its weight to put pressure on the Nordic governments to present a joint Nordic front.

4. Nordic plus Japan (5+1) prime minister summits

With their limited populations, the Nordic countries generally have asymmetrical relations with major world powers, and Japan is no exception. To counter this asymmetry, while at the same time drawing on their common culture and values, there has been a trend in recent decades of Nordic leaders joining forces and engaging in 'summit meetings' with their counterparts in more powerful states. The best-known example is probably the Nordic Prime Minister summits with US President Barack Obama in Stockholm in 2013 and Washington in 2016, but other examples of such 5+1 meetings include the meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2018 and the meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2019. In addition, the Prime Ministers of the Nordic and Baltic countries (NB8) have met annually with the British Prime Minister at the Northern Future Forum meetings since 2011. Less known are the Nordic summit meetings with Japanese leaders (and ensuing collaboration), which took place in a similar format in 1997 and 1999.[6] As in the last

[6] This author has not found similar 5+1 meetings at this level with any country prior to the Nordic-Japan summit meetings of 1997 and 1999. In general, very few academic studies deal with the 5+1 summit format. Iso-Markku (et al.) briefly mentions the different Nordic meeting formats such as 5+1 and NB8, without looking into specific meetings (2018: 12-15). Sverdrup and Lanteigne (2018) discuss the 5+1 format in the context of China. Note that the author has not come across the wording 5+1 or Nordic 5+1 in texts produced at the time of the Nordic-Japan summits, but it is used here as the format is the same.

section, background, themes and organisation of Nordic collaboration towards Japan will be studied.

When the first 5+1 meeting with Japan took place in 1997, Japan had undisputedly become a leading power on the world stage. Japan's economic strength was only surpassed by that of the United States, and Japan was a major contributor to leading multilateral institutions. Also, Japan was the "most important political and trading partner in Asia" for all the Nordic states in 1997 when the first Nordic-Japanese prime ministers' meeting was held ("Joint Press Conference..." 1997). From a Nordic point of view, Japan was undoubtedly seen as a key twenty-first-century partner in Asia, but the question is how Japanese leaders viewed the Nordic states. As can be seen on the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' official website, minister-level visits (and other high-level visits) from the Nordic countries to Japan have been quite frequent in recent decades, while visits from Japan to individual Nordic countries have been few. It is safe to say that gaining attention and visibility at the highest governmental level in Japan has been a common challenge for all the Nordic states. Nordic collaboration itself also faced various challenges from the 1990s, not least due to growing European integration of the Nordic states (see for example Waever 1992).

The first Nordic prime ministers' summit with Japan took place in Bergen, Norway, on 28 June 1997 in connection with the annual meeting of Nordic prime ministers. The meeting can therefore be said to have taken place within the intergovernmental structure of Nordic co-operation (NCM). Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto represented Japan, and his visit was the first ever by a Japanese prime minister to Norway and probably only the second visit on this level to the Nordic region (Nakasone visited Finland in 1987). A confidential summary of the meeting prepared by the Norwegian hosts reveals a few interesting points. Firstly, the meeting was initiated by Prime Minister Hashimoto, and his first remarks at the meeting were thanks for having the opportunity to meet all the Nordic prime ministers in the same place. Hashimoto then expressed his hope "that this type of dialogue could continue in the same format and asked all five [prime ministers] to consider this proposal" ("Opsummering af möte…" 1997). Secondly, the meeting lasted nearly two hours and covered a surprisingly large number of themes. The media stressed themes such as United Nations reform, environmental issues and social welfare ("First Japan-Nordic …" 1997: 1). However, the notes from the summit list discussions about a broad range of issues, for instance regional developments, including security issues in Europe, the Arctic and Asia. Thirdly, the meeting presented a joint Nordic front. The meeting (and the following press conference) did not present a constellation of priorities from each state, but rather a joint Nordic dialogue with Japan where the host spoke on behalf of the Nordics when needed. One of the outcomes of the meeting was that both sides declared to the media that they hoped to continue the dialogue in this format. Further, joint "Japan-Nordic Seminars on Aging Society" were held in Tokyo in 1998 and 1999 as direct results of the summit ("For a World of Human..." 1999).

Two years later in 1999, it was Iceland's turn to hold the chairmanship for Nordic co-operation. The prime minister of Iceland, Davíð Oddsson, extended a formal

invitation to prime minister Keizo Obuchi to join the annual meeting of Nordic Prime Ministers, which was to be held in Reykjavik in June 1999 ("Dear Prime Minister" 1998). Obuchi accepted the invitation, and two preparatory meetings were held, in Tokyo and Stockholm. The first meeting took place on 11 June in Stockholm, where Japan's ambassador to Sweden, Takeshi Fujii, invited the Nordic ambassadors to a joint dinner to discuss the upcoming visit. After the meeting, the Icelandic ambassador reported:

> The ambassador wanted to give further explanations for the interest that Japan showed in collaboration with the Nordic countries. He said that Japan was a major power in Asia, recognised as such in the global economic arena. Japan had so far not used its influence internationally in proportion to the country's [economic] importance and that the collaboration with the Nordic countries was a step towards more broadly demonstrating a will to cooperate. Japan perceived the meeting in Reykjavik as important and expected it to gain attention internationally. For that reason, Japan put strong emphasis on the final joint statement of the meeting. Japan perceived the Nordic countries as desirable partners due to their goodwill internationally and role as advocates of moderation, compromise and human rights. Furthermore, Japan was looking towards the Nordic countries' humane social systems ("Fundur forsætisráðherra...", telefax dated 14 June 1999, own translation).

The second meeting took place the day after, 12 June, in Tokyo, where the Nordic ambassadors to Japan hosted a preparatory lunch in honour of Obuchi. The Icelandic ambassador, Ólafur Egilsson, had taken this initiative and was responsible for coordinating the meeting due to Iceland's chairmanship. In his report, he explains how his contacts in Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs were surprised that the busy prime minister accepted the invitation ("Íslandsför forsætisráðherra…" 1999). The same contacts had also warned that the prime minister did not know much about the Nordic countries, so the ambassadors should not be surprised or take it the wrong way that the prime minister was likely to remain silent. Again, Prime Minister Obuchi surprised everyone, this time by taking an active part in the discussion, which lasted approximately one and a half hours, during which Obuchi expressed keen interest in certain social matters that he already knew had been high on the agenda of the Nordic countries with remarkable results. The ministry staff may have been unaware that Obuchi was an unusual Japanese prime minister in the sense that he had travelled widely around the world in his younger days. During the trip, he had visited all the Nordic countries except Iceland. Furthermore, he had heard about the first meeting from former prime minister Hashimoto and how highly he valued the meeting, not least for the Nordics' "next-century view on welfare issues" ("Íslandsför forsætisráðherra…" 1999).

After two preparatory meetings, the agenda had become quite clear, and the one-and-a-half-hour meeting in Reykjavik seems more focused than the first meeting in

Bergen. The joint press release issued in connection with the meeting with the title "For a world of human dignity and peace: Japan-Nordic partnership for the 21st century" listed Japanese-Nordic collaboration in the following areas: 1) Working toward resolution of the Kosovo crisis and other regional and ethnic conflicts, 2) Contributing to global peace and prosperity, and 3) Pursuing a more humane society. Point number two includes what must have been a focal point of the meeting:

> The Prime Ministers confirmed the need for reform of the UN Security Council and expansion of the number of permanent and non-permanent members. The Nordic Prime Ministers reiterated their support for Japan and Germany as new permanent members [of the Security Council]. The Prime Ministers also confirmed to encourage closer consultations between their countries through various fora with regard to strengthening the UN. ("For a world of human..." 1999)

Iceland, as the host country, used this unique opportunity to arrange a bilateral meeting with Obuchi regarding the opening of reciprocal embassies, an issue which had been emphasised by Iceland for some time but was not as much of a priority for Japan. Largely owing to the meeting, mutual embassies were established a few years later (Ingvarsdottir 2017).

Everything indicates that the two 5+1 meetings were highly appreciated by all six countries involved. Japan's campaign for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council undoubtedly contributed to Japan's initiative to join the annual Nordic meeting. However, judging from ambassador Fujii's comments, it was also a part of what has been described as Japan's wider efforts in this period to "make a greater international contribution (*kokusai kouken*) in a visible manner so as to earn the world community's respect and to gain a voice in shaping global policy" (Mochizuki 2007: 5). Japan's push for reform of the UN Security Council and the UN in general, hosting of the 1997 UN Climate Summit in Kyoto, and wish to meet with the Nordic prime ministers should probably all be seen as part of Japan's new outreach policy in the late 1990s. It has even been said that the Gulf War of 1990-1991 and the Asian economic crisis of 1997–1998 motivated the Japanese to discuss their country's international contribution for the first time in the post-World War II era (Ito 2007: vii). We should not forget, however, that the Japanese prime ministers also saw Nordic welfare as an important role model for Japan, as seen in the two Nordic-Japanese conferences that Japan hosted in connection with the summit meetings. Although Hashimoto and his Nordic colleagues had declared in 1997 their wish that the meetings should become regular – a wish which was reiterated at the Reykjavik meeting in 1999 – only these two have so far taken place. It is not clear why the meetings did not continue. The sudden death of Prime Minister Obuchi in May 2000 and again the short term of his successor, Yoshiro Mori, may have created discontinuity, which was difficult for both countries to overcome. Also, among the Nordic states, the competing pull towards bilateral relations is ever present. For example, according to former Ambassador of Sweden to Japan, Lars Vargö, the

Nordic 5+1 format with Japan did not meet the ambitions of Sweden at the time of the summits. The Swedish government wished to keep existing bilateral formats for discussions and feared that the national agenda, with its focus on specific co-operation structures, would be endangered by a wider Nordic set-up. Sweden did not want the Japanese to treat discussions with the individual Nordic countries as less important than that with larger European countries like the UK, Germany and France (private communication, 2022). Nonetheless, a new model for co-operation had been established, which undoubtedly influenced later meetings with Japan and other world powers.

From the perspective of great powers, dealing with the Nordics as a single unit rather than as individual countries reflects a certain logic and may seem preferable. It may equally be argued that joining forces gives the Nordic countries enhanced leverage in their dealings with larger powers. The Nordic prime ministers' meeting with President Obama in 2016 in Washington is a case in point. The May 2017 meeting between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China and the Nordic Council of Ministers in Beijing is a lesser-known example, but one that follows the same logic, where major global powers find it practical to have official meetings at a Nordic rather than a national level. As Ulf Sverdrup has pointed out, "many of the larger states prefer to meet the Nordic governments simultaneously rather than one by one in order to save time" (Sverdrup 2016: 187). Sverdrup goes on to state that "[c]loser Nordic co-operation on issues of strategic importance could enable the Nordic countries to better secure their own interests and ensure that they can play a larger role in influencing global developments in directions so that it fits with their own interests" (ibid.: 187). Specifically looking at Nordic-Chinese relations, the Institute for Security & Development Policy in Sweden reached the conclusion in a detailed report in 2016: "both China and the Nordics have significant gains to make through closer co-operation. Relations based at the larger, Nordic regional level would be more interesting to China. Bilateral relations with five small individual states would be less so" (ibid.: 3). Likewise, Sverdrup and Lanteigne (2018) have pointed out that "the time is fast approaching" for considering a China-Nordic 5+1 dialogue. The Nordic 5+1 meetings with Japan strongly indicate that the same logic has applied in Nordic-Japan relations.

5. The Nordic Innovation House in Tokyo

Half a century after the Nordic countries participated in the Osaka Expo, in spring 2020, a Nordic Innovation House (NIH) opened in Tokyo. The opening was part of a new initiative through which NIHs were opened in Silicon Valley, New York, Singapore, Hong Kong and Tokyo between 2014 and 2020. The three Asian Houses have all opened within a two-year period and there are no indicators that the expansion, in Asia or internationally, has come to an end. In the past, the official institutions for Nordic collaboration (NC and NCM) have sometimes been criticised for "being bureaucratic and cumbersome" (Etzold 2020: 14). This does not apply

to the NIH concept, which was put into practice in a surprisingly short time. This 'grasshopper speed' of the project makes it a challenging but interesting subject for academic study as there is still very limited documentation available.

The project is quite curious in the context of Nordic collaboration, and it is worth asking whether it may be a part of, or even setting, a new trend. As mentioned earlier, Nordic collaboration faced various challenges from the 1990s onward, resulting in changes aiming to redefine the 'added value' of Nordic co-operation (Etzold 2020: 13). Etzold has characterised 2014–2017 as the period of the 'modernization process', officially launched when the ministers for Nordic co-operation announced their vision for future co-operation, encapsulated by the phrase "together we are stronger" and including both inward- and outward-looking ambitions (2020: 14). The 2014 joint statement from the ministers reads: "We will continue to raise the profile of the countries globally in the 'Team Norden' spirit" and "continue and improve co-ordination on international issues in areas where this is of mutual interest" (Nordic Council of Ministers 2014).

In 2018, the Nordic Ministers for Business launched the "Nordic Co-operation Programme for Business and Innovation Policy 2018–2021", where they stated: "We must improve global market opportunities by effectively integrating companies in the Nordic Region into global value chains and giving them better access to attractive new markets". To realise this goal the ministers advocated, on the one hand, establishing the Nordic Region as a global innovation hub (meaning that "the Nordic Region must be developed into and managed as a leading region for innovation"), and on the other, Nordic co-operation in international markets. The ministers stated:

> In some markets the Nordic countries help each other by acting together and using the joint Nordic brand to improve the countries' visibility and their attractiveness as partners. By working together at the Nordic level, we can offer companies better services by way of a broader professional network and other inroads into the market. It could be advantageous to base this on co-operation between such relevant national and Nordic players as Nordic Innovation [...]. Nordic Innovation House in Silicon Valley is one example of such co-operation (Nordic Council of Ministers 2018: 13).

As indicated by the quotation, the NIH initiative is very much in line with this new vision. The NIHs are a joint initiative co-funded by Nordic Innovation, an institution that operates under the auspices of the Nordic Council of Ministers, and the Nordic government agencies responsible for business growth within their respective countries (Nordic Innovation n.d.). The project initially started through the Nordic High Growth Entrepreneurship Initiative but has since evolved into an independent programme (Nordic Council of Ministers 2015). A similar idea had also existed for some time, as can be seen in the report, *Establishment of Nordic Innovation Centres in Asia?*, which the Nordic Council of Ministers published in 2008 along with the results and recommendations of a Nordic working group on the matter (Andersen 2008). Describing the NIHs or how exactly they operate is not a straightforward task,

as the format varies considerably from location to location. All, however, serve as incubators that offer services and guidance to Nordic start-up companies. They are meant to "…be a service for new and established Nordic companies with the high potential for international growth and success" (Nordic Innovation 2019).

The idea is that the NIHs can be locally funded after the first three years of operations, so the projects are quite lean and cost-efficient from the outset. The projects have small overheads; the set-up is flexible; the Nordic trade representatives based at Nordic embassies in Asia play a key role and the Nordic countries can contribute in different ways. This has led to different set-ups in different locations.[7] The set-ups in Singapore, Hong Kong and Tokyo demonstrate both the Nordic pooling of resources and the flexible setup of the houses. For instance, Denmark is an official participant in Tokyo but not in Singapore and Hong Kong, whereas Iceland is a formal participant in all three cities. According to the official website of the Nordic Innovation House in Tokyo, members gain advisory services from the Nordic Trade Promotion Offices (TPOs) in Japan, that is Business Finland, Business Sweden, Innovation Norway, Business Iceland and Embassy of Denmark (Nordic Innovation House Tokyo n.d.). The NIH also has various Japanese partners such as Japan's External Trade Organization (JETRO), the City of Tokyo and Osaka Innovation Hub. Together with these partners, or independently, the NIH arranged 28 events in 2021 despite Covid, mostly surrounding the key themes for 2021–2022, i.e. digital health, cleantech (addressing carbon neutrality) and digital transition.[8] The project shows very strategic matching of Nordic strengths with Japanese needs and focus areas.

Mikael von Dorrien, former Senior Innovation Adviser at Nordic Innovation, worked on the project during the start-up phase.[9] During Dorrien's work on the Swedish "Born global" programme, which aimed to assist Swedish tech and start-up companies to develop their business models, he visited Silicon Valley with his protégés around 2012. In conversations with his Nordic counterparts in Silicon Valley, he realised that many of them had the same idea, that is, that it would make sense to join forces at the pan-Nordic level. For example, the Norwegians had a house in Silicon Valley to service start-up companies, but "they had run out of companies" (private communication, spring 2021). The other Nordics had companies, but no facilities. The Nordic House in Silicon Valley opened in 2014 to great success. The house received 400–500 visits in the first year, including royal visits from Scandinavia, company visits, various delegations and so on. According to Dorrien, the visits were not just from the Nordic region: "We also received lots of visits from other countries,

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[7] For example, in Singapore, Business Sweden coordinates the project in partnership with Innovation Norway, the Finnish and Swedish embassies in Singapore and the Icelandic Embassy in Japan. In Hong Kong, Business Sweden is also in the lead together with its partners, Innovation Norway, the Swedish Consulate, the Finnish Consulate, the Norwegian, Finnish and Swedish Chambers of Commerce in Hong Kong and the Icelandic Embassy in Beijing (See Nordic Innovation 2018).

[8] Nordic Innovation House Tokyo, unpublished annual report for 2021, slide 57.

[9] Others who worked on the NIH project in the early phase were, for example, Anne Lidgard Director at VINNOVA (Sweden´s Innovation Agency) and Anders Nilsson, CEO of the Swedish incubator Ideon Innovation.

everyone wanted to see how this was done, how we could be five Nordic countries working together" (private communication, spring 2021). The house in Silicon Valley has already become financially self-sustainable and this is also the goal for the other houses. According to Dorrien, "there have been bumps on the road, for example with the demonstrations in Hong Kong and then Covid", but the concept has been proven to work, and the Silicon Valley and Singapore houses are especially good examples. Dorrien describes the concept and strategy as 'guerilla style', where the needs of the tech and start-up companies are put first "rather than the bureaucratic needs of the funding institution" (private communication, spring 2021). The locations have been selected based not only on Nordic business interests, ease of doing business, etc., but also whether the cities or countries have shown interest in what the Nordics have to offer. The format of the collaboration, with its mix of public and private interests and the important pull-factor from host countries and cities around the world, in many ways resembles recent Nordic cultural collaborations: Nordic Cool in the Kennedy Center in Washington, 2013; Nordic Matters at the Southbank Centre in London, 2017; and Nordic Bridges in Canada, 2022. The main difference is that culture has often been seen as an easy arena for Nordic collaboration, whereas exports and investments related to tech companies have been seen as a highly competitive arena.

6. Discussion and conclusion

In tandem with changes in official Nordic co-operation over the last decade, there has been increasing emphasis on Nordic co-operation in an international context. However, as the cases demonstrate, the idea of presenting a joint Nordic front to the world has a much longer history and quite a few precedents in Japan alone. This section returns to the research questions listed in the introduction and addresses them in turn, while paying special attention to the roles and interplay between key actors, which in the context of this paper are the official institutions of Nordic co-operation, Nordic governments and embassies, and finally the private sector.

6.1. What structural form has Nordic co-operation taken in Japan?

An important commonality in all three cases is that the collaborating countries formed a joint Nordic front, meaning that they presented a single joint Nordic agenda rather than a constellation of individual national agendas. Apart from that, the first aspect that stands out when comparing the three cases is how different they are in terms of structure and organisation. The drive for co-operation comes from different directions; the main actors vary, and we see various levels of involvement from official Nordic institutions.

In the first case, the joint Nordic participation at the 1970 Osaka Expo was born out of pure pragmatism and economic necessity. Swedish private interests initially drove the project, but both the Japanese government and the Nordic Council put considerable pressure on the Nordic governments to participate. Sweden was seen as somewhat dominating the decision-making process and official Nordic institutions

seem to have played a limited role. Apart from Sweden, the Nordic governments were initially highly reactive in the process towards collaboration. In the second case, the Japanese side initiated the collaboration and specifically asked for the format where the Japanese prime minister could meet with all his Nordic counterparts in the same setting. The meetings of the Nordic prime ministers held every year under the auspices of the NCM served as a convenient platform for hosting the two meetings. These first two cases can both be characterised as ad-hoc or opportunity-based, with the drive to collaborate having come from neither Nordic governments nor official Nordic institutions.

The Nordic Innovation House in Tokyo stands out as the only case where the official Nordic institutions play a central planning and facilitating role. We see how Nordic Innovation, one of the organisations under the NCM, became a practical platform to facilitate a project that is of great interest to the business and industrial sectors in the Nordic countries. The success in one country has been copied to the next, and the NIH in Tokyo is a result of a consistent Nordic strategy. The speed of action and the agile, flexible and cost-efficient structure could become a new model for international Nordic strategies and is an interesting subject for closer study.

6.2. To what extent can there be talk of a foreign policy collaboration?

Based on Hull's definition of foreign policy, this paper operates under the assumption that the three cases fall under the umbrella of foreign policy and foreign affairs. The cases are very different in nature and, in varying combinations, tip into at least three of Hull's broad categories of foreign policy instruments, that is, the diplomatic, the economic and the cultural. The Osaka Expo, for example, fits into all three categories. However, although this paper considers the three cases within the realm of general foreign policy, it does not necessarily mean that there is a joint Nordic policy or "grand strategy" behind the co-operation we see. In the first two cases, we could say that the Nordic countries 'stumble' into close collaboration that happens to fall within the realm of foreign policy and foreign affairs. In fact, the Nordic Innovation House in Tokyo is probably the only example that can be regarded as the direct offspring of a consistent and proactive international Nordic strategy.

As discussed earlier in the paper, foreign policy is difficult to define, even in the traditional sense; the growing role of sub-regional and intergovernmental actors makes the picture even more complex. Hence, scholars may not always agree which of the diverse Nordic activities that have already been carried out relate to foreign policy and which do not. For instance, Sverdrup and Lanteigne have stated there is "no tradition for formal joint Nordic co-operation with other states in foreign policy, or for joint external representation, and certainly not within the Nordic Council of Ministers" (2018: 127). The statement highlights both the need for more theoretical discussion on the nature of joint Nordic international initiatives and possibly also a lack of visibility of the dispersed co-operation that already exists.

6.3. What can we learn from these examples?

Despite the structural and thematic differences within the three case studies, what they have in common is that they work. In all three cases, we see smooth collaboration, cost-efficient solutions and high visibility among the target audience in Japan. In two of the cases, the pooling of Nordic resources made possible projects that would have been unrealistic for any one of the Nordics on its own. A mostly unintended bonus has been the strong demonstrations of Nordic unity and collaboration in action, which has been a source of positive attention throughout the period covered in this study. Also, the cases show a strategic matching of Nordic strengths and Japanese interests, which in all cases has enhanced public reception in Japan. Finally, it is important to point out that the Nordic embassies in Japan play an important role in all three cases. Even in the case of the Nordic Innovation House in Tokyo, where official Nordic institutions have been important in the start-up phase, the execution of the project has mainly been in the hands of staff at the Nordic embassies or local hires who know the Japanese market. Official Nordic institutions can play an important coordinating and facilitating role, but the key to success seems to be effective collaboration between partners with a solid understanding of Japanese conditions, such as embassies and export companies.

The scale difference, distance and cost of operating projects in or with Japan have made collaboration practical for the Nordics, and Japanese leaders have considered it to be practical to deal with the Nordics as a group. As stated by the scholars Haugevik and Sending (2020), the Nordics may not be likely to adopt a joint foreign policy *in general*, but when it comes to large, important and distant partners like Japan, a united Nordic front makes a great deal of sense. While a comparison with the European Union is outside the scope of this paper, it is interesting and relevant to study further whether the Nordics might benefit from working more systematically with select 'strategic partnerships' towards major countries, as has been practised by the European Union.

6.4. Why is there not more organised Nordic foreign policy collaboration?

In the cases studied here, there is nothing that obviously goes wrong; there are no cautionary tales which could hint at why the Nordics should not work more with joint international representation, although we sometimes sense the pressure from the competing 'bilateral model'. Overall, it is safe to conclude that all three cases have been quite successful. The answer to the question above has more to do with the official will, and matching structures, to carry out more external activities. In his study of Nordic relations with European partners, Etzold (2016) points out that from an "external point of view, the NCM and the NC tend to be seen as Nordic organisations that primarily deal with Nordic affairs rather than as strong international actors with a broader remit" (ibid.: 160), and further from an internal point of view that "it seems rather difficult to establish a clear and effective division of labour among the NCM and the Nordic countries' foreign ministries" (ibid.: 161). Indeed, the cases demonstrate varying levels of involvement from Nordic institutions,

Nordic governments, and the private sector. Despite these complexities, things are obviously in motion as seen in, for example, the international strategy, international branding strategy and various high-profile international activities launched by the bodies for official Nordic collaboration. In the short to medium term, it looks realistic for the Nordics to join forces in certain policy areas, for instance along the lines of a foreign policy community as proposed by Strang (2012). Such a community would bring together committees of the NC and special networks to "draft proposals and launch initiatives" within select priority areas (Strang 2013: 8). The NC and NCM secretariats could play an important administrative and coordinating role in such a collaboration. The work could still be flexible and somewhat opportunity-based, while ideally carried out with more coordination, consistency and institutional learning than hitherto. So far, the tendency is for precious experience from large international projects to be rather easily lost and forgotten.

This paper deals with three forms of Nordic co-operation which can be characterised as representing a united Nordic front in 1) international fairs/events, 2) summit meetings with larger states and 3) export/business promotion. The cases discussed here focus on Japan, but many more examples exist, both involving different geography (e.g., 5+1 meetings with the United States) and additional forms (e.g., Nordic information offices in the Baltics). In fact, there is a myriad of examples of the Nordic countries joining forces to present a united front to the wider world; what is lacking is both a consistent 'grand strategy' behind these initiatives and a more systematic study of them. This paper cannot possibly cover all aspects of Nordic collaboration in Japan or under the different formats but hopefully serves as an invitation for further dialogue and study.

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