

THE OPERATION

Norway was the perfect place to base the mission.

In the past few years of East-West crisis, the U.S. military has vastly expanded its presence inside Norway, whose western border runs 1,400 miles along the north Atlantic Ocean and merges above the Arctic Circle with Russia. The Pentagon has created high paying jobs and contracts, amid some local controversy, by investing hundreds of millions of dollars to upgrade and expand American Navy and Air Force facilities in Norway. The new works included, most importantly, an advanced synthetic aperture radar far up north that was capable of penetrating deep into Russia and came online just as the American intelligence community lost access to a series of long-range listening sites inside China.

A newly refurbished American submarine base, which had been under construction for years, had become operational and more American submarines were now able to work closely with their Norwegian colleagues to monitor and spy on a major Russian nuclear redoubt 250 miles to the east, on the Kola Peninsula. America also has vastly expanded a Norwegian air base in the north and delivered to the Norwegian air force a fleet of Boeing-built P8 Poseidon patrol planes to bolster its long-range spying on all things Russia.

In return, the Norwegian government angered liberals and some moderates in its parliament last November by passing the Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement (SDCA). Under the new deal, the U.S. legal system would have jurisdiction in certain “agreed areas” in the North over American soldiers accused of crimes off base, as well as over those Norwegian citizens accused or suspected of interfering with the work at the base.

Norway was one of the original signatories of the NATO Treaty in 1949, in the early days of the Cold War. Today, the secretary general of NATO is Jens Stoltenberg, a committed anti-communist, who served as Norway’s prime minister for eight years before moving to his high NATO post, with American backing, in 2014. He was a hardliner on all things Putin and Russia who had cooperated with the American intelligence community since the Vietnam War. He has been trusted completely since. “*He is the glove that fits the American hand,*” the source said.

Back in Washington, planners knew they had to go to Norway. “*They hated the Russians, and the Norwegian navy was full of superb sailors and divers who had generations of experience in highly profitable deep-sea oil and gas exploration,*” the source said. They also could be trusted to keep the mission secret. (The Norwegians may have had other interests as well. The destruction of Nord Stream—if the Americans could pull it off—would allow Norway to sell vastly more of its own natural gas to Europe.)

Sometime in March, a few members of the team flew to Norway to meet with the Norwegian Secret Service and Navy. One of the key questions was where exactly in the Baltic Sea was the best place to plant the explosives. Nord Stream 1 and 2, each with two sets of pipelines, were separated much of the way by little more than a mile as they made their run to the port of Greifswald in the far northeast of Germany.

The Norwegian navy was quick to find the right spot, in the shallow waters of the Baltic sea a few miles off Denmark’s Bornholm Island. The pipelines ran more than a mile apart along a seafloor that was only 260 feet deep. That would be well within the range of the divers, who, operating from a Norwegian Alta class mine hunter, would dive with a mixture of oxygen, nitrogen and helium streaming from their tanks, and plant shaped C4 charges on the four pipelines with concrete protective covers. It would be tedious, time consuming and dangerous work, but the waters off Bornholm had another advantage: there were no major tidal currents, which would have made the task of diving much more difficult.



After a bit of research, the Americans were all in.

At this point, the Navy’s obscure deep-diving group in Panama City once again came into play. The deep-sea schools at Panama City, whose trainees participated in Ivy Bells, are seen as an unwanted backwater by the elite graduates of the Naval Academy in Annapolis, who typically seek the glory of being assigned as a Seal, fighter pilot, or submariner. If one must become a “*Black Shoe*”—that is, a member of the less desirable surface ship command—there is always at least duty on a destroyer, cruiser or amphibious ship. The least glamorous of all is mine warfare. Its divers never appear in Hollywood movies, or on the cover of popular magazines.

“*The best divers with deep diving qualifications are a tight community, and only the very best are recruited for the operation and told to be prepared to be summoned to the CIA in Washington,*” the source said.

The Norwegians and Americans had a location and the operatives, but there was another concern: any unusual underwater activity in the waters off Bornholm might draw the attention of the Swedish or Danish navies, which could report it.

Denmark had also been one of the original NATO signatories and was known in the intelligence community for its special ties to the United Kingdom. Sweden had applied for membership into NATO, and had demonstrated its great skill in managing its underwater sound and magnetic sensor systems that successfully tracked Russian submarines that would occasionally show up in remote waters

of the Swedish archipelago and be forced to the surface.

The Norwegians joined the Americans in insisting that some senior officials in Denmark and Sweden had to be briefed in general terms about possible diving activity in the area. In that way, someone higher up could intervene and keep a report out of the chain of command, thus insulating the pipeline operation. “*What they were told and what they knew were purposely different,*” the source told me. (The Norwegian embassy, asked to comment on this story, did not respond.)

The Norwegians were key to solving other hurdles. The Russian navy was known to possess surveillance technology capable of spotting, and triggering, underwater mines. The American explosive devices needed to be camouflaged in a way that would make them appear to the Russian system as part of the natural background—something that required adapting to the specific salinity of the water. The Norwegians had a fix.

The Norwegians also had a solution to the crucial question of when the operation should take place. Every June, for the past 21 years, the American Sixth Fleet, whose flagship is based in Gaeta, Italy, south of Rome, has sponsored a major NATO exercise in the Baltic Sea involving scores of allied ships throughout the region. The current exercise, held in June, would be known as Baltic Operations 22, or BALTOPS 22. The Norwegians proposed this would be the ideal cover to plant the mines.

The Americans provided one vital element: they convinced the Sixth Fleet planners to add a research and development exercise to the program. The exercise, as made public by the Navy, involved the Sixth Fleet in collaboration

with the Navy’s “*research and warfare centers.*” The at-sea event would be held off the coast of Bornholm Island and involve NATO teams of divers planting mines, with competing teams using the latest underwater technology to find and destroy them.

It was both a useful exercise and ingenious cover. The Panama City boys would do their thing and the C4 explosives would be in place by the end of BALTOPS22, with a 48-hour timer attached. All of the Americans and Norwegians would be long gone by the first explosion.

The days were counting down. “*The clock was ticking, and we were nearing mission accomplished,*” the source said.

And then: Washington had second thoughts. The bombs would still be planted during BALTOPS, but the White House worried that a two-day window for their detonation would be too close to the end of the exercise, and it would be obvious that America had been involved.

Instead, the White House had a new request: “*Can the guys in the field come up with some way to blow the pipelines later on command?*”

Some members of the planning team were angered and frustrated by the President’s seeming indecision. The Panama City divers had repeatedly practiced planting the C4 on pipelines, as they would during BALTOPS, but now the team in Norway had to come up with a way to give Biden what he wanted—the ability to issue a successful execution order at a time of his choosing.