

Dear reader,

Thank you for your interest in this article. This is a preprint version of the Cooperation and Conflict article. It deals with the particular status seeking dynamics inside the Nordic region where the countries both compete and cooperate for social status in a friendly setting. It was my first single authored paper published which was a huge relief when I got the accept!

It was originally envisioned to contain network analysis as well, but (luckily) my colleagues and conference participants convinced me to do more interviews and stick to the interviews with Nordic diplomats. The peer review process was particularly useful for this article and one of them got me on the idea of conceptualizing the dynamic as a Nordic neighborhood. The article hopefully contributes to the investigation of club and group dynamics in the pursuit of social status in world politics.

I am grateful for any comments, critique and praise (if you have any). You can reach me at palroren@gmail.com, or on twitter: [@palroren](https://twitter.com/palroren)

Happy reading!



Status seeking in the friendly Nordic neighborhood

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Abstract

The article argues that the way status is pursued in social groups in world politics is contingent on the type of social relations that constitute interaction between the members. The Nordic region is a group of countries marked by friendship and trust. Here, the numerous societal linkages between the Nordic countries have made their region into a ‘friendly neighborhood’. This has changed the way that these countries pursue status. To explore this status dynamic, the article draws on a series of interviews with Nordic diplomats and argues that a strong friendship both enables collective status seeking, and constrains individual status seeking. Specifically, turning their social group into a friendly neighborhood allows the Nordic countries to posture as a collective polity and seek status on behalf of it. This grants them more status recognition in world politics. Moreover, friendship does not eliminate status rivalry, but it does turn it into a friendly kind of status competition. Indeed, while the intra-regional intensity of the competition endures, the article finds that the Nordic countries are unlikely to compete in ways that might harm their friendship or their neighborhood.

Keywords

diplomacy, friendship, Nordic countries, practice theory, social groups, status [AQ: 2]

Introduction

When Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström in 2014 launched her government’s feminist foreign policy, it was partially due to Sweden consistently being regarded as, according to Wallström herself, ‘a humanitarian superpower (Radio Sweden, 2015). Likewise, one of the aims for Denmark, when it joined the US-led coalition of the willing in 2003, was not only to address security concerns, but also to relinquish its ‘small state mentality’, reestablish itself as a close NATO ally and to build a stronger reputation for resolve (Lunde Saxi, 2010; *Mandag Morgen*, 2006). Finally, when former Foreign Minister of Norway, Jonas Gahr Støre, criticized the G20’s membership policy, it was not only to secure future economic gain (Der Spiegel, 2010); it was also an attempt to lobby for Nordic membership in a club that could elevate Norway, Sweden,

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Finland, Iceland and Denmark's status in the world. As in most countries, status is – along with its etymological relatives standing, rank, reputation, honor, and prestige – very often a consciously sought by-product of a wide range of Nordic foreign policies. These smaller countries do not seek domination, but rather focus on niches that they hope will see them turn enough heads to elevate their standing among their peers (De Carvalho and Lie, 2015).

Due to their relatively low hierarchical position, the Nordic countries are often left competing for what has been labeled as 'good power' status (De Carvalho and Neumann, 2015). This entails trying to 'play on their moral authority when seeking to increase their status', and, 'to be perceived as good, reliable partners in a hegemonic arrangement or within a multilateral set-up' (De Carvalho and Neumann, 2015: 11). While all the Nordic countries arguably have the status of 'good power', they still compete to *stand out* among the good powers. To be sure, because social status is positional and relative, not everyone can be the best good power. As the existing status research often notes: '[i]f everyone has high status, then no one does.' (Paul et al., 2014: 9) Indeed, it is no surprise that many scholars have highlighted how the pursuit of status among the Nordic countries is frequently competitive (De Carvalho and Neumann, 2015; Pedersen, 2017; Wohlforth et al., 2017).

However, decades of cultural exchange and close cooperation has reshaped the interaction between these countries and forged a bond of friendship. Indeed, as the example of the former Norwegian foreign minister illustrates, the Nordic countries often promote and seek status on behalf of the Nordic region. In addition, even if the Nordic countries compete intensely to be placed on top of the Nordic status hierarchy, this competition is not fought with animosity or violence. Thus, the Nordic foreign policy constellation forms a puzzle for the established literature on status in international relations (IR). As envisioned in this literature, status seeking is normally a competitive, and often violent, pursuit of what countries see as a scarce and sometimes zero sum good (see for instance Deng, 2008: 292; Nitoiu, 2016; Onea, 2014: 152). Indeed, if the pursuit of social status among the Nordic countries is a competition to stand out from the rest, as one would expect reading existing literature in IR, then cooperation and friendly competition for social status makes little sense. In other words, if international status is a relative and positional good, how can each Nordic country compete in a friendly way with the other Nordic countries for the same type of social status while at the same time, through shared Nordic cooperative practices, seek to increase the social status of their competitors?

To answer this question, and to understand how status concerns play out in each of these countries' foreign policies, this article investigates Nordic diplomatic practices of status seeking and friendship. Expanding upon ideas of functional and ideational status peer groups in IR, I suggest that the way in which status is pursued in groups in world politics is contingent on the type of social relations that constitute interaction between the members. The Nordic region is a group of countries marked by friendship and trust. Conceptualized as a 'friendly neighborhood', I suggest that just as the friendly or unfriendly relations between neighbors shape their social interaction, so should they affect the Nordic neighbors' pursuit of status in world politics.

I invoke practice theory to explore how friendship and the communal feeling of solidarity informs, constrains and shapes their status seeking. Methodologically, I rely on 21

interviews with Nordic diplomats to address the broader questions and figure out how status competition and friendship are intertwined. My conversations with the diplomats reveal two ways in which friendship affects the Nordic countries' status seeking and the way the Nordic countries interact with their group. First, Nordic friendship enables the countries to turn a sterile group into a friendly neighborhood. This communal feeling allows the Nordic countries to posture as a collective polity which in practice grants them more recognition, and broader access to privileges in world politics than they would enjoy if they pursued status independently. Second, friendship has not eliminated the status rivalry among the Nordics and their group, but it has constrained it. Indeed, because they are homogenous and have congruent interests, they compete for status in the same fields and arenas. But this competition for status is not marked by animosity or hostility. Instead, it is a friendly kind of status competition. Indeed, while the intensity of the status competition inside the region endures, as it does in any other neighborhood, the countries are unlikely to compete in ways that might harm their friendship or damage the neighborhood.

This article is in four sections. The first section briefly reviews the literature and identifies a gap in our understanding of how groups alter countries' pursuit of social status. The second section conceptualizes the Nordic group as a 'friendly neighborhood' marked by close social proximity and a high degree of trust, which in turn affects the internal status dynamic of the group. The third section investigates the Nordic countries' pursuit of social status, drawing on a series of interviews with Nordic diplomats. I specifically focus both on how the countries collectively promote the neighborhood as well as how they compete inside it. The final section provides pointers for future research and discusses whether the model introduced in this article is applicable to other social collectives in world politics.

Status seeking in groups

IR theory in recent years has returned to the idea that international society produces hierarchies rather than anarchy (Mattern and Zarakol, 2016). While not possessing the formal rigor of a military hierarchy, it is held that international plebeians are largely led by patricians, to the extent that we can confidently speak of a hierarchy of powers. With this focus on hierarchy, status research in IR has emerged from the background to become a promising and productive field of research (See Dafoe et al., 2014 for a comprehensive review). Beyond this established aphorism that countries seek status, IR scholars have recently begun to answer the question of *how* they seek status, *in which ways* it is sought, and *whom* they are seeking it from (see for instance Duque, 2018; Pedersen, 2017; Pouliot, 2014; Renshon, 2017; Ward, 2017; Wohlforth et al., 2017). Additionally, we now understand more about how different types of country, in different spatial and temporal contexts, pursue different strategies for attaining status (De Carvalho and Neumann, 2015; Freedman, 2016; Neumann, 2014; Stolte, 2015; Towns, 2010; Wohlforth et al., 2017).

One feature of status research in IR has been a move towards exploring status as a group phenomenon. The justification for this move is rooted in the observation that status is far more often structured in a narrower and more secluded fashion [AQ: 3]. In

other words, actors in world politics very rarely seek recognition from international society as a whole. And rarely do they compete in and compare themselves to every other country when pursuing or evaluating status (Renshon, 2017). To come to grips with this, a central topic among these researchers is to understand how social collectives of actors (normally collectives of countries) either inform, motivate, or constrain the pursuit of social status in world politics (Duque, 2018; Larson, 2018; Paikowsky, 2017; Renshon, 2017). Actors in world politics tend to pursue status in the same way as individuals do: through groups, clubs, communities, or other forms of social collective. On the one hand, these collectives confer status automatically by association. To be a member of an esteemed collective raises an actor's social status. On the other hand, these collectives provide a reference point against which actors compare and wager their status. Yet as intuitive as this sounds, we still know very little about the effect that these groups have on the way status seeking, comparison and competition are played out. The following sections aim to shed light on this under studied topic by exploring the subtle characteristics of the ways in which status is pursued by the ideational and functional peer group consisting of the Nordic countries.

Meet the Northerners: status in a friendly neighborhood

The Nordic countries have long sought status in world politics, though not in the manner that status research assumes. Indeed, while the Nordic countries fight wars, mediate conflicts, give aid, promote gender equality, and participate in multilateral organizations, they do it in a way that seeks to elevate their status as well (De Carvalho and Lie, 2015; Græger, 2015; Jakobsen, 2007; Jezierska and Towns, 2018; Laatikainen, 2003). As suggested in the introduction, the Nordic countries have sought a similar kind of status: the 'good power'. The origins of these countries' similar status-seeking profiles – focusing on stability, law, and peace – are also found in their common historical roots (see Leira, 2015). Because of their smallness, the Nordic countries cannot compete for primacy, power or hegemony (De Carvalho and Neumann, 2015: 16; Wohlforth, 2015). Instead, the Nordic small powers must compete with each other and other small Western powers to be seen, and even recognized as, the best at being good (De Carvalho and Neumann, 2015). In general, small powers compare themselves to and compete with two different forms of peer group: functional and ideational (Wohlforth et al., 2017: 3–4). Functional peer groups are normally defined by their geography, their neighboring states. Ideational peer groups, on the other hand, are groups of countries that share similar foreign policy profiles and thus pursue similar kinds of status. For the Nordic countries, these peer groups are near identical.

To conceptualize the Nordic ideational and functional peer group, this article invokes and employs the analogy of a neighborhood.¹ Neighborhoods are spatially delimited areas where social agents live, interact, and socialize. Identity shaping is bound to occur here because 'states do not have the option of leaving their neighborhood and creating a new identity elsewhere' (Zarakol, 2011: 97). A neighborhood can be good or bad, friendly or hostile, depending on the type of actors that reside in it and the nature of their relationships. If residents of a neighborhood live close to each other for a long time, these residents resemble what Elias and Scotson labelled as Winston Parva's 'old families'. These

neighbors ‘were bound to each other by bonds of emotional intimacy ranging from the intimacy of long-standing friendship to that of long-standing dislikes’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994: xxxix).

Just like the neighbors of Winston Parva, the type of relations between neighboring countries change their interaction. Indeed, the type of interaction between countries is marked by the extent to which they are enemies, friends or somewhere in between the two. A great deal of literature has showed how one side of the enmity/enmity continuum [AQ: 4], namely friendship, transforms relations between countries (see Oelsner and Koschut, 2014a for an overview). While friendship only presents a partial source of explanation for interstate relationships, it still remains an important one (Oelsner and Koschut, 2014b: 202). In particular, friendship ultimately ‘shapes and reinforces the identity of the actors involved’, as well as empowering them ‘through mutual learning, reciprocity/solidarity’ (Berenskoetter, 2014: 67). Thus, a vital process of constituting the Self also takes place in a social group or community through a process of positive identification (Berenskoetter, 2007: 659) [AQ: 5]. Consequently, this process of positive self-identification influences the identity of countries, hence their diplomatic, trade, and security relations become intertwined with the type of friendship they share with other countries.

To be sure, the Nordic countries recognize each other as friends rather than enemies. While the three Scandinavian polities remained in the Kalmar Union from 1397 to 1523, this was soon to turn into a 300-year feud and struggle for status primacy between the two rival polities: Denmark-Norway-Iceland on the one hand and Sweden-Finland on the other. The Napoleonic wars incited a Nordic hegemonic switcheroo between Stockholm and Copenhagen, culminating in the independence of Finland in 1917, Norway in 1905 and Iceland in 1944 (Leira, 2015). This signaled, paradoxically, the beginning of increased cooperation and friendship between the countries (Schouenborg, 2012). The end of the Cold War saw increased European integration, and some scholars contended that Nordic regionalization would wane and render the Nordic brand meaningless (Mouritzen, 1995: 18; Wæver, 1992: 79). Three decades into the post-Cold War era, and the bleakest predictions have yet to come to fulfillment. Intercultural mobility, trade, and overall cooperation between the Nordic countries remains high. More important in this regard is the recent relaunch of closer Nordic defense and foreign policy cooperation, perhaps signaling a return to increased regionalism (Forsberg, 2013).

Considering this historical development, I conceptualize the Nordic group of countries as a *friendly neighborhood*. Here, the numerous Nordic societal linkages have created official sub-governmental linkages which are comparable ‘to a cobweb of numerous delicate threads which together make up a net of considerable strength’ (Sundelius and Wiklund, 1979: 72). These bonds of emotional intimacy are crucial for understanding how things play out in the neighborhood. As Elias and Scotson (1994: xxxix) explain, these emotional bonds between the neighbors are hooked up to the ‘status rivalries associated with them’.

Of course, the relationships within the Nordic neighborhood go beyond a mere cordial friendship. Friendships in international relations, as elsewhere, can be established and maintained purely for strategic reasons. Instead, the Nordic countries exhibit a level of *trust* that goes beyond cordial pleasantries. Trust is constitutive of friendship. As Hopf

(2010: 554) suggests, ‘categorizing another state as a friend automatically produces perceptions, attitudes, and practices that already entail an unconscious confidence in that state’s trustworthiness’ The Nordic neighborhood moves beyond what is often labelled the ‘minimalist’ conception of trust where a state trusts another not to injure the first state (Ruzicka and Keating, 2015: 18). Instead, the Nordic countries embrace a kind of ‘maximalist’ idea of trust where they ‘mutually attempt to promote each other’s values and interests’ (Booth and Wheeler, 2011; Ruzicka and Keating, 2015: 18). Friendship coupled with a maximalist notion of trust has, through years of inter-cultural state and non-state practices, rooted itself in the societies of the Nordic countries. Thus, the friendly Nordic neighborhood arguably mediates how each Nordic country seeks status. After detailing how status, friendship and trust should be studied, the subsequent sections specifically explore how the trusting friendship between the Nordic countries alters the pursuit of status.

Studying the neighborhood

In his reworking of practice theory to investigate status, Pouliot (2014) argues that agents are born into the game of status competition which in turn forms a major part of their everyday practices. These practices, however, often remain inarticulate. Practice theorists try to elicit these tacit rules of the game, appearing to practitioners and scholars alike as ‘facts’, through interviews, ethnography or discourse analysis (Adler-Nissen, 2015; Bueger and Gadinger, 2014). To capture the countries’ status aspirations thus involves zooming in on how practitioners ‘conceive of status markers, how they rank countries, and according to what rules of the game’ (Pouliot, 2014: 192).

In short, I suggest that social status in world politics is best thought of as a relational social phenomenon that should be studied by investigating the social practices of the actors enacting it. To be sure, status seeking practices are ubiquitous and found in all levels of society. However, in world politics they are most visible in social spaces where practitioners engage with practitioners from other countries or polities (Pouliot, 2014). Thus, investigating status seeking among foreign policy practitioners, and how they see the game unfold, is a useful approach for illuminating broader patterns of cooperation and competition in countries’ pursuit of status. This practice approach is also conducive to grappling with the friendly Nordic neighborhood. While the two nouns ‘friendship’ and ‘neighborhood’ might invoke possessive characteristics, they are only given meaning through processes and relations (Jackson and Nexon, 1999). I conceptualize friendship as a formative processual relationship between two or more social actors based on a set of bonds of intimacy that temporally and spatially evolve (Berenskoetter, 2014: 52–54). Practice theory here also offers a way for us to study the mundane and tacit aspects of friendship, and how it is embedded and enacted in the neighborhood (Michel, 2013).

To get at the social practices of Nordic friendship and status seeking, I conducted a total of 21 in-depth interviews with current or former diplomats from the Nordic countries from November 2016 to June 2017.² Common to all the interview subjects was that at some point they had been, or had acted as, diplomats on behalf of one of the Nordic states. In addition to these interviews, I also received written responses to initial, clarifying or follow-up questions from the same or additional diplomats. I conducted each

interview either in person or by Skype. In the interviews, I focused especially on the diplomat's view of their own country's status and reputation and their friendship, cooperation, and competition with the other Nordic countries.

A note of caution is in order regarding the methodological limitations of this approach. First, interviews are at best proxies for indicating and recreating practices (Bueger, 2016: 334). Instead, the interviews conducted here, as well as the research backing these interviews up, provide post-hoc rationalizations of practices (Bueger and Gadinger, 2014: 89), as a way of reconstructing practitioners' points of view (Pouliot, 2016: 277), and understanding how they 'perceive themselves and their condition for action' (Adler-Nissen, 2016: 97). Nordic status seeking is a big field comprised of numerous social practices. This article can only offer a window into that field.

A second limitation regards the use of diplomats as the primary source of getting at the Nordic countries' status seeking [AQ: 6]. This feeds into the broader ontological issue of anthropomorphizing the state and assigning it desires, emotions, and agency in the same way we do as humans. I hold that countries are social constructs and functions as 'a bounded community constituted by a biographical narrative' (Berenskoetter, 2012: 262). These biographical narratives are in turn (re)imagined, performed, and embodied. We embody countries in buildings, flags, maps, territories, and perhaps most importantly, in people. This is the process of personation, as Hobbes called it, where a person embodies a social entity and equips that actor with causal powers (Jackson, 2004: 286–287). Crucially, to equip our biographical narrative with agency, we imagine diplomats carrying with them the 'essence' of various polities, representing their interests and goals, in meetings with other (embodiments of) polities (Neumann, 2012: 171; Sharp, 1997: 612–613). I thus argue that diplomacy is the recognized story of embodiment in world politics, and the diplomat is the protagonist of that story. To be sure, diplomacy and diplomats are not synonyms with foreign policy and its practitioners. Yet, as functional embodiments of the state, and as practitioners and experts in their country's foreign policy, diplomats can supply direct information on status seeking practices (Bueger and Gadinger, 2014: 89–90; Jönsson and Hall, 2005; Pouliot, 2013: 49). In sum, I hold that the interviews provide, at the very minimum, a snapshot of a peculiar status dynamic in an interesting neighborhood.

The pursuit of status in the Nordic neighborhood

The previous sections suggested that the way in which status is pursued within groups is contingent on the type and form of social relations that constitute interaction between the members. One of the most prevalent relationships that govern the pursuit of status within a group is whether the ties are marked by amity or enmity. Indeed, just like the friendly or unfriendly relations between neighbors shape their social interaction, so they affect the Nordic neighbors' pursuit of status in world politics. In this section, I especially focus on how the Nordic countries, as described by the diplomatic practitioners, cooperate and compete for social status. Cooperation here means the way countries and their practitioners come together to promote the Nordic region or one country within that region. Competition, in contrast, means the pursuit of status that is sought for each individual country regardless of any potential status loss to other countries in that region. In doing

so, this section elicits and details the underlying logic that structures the pursuit of social status in the friendly Nordic neighborhood.

Cooperation in the neighborhood

Nordic foreign policy practitioners, other foreign policy leaders, and observers have for a long time claimed that the Nordic countries ‘punch above their weight’ (Björkdahl, 2008; Jakobsen, 2007). This type of claim ‘takes the form of an acknowledgement of the small state’s contribution *in spite of* its size [original emphasis]’ (De Carvalho and Neumann, 2015: 11). The diplomats I spoke to echoed this mantra. In line with the initial suspicions that I alluded to earlier, nearly all the diplomats agreed that coming together and *promoting the Nordic region* allows diplomats to take a higher position in the diplomatic pecking order and/or for the countries to enjoy a higher social status in world politics. Recall the neighborhood analogy: in neighborhoods, the residents normally benefit from living in a community with a good reputation; a good reputation will attract people with higher income who pay more taxes; this in turn is invested into schools and other public institutions. All these positives are likely to increase the reputation of the neighborhood, perpetuating a virtuous circle.

The diplomats’ own recollections are in line with the neighborhood analogy. Though all five countries covered here are ‘small’, they still vary greatly in geographic size, absolute wealth, and population. Despite these differing degrees of smallness, the diplomats all considered being a part of the Nordic region a strength because they feel they are ‘being heard’ and ‘being recognized’. As one Icelandic diplomat put it, ‘in the big world, we are quite small’, and thus ‘by acting as a region we have more instruments to play with for receiving recognition and to be viewed as an active and interesting actor in the world’. Similarly, ‘if we were to stop cooperating I think that will represent a clear break with the expectations the world has for us’, as a Swedish diplomat suggested. An Icelandic diplomat said that Nordic cooperation was particularly important now in the light of the recent American presidential election and the onset of Brexit: ‘We should focus on being ourselves, and that is being Nordic. You should not underestimate the effect that such a recognizable cooperation as the Nordic one has for our reputation.’

Promoting the Nordic neighborhood not only benefits the collective status of the region, it also benefits the individual countries. Just as homeowners in a reputable neighborhood will see the value of their houses rise, so will countries gain individual status benefits. Status seeking on behalf of the neighborhood stems from utility maximization that is also visible in other aspects of their foreign policy: ‘As a region we are more competitive. Companies are much better off working in a Nordic market rather than just a national one’, as one Swedish diplomat put it. Similarly, as one Norwegian diplomat suggested: ‘promoting the Nordic region will benefit us. It is basically collective promotion for national utility.’ Another Norwegian diplomat suggested that ‘we cooperate on the things that really matter’. ‘For instance,’ he said, ‘Norway did a whole lot for Sweden to become elected to the UN Security Council because we know that if it was us, they would work for us as well.’ What the diplomat referred to here is an institutionalized rotation mechanism where all the countries support and promote the candidacy of one Nordic country (Kolby, 2003; Thorhallsson, 2012). Thus, in cases where having a Nordic

seat is not feasible, the Nordic neighborhood forms a coalition enabling each country to have a chance at increasing their status. If the Nordic neighborhood cannot be represented in the ‘city council’, they try to ensure that at least the Heikkinens or Hansens are there, instead of having no one from the neighborhood in the council at all.

The Nordic diplomats practice the same rationale as the states they are embodying. Indeed, in third party countries there will, if possible and applicable, ‘often be cooperation between two or more countries from the Nordic region’, one Norwegian diplomat said. Five diplomats told me that cost efficiency is the main reason why they cooperate. Two of the diplomats mentioned that cooperation helps ‘build the Nordic brand’. ‘I know it sounds harmonic, but it is true,’ a Danish diplomat said referring to their cooperative status-seeking. ‘It works out very well’, the diplomat continued. ‘I genuinely believe that it gives us more leverage and more visibility here, both as a country and as a region.’

Promoting the neighborhood is essentially cost-effective status seeking. This gives these small powers more visibility, a chance to be heard, more recognition, and saves them money (see Forsberg, 2013; Schouenborg, 2012; Thorhallsson, 2012). However, as should be stressed, rationality is not enough for countries to pool their resources and promote their respective regions. If that were the case, we would see a many more similar constellation of countries seeking status on behalf of their neighborhoods. When asked about how this collective status seeking could emerge, one Finnish diplomat suggested that the cooperation is enabled by a ‘historical friendship between the diplomats, governments, and peoples that has only been strengthened in the last couple of years’. Other interviewees confirmed this. Indeed, most of them either alluded to a ‘special’ bond between the Nordic countries forged through language, geography and history that enables collective status seeking.

Indeed, the level of cooperation seems to be firmly rooted in the tacit practices of diplomats and goes beyond what we would expect of rational choice theories: ‘If I arrive as a new diplomat in some place, I always go to the Nordic [diplomats] first, then to the big ones and then to the neighboring countries of the country which I am in,’ one Norwegian diplomat said. As one Swedish diplomat put it: ‘My Norwegian colleague and I exchange reports before we send them to the ministry, like “could you read through this, what do you think about this”, and then we would send it home.’ Though the reports in question were not highly confidential, sharing diplomatic correspondence that is still in draft is a remarkable practice. The same diplomat continued: ‘There are no borders [in the office]. We can see each other’s office spaces and we have a common room where we eat lunch every day together.’ A Norwegian diplomat who had experienced this kind of cooperation first hand suggested that this level of cooperation was also ‘really demanding’: ‘should this cable go through this wall or around it? These small issues are not easy to solve even inside the family.’ Despite the obstacles that they must overcome, the friendship arising from cooperation in the neighborhood made it hard for animosity to arise. Indeed, these strong historical commonalities are complemented by a longstanding tradition of working together on issues of human rights, aid, and peace and stability (Ingebritsen, 2002; Jakobsen, 2007; Schouenborg, 2012). Thus, friendship here is not just a historical variable causing heightened levels of cooperation. Friendship is nurtured through a range of cooperative practices, and in some fields even molded into something

‘sacrosanct’ (Laatikainen, 2003: 410). In these settings, the practice of seeking status together is near habitual.

I explained to some of the diplomats that in the IR literature we normally think about status as a zero-sum game. I then asked them whether the model was erroneous, given that the Nordic countries often promote their neighbors or cooperate with them. Several diplomats re-emphasized that ‘everyone is profiting from it’. As one Swedish diplomat said, ‘there are no contradictions in promoting region and promoting Sweden’. The benefits of collective status seeking were present on both the input side and in the perceived rewards from it. When asked whether there could be any problems associated with promoting the Nordic region, one Norwegian diplomat said: ‘it can be time consuming and, yeah, frustrating. Sometimes the Finns will put 10,000 kroner on the table, Denmark 5000 and Norway 100,000. Then you find yourself asking, “is this right?”. The diplomat answered quickly: ‘yeah, it is worth it. Because we know that the end product will be a lot bigger if we present it as Nordic. And next time we know that the others will pay more’. Regarding the perceived rewards of neighborhood status-seeking, a Norwegian diplomat referred to a story from May 2016, when all the Nordic prime ministers met with Barack Obama in the White House. He pointed to a picture of Obama leading the prime ministers on a private tour and said:

Of course all of them would want to go there alone. No question about it. But at the same time, it is more likely that we will get time with Obama if we do it as the Nordic region. That means more visibility for all of us.

In sum, these diplomatic recollections lend weight to the analogy of a friendly Nordic neighborhood. More importantly, however, they show how the friendship enables status-seeking on behalf of the entire neighborhood. To be sure, a host of countries would see the added benefit of seeking-status on behalf of their social group. Yet, friendship and trust provide the missing link between neighbors who would normally refrain from promoting the neighborhood instead of spending those resources on themselves **FAQ: 71**. Crucially, the recognition of each other as a friend changes the external pursuit of status within a social group. Friendship in the social group enables a communal feeling of solidarity, which in turn acts as an incentive for countries to partake in the collective neighborhood status-seeking.

Competition in the neighborhood

The Nordic countries are friends but they are nonetheless rivals, too. The Nordic neighborhood rivalry is present both inside the countries’ foreign ministries all the way down to the practitioners on the ground. As De Carvalho and Neumann (2015: 13) suggest, while Norway may have the ‘occasional worries about Canadian, Dutch or even Swiss spending on peacekeeping, a crisis is not declared until Norway is about to be overtaken by one of the other Nordics (Sweden, Denmark, Finland)’. The interviews overall confirm this sense of rivalry and competition. This rivalry characterizes everyday conduct of foreign policy and can be found inside formal or informal international organizations and institutions. A few diplomats suggested that inside their respective ministries, a way of

measuring who excels in terms of recognition is to monitor ‘who is being called first by the big countries’ by referring to either new inaugurations or situations arising in world politics where the Nordics are called upon (Græger, 2015; Jakobsen and Møller, 2012).³ The diplomats suggested Nordic countries compete for national status through role building: ‘I think we have had a rivalry with the Norwegians regarding security policy and our special forces’, a Danish diplomat told me. The diplomat continued that the countries compete ‘to see who can get the most recognition from other NATO countries’.

Indeed, most of the diplomats could recall a competitive element in their everyday diplomatic practices: ‘If you go to the Middle East, then I think there is a strong competition about who can do the most and be the most visible in the eyes of, for instance, the Americans’, one former adviser in a Nordic MFA [AQ: 8] remarked. This echoes De Carvalho and Neumann’s (2015: 10–11) assertion that the small Nordic countries compete for the ‘good power’ by being acknowledged by the Western major powers and, if only for a brief moment, share the limelight. The advisor continued:

My view is that what you do is done to become seen and recognized. The focus is not on what you achieve, but rather that the stuff you do is recognized. Since the Nordic countries do the same things in different countries, you often end up competing with each other on a diplomatic level.

The Arctic region is another example of an institutionalized field in which the Nordics compete for status. A Norwegian diplomat suggested that the competition on where the Arctic Council secretariat should be situated was a ‘big fight’, and that this was important inside the MFA and for the various Nordic ministers (also see Wilson Rowe, 2014: 76). Similarly, when Russia planted a flag on the North Pole seabed in 2007, the Danes and Norwegians wanted to reaffirm the idea of an existing regional order, while at the same time securing a privileged position in that order. Both the Norwegian and the Danish MFA simultaneously started to work on separate meetings that would launch the ‘Arctic 5’ cooperation, consisting of the five Arctic Ocean coastal states: Norway, Denmark, Canada, Russia and the US. The Danes feared that the Norwegian initiative would take the spotlight away from them. To combat this, the Danes, together with Greenland, suggested a meeting on the political level that would have an ambitious and binding output.⁴ As organizers of the meeting, which would eventually lead to the Ilulissat declaration, the Danes and the Greenlandic government gained considerable prestige. Reykjavik saw it as a considerable loss of status as Iceland was downgraded to ‘a non-coastal’ state,⁵ while Norway lost out on an opportunity to be recognized as the hub for Arctic matters (Rahbek-Clemmensen and Thomasen, 2018: 13–18).

The Arctic example above illustrates that the similarities in the Nordic countries’ foreign policy profile mean not only that it is possible to cooperate, but also that competition frequently emerges. Given competition to be the best good power, confirmed by nearly all the diplomats I spoke to, I wanted to know if anyone benefits more from the collective status seeking. So, I asked the diplomats exactly this. In response, one Norwegian diplomat asked rhetorically: ‘Is there someone who is more recognizable here of the Nordic countries? Will more people think about Sweden rather than Norway?’

Yes, I think that might be the case.’ When pressed about this, 10 diplomats from all the Nordic countries were adamant that Sweden earned most status from promoting the Nordic region. This was due not only to Sweden’s size, but also because ‘in many ways, Sweden is uncompromising regarding questions of human rights and international law’, a Norwegian diplomat said. This uncompromising behavior, the diplomat continued, made the Swedes ‘much more in tune with what others consider to be Nordic’. This insistence on the Swedes gaining most status from the collective promotion of the neighborhood confirms that countries and their diplomats do keep track of their own and others’ status and that they are competitive about it.

While status rivalry and competition are present in the Nordic neighborhood, friendship tames the intra-group competition for status so that it is unlikely to harm the individual status of the residents in the neighborhood – a friendly status competition. All the diplomats made it clear that that this intense competition was not fought with animosity, while some even labeled it ‘healthy competition’. Friendship involves a constitutive process of positive identification, which in turn manifests itself in a series of practices from actors (Berenskoetter, 2007). Friendship involves building a collective identity with an expectation of reciprocal trust. This ‘maximalist’ notion of trust was evident throughout the conducted interviews. Despite the diplomats mentioning the intensity of the competition for status, even more prominent were words reminiscent of amity, including ‘brotherhood’, ‘brotherly love’ and ‘the family’. Similarly, as a Swedish diplomat with experience of sharing his office space with other Nordic diplomats said, the close cooperation ‘sparks other forms of competition’, meaning that the competition ‘resembles what you would find inside a department of the MFA’.

Breaking trust and friendship through harmful competition therefore not only ruins friendship, it shatters the perception of a collective identity and the ability to promote that collective identity. Even though the status competition inside the region is intense, the Nordic countries are more likely to compete in ways that does not harm their friends and break their trust. The result is a friendly kind of status competition. When I did my pre-research for this article, I heard a story about a peripherally stationed Nordic diplomat scrambling for his embassy to receive more likes on Facebook than his Nordic counterparts. Although there was no animosity in this competition, the ambassador’s urge to compete with the other Nordic embassies made Nordic rivalry into a highly routinized practice for the whole staff working at the embassy of that diplomat. In response to this anecdote, one Norwegian diplomat suggested that cooperation, enabled by the close friendship, made it ‘impossible to sit in a corner and count likes on Facebook’. When I asked why it was so, the diplomat responded, ‘Well, you could do that in theory, but that does not really create a good working environment, does it?’ Thus, while their close proximity and similar foreign policy profile have made the Nordic countries ‘natural’ competitors for status, the same factors have enabled the creation of a friendly neighborhood that in turn sparks friendly rather than harmful status-seeking practices.

How friendship alters status seeking

Most residents in a neighborhood compete for prestige. As Elias and Scotson (1994: 155) claimed with regards the neighboring old families of Winston Parva: ‘[A]mong

themselves they may, and almost invariably do, compete, mildly or wildly according to circumstances, and may, often by tradition, heartily dislike or even hate one another.’ Acquiring status symbols such as cars, gardens and houses are a means to compete for status amongst the neighbors. In contrast to Elias and Scotson’s neighboring old families, however, the Nordic countries do not compete with hate or even discontent. Quite the contrary, as shown in the latter part of this article – the pursuit of status among the Nordic neighbors is often quite friendly.

To be sure, intra-residential competition can still be potentially harmful, even for the Nordic countries. As the incident of the Arctic council and Arctic 5 affair above illustrates, status rivalries could halt the achievement of individual foreign policy goals. Moreover, countries sometimes only bestow recognition on single countries in the group. Yet, competing *with* the Hansens is better in the long run for the social status of the Anderssons, Jónsdóttirs, Heikkinens and Nielsens. Thus, while each Nordic country wishes to prioritize its own international status, the neighborhood becomes a means – perhaps even the best available means – of pursuing and securing a status gain. Even though the Nordics might believe that the Anderssons are the Nordic neighborhood’s public face, and are thought to gain more from the collective promotion, these laments are quickly muted due to the overall gain in status due to the collective efforts of the Nordic group .

The option of promoting the neighborhood should not be taken for granted. To be sure, the option of cooperating to increase the status of the neighborhood is only enabled once trust and friendship are established. Thus, the Nordic neighborhood has a competitive edge over the other small and middle-sized countries that lack such a friendly neighborhood constellation. Without this trust, collective promotion and cooperation may not be possible in the first place. Thus, when Stockholm pursued a seat on the UN Security Council in 2014, Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström proclaimed that their ‘candidacy has the full backing of the Nordic countries’ (The Government of Sweden, 2014). Implied in this message, as shown in this article, is not only the expectation that the Nordic countries would support Sweden’s bid, but also that Sweden would return the favor. Not every country has this option, and not every country would trust their peers to support their future bid for a seat on the UN Security Council. Thus, the trust and friendship between the Nordic neighbors not only opens up new and more efficient ways to pursue status, but it is also mutually empowering in that increasing the status of one country will ultimately benefit others in the group .

‘Your ability to cooperate is essential for this position’: some concluding remarks

In this article, I have sought to explain how status competition among the Nordic countries is friendly and intense, while at the same time, through shared Nordic cooperative practices, each seeks to increase the social status of their competitors. To explore this, I have traced Nordic diplomats’ practices in order to understand how patterns of status competition and cooperation are intertwined, and how both higher status for the region and individual countries can be sought simultaneously.

The interviews depict an intriguing status dynamic taking place in this confined friendly neighborhood in the very north of Europe. The interviews firstly showed that the friendship among the Nordic countries allows them to turn their social group into a friendly neighborhood. This enables them to posture as a collective polity, which, when practiced, grants them more recognition and broader access to status privileges in world politics than they would gain if pursued independently. Second, the friendship among the Nordic countries and the development of a friendly Nordic neighborhood has not eliminated status rivalries, but it has changed it into a friendly status competition. The residents of the Nordic neighborhood are homogenous, have similar interests and priorities, which in turn ensures status competition. However, while the intensity of the status competition inside the neighborhood endures, as it would in any other neighborhood, the residents are unlikely to compete in ways that might harm their friendship or the status of the neighborhood as a whole.

Recall the diplomat who told me that he and his Norwegian colleague often reviewed and proofread each other's reports, which were then sent back to their respective foreign ministries. While the generalizability of this practice should not be exaggerated, several diplomats reaffirmed this *type* of cooperative entanglement [AQ: 9]. Thus, what was perhaps most surprising was not the nature of the shared cooperative practices themselves, but the fact that the diplomats I spoke to so easily framed these rather peculiar practices as self-evident truisms. This indicates that friendship and trust among these countries, their people and their practitioners are institutionalized to a level where it seems like they are sometimes working as one country rather than five. Put differently, when practices such as the ones above become so embedded in the workplace, we usually label them as 'routine' or even 'mundane'. And when things are part of a mundane routine, we know they are essential for the job.

Questions then arise as to how unique the Nordic case really is. To be sure, if neighboring countries are small to middle sized, relatively homogenous, with similar interests, and have shared decades of trust and friendship, their status seeking will look similar. Yet, because not too many countries share the same maximized notion of trust, the Nordic case is therefore more likely to be an extreme example in this regard.

However, the broader takeaway from this article should be that status seeking is often pursued in socially delimited spaces, in groups or clubs, which most likely have their own internal status dynamic. The way in which status is sought by individual actors in world politics is contingent on the type of social relations that constitute interaction between members of those actors' social group. In addition to this broader takeaway, I also believe the amity/enmity continuum introduced in this article will be a helpful tool for future research on status in IR focusing on groups and clubs in world politics. In sum, instead of treating the Nordics as a generalizable case, future research is better off asking what is the main peer group, and where are the group's members located on the amity/enmity continuum. Research can then explore how this amity/enmity informs these groups' pursuit of status, in contrast to the Nordic example.

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Notes

1. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for introducing this analogy.
2. I acquired these interviews through snowball sampling. I have personally translated all the quotes that were recorded in a Scandinavian language. Of the 21 interviewees, 6 were from Norway, 5 from Denmark, 4 from Sweden, 4 from Finland and 2 were from Iceland.
3. Of these big countries, a call from the US is seen as the highest status prize.
4. This was in contrast to the Norwegian initiative for the meeting which was held at a diplomatic level with only non-binding remarks as the final output.
5. Reykjavik, in contrast to the other Arctic 5 members, views the Arctic as a region that also encompasses the North Atlantic, rather than just confined to the Arctic Ocean.

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