

## Pro-American non-alignment. Sweden and Finland develop closer military co-operation with the United States

Justyna Gotkowska, Piotr Szymański

Russia's increasingly aggressive policy and its enhanced military activity in the Nordic-Baltic region has led to revaluations in Sweden's and Finland's security and defence policies and a rethinking of the formats of their military co-operation. While remaining outside NATO, the two states have been developing closer bilateral defence co-operation and working more closely with the United States, while at the same time developing co-operation with NATO. Sweden and Finland perceive the United States as the guarantor of regional and European security. From their point of view, the United States is currently the country that has both the necessary military capabilities and the political will to react in the event of a conflict between Russia and NATO in the Nordic-Baltic region, in which both countries would inevitably become involved despite their non-aligned status. For Sweden and Finland, intensified co-operation with the United States offers an alternative to NATO membership, which is currently out of the question for domestic political reasons. Meanwhile, the US has also become increasingly aware of the strategic importance of the two states, which, for the purposes of contingency planning, are in fact an extension of NATO's north-eastern flank.

### Alliance with the United States as an alternative to NATO membership?

Because of their geographic location, Sweden and Finland are both very important for the planning and potential execution of military operations by NATO (primarily the US) and by Russia in the Nordic-Baltic region. In the case of Sweden, this especially concerns the Baltic Sea region, and in the case of Finland, mainly the High North. The governments of both countries are aware that, despite their formal non-aligned status Russia would not respect their neutrality in the event of a crisis or conflict in Northern Europe. Moscow views Sweden and Finland as integral parts of the West which would collaborate with NATO in case of confrontation between Russia and the Alliance. Both countries are EU members and are bound by the EU's mutual

assistance clause (Article 42(7) TEU), and both have been co-operating with NATO for years. In view of Russia's aggressive policy (the interventions in Ukraine and Syria and the increased military activity in the Nordic-Baltic region, including aggressive military drill scenarios involving simulated attacks against Sweden and Finland), the governments in Stockholm and Helsinki have been reviewing their security and defence policies and formats of military co-operation. After focusing on the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO) for some time, currently their priority is to develop closer Swedish-Finnish defence co-operation<sup>1</sup>. While the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO

<sup>1</sup> This is also related to the change in the priorities of other Nordic partners, like Denmark and Norway, which have been focusing mainly on closer co-operation with allies within NATO since 2014.

would in the long term significantly improve regional security by delineating a clear border between Russia and the Alliance in the Nordic-Baltic region (while admittedly triggering a negative reaction from the Kremlin in the short term), one should not expect either country to take any steps towards NATO membership in the next few years. There is not enough political and public support for such a move in either country. Sweden's 2014-2018 coalition agreement between the Social Democrats and the Greens stipulates that Sweden will not seek NATO membership. Generally, though, the idea of joining NATO has recently gained more support within the elites and the general public. If Russia continues to undertake provocative actions in the region, a new political and public consensus for accession may emerge after the next Swedish parliamentary elections in 2018.

**The United States is becoming Sweden's and Finland's priority partner for defence co-operation.**

Finland, on the other hand, has for years been sceptical about NATO membership (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is currently working on a new report on the consequences of potential accession; the last assessment was published in 2007). It fears the aggressive pre-emptive measures that Russia might take to hinder its accession to the Alliance, has concerns about becoming a NATO front-line state (it shares around 1300 km of its border with Russia) and does not want to assume an obligation to actively defend the Baltic states. Moreover, the Russian interventions in Georgia and Ukraine have hardly contributed to a rise in support for NATO membership in Finland.

However, while they have not decided to join NATO, both Sweden and Finland have been developing closer co-operation with the Alliance, including common military exercises, training

activities, participation in the NATO Response Force, and the ratification and implementation of the Host Nation Support agreement which opens political and military-technological opportunities for NATO to use the land territory, airspace and territorial waters of Sweden and Finland. Nevertheless, the two countries are aware of the growing disparities in how the different NATO member states perceive the Alliance's challenges and the threats it is facing, its lengthy decision-making processes and the time it takes to implement decisions, as well as the shrinking defence budgets and military capabilities of the European allies. Therefore, despite the changed priorities of US security policy, Sweden and Finland both see the United States as the driving force and the ally who can contribute most to strengthening NATO's presence on its eastern flank, as well as the real guarantor of regional and European security. As NATO membership is not an option for domestic political reasons, the United States has become Stockholm and Helsinki's priority partner for defence co-operation.

From the American point of view, Sweden and Finland are an extension of NATO's north-eastern flank. Stepping up the US military presence in those states is intended as a signal to Russia that any attempts at using the territories of Sweden and Finland for aggressive actions in the Nordic-Baltic region will be met by a reaction from the US. Since 2015, the United States has been developing more intensive co-operation with the two states, mainly involving the air forces and navies. In doing this, the US seeks to make the most of the existing formats of multinational military drills in the Nordic-Baltic region, including exercises under US command (BALTOPS, Saber Strike), NATO exercises (BRTE) and Nordic exercises (Arctic Challenge, Cold Response). However, bilateral and trilateral formats have also been developed (FSTE, Arrow16), with the US units participating in exercises in the Baltic states. While the scale of the United States' co-operation with Sweden

and Finland is much smaller than the scale of its collaboration with NATO member states from the Nordic-Baltic region (Norway, the Baltic states, Poland), developing closer bilateral and trilateral military co-operation with the United States is nonetheless a breakthrough for Sweden, Finland and the region as a whole.

### Sweden: increasingly aware of the geopolitical realities

Even during the Cold War, neutral Sweden pursued a policy of secret military co-operation with NATO and the US. The leaders in Stockholm realised that their chances of not being affected by potential military operations in Northern Europe were slim, and that in the event of a war, quick military assistance from the West would be the country's only chance of avoiding a Soviet occupation. Publicly, however, Sweden's Social Democratic governments often criticised the United States' foreign and security policy.

**Co-operation with the US, in areas such as interoperability, exercises and training, military equipment and operations abroad, is set to be a priority for the Swedish Armed Forces in the years 2016–2020.**

For this reason, anti-American resentment prevailed in Sweden long after the end of the Cold War, and grew stronger after the fiercely criticised US intervention in Iraq in 2003. It was only under the government of the centre-right (*Alliansen*) coalition led by PM Fredrik Reinfeldt (2006–2014) that Sweden decided to co-operate more closely with NATO and the US (exercises and training, participation in the operations in Afghanistan and Libya).

Given Russia's aggressive and revisionist policy (the wars in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014), Stockholm has become increasingly aware that the Nordic-Baltic region might become

an arena of confrontation between the Russia and the West. Bearing in mind that the country's own military potential has shrunk over the last twenty years, and that there is insufficient public and political support for membership in NATO, nearly all political parties in Sweden support closer co-operation with the United States (with marginal protests from the peace movements). In 2015 the minority government of the Social Democrats and the Greens led by PM Stefan Löfven adopted Sweden's new security strategy for the years 2016–2020 (in agreement with the conservative opposition), a plan which has been approved by the parliament. According to this document, Stockholm views trans-Atlantic co-operation as key to ensuring European security. The strategy further points out that the United States is the only Western state with sufficient military capabilities to conduct operations against an enemy possessing a large conventional armed forces<sup>2</sup>. Co-operation with the United States in areas such as interoperability, exercises and training, military equipment and operations abroad is set to be a priority for the Swedish Armed Forces in the years 2016–2020<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the role of bilateral co-operation with the United States in Sweden's security policy is set to grow, unless Sweden's political elites reach agreement over accession to NATO after 2018.

The US-Swedish military co-operation has been gaining momentum since 2015. At that time the Swedish Air Force held the first exercise of its kind with the US F-16 fighters over the Baltic Sea (as part of the Finland-Sweden Training Event, FSTE), and the US Air Force made a major contribution to the Swedish-Norwegian-Finnish drill

<sup>2</sup> The Government of Sweden, Regeringens proposition 2014/15:109, Försvarspolitisk inriktning – Sveriges försvar 2016–2020, 23 April 2015, p. 26–28, <http://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/266e64ec3a254a6087e-be9e413806819/proposition-201415109-forsvarspolitisk-inriktning--sveriges-forsvar-2016-2020>

<sup>3</sup> The Swedish Armed Forces, Försvarsmaktens Årsredovisning 2015, 16 February 2016, p. 34, <http://www.forsvarsmakten.se/siteassets/4-om-myndigheten/dokumentfiler/arsredovisningar/arsredovisning-2015/160122-003-forsvarsmaktens-arsredovisning-2015-huvuddokument.pdf>

in the far north (the Arctic Challenge Exercise, ACE). In a symbolic move, the multinational BALTOPS 2015 exercise, organised annually by the United States Naval Forces Europe (NAVFOREUR), included the first amphibious assault of its kind (executed by US and British marines, among others) on the south-western shore of Sweden.

**If tensions with Russia persist in the long term, the importance of the United States in Finland's security and defence policy may further increase, possibly moving toward an informal alliance.**

As part of the Cold Response exercise (February-March 2016) in Norway, a US infantry battalion operated under Swedish command within an international brigade. As of 2016, the Swedish Armed Forces are to pursue regular military staff-to-staff consultations with the US European Command (USEUCOM). According to statements by General Ben Hodges, the commander of the US Army Europe (USAREUR), the US also intends to start military drills involving the deployment of US military equipment from bases in Europe to Sweden by sea, including the Patriot air defence systems<sup>4</sup>.

### **Finland: overcoming the Cold War taboo**

After the end of the Cold War Finland rejected the political and military limitations imposed on it after World War II, ended its dependence on Moscow and adopted a course towards integration with the West (joining the EU, but not NATO). Rapprochement with the United States was part of this reorientation of Finnish foreign and security policy. The 1992 political decision to purchase 62 US-made F-18 Hornet fighters

was crucial in this context, as it led to ongoing Finnish-American military co-operation on pilot training, exercises and aircraft modernisation (for example, the purchase of around 70 US-made long-range air-to-surface JASSM missiles in 2012). Moreover, the Finnish Armed Forces have been increasing their interoperability with the US military, mainly in the framework of the multilateral regional exercises within the NATO Partnership for Peace programme. At the same time, though, this co-operation with the United States has not been emphasised to the domestic public, because of the strong traditions of neutrality and a reluctance to vex relations with Russia. From the point of view of the centre-right government under PM Juha Sipilä (a coalition formed in 2015 by the Centre Party, the Finns Party and the National Coalition Party), the United States plays a key role in ensuring the security of the Nordic-Baltic region and has not only the necessary military potential, but also the will to stop Russia's potential aggressive actions. However, developing deeper bilateral military co-operation with the US is politically controversial and, unlike in Sweden, there is no political consensus over it. Sections of the political elite and the public still deeply hold a belief, dating back to the Cold War era, that it is best to stay out of tensions between Russia and the West, despite the fact that the accession of the Baltic states to NATO has changed the geopolitical situation. The ruling coalition's policy of developing closer military co-operation with the United States has the support of the opposition Swedish People's Party and (partly) the Greens, while the opposition Social Democrats and the Left Alliance remain sceptical and fears to provoke Russia and to abandon the non-alignment policy<sup>5</sup>. However, should tensions with Russia

<sup>4</sup> Exklusiv intervju: USA vill flytta krigsmateriel till Sverige, TV4 Nyheterna, 7 March 2016, <http://www.tv4.se/nyheterna/klipp/exklusiv-intervju-usa-vill-flytta-krigsmateriel-till-sverige-3294412>

<sup>5</sup> Eeva Palojärvi, Kiistelty Rissalan lentoharjoitus sai alkunsa Yhdysvaltain aloitteesta, *Helsingin Sanomat*, 12 February 2016, <http://www.hs.fi/politiikka/a1455256886428>; Juha-Pekka Tikka, 'Hävittäjien vierailu yhtä dramaattista kuin roska-auton käynti takapihalla', *Verkkouutiset*, 11 February 2016, <http://www.verkkouutiset.fi/kotimaa/laivue%20haglund-46613>

persist in the long term, the importance of the United States in Finland's security and defence policy may increase further, possibly moving towards an informal alliance, as Finland's accession to NATO is hardly realistic for the reasons discussed above.

The stepped-up US-Finnish military co-operation mainly involves more extensive joint exercises in Finland, a trend that will be particularly visible in 2016. In May, as part of the US Atlantic Resolve operation aimed at strengthening NATO's eastern flank, Rissala airbase in central Finland (some 200 km away from the border with Russia) will host a relatively large exercise of US and Finnish air forces (with 6–8 F-15C fighters of the US National Guard), with the possible participation of other Nordic partners. At the same time a US mechanised infantry company (with around 20 Stryker armoured vehicles) will take part in the Finnish land forces' Arrow16 exercise in western Finland (this will be the first Finnish-American exercise of this kind). An amphibious assault by US marines on the south-western shores of Finland will be part of the BALTOPS 2016 multinational exercise in June

2016<sup>6</sup>. The two countries have also been deepening their co-operation on the modernisation of the Finnish Armed Forces (the acquisition of Stinger MANPAD systems and guided munition for multiple rocket launcher systems, the integration of JDAM and JSOW guided bombs and JASSM missiles with the F-18 Hornet fighters aircraft) and developing more intensive military and political contacts. Moreover, Finland has declared its readiness to continue supporting the United States in overseas deployments, despite the government plans to scale down the international involvement of the Finnish Armed Forces. The government has already pledged to increase the size of the Finnish training mission in Iraq as part of the US-led international coalition to 100 instructors (from the current 50)<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Pekka Tiinanen, USA:n sotilaita Suomeen kolmeen harjoitukseen, *Iltalehti*, 18 February 2016, [http://www.iltalehti.fi/uutiset/2016021821138187\\_uu.shtml](http://www.iltalehti.fi/uutiset/2016021821138187_uu.shtml); 'Kohuttu harjoitus yhdysvaltaisten kanssa täysin ensimmäinen - "nyt testataan kyvykkyyttä"', *Iltalehti*, 26 February 2016, [http://www.iltalehti.fi/uutiset/2016022621180984\\_uu.shtml](http://www.iltalehti.fi/uutiset/2016022621180984_uu.shtml)

<sup>7</sup> The Ministry of Defence of Finland, Puolustusministeri Niinistö: Irakin koulutusoperaatioon osallistuminen kehittää puolustusvoimien suorituskykyä, 9 March 2016, [http://valtioneuvosto.fi/artikkeli/-/asset\\_publisher/puolustusministeri-niinisto-irakin-koulutusoperaatioon-osallistuminen-kehittaa-puolustusvoimien-suorituskykyja](http://valtioneuvosto.fi/artikkeli/-/asset_publisher/puolustusministeri-niinisto-irakin-koulutusoperaatioon-osallistuminen-kehittaa-puolustusvoimien-suorituskykyja)

## APPENDIX

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### Major bilateral, trilateral and multilateral military exercises involving Sweden, Finland and the United States in the Nordic-Baltic region (2015–2016)

#### Exercises under US command

**BALTOPS:** In June 2015 Sweden and Finland participated in the BALTOPS multinational naval exercise led by the United States Naval Forces Europe and Africa (NAVFOREUR) in the Baltic Sea region. Sweden deployed 300 troops, a Stockholm-class missile corvette and eight JAS 39 Gripen fighter aircraft, while Finland contributed 180 troops and a minelayer. The USA deployed 670 troops, 3 vessels (a landing platform, a missile cruiser and a missile destroyer), naval helicopters and B-52 strategic bombers. The exercise scenario included a combined sea and land operation in the Baltic Sea region with air support. The US B-52 bombers simulated an operation of dropping naval mines on the Swedish coast. Marines from the USA, Great Britain, Sweden and Finland, among others, exercised an amphibious assault on the Swedish shore. BALTOPS 2016 will include an amphibious assault of US marines on the south-western coast of Finland (the Hanko Peninsula).

**SABER STRIKE:** As part of the land forces exercise Saber Strike 2015, taking place in Poland and the Baltic states and organised by the US Army in Europe (USAREUR), a Finnish company (around 100 troops with AMOS self-propelled mortars) held drills on Latvian territory, together with companies from the United States, Great Britain and Norway as well as a Baltic battalion. The exercise scenario included defensive tasks performed by multinational forces (co-operation of armoured units, air support, airborne landing, retaking control of critical infrastructure, brigade and battalion-level command).

#### NATO exercises

**BRTE:** In 2015 the USA, Sweden and Finland took part in successive editions (a total of three in 2015) of the Baltic Region Training Event (BRTE) organised by NATO in the international airspace over the Baltic Sea and in the airspace of the Baltic states. Sweden and Finland usually deployed 2 fighters each, and the USA an aerial refuelling aircraft. The drill scenarios included landing in bases on the territories of the Baltic states, interceptions, search and rescue operations, close air support and air-to-air refuelling.

#### Nordic exercises

**Arctic Challenge:** In late May and early June 2015, the Norwegian-led exercise Arctic Challenge 2015 took place in the airspace of northern Norway, Sweden and Finland. It involved 115 aircraft and 4000 troops from 9 states. The USA deployed 12 F-16 fighter aircraft (base in Kallax, Sweden), Sweden deployed 18 JAS 39 Gripen fighter aircraft (bases in Kallax and Rovaniemi, Finland), and Finland deployed 16 F-18 Hornet fighter aircraft (Rovaniemi). The exercise scenario included i.e. suppression of enemy air defences (destruction of ground targets, simulated in the case of Finland), low-altitude flights and air-to-air refuelling.



**Cold Response:** In February and March 2016, Norway hosted the Cold Response 2016 exercise involving 15,000 troops from 13 states including 3000 from the United States, 2000 from Sweden and 430 from Finland. It was a joint and combined forces exercise involving land air and sea components. The USA used its military equipment prepositioned in Norway (tanks and artillery), a B-52 bomber and an amphibious landing platform, among other items. Finland contributed a mechanised infantry battalion (with AMOS self-propelled mortars and XA-360 armoured carriers, among other equipment), with one company each from Sweden and Norway operating under its command (as part of a multinational brigade under Swedish command). The scenario included a UN Security Council mandated operation to regain territory seized by the enemy in Arctic conditions.

## Bilateral and trilateral exercises involving Sweden, Finland and the United States

**Finland-Sweden Training Event, FSTE:** The FSTE is a series of exercises for the Swedish and Finnish air forces that takes place in the Swedish, Finnish and international airspace over the Baltic Sea, and also involves the air forces of NATO countries temporarily present in the Baltic states. The Swedes and Finns held the first exercise of this kind in late March 2015 alongside the USA (four F-18 Hornet fighter aircraft from Finland, eight JAS 39 Gripen fighter aircraft from Sweden, and several F-16 fighters from the United States).

Moreover, in 2015, two bilateral exercises of the Finnish and US air forces took place. In late August and early September 2015, the two countries held the Combined Flight Training Event (CFTE) involving two F-18 Hornet fighters and two A-10 close air support aircraft of the US (operating from the airbase in Ämari, Estonia). The exercise was conducted in international and Finnish airspace (southern Finland). In September 2015 the two states exercised air-to-air refuelling over northern Finland (around twenty F-18 Hornet fighters and an aerial refuelling aircraft from the United States).

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EDITORS: Mateusz Gniazdowski,  
Anna Łabuszewska, Katarzyna Kazimierska  
TRANSLATION: OSW  
Co-operation: Jim Todd  
DTP: Bohdan Wędrychowski

Centre for Eastern Studies  
Koszykowa 6a, 00-564 Warsaw  
phone: +48 | 22 | 525 80 00  
e-mail: [info@osw.waw.pl](mailto:info@osw.waw.pl)

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