

Nordic Pooling and Sharing

Sweden's proposal for closer military integration with its neighbors could affect NATO

By *per Concordiam* Staff

If a new Swedish plan for Scandinavian defense cooperation is adopted, fighter squadrons with Norwegian and Finnish wingmen could patrol northern skies, and Swedish and Icelandic sailors could serve in the Baltic Sea side by side on a ship captained by a Dane. This new twist on “pooling and sharing” would deepen already broad military cooperation among the five Nordic countries in all areas of foreign, security and defense policy and, in an era of defense budget austerity, hopefully save money.

International military cooperation to the point of intermingled units might seem unconventional, but the benefits of increasing defense cooperation have been touted as a way to maintain necessary capacities while spending less. NATO calls it “Smart Defence” and in 2012 made it a cornerstone of the Alliance’s New Strategic Concept. The new Swedish proposal embraces pooling and sharing at a new level, which *Defense News* said could result in the creation of a “Nordic Defense Force” of air, army and naval units.

Swedish Defense Minister Karin Enström and Foreign Minister Carl Bildt introduced the idea in the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* on January 13, 2013,

and reiterated their support the next day at the Society and Defence Annual National Conference in Sälen, Sweden. Notably, the plan calls for “joint ownership and use of military capabilities and resources.” “We want to create more efficient resource use, higher quality, and stronger and wider military capabilities through enhanced cooperation,” Enström and Bildt wrote. They pointed out that the Nordic countries share values associated with a modern democratic society, including a belief in “human rights, freedom and the rule of law,” but emphasized that they could advance these values abroad more effectively when acting together.

NATO's role

Implementation of Sweden's ambitious proposal, however, raises important questions. First and foremost is how NATO members Norway, Denmark and Iceland can integrate so fully with nonmembers Sweden and Finland. Norway and Denmark consider NATO to be Europe's primary security apparatus and will not leave the Alliance, but strong public opposition to NATO membership remains in Sweden and Finland. A 2012 opinion poll by the Finnish Ministry of Defence found only 18 percent of the



Female ISAF soldiers from Sweden and Finland train in Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan, in August 2012. Female Engagement Teams do body checks of Afghan women and speak to them about their needs. REUTERS



Finnish Air Force F-18 Hornets like these participate with other Nordic partners in air patrols over Iceland.

FINNISH DEFENCE FORCES

public supported joining NATO, compared with 71 percent opposed. A 2011 poll in Sweden yielded similar results: 23 percent in favor of NATO membership, 50 percent opposed.

Sweden and Finland already work together with NATO members Norway and Estonia, as well as nonmember Ireland, in the European Union's Nordic Battlegroup, which Sweden leads. The force is designed to carry out peace-support, peace-enforcement, evacuation and humanitarian operations at the direction of the European Council. But the battlegroup has never been called on and, according to the Brussels-based International Security Information Service's European Security Review, "fragmentation, lack of capabilities

and political will, and lack of leadership" have led to disappointment. The battlegroup concept, which suffers from declining support from member states, is sometimes viewed as a rival for resources and redundant to the NATO Response Force.

Some believe the level of integration inherent in the Swedish proposal would require a formal defense treaty that draws Sweden and Finland closer to NATO, an idea that Finnish Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen rejected outright. "Discussion of a defense pact is currently not on the agenda, and I don't know if it ever will be. Now is the time to concentrate on defense cooperation at a practical level," he told Finnish broadcaster Yleisradio.



Maj. Gen. Robert Mood of Norway, right, head of the UN observer team in Syria, speaks with UN peacekeeping chief Herve Ladsous, left, near Damascus in May 2012. Nordic militaries have traditionally supported UN peacekeeping missions.

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In Sweden and Finland, proponents and opponents of NATO membership consider the two countries to be virtually part of the Western alliance. At the Sälén conference, Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet dubbed those countries NATO's closest allies: "One could even say that Sweden and Finland are de facto members of NATO," he said, praising them for close cooperation that occasionally draws protests from across both countries' political spectrums. For example, a 2012 decision to participate in joint NATO air patrols over Iceland drew heavy criticism from some parties in the Finnish parliament. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – all of which eagerly joined NATO in 2004 to seal their break from the former Soviet Union – remain strong proponents of increased defense integration between the Nordic and Baltic countries. According to the Jamestown Foundation's Eurasia Daily Monitor, they advocate for "full Nordic NATO membership, as it would deepen Nordic commitment to the defense of the Baltic states. Estonia in particular has energetically advocated for Finnish and Swedish NATO membership."

Sweden and Finland's historic reluctance to join the Alliance largely centered on fears of provoking the Soviet Union (or later Russia), according to a 2011 Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) report. Both nations have preferred to cooperate with NATO when national interests were at stake, assuming that any regional threat would draw NATO intervention regardless of formal membership status, the INSS report stated. However, as NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen stressed at the Sälén conference, no matter how close the security relationship, partner countries such as Sweden are not protected by NATO's Article 5 collective security guarantee. "You cannot be outside NATO but want every-

thing that NATO can give," he said.

Changing security environment

Changes in the regional security environment contribute to the need for increased defense cooperation. In December 2012, Swedish armed forces chief Gen. Sverker Göransson announced that the Swedish military could only defend the country for about a week without outside help, sparking national controversy and denials from the government, which insisted Sweden's capabilities were sufficient to handle current threats.

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—EURASIA DAILY MONITOR

Conventional threats are few. The only plausible threat – and such a threat is considered extremely unlikely – is Russia. But defense planners must prepare for future contingencies. Russia's defense spending and military modernization have been growing rapidly. Russian defense spending is expected to increase by 59 percent by 2015, Russian news agency RIA Novosti reported in October 2012. This growth concerns defense establishments in the Nordic and Baltic countries. Said the Eurasia Daily Monitor: "For Finland and Sweden, the interest in Nordic defense cooperation is heavily affected by changes in the balance of power in the Baltic region – the quickening pace of Russia's military modernization, its increasingly assertive posture toward former Soviet satellite states in eastern Europe, and the United States' phased restructuring of its military resources in Europe – as well as budgetary constraints facing Swedish and Finnish militaries." Of particular concern are Russian naval upgrades in the Baltic Sea, whose shipping routes Sweden's Enström views as increasingly important to regional trade.

Uneven levels of defense spending are another potential obstacle to enhanced cooperation. Norway, which benefits from energy revenues unavailable to the other Nordic nations, is increasing spending by 4.2 percent in 2013 to about 1.6 percent of GDP. Sweden, once the region's foremost military power, has dropped defense spending to 1.2 percent of GDP – fourth among the five Nordic countries. The lowest is Iceland, which maintains only a Coast Guard. Sweden's opposition parties have been critical of that level of defense spending. Center Party defense spokesman Staffan Danielsson told *Defense News* that Sweden must boost its own defense to improve credibility for greater integration with its neighbors. "This means taking responsibility and spending a lot

more money on our military," he said. "This is the best means of contributing to increased stability in the Nordic region."

Shared values and history

Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark have a history of military cooperation since collaborating on United Nations peacekeeping operations in the 1950s. Sweden and Finland joined Partnership for Peace after the Cold War, through which they contributed to NATO-led peacekeeping operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo and have also jointly contributed to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan.

With a foundation in mutual democratic values, Nordic relations with NATO continue to strengthen, abetted by the Nordic NATO members. The new Swedish proposal would expand cooperation under the Nordic Defense Cooperation (NORDEF) framework, which has managed joint Nordic military activity and cooperation with NATO, the EU and the UN since 2009, when it replaced previous agreements and shifted the focus of Nordic cooperation to international crisis management and peace support operations.

Though most observers believe NATO would welcome Sweden and Finland with open arms should they apply for membership, increased cooperation, even outside the Alliance, improves capabilities and regional security and allows NATO and its partners to work effectively together when necessary. Fiscal realities and an evolving international and regional security environment are making military cooperation the wave of the future. Nations that share the "values we associate with a modern democratic society," as Enström and Bildt wrote, can achieve "more impact for our common values" through close cooperation. □