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Sweden Ponders NATO Membership: Tough Call

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Sweden is stepping up its military capabilities and exercises as an element of its anti-Russia policy. It will increase the number of training events with NATO, including those on Swedish NATO territory, Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist told Dagens Nyheter on June 26.

For instance, Swedish troops will take part in a large NATO exercise in Spain in September and in Norway in 2018. «*We need to keep up with the new reality. It is broadly anchored in parliament that it is important for the United States to be militarily represented in Europe and this is part of the balance*», said Hultqvist.

Neutrality and history of being privileged NATO partner

For 200 years Sweden has maintained a policy of armed neutrality. Indeed, the country has a good claim to being the second-longest continuously neutral political entity in the world, second only to Switzerland. During the Cold War neutrality allowed Sweden to pursue independent foreign policy. Now this independence is questioned as the national defence has become an object of heated public debate.

Sweden has a long history of international military operations. It became an early member of NATO's Partnership for Peace program in 1994, and participated in the NATO-led peacekeeping missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as in Kosovo with the provision of armed units and

in the Indian Ocean in EU and NATO anti-pirate policing operations. Furthermore, Sweden was a member of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. It was the only country neither a member of NATO nor of the Arab League to participate in the intervention in the Libyan Civil War in 2011, a mission inarguably going far beyond peacekeeping. Sweden has registered its interest in contributing units to the NATO Response Force (NRF). The country is home to NEAT, the North European Aerospace Test Range, with some 24,000 kilometers of restricted airspace plus ground room it is a testing playground for NATO and the US.

Ramping up efforts to join Alliance and counter Russia

The June 16th defence ministry proposal to parliament refers, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, to building up the country's defence «to prepare Sweden for war».

In April, Sweden announced plans to raise defence spending by 10.2 billion kronor (1.09 billion euros, \$1.18 billion) for 2016-2020, mostly to modernize ships to detect and intercept submarines.

This March, Sweden decided to remilitarize the island of Gotland off the southwest coast of the country in the Baltic Sea. The decision to deploy around 150 troops to the island came as Estonia expressed major concerns about the island's vulnerability.

On April 9, Nordic nations agreed on closer defense ties and increased solidarity with the Baltic states aiming to increase regional security through deterrence. The defense ministers of Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark and Iceland said in a joint declaration that Northern Europe must get prepared to confront Russia.

Sweden has just announced its decision to join the NATO Tallinn-based Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence, a NATO-accredited knowledge hub focused on interdisciplinary applied research and development as well as consultations, trainings and exercises in the field of cyber security.

Last month more than 5,000 air, sea and ground troops took part in a multinational NATO maritime exercise near Ustka, Poland. It included 14 NATO members plus three countries not part of the alliance - Sweden, Finland and Georgia - which have all been the subject of speculation that they may join the U.S.-led alliance. The Dutch foreign affairs minister has told Russia that the BALTOPS was nothing else but a warning to Russian President Vladimir Putin. *«These drills are also a warning to President Putin», Koenders said. «This is a combination of pressure and dialogue, rather than a lack of judgment when dealing with Putin»,* he added. The comments from Bert Koenders contradicted NATO earlier statements that the exercise «was not aimed at any country in particular».

NATO stands to gain

NATO has good reason to be interested in Sweden joining its alliance. In fact, the Alliance would like to see Sweden accede. Many experts believe that if Sweden joins, then Finland will follow the suit. If the plans for bringing in Sweden and Finland come through, then the Baltic

Sea, a precious warm-water port for Russia, would be entirely surrounded by NATO member nations, with the exception of two small slivers of Russian land. The inclusion of Sweden in the alliance would to large extent allow NATO to treat the entire Arctic-Nordic-Baltic region as one integrated military-strategic area for defense planning and logistical purposes. It would place NATO forces within arm's length of Russia's strategic nuclear submarine bases located on the Kola Peninsula. It would also turn the Baltic Sea into a NATO lake, one through which much of Russia's vital trade and energy exports would have to transit. Needless to say, Russia would have to react adapting to new security conditions.

Prospects for membership and factors to reckon with

Support for NATO membership remains rather low in Sweden. Only one in three thinks the country should join the defence organization, according to a new poll.

The new figures by the Gothenburg-based SOM Institute, which conducts surveys on public opinion in Sweden annually, suggest that support for NATO has not changed markedly since last year. In 2014 the same survey showed that 31 percent of respondents thought that joining NATO would be a good idea.

The ruling center-left coalition has repeatedly ruled out any discussion of membership while the Sweden's Christian-Democrat opposition party is lobbying for full membership in NATO. The Christian-Democrats say NATO membership offers the only long-term viable defense solution to protect the sovereignty of Sweden and neighboring Nordic states. The Moderate Party (Moderaterna), a liberal-conservative political party which is the largest and dominant party of the Swedish centre-right, has recently called for a roadmap for NATO membership after the next election in 2018.

Factors to reckon with

On June 16 Russian Ambassador to Sweden Viktor Tatarintsev told Dagens Nyheter that Russia does not have any military plans against Sweden, in line with Stockholm's alliance neutrality.

But Tatarintsev warned that this could change if Sweden were to join the NATO alliance. *«I don't think it will become relevant in the near future, even though there has been a certain swing in public opinion. But if it happens there will be countermeasures»,* the ambassador said. *«Putin pointed out that there will be consequences, that Russia will have to resort to a response of the military kind and reorientate our troops and missiles»,* the official added. *«The country that joins NATO needs to be aware of the risks it is exposing itself to».* However, such a response would not take the immediate form of an attack, since *«Sweden is not a target for our armed troops»,* Tatarintsev noted. He hit out at what he called an *«aggressive propaganda campaign»* by Swedish media. *«Russia is often described as an attacker who only thinks of conducting wars and threatening others. But I can guarantee that Sweden, which is an alliance-free nation, is not part of any military plans by Russian authorities. Sweden is not a target for our armed troops»,* he said.

Here is the example of what the ambassador meant talking about the propaganda campaign.

Recently, US think-tank Center for European Policy Analysis suggested that Russia is seeking to invade the Baltic region. Chief of Staff Presidential Administration of Russia Sergei Ivanov replied that such a plan would be «suicidal» and viewed the allegations as nonsense.

A researcher at the Swedish National Defense College, Peter Mattsson, said that the US report on the alleged «Russian threat» to the Baltic region is nothing else, but a part of the information war.

The expert believes that the United States is trying to convince Sweden and other countries that they are vulnerable without American troops and that Russia is planning to invade the region. US analysts, among others, reported that Russian military maneuvers had been designed to rehearse the «invasion» of the Scandinavian Islands and other territories in the Baltic region. In reality Russia trains its troops as other countries do. The assumption that the islands can actually be attacked is a speculation, Mattsson said. According to him, the aim of the US-designed report is to influence Sweden's attitude toward NATO.

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Think twice before you jump, they say. As a full-fledged NATO member Sweden will become a target of potential retaliatory strike and subject to increased influence of the US. It won't be independent anymore. The plans to enter the Alliance go against the will of the majority of population, as polls show.

Reluctance to join NATO is deeply rooted in the history of the country. Emphasis on neutrality is also the reason why the Swedes prefer to stay militarily non-aligned. Neutrality is often considered to be the reason why Sweden has not had a war on its soil for two hundred years. Swedish membership in NATO would rewrite this past and would throw uncertainty into the future geopolitical relationship.