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Sweden Uses Ukraine to Heat Up NATO Entry Debate

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The Swedish government has made public plans to beef up its defence forces by fitting its Gripen fighters with new long-range cruise missiles. Defence Minister Karin Enström said the high-precision weapons are needed to deter other countries from attacking Sweden and «*increase the effectiveness*» of the country's defense. «*They would give new capabilities by offering a longer reach, but also the ability to fight targets that are further away*», she told Sveriges Radio (SR) on April 24. The range is around 1,000 kilometers, twice as much in comparison with the systems Sweden uses now. The new missiles can fly at low altitude, have GPS guidance, and can manoeuvre like an aircraft. Last year Foreign Minister Carl Bildt said that cruise missiles would «*Never be relevant for Sweden. Our defence is a defence*». According to Gunnar Hult, a professor at Sweden's National Defence College, the Bildt's comments had been made long before the events in Ukraine, «*There is a clear contradiction here. Before the Ukraine crisis, a move like this would have been perceived as quite aggressive*», [he said](#) adding that after the events in Ukraine «*Sweden has obviously seen the need to stock up on the missiles*».

On April 22, Sweden's centre-right government coalition announced plans to increase military spending, with an emphasis on more fighter jets and submarines if the four parties win the September elections. If the coalition were to remain in power, it would aim to increase the military budget by five billion kronor (\$760 million) annually, starting in 2015. The government said that spending would rise gradually until 2024, when the annual defense budget increase would be around 5.5 billion kronor (€604 million, US \$835 million) greatly exceeding previous

estimates. It cited the crisis in Ukraine as a reason to justify the burden.

In an article published in the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (DN) the four party leaders wrote about the crisis in Ukraine stressing that *«Seen against the backdrop of developments in our region it can be particularly motivated to increase Swedish presence on the Baltic Sea and on Gotland Island»*, as the op-ed text stated. The coalition would order Saab to provide the Armed Forces with 70 rather than 60 of the new generation of Jas Gripen E fighter jets, buy two new submarines to reach a total of five and refurbish other ships. The plans include cutting cooperation with Russia in environmental and nuclear energy issues, among other measures.

Adding more submarines to the naval fleet would also be on the cards if the government's proposals make it to the negotiation table with other parliamentary parties. Sweden has traditionally anchored much of defence policy across party lines to secure longevity. *«Sweden should have an accessible and useful defence, adapted to a rapidly changing world»*, Fredrik Reinfeldt, Jan Bjurklund, Göran Hägglund and Annie Luuf wrote. The all-party defense committee has changed the date when it will submit its recommendations. They were due March 15 but now are expected on May 15. The stated reason for the prolonged submission date is the situation in Ukraine.

There is also a movement among high government officials to re-examine the long-running issue of joining NATO. Jan Bjurklund, the Liberal Peoples' Party leader and Sweden's deputy Prime Minister, is pushing for a *«comprehensive strategic military re-think on capability»*. Bjurklund also wants Sweden to *«set the wheels in motion to join NATO»*. *«What the crisis in the Ukraine shows is that we need to return to our original defense doctrine of having the capability to defend our borders»*, Bjurklund said at a March 12 news conference. According to him, *«The crisis highlights our vulnerability in the Baltic Sea. We need to strengthen our presence and capability here. NATO membership is the best long-term option»*.

Peter Hultqvist, chairman of the Parliamentary Defense Committee (PDC) says ditto, *«We need to build a stronger and better resourced defense. Having a robust air and naval presence in the Baltic Sea and a strengthened military base on Gutland Island is fundamental to defending future threats»*. (ibid) On March 4 Sweden sent a squadron of Gripen aircraft to Gutland, an island located at the distance of 248 km from the Russian Kaliningrad region. The Nord Stream-operated Baltic Sea gas pipeline runs in the vicinity of the island's shore to transport 55 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually to markets in Western Europe.

Sweden's shift to becoming more militarily engaged abroad evolved in the 1990's and the 2000's, with units deployed as parts of multinational contingents to give meaning to Sweden's goal of becoming a nation with international clout. The Swedish military units have been present as peacekeepers in Bosnia, Kosovo, Chad, Lebanon, Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Liberia, Georgia, Libya and Mali.

Considering Sweden's shared values and recently close cooperation with the Atlantic alliance, it is not surprising that most party leaders are highlighting the need for full membership. Sweden is a valuable contributing partner. The country's military has a high degree of interoperability with NATO. Sweden has contributed well-trained soldiers to the war Afghanistan and aerial support

in Libya under the NATO flag. Most recently, it also contributed a squadron of Gripen fighter jets as well as a mine-sweeping ship to the NATO Response Force (NRF). On April 30 the Swedish government took the decision to allow the flight of NATO AWACS over its airspace. AWACS planes are capable of monitoring air and sea territory at least 400 km away. The aircraft can stay in the air for eleven hours without refueling. As far back as 2009 the Swedish government unilaterally issued a solidarity declaration stating that Sweden would support its Nordic and EU neighbors in case of disaster or armed attack, no matter it was not a NATO member. The statement went to large extent unnoticed by media. But it's relevant to recall it today.

The deliberations inside the country do not exclude the scenario of making formal application to join NATO in the run-up to national elections in September.

At that, Latvia and Lithuania announced that they will boost military spending, bringing it in line with NATO requirements of two percent of the GDP by 2020. In early April, NATO assured the anxious Eastern members of its support. The alliance didn't rule out situating permanent military bases in the Baltic states and is considering sending more troops to its eastern borders. 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. Indicating Moscow's level of concern about NATO expanding to the North, Russian Prime Minister and former President Dimitri Medvedev stated in June 2013 that any expansion of NATO to Sweden and Finland would upset the balance of power in Europe and force a Russian response. Russia cannot see NATO expansion towards its borders as positive, as under certain circumstances the possibility of military confrontation remains, the Russian PM has said at the Euro-Arctic Council's forum. When a reporter asked Dmitry Medvedev how the balance of forces in Europe will change if Sweden and Finland decide to enter NATO, the Russian Prime Minister answered that his country would have to react to such developments. *«This is their own business; they are making decisions in accordance with the national sovereignty doctrine. But we have to consider the fact that for us the NATO bloc is not simply some estranged organization, but a structure with military potential»*, the head of the Russian government said adding that under certain unfavorable scenarios this potential could be used against Russia. *«All new members of the North Atlantic alliance that appear in proximity of our state eventually do change the parity of the military force. And we have to react to this»*, the top official noted.

The major obstacle for NATO membership is the strong opposition among the citizens. The political risk is simply too high. The poll published by the Swedish daily *Svenska Dagbladet* shows that only 31 percent of the Swedes would like to see their country in the Western military alliance. Fifty percent prefer to stay [outside](#). 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.

Sweden is among the top ten foreign direct investors in Russia. According to the Russian Central Bank Swedish accumulated direct investments in Russia amounted to 15, 8 billion USD as of 1 January 2013. Approximately 400 Swedish companies are currently present on the Russian market.

The country's business has actively invested in timber and wood processing industry in Karelia, Arkhangelsk and Komi. The expensive resources used for economic development and cooperation in the Barents Region certainly contributed in establishing good environment for Swedish business activities in the Russian parts of the region. In 2013 Russia was Sweden's 13th biggest export market and 7th biggest import market. Sweden exports export products are automobiles, equipment for the telecommunications industry and chemicals. Russian tourists have become one of the major segments in Sweden. They generate an enormous amount of profit to Swedish businesses. The economic cooperation with Russian generates many thousands working places and profit in taxes. Suppose it all suddenly goes down the drain with an alternative of increasing the military burden in the times of economic woes. It will be done for the iffy benefit of losing traditional neutrality in favor of the dependence on the United States as a NATO member with a big and powerful neighbor rightfully concerned about the Alliance's expansion and ready to respond, including military measures, thus significantly reducing the nation's security.

By joining NATO Sweden will become a target of potential retaliatory strike and subject to the US influence to even greater extent, which is strong enough as it is... It hardly meets the interest of Swedish people. The obvious trend to enter the Alliance goes against their will, as polls show. If you have a good, profitable, mutually advantageous and functional relationship with a large and powerful neighbor, then the question pops up - why rock the boat?