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Sweden Strengthens Military in Response to Ukraine Crisis

By Jordan Shilton

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Amid a major military build-up in Europe using the conflict between Russia and the western allies over Ukraine, Sweden's government has revealed plans to boost military spending by more than 10 percent over the next ten years.

The increased spending will go towards expanding its air force, from 60 to 70 fighter jets, boosting numbers in the army and upgrading equipment. The build-up will focus predominantly on the Baltic region, which is growing in strategic importance. Along with Sweden, Germany, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Denmark, Finland and Russia all border the Baltic Sea. Finland also has a 1,000 kilometre border with Russia.

On April 24, Defence Minister Karin Enström backed plans to deploy cruise missiles on Swedish Saab Gripen fighter jets. "In the future the ability to combat longer range targets can be important," she told public radio SR. "It would raise our collective defence capabilities and thus raise the threshold effects of our defence."

The move, which will see the Swedish air force double its firing range, was welcomed by military figures who were more open about its offensive purpose. "It shows a potential opponent that we can fight at long distances and therefore we believe it is a deterrent. If we are detected

early we must be able to have a firing range that is much longer than what we've previously been used to," Colonel Johan Hansson told SR.

Such warlike language is directed at Russia and is part of a deliberate plan of escalation by the military and ruling circles over the past year, in alliance with US imperialism and its western NATO allies.

In December 2012, the head of Sweden's armed forces, Sverker Göranson, gave a newspaper interview in which he asserted that in the event of an attack, Stockholm would only be able to defend itself for a week. This was due to moves by successive governments to reduce the defence budget and a focus on foreign interventions around the globe rather than territorial defence, he argued.

Three months later, at the end of March 2013, the military and political elite seized on a Russian military exercise over the Baltic Sea to launch a public campaign for military rearmament. It provoked discussions on the need to refocus on territorial defence and has continued into a full defence review due out later this month.

A month prior to the mock Russian attack, in February 2013, Deputy Prime Minister Jan Björklund provocatively declared that Sweden should station Patriot missiles on the island of Gotland to deter opponents. "I don't want to say they're a threat today, but for the first time since the Cold War the Russians are substantially rearming," Björklund told daily *Svenska Dagbladet*.

The main opposition party, the Social Democrats, look likely to head a new government after elections due in September. They are firmly behind the military build-up.

Peter Hultqvist, Social Democrat MP and chairman of Sweden's parliamentary defence committee, said of the planned spending increase, "This defence reinforcement initiative is long overdue. It will go some way to restoring Sweden's position, lost in recent years because of low spending on defence, as the Nordic region's strongest military power. It will also improve our capacity to better police the Baltic Sea area from forward military bases on Gotland Island."

A key figure in the escalation against Russia has been Foreign Minister Carl Bildt. An experienced diplomat who played a role in negotiations over the Balkans in the 1990s, Bildt has stepped up attacks on Russia ever since the four-day conflict with Georgia in 2008, which was provoked by a US-backed attack on Russian peacekeeping forces. Bildt commented at the time, "Stronger European and Atlantic engagement with these two countries (Ukraine and Georgia) but also with the greater region between Russia, the European Union and the southern Caucasus would raise the cost of any aggressive move by Russia in the coming years."

It was this drive by Washington and its European allies which provoked the current crisis over Ukraine. Through the backing of a coup spearheaded by fascists in Kiev, they sought to bring a regime to power aligned closely to western interests against Moscow.

Bildt and the Swedish government fully supported this course. Along with Britain and Poland, Sweden was one of three European Union members to propose a joint policing mission to back

the new Ukrainian regime in early April. Later that month, Bildt defended the regime's use of force to put down separatist protests in the east, writing on Twitter, "If illegal armed groups took over police stations and local government offices in Sweden we would use all our instruments to restore order."

Sweden's military build-up has seen it abandon all remnants of its historic non-aligned position. As well as its support for military operations in Afghanistan and its sending of Saab Gripen fighter jets to Libya in 2011, this has meant an intensification of international collaboration on issues relating to surveillance and defence.

Although it remains formally outside of NATO, Sweden is to all intents and purposes a full member. It agreed last year to contribute troops to the NATO Response Force (NRF), the alliance's rapid reaction military unit. The Swedish army participated in NATO's largest exercise in seven years, "Steadfast Jazz", in the Baltic last November. The operation, involving up to 6,000 ground troops and directed at Russia, took place in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland for one week.

The other two non-member partners in the NATO operation were Finland and Ukraine.

NATO General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen said of Swedish participation in the exercise, "Our relationship is strong and this will make it even stronger."

Describing the purpose of Steadfast Jazz, he went on, "The NATO Response Force is the spearhead of this alliance: a rapid-reaction group able to defend any ally, deploy anywhere, and deal with any threat. Exercise Steadfast Jazz will make sure that the spearhead is sharp, and ready to use."

Later in 2013, it emerged that Sweden's Försvarets radioanstalt (FRA) intelligence agency was one of the main collaborators with the American National Security Agency in its global spying programme. The NSA reportedly receives large quantities of information from FRA, including a substantial number of communications from Russia.

The outbreak of the Ukraine crisis coincided with a conference in Sweden held in early March on integrated air and missile defence. Sponsored by a number of global defence companies, it brought together speakers and representatives from the Swedish, British, German, Polish, Finnish, Lithuanian, Czech and Hungarian armed forces from March 3-5 in Halmstad. It was organised by the Swedish Air Defence Unit, which has overall responsibility for coordinating the country's air defence systems.

According to the information posted on the conference website, attendees would be enabled to "Identify key emerging requirements from across Europe and the US, with detailed insights into the development plans of the Swedish, Ukrainian, Polish, Czech and US Armed Forces, amongst others" and also "Develop new contacts with both military and industry to facilitate international cooperation and integration."

NATO representatives gave a presentation on the second day of the conference entitled, “The bigger picture in international air missile defence: the NATO perspective.” It covered “the potential for NATO outreach to 3rd states to build a wider framework” and “future visions for the NATO BMD (Ballistic Missile Defence) programme.”

These are two components of NATO’s confrontational policy towards Moscow. The BMD programme aims to develop a unified missile defence system for NATO’s European members, while the integration of “third states” including the former Soviet republics of Ukraine and Georgia is aimed above all at weakening Russia.