

Swedish Security and Defence in 2014 as Seen from the East

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Introduction

Sweden is, in terms of GDP and population, the largest of the Nordic and Baltic nations. This paper examines last year's security- and defence-related developments affecting both Sweden and its Nordic–Baltic neighbours, most of which are members of the European Union and NATO. Special attention is given to aspects of security that at a first glance may seem purely national, but are also important when seen from Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius.

Last year, Sweden saw a lively debate on security and defence policy issues, focusing on three major topics: Russia's increasingly unscrupulous behaviour, the poor state of the Swedish armed forces and the future of the country's traditional non-alignment policy. By the end of 2014, the debate had not resulted in any significant political decisions. It is not obvious why Sweden's political leadership would need more than nine months to draw the necessary conclusions from Russia's occupation and illegal annexation of Crimea in early 2014. Neither the previous centre-right Alliance for Sweden nor the newly formed left-wing government were ready to increase the defence budget more than symbolically or consider the option of joining NATO. This is in stark contrast to Lithuania's 32% defence budget increase in 2015 and might tempt the false conclusion that Sweden is one of the all-talk-no-action Western European nations that choose to rely on their allies, especially the US.¹ But, being a non-aligned country, Sweden does not have any allies to rely upon, only partners – of which Russia is one of the most powerful, for better or worse.

Russia's military activity

Sweden found itself in a changed security environment after Russia's armed attack on Ukraine in February 2014. Both Russia and NATO increased their military activity significantly in the Baltic Sea region and this required the Swedish armed forces to react and raise their availability of both personnel and equipment. According to Sweden's Air Force chief, the Swedish quick-reaction alert system increased its level of activity by approximately 50% compared to previous years.²

Russia raised concern among its neighbours by conducting a snap exercise on 5–10 December, focusing on the units in Kaliningrad oblast involving 9,000 servicemen, 250 tanks and APCs, over 100 artillery units, 55 warships and the Iskander ballistic missile system.³ Very few analyses have been published about the exercise but, according to one expert, it is believed to have included a surprise attack against a Baltic Sea nation with a brigade-size airborne unit from the 76th Guards Air Assault Division from Pskov, near the Estonian border.⁴ The exercise also included sorties by nuclear-capable Tu-95 Bear strategic bombers and Tu-22M Backfire long-range bombers.

There were also other extraordinary events in 2014, including two serious incidents close to Sweden involving Russian military aircraft and civilian airliners. On 3 March an SAS flight had to take last-minute evasive action to avoid colliding with a Russian Ilyushin Il-20M aircraft, and on 12 December a similar incident took place when a Russian military aircraft approached Kastrup airport with its transponder switched off while a civilian airliner was taking off.^{5,6}

In October, the Swedish armed forces, primarily the navy, launched an operation to search for a submarine in the Swedish archipelago.⁷ Being of a much smaller scale than

the incidents in the 1980s, the operation was initiated on the basis of a number of observations, mainly by the public but also by the armed forces, involving both photos of a surfaced submarine and tracks on the sea floor.⁸ A week later, a surfaced submarine was again observed, this time in the waters near the suburbs of Stockholm.⁹ Compared to similar incidents during the Cold War, there was surprisingly little public criticism of the Swedish military for not being able to identify and target the intruders. The results of a combination of Russia's generally aggressive behaviour and the downsizing of the Swedish national defence system over recent decades are obvious. The security vacuum that has been created by the Swedes themselves will eventually be filled, if not by the Swedish armed forces, then by somebody else.

Shifting focus of the armed forces from national defence to international operations

The debate was originally sparked by the Supreme Commander of Swedish Armed Forces in late 2012, when he stated that the nation's armed forces would be able to conduct defensive operations in one direction for up to one week once the ongoing restructuring had been completed.¹⁰ The Russian Air Force's mock attacks on targets in Sweden on Good Friday 2013 only intensified the debate and, by the time Russia occupied Crimea in early 2014, the Swedish public started to realise that their security environment had deteriorated while their politicians were refocusing their armed forces away from national defence towards participation in operations far from home.¹¹

Two previously anonymous bloggers made a significant and refreshing contribution to the Swedish defence debate. In December 2013 it was revealed that Swedish Air Force major and Gripen pilot Carl Bergqvist was the person behind the blog signature "Wiseman", who for six years had provided expert comments about the current status of the armed forces and developments in Northern Europe.¹² In August 2014 Lieutenant Commander Niklas Wiklund, Commanding Officer of the corvette HMS *Stockholm*, stepped forward after publishing insightful and popular blogs since 2010 under the signature "Skipper".¹³ The quality of their texts is illustrated by the fact that both bloggers were hired by major Swedish daily newspapers (*Expressen* and *Svenska Dagbladet*) in late 2014 to write columns.

Some opinion formers blamed the previous centre-right government led by Fredrik Reinfeldt for the poor state in which the armed forces found themselves, but in reality the parliamentary decisions that caused this situation had been drawn up by previous social-democratic governments more than ten years ago.¹⁴ Thus, all major political parties are responsible for the current situation; the wider public is slowly becoming aware of the magnitude of the problems, but there are no funded decisions on how to address them.

2014 was the year in which the new defence organisation was supposed to have been achieved (though not yet fully manned), but the armed forces are still undergoing transformation.¹⁵ The current state of the Swedish armed forces was highlighted by the National Audit Office in a report published in March 2014.¹⁶ The report focused on the still ongoing restructuring of the forces and concluded that the aim to transform the conscript-based territorial defence organisation into an all-volunteer force by 2014 would be delayed for several reasons. First, the Swedish parliament's decision

assumed that sufficient funding would be created by savings and the rationalisation of processes in other parts of the defence budget. This assumption proved unrealistic. Second, the decision was not backed with long-term financial calculations, so nobody knew how much the future defence organisation would cost once it was fully manned and equipped.

Russia's attack on its neighbour and the hunt for submarines in the Swedish archipelago has not meant that the ongoing downsizing of the armed forces has been halted. Instead, the navy will in 2015 be forced to decommission and scrap six smaller vessels, downgrade two corvettes and scrap two other corvettes for budgetary reasons.^{17,18}

According to a public opinion poll published in December 2014, only 15% of respondents had confidence in the Swedish armed forces' ability to defend the country, while 57% stated that they had little or no confidence in the military being able to fulfil its core task.¹⁹ A poll in April 2014 among 1,400 members of the 13,000-strong trade union for officers, soldiers and sailors (*Officersförbundet*) showed that morale in the Swedish armed forces has been put under pressure.^{20,21,22} 81% of respondents said that their units lacked equipment, personnel and training, preventing them from fulfilling their core tasks. 46% had no trust in how the Swedish government managed the armed forces and 69% of officers would not become officers again if they had to choose today.

In mid-May the Defence Commission, composed of representatives from the Swedish parliament and government, presented its defence policy report, which will form the basis for the 2015 parliamentary decisions on the structure and development of the Swedish armed forces in the period 2016–19. The report stated that “the Nordic and Baltic Sea region is characterised overall by stability, dialogue and cooperation. The policies pursued by Russia, on the other hand, are unpredictable and destabilising.”²³ The commission recommended that additional funds be devoted to operations and procurement, but proposed a very limited increase (3% compared to the 2014 defence budget) from 2017 and a more substantial increase starting from 2019 that would eventually amount to an overall increase of 16% in 2023 in relation to the 2014 budget.^{24,25} However, this would cover less than half of the commission's proposals.²⁶

In safeguarding the rear of the Baltic States, Sweden has an important role in preventing Russian forces from cutting off Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania from their allies. As pointed out by retired Major General Karlis Neretnieks, access to Swedish territory and airspace will be decisive if NATO is called on to defend the Baltic States. Denying an opponent the same access would also be crucial. By lacking the capacity to defend its own territory and failing to make any preparations to either support NATO-led operations or receive assistance, Sweden is undermining NATO's ability to defend the Baltic States.²⁷

Non-alignment, solidarity or NATO membership?

At the end of 2013, Defence Minister Karin Enström appointed Ambassador Tomas Bertelman to conduct a study on Sweden's international defence cooperation. The report was supposed to describe the current status of cooperation and to propose ways in which it could be developed in the future.²⁸ The overall conclusion was that the effects of current cooperation remained marginal, in the sense that they did not alter the overall picture of the fundamental problem of the gap between the tasks of the Swedish armed forces and their capabilities. Ambassador Bertelman recommended that an objective and interest-based examination of what NATO membership would mean for Sweden should be undertaken, if possible together with Finland.

However, among politicians NATO remained a non-topic. Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt stated in January 2014 that NATO membership was not currently on the agenda.²⁹ Sweden's new Social Democratic Prime Minister, Stefan Löfven, recently reaffirmed Reinfeldt's view by stating that Sweden would not launch a study on what NATO membership might bring for the country.³⁰ In addition, the new left-wing government also signalled a return to the traditional non-alignment policy that had been abolished by the former centre-right government.³¹ Sweden thereby took a step away from closer ties with the Western nations with whom it otherwise shares common values.

Closer bilateral defence cooperation with Finland has been proposed as a substitute for NATO membership. During the Annual National Conference on security and defence policy on 11–13 January 2015 (*Folk och Försvar*), the Swedish and Finnish defence ministers jointly presented their views on how cooperation could be enhanced in the areas of air and sea surveillance information exchange and common use of air and naval bases, as well as extended air exercises and amendment of legislation that would enable Finnish naval forces to support their Swedish colleagues in hunting down intruding submarines.³²

Throughout the Cold War, Sweden employed a non-alignment policy that was supported by strong national defence, but this is no longer the case. The defence budget amounted to 3.1% of GDP in 1975, but decreased slightly from 1987 to 2.5%, where it remained until 1993, when a rapid decline started to today's 1.2%.^{33,34} This is below the average of NATO's European member states (1.6% of GDP in 2013).³⁵

Sweden does not belong to the category of economically mismanaged nations that have been forced to undertake serious austerity measures, and it could therefore afford to spend more on defence. In 2013, the country was among the six EU member states with the lowest government deficits in terms of percentage of GDP (-1.3%) and would be able to afford a larger deficit before breaching the 3% limit defined in the Maastricht criteria.³⁶ Sweden also had the sixth-lowest ratio of government debt to GDP (38.6%) and could therefore afford a higher debt without exceeding the set 60% limit.³⁷ Thus, among the 28 EU member states, Sweden is in a relatively favourable situation that would allow for a substantial increase in defence spending. What it seems to lack is the political will to take the decisions that are required by the "new normal".

However, these decisions are not necessarily as difficult as they seemed only a few years ago. Three opinion polls published in December 2014 and January 2015 show that public support for joining the military alliance has increased and that support for remaining non-aligned has decreased. One poll, presented in early January 2015, showed greater public support for joining NATO (48%) than for remaining outside the Alliance (35%).³⁸ According to the same poll, a majority (57%) of respondents favoured increased defence spending (compared to 38% in 2013). Another opinion poll published in January 2015 indicated that 41% expressed support for joining NATO, with 34% opposed.³⁹ A third poll, from December 2014, also concluded that a majority (54%) of respondents supported increased spending, but here the result on NATO membership was different (33% in favour of joining the Alliance, 47% against).⁴⁰

Sweden cooperates closely with all three Baltic States, both bilaterally and, increasingly, as part of the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO). While this offers the participants financial benefits in terms of savings and operational gains from joint training, this has only an indirect effect on the involved nations' ability to survive an armed conflict. Neither the European Union nor NORDEFECO can provide collective security in a worst-case scenario where the very existence of nations is at stake.

Conclusions

Sweden has lost precious time, regardless of whether the country decides to launch a study on NATO membership or boosts the defence budget significantly. Joining NATO is a lengthy and formal process involving numerous actions, including investment in infrastructure for the exchange of classified information and harmonising legislation. In the military sense, NATO membership is about capability development and operational planning: to agree with other NATO members on *what kind of forces* Sweden as a future member should train and equip to avoid duplication with other allies, but also to *plan for the possible use* of those forces. Last-minute improvisation cannot be as successful as careful preparation.

Here both Sweden and current NATO members have something to gain. Russia would have nothing to lose from Swedish NATO membership, unless it believes that Sweden, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania constituted a threat to Russia's independence.

The development of military capability in a purely national, non-aligned context is also a lengthy process. No capabilities can be developed within months or a few years. A decision taken today to acquire a new capability, along with all necessary funding, would in most cases not have any effect earlier than seven to ten years from now. In the shorter term, it is possible to strengthen existing capabilities, but this also requires a substantial increase in the defence budget. An immediate effect could only be delivered by determined political leaders producing concrete results.

The issue of Sweden being able to defend itself militarily and/or being a member of NATO is directly related to the freedom and independence of the Baltic States. A strong and stable neighbour on whom you can rely will in itself not guarantee a bright future for these three small nations. But a militarily weak neighbour whose territory may be used by an aggressive opponent would be a concern for any nation that wants to live in peace and stability.

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