

Russian war games in the Baltic Sea region: the Swedish case

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From 17 to 24 October the Swedish Armed Forces were conducting an intelligence operation against 'foreign underwater activities' in Swedish territorial waters. The Swedish media speculated about what kind of actions were conducted in the Stockholm archipelago, and whether the whole matter might be a provocation. It is most likely, that Russia is behind these activities, pursuant to increased Russian military activity against Sweden in 2014 and in previous years. Russia is seeking to 'neutralize' Sweden in the political and military sense. Its aggressive actions are intended to demonstrate Russian overwhelming military capabilities and emphasise the glaring gaps in Sweden's defence system, and thus intimidating the public and influencing decision-makers in Sweden and throughout the Baltic Sea region. This activity is so far part of the psychological war Russia is carrying out in the region. Its purpose is to influence Swedish security and defence policy, the direction of which – due to the country's geographical position – is of essential importance for the security of the entire Baltic Sea region.

Underwater activities in Swedish waters: official information

According to a report by the Swedish Armed Forces (Försvarsmakten, FM) of 19 October, the observations of earlier days, together with repeated incidents in the area in 2014 and individual incidents in previous years, indicate that foreign countries were conducting underwater activities in the Stockholm archipelago, particularly in the region of the Kanholmsfjärden bay. In connection with this, the FM were looking for a foreign entity – a submarine or a mini-submarine – but did not indicate the presumed country of origin. The search was conducted along the skerry coast by Stockholm, from the islands of Möja to Ornö, and the air- and seaspace in the region was partially closed to civil traffic.

Since the Swedish media was speculating that Russia may be behind the underwater activities in the Stockholm archipelago, the Russian Defence Ministry in a press release announced that Russian submarines and surface vessels were performing their duties in the waters of the World's Oceans according to plan and without any emergency situation having arisen. Russian newspapers, citing a source in the Russian Defence Ministry, reported that Sweden's FM were actually looking for the Dutch submarine Bruinvis which took part in the Swedish-Dutch Northern Archer naval exercises between 13-17 October in Sweden. This information was however denied by the Netherlands – after leaving Sweden, the Bruinvis submarine took part in joint Dutch-Estonian exercises off the coast of Estonia (18-19

October).

The wider context: Russian military activity against Sweden

Media speculation about the underwater activities in the Stockholm archipelago – be they real or fake – is based on a lack of precise data. Most likely, these actions were carried out by Russia. They fit into a pattern of increased Russian military activity in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic which has been observed since 2008, and has intensified in 2014 – either in the form of larger and more frequent military exercises conducted on the basis of offensive scenarios; of violations of the airspace of the countries in the region; or of aggressive actions against military aircraft and vessels of these countries in international airspace or in international waters. Representatives of the Swedish FM openly discussed this: the Chief of Defence, Sverker Göranson, publicly stated that the security environment in the region has been deteriorating for a relatively long time, with the negative trends intensifying in 2014. This was also confirmed in a statement from the National Defence Radio Establishment (FRA), the Swedish national authority for signals intelligence, which tracks foreign military activity in the region. After another Swedish-Russian incident, the FRA issued a statement on 2 October reporting an increase in Russian military activity in recent years and in the number of provocative manoeuvres by Russian planes against Swedish aircraft in 2014. In September this year, Russian fighter jets violated Swedish airspace near the island of Öland; the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the Russian ambassador after this case. The most serious incident was the exercise by Russian strategic bombers and fighter jets in March 2013 simulating an attack on two military targets in Sweden, which was conducted around 35 km from Swedish airspace. Statements by Swedish military representatives indicate that such provocative incidents against Sweden from the Russian side could have been taking place much more often in 2014 and in previous years.

The incident in the Stockholm archipelago may be a Russian 'setback'. However, Russian units may also have consciously taken actions that allowed their presence to be detected – regardless of whether they were carrying out a specific mission or not. A Russian provocation aimed at simulating a Russian military presence in Swedish waters near Stockholm cannot be ruled out either. The increased Russian military activity against Sweden, of which the 'underwater activities' are probably a part, is aimed at checking the combat readiness of the Swedish Armed Forces and their actual ability to respond in similar situations, as well as testing the Swedish signal intelligence. It is also a demonstration of Russia's capabilities to conduct military actions against Sweden – in this case in Swedish territorial waters in the region of Stockholm, which is a priority area for the defence of the country. It also serves to demonstrate the Swedish Armed Forces' limited capabilities in territorial defence, which were drastically reduced after the end of the Cold War, especially over the last decade during which the Swedish military switched to participating in crisis management operations abroad.

War games in the Baltic Sea region

Due to its geographical position, Sweden (particularly its southern and central part and the island of Gotland) is important for planning and conducting of military operations both for

NATO and Russia in the Baltic Sea region. Sweden may allow or deny access to its airspace and territorial waters for the conduct of NATO operations, which may decide on the outcome of possible Russian military actions against the Baltic countries, and whether (or not) NATO would be able to meet its commitments on collective defence. Thus, a sort of a game is underway in the region with the aim of influencing Sweden's security and defence policy.

Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, who are aware of the importance of Sweden to their own security, are the countries that have been lobbying loudest for the membership of Sweden (and Finland) in NATO. For its part, Sweden has begun once again (after the Cold War period) to gradually become aware of its geostrategic importance for the security of the entire region. At the same time, for domestic political, historical and social reasons, the Swedish political class does not want to break the public's resistance to changing the country's non-aligned status or run the risk of raising tensions between Stockholm and Moscow. Instead, the previous Swedish government started to develop closer cooperation with NATO. As a result Sweden and NATO signed the Host Nation Support (HNS) agreement at the NATO summit in Newport this September. The HNS agreement – assuming that it will be fully implemented – will create political and military-technical conditions for NATO to use Sweden's land territory, airspace and waters as well as infrastructure should the need arise for NATO to conduct a military operation provided that there is prior consent for that from the Swedish government.

Russia's aim is, on the other hand, the political and military 'neutralisation' of Sweden. This is not only a matter of Sweden's potential NATO membership: Sweden's previous conservative government did not apply to join, and the current Social-Democratic/Green coalition has officially ruled out the possibility. Russia's multi-dimensional actions – political, economic, military, propaganda – both now and in the future are intended to ensure that Sweden refrains from far-reaching co-operation with NATO (for example, by implementing the HNS agreement). Moreover, in the event of crises or conflicts in the Baltic Sea region, Russia wants Sweden to refrain from approving the movement and stationing of NATO forces in Sweden. However, the main goal of Russia is not to bring about the worst-case scenario – which in the case of an armed attack on the Baltic states would most likely also include: sabotage or attack on Swedish air and sea bases that might be used by NATO during the conflict; taking control of the shipping lanes near Sweden; and taking over key points on Swedish territory, such as the island of Gotland. Such a scenario should not be fully excluded; however Russia's main goal is to convince the Baltic states, Sweden and Finland and NATO that it is able to execute such a plan and has the military capabilities to do so. This, in turn, is intended to act as a deterrent to NATO and the countries of the region, and translate into a reluctance to meet the Alliance's obligations. As a result, this would lead to a weakening of faith in NATO's Article 5 and thus undermine the credibility of the Alliance, which is the overarching goal of Russian foreign and security policy. The Russian military activity against Sweden and throughout the region is therefore today mainly an element of psychological warfare. It is being used to demonstrate its superior military potential and to highlight the glaring gaps in Sweden's defence system, and thus intimidating the public and influencing decision-makers in Sweden and the Baltic countries.

The new Swedish government's security and defence policy

It should not be expected that Russia's actions will bring about a change in Sweden with regard to applying for NATO membership. The new ruling coalition of the Social Democrats and the Greens has officially announced that it will not seek to join NATO. Most likely, however, it will strive to implement the HNS agreements with NATO signed by the previous conservative government. It seems that in the short-term perspective Russian activity against Sweden will be counterproductive. It will probably have a positive impact on cross-party agreement on a small increase in short-term military spending and in long-term defence planning, probably beyond what was proposed in the spring of 2014 by the Swedish Defence Commission. However, the possible increases in the Swedish defence budget will still be insufficient for the needs of the Swedish Armed Forces. However, the medium- and long-term impact of Russian provocation on Swedish society and the political elite is not fully predictable – something which should serve as an impetus to Sweden (and other Nordic and Baltic countries as well as NATO) to develop strategies to counter Russia's informational and psychological war games in the region.

Appendix

Aggressive Russian military activity in the Baltic Sea region

In 2014, there was an increase in reports of aggressive actions by the Russian Armed Forces in the Baltic Sea region. These consist of violations of airspace of the Nordic and Baltic countries, approaches towards their airspace, aggressive manoeuvres by Russian planes in international airspace, as well as the increased number of military exercises based on offensive scenarios. In the case of Sweden, the main and publicly known ones were: aggressive manoeuvres by Russian fighters towards a Swedish signals intelligence aircraft (3 October), a violation of Swedish airspace by Russian fighter jets (17 September), and in March 2013, a Russian military exercise simulating an attack on two targets in Sweden. Finland, since May this year, has recorded several violations of its airspace (28 August, 25 August, 23 August, 20 May, 12 May) and aggressive manoeuvres against the Finnish marine research ship Aranda (2 September, 2 August). In 2014, Estonia has seen several violations of its airspace by Russian aircraft (13 August, 25 June, 12 June, 11 June, 21 May), while Latvia recorded more than 150 close incidents, that is, approaches to its airspace which forced multiple responses from NATO fighters. In the case of Lithuania, in addition to the close incidents involving Russian aircraft, the towing of a Lithuanian fishing boat stationed in international waters to a Russian port (18 September) should be also mentioned.

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