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Security and Defense Challenges in the Baltic Region: The Finnish Perspective

by Elina Lepomäki

Introduction

Military activity and military tensions have increased in the Baltic Sea region. The early-warning period for military crises has become shorter and the threshold for using force has lowered. Russia bears the main responsibility for this negative development. The area that was previously under no significant stress is now facing difficulties following the Russian occupation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The strategic importance of the Baltic Sea region has risen and military activity has intensified in the area. A conflict in the Baltic Sea region would inevitably impact Finland's security. Finland has responded by improving military

readiness through procuring new materiel, and by increasing defense spending. Other countries in the region have undertaken similar measures. During the years 2012-2014, a reform of the Finnish Defense Forces was carried out. It adapted the size and the basic structure of the Defense Forces to meet stringent financial demands and the then lower threat level of the security environment. The defense budget was cut by approximately 10 per cent. Since then, the policy has been reversed.

The Government of Finland published its first Defense Report in February 2017. The timing

of this unique report reflects the need to respond to the transformation of the security environment surrounding our country. The cuts made earlier to the budget and the size of the Defense Forces had to be re-evaluated. The defense of Finland calls for the ability to carry out land, maritime, air and cyberspace operations. The government has agreed to increase the Finnish wartime strength by 50 000 troops from 230 000 to 280 000. This will take the strength back to where it was before the reform of 2012-2014. The bigger investments will be carried out in the 2020's when the main systems of the two military branches will be phased out simultaneously. The Navy's vessel project and the Air Force's fighter program, which replaces the capabilities to be decommissioned, are indispensable strategic programs for the defense of Finland. Preparations for replacing the Navy's vessels (Squadron 2020 project) and the capability of the Air Force's multi-role fighters (HX program) have been launched.

The Russia factor in the Baltic region

Russia's aggressive behavior is not limited to Ukraine. Russia has also targeted Sweden and Finland with different levels of hostile behavior including public threats from Russian leaders, conventional coercion from the Russian military, cyber attacks and hybrid interventions organized by the Russian government. One of the most famous attacks was carried out on Finnish foreign ministry's computer network. The cyber breach had

been active for four years and it had been initiated by a state sponsored group of Russian hackers.

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According to a study by the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Russia has made Sweden the target of "a wide array of active measures." Last year, the Swedish Security Service (SÄPO) released a report that detailed the hostile Russian activities being conducted against Sweden. The threat is so significant that Prime Minister Stefan Löfven admitted he could not rule out Russia trying to influence the next Swedish national election in 2018. Like other countries along the Baltic Sea or in Eastern Europe, Finland has seen a notable increase in fake news stories and propaganda targeted against it that can be linked back to Russia. These attacks have sought to undermine the government and often coincided with military shows of force along

the Russian border. Finland has been a target of Russia's hybrid campaigns for years. There have been approximately twenty cases of misinformation operations verified against Finland.

Defense cooperation between Sweden and Finland

Finland and Sweden remain outside of all military alliances but both have an enhanced partnership with NATO. Material acquisitions are NATO compatible and military spending is up in both countries. The governments seem to be paving the way for future membership. A total of 22 EU member states belong to NATO. Member states of the EU and NATO intend to intensify and deepen their defense cooperation. As an EU member Finland has been an active advocate in taking the defense cooperation of the EU to the next level.

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Developing a country's defense cooperation in all different forms is essential to any country but especially to a small one like Finland. In

case of emergency Finland would not make it on its own and seeking cooperation as well as security guarantees should be of highest priority. Strengthening military cooperation in the EU and with neighboring countries is a step into the right direction.

Defense cooperation does not only strengthen defense in normal and emergency conditions but it also enhances deterrence and improves the chances of receiving political and military assistance when needed. However, defense cooperation does not provide any security guarantees to Finland as it is not a member of a military alliance. Finland's partnership with NATO does not mean that it would fall within the scope of collective defense or have any right to participate in the decision making of NATO.

The cooperation with Sweden has grown significant over the past years. The special relationship between the two countries comes naturally since they are much alike. Both are Nordic countries outside NATO but strategically depend on the alliance. We also share common values and are culturally very similar. Although Finland and Sweden are neighboring countries the history and geographical location of Finland makes its situation always a little different.

Sweden has returned the focus of its armed forces' development from crisis management to defending its territory. At the end of the cold war Sweden's armed forces consisted of around 850 000 personnel. Today the number is only 50 000 but new investments and recruitments are being made. Finland's focus

has all along been mostly on defending its territory but as set out above new investments have been made to strengthen that focus. In fact, after all the new investments Finland would reach the target military spending of 2% of GDP set for NATO member states.

Attitudes on NATO membership

In Finland public support for joining NATO rose to around 30 % in 2014 during the invasion of Crimea and the unrest in Ukraine but the support has since gone down to 22 % (2017). In Sweden the trend has been contrary to that in Finland. The support has risen to 44 % (2017) from year 2014 when 37 % of the population were in favor of joining NATO. In Finland, the population traditionally follows its foreign policy leaders in making decisions about joining international organizations, especially those concerning defense policy such as NATO. In a recent poll, a significant majority of Finns would approve of NATO membership if it was recommended by the country's foreign policy leaders. Historically, Finland and Sweden have been watching each other to take the first step into applying for membership. NATO membership would be a big step for both countries and the ideal situation would be for Finland and Sweden to apply simultaneously. The problem is that it never seems to be the right time. The current opposition parties in Sweden are in favor of NATO membership and since Sweden will hold elections in 2018, it will be a decisive moment if the government changes. It remains to be seen whether the country moves ahead with a membership application.

There seem to be two main reasons for hesitating with applying for NATO membership. First comes the historical position of neutrality, which these days is of lesser importance since both countries have long been members in the European Union. Through the Lisbon Treaty also Finland and Sweden have committed themselves to assist other EU members through the Article 222 which calls for common action against terrorist attacks and man-made disasters. After the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015, France invoked the overlooked article 42.7 which states that EU members have "an obligation of aid and assistance" to other members that are victims of "armed aggression."

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Since the end of the Cold War, Sweden and Finland have experienced a historic change in their security policies. They have made political and defense commitments to other countries,

thus they are no longer neutral. In 2009, Sweden announced a new unilateral Declaration of Solidarity. "Sweden would not stand passive if a neighbor is threatened or attacked. Whilst no military alliance, the EU also has a solidarity clause between its members and the cooperation is to be intensified over the coming years what comes to security and defense.

If Finland and Sweden joined NATO, the Baltic Sea coast line not belonging to Russia would be NATO territory. The fear of a Russian response to NATO membership is more visible in Finland. A shared difficult history and 1300 kilometers of shared border with Russia makes Finns more hesitant. Sweden has been much more forth-coming over the years and has been more active in leading military initiatives with the US and NATO.

The second reason for hesitating with NATO membership is Russia. Most recently, Russia's heavy-handed actions to impede Montenegro from joining the Alliance, show that Putin is willing to make the "NATO option" much more difficult for prospective members such as Sweden and Finland. If Finland and Sweden joined NATO, the Baltic Sea coast line not

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A recent show of this active role was the Swedish led Aurora 2017 military exercise in the Baltic Sea region. Others taking part in the exercise were NATO, some NATO countries - and also Finland. The Aurora exercise was the biggest of its kind in 23 years and its aim was to increase capabilities to meet an attack against Sweden. The Swedish defense minister has admitted that the timing of this exercise was no coincidence. Russia's actions in Crimea and Ukraine have shown that the security situation in the area could change fast. This has made Sweden nervous for a good reason.

The Aurora exercise was valued also in Finland. Exercises like this are an actual way of deepening and testing cooperation and inter-functionality in practice. The exercise had also symbolic value as it exhibited the power of alliances given the situation that the Baltic Sea region would face a conflict. It both raised the deterrent threshold against different types of incidents and provided important data for evaluation on the actual military capabilities.

Finnish position on Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline

The Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline brings a new kind of political tension to the Baltic Sea region. Unlike its neighboring countries, Finland has not voiced any concerns of the pipeline as a possible threat for security. Finland sees the project simply as an economical and environment issue just like Germany, the biggest defender of Nord Stream 2 in Europe. Unlike in Denmark and Sweden there is hardly any political discussion about the project in Finland.

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The Finnish point of view shuts out completely the fact that the pipeline is also a political and highly strategic project for Russia. In today's context, Nord Stream 2 have been conducted in the past, the pipeline can simply not be viewed the same way as its predecessors. The unstable

situation in the Baltic Sea region and the war in Ukraine with all its consequences have changed the situation completely. The Nord Stream 2 pipeline has been seen as a strategy to bypass Soyuz and Brotherhood pipelines, which pass through Ukraine.

Many Nordic and Baltic countries have strongly opposed the pipeline. Some Nordic countries have security concerns concerning both the construction and operational phase of the pipeline. For instance there have been doubts to let the Nord Stream company operate Swedish ports during the construction phase. In general, countries are concerned with the location of the pipelines near their shores in the Baltic Sea, where Russia has increased its military presence. Denmark for example has recently passed a law that could allow it to ban the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from going through its waters on grounds of security policy.

The European Commission has raised concerns that the pipeline would increase Europe's reliance on Russian gas and cut transit revenues for Ukraine. The Commission sought support from all member states to negotiate on their behalf with Russia on these concerns, but the talks were blocked by the lack of unity among member states. Now the EU is working on a fast pace on new legislation that aims to apply the EU's internal energy market rules to offshore gas pipelines to the EU.

Conclusion

The growing tension in the Baltic Sea region does not seem to be shifting any time soon. The cooperation between the Nordic and the Baltic countries is important for the safety of the whole area. It comes naturally through geography, shared history, common values and

shared security threats. Our advantage is this Nordics-Baltics bond, NATO's strong commitment for the region, our bilateral relations with outside countries and the EU stepping up on its common security and defense agenda. In case the security situation deteriorates, we have each other and what we bargained for in the times of peace.

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