

Scandinavian countries respond to Russia-Georgia conflict

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The war between Russia and Georgia has greatly increased tensions, not only in the immediate region but throughout the world. Scandinavia is no exception.

Recent years have seen Sweden align itself ever more openly with US imperialism, and its response to the Russia-Georgia conflict has been to issue provocative statements condemning Russia's actions and solidarising itself with Washington. The government's main spokesman has been Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, a former prime minister and diplomat who was heavily involved in negotiations over the Balkans in the late 1990s. A fervent advocate of Kosovan independence following the NATO-led bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999, his comments have contained an unmistakable tone of confrontation with Russia.

In the immediate aftermath of the war on August 12, Bildt declared in an interview from Tblisi that "Russia will sooner or later have to pay a high price for this."

On August 31, prior to the European Union summit to discuss the Russia-Georgia war, Bildt issued a call for a summit between the EU and eastern European countries such as Ukraine and Georgia to discuss closer cooperation. "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," he said.

Indeed it would. The proposals advanced by Bildt would inevitably lead to increased friction between Russia and the EU, since no state, Russia included, would be willing to permit its control to be undermined in one of its former spheres of influence.

In spite of his involvement in the drive to recognise Kosovan independence, Bildt has nevertheless claimed that Russia's recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia is unacceptable. In terms that could equally have been applied to the role of the Western powers in Yugoslavia, Bildt rejected Russian policy in the Caucasus as resembling nineteenth century imperialism. On Russia's recognition of the two Georgian provinces, he noted that it was "a deliberate violation of international law and basic principles for stability in Europe" that "dramatically escalated the crisis between Russia and the rest of the world."

Such comments make clear that Sweden is prepared to play an increasingly provocative role in the region in alliance with US imperialism. Recent years have seen Sweden collaborate in a number of rendition cases, where the government permitted

individuals to be removed from the country by the US military for interrogation in a third country. Earlier this year, the so-called FRA law was passed through parliament, permitting surveillance of cross-border communications using the pretext of foreign threats to Sweden's national security. The legislation is one of the most wide-ranging surveillance programmes in Europe and resembles the Bush administration's wire-tapping programme in place since 2001.

During the intense political debate that followed the passage of the law, it was revealed by a source from the Swedish intelligence service that the measure, notwithstanding claims to the contrary, was aimed primarily at Russia. Leading politicians and intelligence staff have made it plain that they would be quite willing to exchange any information obtained with other countries. Given Sweden's recent record, it is clear that the US would be the chief beneficiary from such exchanges.

Washington is determined to prevent Russia from expanding its influence in the Baltic region and has expressed concerns relating to security in the area. The US ambassador in Stockholm, Michael Wood, has been critical of a planned gas pipeline between Russia and Germany that will pass under the Baltic Sea. In an article published in *Svenska Dagbladet*, Wood criticised the project as being a destabilising factor. Claiming that Russia could use the pipeline to exercise political influence over smaller countries in the Baltic area, he urged Sweden to oppose the plans.

In spite of such apprehension from Washington over the project, the Swedish government has given its support to the pipeline since it is considered a European project. While Prime Minister Reinfeldt and his government are prepared to accede to US imperialism's drive to achieve its dominance in the region, it has at the same time fundamental economic interests that necessitate cooperation with European states, in this case Germany. In a joint press conference with Prime Minister Reinfeldt at the end of August, German Chancellor Merkel, referring to the pipeline, noted, "That we have economic connections is no secret. We cannot however disregard our values. There is a six-point plan agreed with Russia that we both have to follow."

At the same conference, Reinfeldt voiced his intention to work closely with Germany to develop the so-called "Baltic sea initiative," a plan designed to develop economic and business competitiveness in the region. He commented, "It is now a fact that the Baltic Sea is surrounded by EU member states and is therefore an issue that affects the whole of the EU."

A number of comments made by military figures and security commentators following the August conflict make clear that there is a growing desire for Sweden to play an aggressive role in the region. Bo Pellnäs, a retired army general, authored a piece published in *Svenska Dagbladet* on August 13 that was heavily critical of successive governments' policies of reducing Sweden's defence budget. "We have consciously deprived ourselves of the majority of the military resources, which, in the long term, could contribute to peace and stability in the region.

"This has happened as a result of successive military advisory committees focusing on short-term threats and avoiding any discussions concerning long-term security measures."

Pellnäs went on to note that the recent conflict had significantly increased the risk of military deployments in the Baltic region. "Should the security situation worsen and the Russian military build-up continue at the current rate, a discussion about the precautionary deployment of NATO or EU troops in the Baltic states will become unavoidable."

He expressed severe concerns about Sweden's decision to demilitarise the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea, stating, "The principal of being first in place in a conflict zone is directly applicable to our own security situation with regard to Gotland.

"It was a fundamentally stupid move on Sweden's behalf to withdraw its military units from Gotland. We need to maintain a long-term perspective, month after month, year after year, to display our determination to defend Gotland."

In particular, the designation of Gotland as a "conflict zone" contains an ominous undertone.

Responding to such criticism, Defence Minister Sten Tolxfors announced that the government would postpone the announcement of its plans for financing the military until early next year. The plan was widely expected to slash the military budget in the coming period, but concerns have been raised about the effectiveness of the Swedish armed forces. Noting the speed with which troops were deployed in Georgia by Russia, Tolxfors complained that at present it would take a year to mobilise 10,000 troops of the Swedish armed forces total of 30,000. He stated, "Operability has to increase. I want units that are useful both abroad and at home."

Further confirmation of increased military activity can be seen in a re-emergence of the NATO question following the Russia-Georgia conflict. On September 24 and 25, joint exercises were held between Swedish forces and NATO troops, in order to better facilitate exchanges of information and to develop a joint response to so-called emergency situations.

Liberal Party defence spokesman Allan Widman has presented the Swedish decision to join NATO as a natural progression from the country's current activities. He stated, "We participate in NATO-led international missions. We have adopted NATO standards in terms of equipment and training in defence. We both pay the membership fee and participate in meetings, but have no voting right within NATO."

Finland, which shares a border of more than 1,000 kilometres with Russia, is also discussing its relationship to NATO.

Only last April, opinion on NATO membership was that no decision would be coming any time soon. One observer, Risto

Penttilä of the Finnish business and policy forum, even remarked that "The debate hasn't really moved anywhere in the past 10 years."

The Russia-Georgia conflict has altered this position dramatically. Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb, a supporter of NATO membership, made it clear that the issue had to be put higher on the political agenda. "The talk about how nothing has changed is inconceivable to me," he said. "It makes sense now to take into consideration a NATO bid. The time for a decision in this regard has not come yet, but we need to be flexible and quickly adapt our security policy. This must not take place in slow motion."

While Prime Minister Vanhanen has attempted to evade the NATO issue, due to divisions within his own Centre party, the recent conflict may prove to make a decision on the matter unavoidable.

Finland has taken a much more conciliatory position towards Russia than its neighbour Sweden, issuing statements that while condemning Russia's actions, cautioned against adopting confrontational measures such as sanctions. Vanhanen, prior to the recent EU summit on the situation in the Caucasus, stated, "There would be nothing positive to be gained from sanctions which cause the situation to escalate."

Nevertheless, he does support the EU having a greater involvement in the Caucasus region, something that will inevitably raise EU-Russian tensions. Vanhanen commented, "The EU must discuss giving significant input into stabilising the situation in the whole Caucasus region." He also called for closer ties with Georgia and particularly Ukraine on the way to encouraging EU membership.

Foreign Minister Stubb has also warned against sanctions, on the grounds that it would not make economic sense. Finland has substantial economic ties with Russia, particularly in the forestry sector. Many Finnish corporations see Russia as a vast market for their products, and, given its close proximity, they have enjoyed considerable activity within Russia. This is the principal reason why, within Finnish ruling circles, sanctions against Russia are opposed and a less confrontational approach has been sought.



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