

Sweden mounts military operation to find alleged Russian submarine

Jordan Shilton
22 October 2014

Since last Friday, Sweden's military has been carrying out a major operation involving troops, navy ships and aircraft. The operation is said to be in response to an as yet unspecified "underwater threat" in the Baltic Sea near the capital, Stockholm.

By Saturday, over 200 troops, stealth ships, minesweepers and helicopters were combing an area of sea around 50 kilometres from the city, and media reports were claiming that the search was in pursuit of a Russian mini-submarine. Army commander Jonas Wikström, speaking at a Saturday press conference, stated, "We still judge that the information we received yesterday was very trustworthy."

The Swedish military warned yesterday that should it find the sub, it would not hesitate to use force in order to compel it to surface. On Monday, the military closed off an area of water and airspace around the search zone, warning that civilian aircraft should not fly below 900 metres for security reasons. But by yesterday, after five days of extensive searching, the only evidence that had been uncovered was a grainy picture and three alleged sightings of suspicious activity.

Whether the presence of a Russian submarine has been seized upon or has been invented remains unclear. But it is unquestionable that the alleged incident is being exploited to justify a vast expansion of militarism in the area and not only on the part of Sweden.

Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics wrote on Twitter on Monday, "Closely following events in the Swedish territorial waters, may become a game-changer of the security in the whole Baltic Sea region."

The Estonian government announced it was stepping up surveillance of its territorial waters.

There is good reason to suspect that the "credible source" cited by the Swedish military is in some way connected with the US military or intelligence services.

As well as the close collaboration between Stockholm and Washington in the area of surveillance, America's renewed focus on the Baltic was demonstrated last month when President Barack Obama visited Estonia and promised Washington's backing to the Baltic States in any confrontation with Russia.

Two days after his visit to Tallinn, Obama and other NATO leaders adopted a plan at the alliance summit in Wales to establish a rapid reaction force capable of intervening in Eastern Europe, and to store weapons with NATO's eastern allies in readiness for military operations. Extra forces have already been sent to the Baltic States.

Even before confirmation of an incursion by a Russian submarine, hopes have been expressed that the latest incident will serve as a means for NATO expansion into the region, by convincing Sweden of the need to become a member and a participant in provocations against Russia. As Britain's *Guardian* editorialised, "In the long run, the logic of Sweden's geostrategic position makes NATO membership almost inevitable. This incursion, coming so soon after the invasion of the Crimea and Ukraine, should help to make the point clear."

Stockholm long ago abandoned the pretence of a neutral status, intensifying its military activity in recent years. As well as sending troops to Afghanistan and fighter jets to support the bombardment of Libya in 2011, it has broadened its activities in the Baltic.

Indicating that he viewed the current operation as a test of Sweden's growing military presence, Supreme Army Commander Sverker Göranson told the media yesterday, "The most important value of the operation, regardless of whether we find something, is to send a very clear signal that Sweden's armed forces are acting and are ready to act when we think this kind of activity

is violating our borders.”

Sweden has been quick to publicise alleged military incidents involving Russia over recent months. In March 2013, Swedish defence sources claimed that the Russian air force had launched a mock attack on Sweden in the Baltic, and were only forced to withdraw when Danish fighter jets were scrambled from a nearby base. The incident was used to intensify a campaign, begun the previous year by top military commanders, to push for a vast expansion of the defence budget.

Earlier this year, the former government of the right-wing Alliance parties announced a 10 percent rise in defence expenditure, a move that was backed fully by the now-governing Social Democrats. The spending increase came as the US and its European allies stepped up their anti-Russian declarations over the Ukraine crisis. During the recently concluded election campaign, not a single party raised the growth in military spending as a major issue.

Last month, the outgoing government seized on an alleged incursion into Swedish airspace by two Russian SU24 fighter jets to make an official protest to the Russian embassy in Stockholm. Military sources reported that the planes remained in Swedish airspace for approximately 30 seconds.

The government has proclaimed its full confidence in the armed forces. Newly installed Defence Minister, Peter Hultqvist of the Social Democrats, left no doubt that the new government would be no less aggressive than its right-wing predecessor in joining in the US-led drive against Russia. “What’s been happening in the Baltic Sea, including airspace incursions, shows that we have a new, changed situation,” he said. “Russia has made enormous military investments...with their increased strength they are training more, and that influences the security environment.”

The reality is that the Swedish ruling elite has been dramatically expanding its efforts to play its part in the drive by the major imperialist powers, particularly the US and Germany, to push back Russian influence in Eastern Europe. The rise in Stockholm’s defence budget has been accompanied by closer cooperation with NATO in military and defence operations.

Late last year, Swedish military forces took part in the NATO Steadfast Jazz mission in the Baltic region, which involved several thousand troops, ships and aircraft in manoeuvres against a fictitious enemy. The

Swedish participation, along with the non-NATO member Finland, was hailed by then-NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen as a significant step in further integrating military and defence policy.

The latest operation, coming just two weeks after the assumption of power by the new Social Democrat-Green Party government, shows that the new administration plans to continue this course.

In an interview published in the *Social Europe Journal* a week after the election, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven laid out his plans for closer collaboration with NATO. “A good transatlantic cooperation is of utmost importance to increase security as well as creating more jobs. We support a strong cooperation with NATO. It strengthens our defence capability and enhances our ability to give and receive military support,” Löfven commented.

This strategy also has the support of the Left Party, which in early October agreed to support the government in parliament in votes on the budget and other important matters. This will still leave Löfven without a majority, meaning he will need to seek backing from one of the right-wing parties.

In his interview, Löfven went on to fully accept the previous government’s firm pro-US stance in the Ukraine crisis. “We have stressed that the increasingly aggressive Russian behaviour towards its neighbours is unacceptable and that the violation of territory integrity [sic] of Ukraine must stop. We support the united position and restrictive actions that the European Union has taken. The EU must stay united and offer Ukraine a long-term membership perspective,” he declared.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact