

Nordic countries sign defence cooperation agreement aimed at Russia

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The five Nordic countries, NATO members Norway, Denmark and Iceland, and non-NATO members Sweden and Finland, announced a new defence cooperation agreement last week aimed explicitly at confronting Russia.

The deal will see expanded military exercises in the region, intensified collaboration on the production of military equipment, and a more extensive sharing of intelligence between the countries.

Russia responded angrily to the Nordic defence deal. The foreign ministry's website declared Sunday "Nordic defence co-operation ... has begun to be directed against Russia in a way that could undermine the positive engagement accumulated over the past decade."

The agreement was announced in a joint statement published in the Norwegian daily *Aftenposten* by the defence ministers of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark, and Iceland's foreign minister. The statement opened by repeating the propaganda of the US and its imperialist allies that Russian aggression triggered the Ukraine crisis, declaring, "The Russian aggression against the Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea are violations of international law and other international agreements. Russia's conduct represents the gravest challenge to European security. As a consequence, the security situation in the Nordic countries' adjacent areas has become significantly worsened during the past year."

The claim that the move is a response to Russian aggression is thoroughly dishonest. The reality is that, with the full backing of US imperialism, the Nordic countries are committing themselves to transforming the region into yet another area of potential conflict with Moscow.

The text of the agreement makes this clear when it

asserts that a key aim of the stepped up military cooperation would be defending the sovereignty of the three Baltic republics. This echoes the declaration of US President Barack Obama, who stated during a trip to Estonia last year that NATO had an eternal commitment to defend the Baltic republics.

The ministers wrote, "Russia is undertaking huge economic investments in its military capability. The nation's leaders has [sic] shown that they are prepared to make practical and effective use of military means in order to reach their political goals, even when this involves violating principles of international law... The Russian military are acting in a challenging way along our borders, and there have been several infringements on the borders of the Baltic nations."

It did not help the ministers' case that Sweden has now been forced to admit that the alleged incursion into Swedish waters by a Russian submarine last autumn was in fact nothing more than a workboat.

Russian press reports Saturday cited Swedish Rear Admiral Anders Grenstad telling the Swedish TT news agency that there was no submarine and that the Swedish Navy changed the wording from "*probable submarine*" to "*non-submarine*" when referring to the massive search mission lasting one week and involving over 200 troops, helicopters, stealth ships and minesweepers to search the Baltic Sea.

The latest defence agreement is just one part of broader moves to integrate Sweden and Finland more closely into the US-led NATO military alliance. Norway, Denmark and Iceland were all founding members of the alliance when it was created in 1949. Helsinki and Stockholm have officially maintained their distance and remain non-members.

Finland shares a 1,000-kilometre border with Russia and has extensive trading relations. Moreover, there is

wide public hostility to joining NATO in both countries. With an eye to parliamentary elections taking place next weekend, Carl Haglund, Finland's foreign minister, told public broadcaster YLE, "In my opinion this Nordic security cooperation is one thing and NATO membership is a totally different matter."

In practice, however, the Swedish and Finnish militaries are increasingly integrated into NATO operations. Both countries are members of the NATO Partnership for Peace initiative, which also includes Ukraine. They regularly participate in NATO operations, including a major exercise in the Baltic in late 2013, "Steadfast Jazz," that involved thousands of military personnel, ships and aircraft mobilising across Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

All of the military exercises to be conducted under the deal are to conform to NATO standards, which many see as the preparation for full membership. The first, Arctic Challenge, is to take place at the end of May in Norway and Sweden. A large contingent of US F16 fighters based in the UK is expected to be involved.

The defence agreement coincided with a major NATO naval operation off the coast of Scotland, scheduled to run over two weeks. Britain's Royal Navy led a fleet of 55 warships, 70 aircraft and 13,000 sailors in operations including submarine tracking and amphibious landings. Warships from the US and Canada are involved. While these particular exercises occur twice annually, this will be the largest operation to date.

The latest move has been prepared in discussions involving the leading European imperialist powers. A meeting last November in Oslo, Norway, saw representatives from twelve countries come together, among them British Defence Secretary Michael Fallon and Germany's ambassador to Norway Dr. Axel Berg. Also attended by the defence ministers of the three Baltic republics, the talks agreed to expand the access of Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish fighter planes to all Nordic airspace for weekly joint training missions.

Referring to the NATO summit last September, where it was agreed to establish a rapid response force together with a massive military build-up in Eastern Europe, Norwegian Defence Minister Ine Eriksen Sørreide stated that "resolve and firmness" would be required in the region.

States "emerging from conflict" would be helped to participate in international military exercises in conjunction with NATO, as well as in reforming their defence sectors with NATO or EU assistance.

As the largest Nordic nation, Sweden is playing a critical role in the new military plans. Having long ago abandoned its formal neutrality with its participation in the Afghanistan conflict, followed by its sending of Saab Gripen fighter jets to take part in the Libyan war in 2011, it has emerged ever more openly as a military ally of US imperialism.

Sweden is currently leading the Nordic defence cooperation operations, and is also the leader of the Nordic Battle Group, a European Union unit.

Since coming to power last September, the Social Democrat-Green Party coalition in Stockholm has stepped up the aggressive anti-Russian policy of its right-wing predecessor.

As well as initiating last autumn's "submarine search", the government also continues to seize on alleged incursions of Russian aircraft into Swedish airspace to justify a military build-up.

The previous government announced massive spending increases for the defence budget over the coming decade, and the Social Democrats and Greens have vowed to continue this policy.

The day before the Nordic defence agreement was unveiled, Stockholm confirmed plans to send up to 120 military personnel to northern Iraq as part of the US-led war against ISIS. Although the troops are officially in the country to provide training to Kurdish forces and offer "advise and assist" support, such claims have been used by other countries whose military forces have ended up in frontline combat activity. The Swedish contingent will be under the command of the US military.



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