Finland’s navy drops depth charges in search for “underwater object” in Baltic Sea

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In scenes remarkably similar to Sweden’s military operation last October to detect a suspected submarine close to Stockholm, Finland’s navy launched extensive surveillance operations on Monday to investigate what was described as a possible underwater object in Finnish waters.

At 03:00 on Tuesday, low-impact depth charges were fired by a Finnish naval vessel in waters near Helsinki. The navy claimed this was intended as a warning to any vessel that might have illegally entered Finnish waters, and could not have resulted in serious damage.

Speaking to state broadcaster YLE on Tuesday, the navy’s operations manager, Commodore Olavi Jantunen, stated, “A possible underwater object, that is all we can say at the moment. When the first sighting was made a search was ordered and a new reading was observed in the search area last night.”

Defence Minister Carl Haglund of the conservative National Coalition Party (NCP) took a much more emphatic position, telling broadcaster STT, “We strongly suspect that there has been underwater activity that does not belong there. Of course, it is always serious if our territorial waters have been violated.”

The incident was seized upon to ratchet up tensions with Russia. Despite a lack of evidence, it was reported in the international media as a suspected foreign submarine, with no doubt being left as to where it came from.

However, by late Tuesday evening, the head of Finland’s armed forces acknowledged that no proof for such claims had been found. Admiral Juha Vauhkonen stated at a press conference, “An analysis of the data about the case will be available only within days, perhaps even weeks.”

The Finnish navy’s actions are part of growing tensions in the Nordic and Baltic regions driven by the increasingly aggressive stance of the United States and its regional allies towards Moscow.

Just two weeks before Tuesday’s events, Finnish Defence Minister Haglund was one of five government ministers from the Nordic states who signed a joint declaration to intensify defence cooperation between Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland. The move was unambiguously directed at Russia, identifying Moscow as the greatest security threat in Europe today.

The agreement undoubtedly had the support of Washington, which continues to increase tensions with Moscow in Eastern Europe and the Baltics. Last week, US troops arrived in Ukraine to begin training the Ukrainian army and National Guard to fight pro-Russian separatists in the country’s east. At the same time, a major NATO military build-up throughout Eastern Europe is continuing, involving military manoeuvres close to the Russian border and the deployment of large numbers of personnel and military equipment.

The intimate involvement of the US in the Nordic region’s stepped-up defence cooperation was underscored in an article published last October by the Center for Transatlantic Relations, authored by Erik Brattberg and Michael Mohr. The Washington-based think tank has close ties to the US government and policy-makers.

In their article, Brattberg and Mohr noted that “the Nordic region, with its open and liberal defense industry, can play a crucial role.” The article continued: “For the United States, the Nordic case is worthy of special attention. US-Nordic defense cooperation has the potential to strengthen Nordic-Baltic defense capabilities, regional energy security and maritime security in the Arctic as well as US-European security in general. Forging a stronger US -Nordic defense industrial partnership could also be seen as a vehicle for promoting transatlantic defense integration.”

Finland’s alleged sighting of an underwater object comes just months after a series of similar incidents in neighbouring Sweden which saw Stockholm launch a

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week-long military hunt in the Baltic.

The evidence used to justify this unprecedented action appears increasingly dubious. Earlier this month, the Swedish military acknowledged that the alleged second sighting of a submarine, reported a week after October's military operation, was provoked by a civilian work boat. The military refused to comment on the cause of the original incident two weeks earlier that prompted the military mobilisation, stating that a report was due later in the year.

Such revelations not only undermine the official narrative put out by the government in Stockholm, but also demonstrate just how provocative the response was. Far from reacting defensively to a perceived threat, the aim was to send an unmistakable message to Russia that Stockholm was fully allied with the Obama administration's drive to encircle Moscow in Eastern Europe and the Baltic region.

The Finnish move serves a similar purpose. Incoming Prime Minister Juha Sipilä, whose Centre Party won parliamentary elections earlier this month, has made clear his intention to deepen Helsinki's collaboration with NATO, even if he rejects full membership for the time being. All of the potential coalition partners, including the NCP, Social Democrats and Finns Party, support a national debate on NATO membership and the maintenance of the Partnership for Peace programme, under which Helsinki has participated in several large-scale NATO exercises.

Although the final composition of the new government remains unclear, Haglund has emphasised that regardless of who is in office, the coming years will see a significant expansion of Finnish military spending. In an YLE interview last October, he remarked, "We have carried out Defence Forces reform and it brought the savings we were looking for, but it has led to a situation in which the lemon has been squeezed dry. In the long term we will need a new supply of material to replace aging equipment. If we fail to do this, Finnish defence will no longer be credible."

In the same discussion, he insisted that to pay for an expanded military, the government would have to slash spending to critical public services relied upon by the working population.

"As it is, the public sector will confront major adjustments in the future, so this will be a hard nut to crack. The money must partially be raised via savings, because we can't count on a rapid influx of tax revenue. We also cannot expect to take more loans. Government negotiation over this will be tough, and I think it is a good thing to give people a heads-up already at this stage," Haglund said.

Citing increased Russian military activity and several incidents of Russian aircraft entering Finnish airspace last year, the Finnish armed forces are making preparations for a potential conflict or crisis situation.

A day prior to the firing of depth charges, the Finnish armed forces released an announcement on YLE television reminding 900,000 former military reservists that conscription was the cornerstone of Finland's defence policy. "We want to have a word with you," the announcement declared.

The broadcast was aimed at publicising letters being sent to reservists advising them of where they would be posted in a crisis situation, and requesting that they inform the army of their current whereabouts.

This followed a statement by the Finnish army last august noting plans for a major military exercise on the Russian border in June. Around 8,000 reservists are to take part in training in the eastern region of Pielinen Karelia.

Finland also played host last year to the Northern Coast (Noco) de-mining exercise off its western coast. The exercise is open to NATO and European Union member states and saw a large number of NATO warships based in the city of Turku.

According to the Swedish armed forces, which hosted the 2013 exercise, "Noco is a professional exercise designed to exercise smaller units and match the needs for the Baltic countries. The goal of the exercise is to train the units, working together in a multinational task force, in confined and shallow waters, applying a crisis scenario."

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