

NATO begins largest anti-submarine exercises ever in the North Sea

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NATO launched its annual anti-submarine and anti-surface North Sea naval war games Monday. Approximately 5,000 sailors and other servicemen from 11 countries will take place in the exercise.

In a significant development, the North Sea exercise will incorporate forces from non-NATO ally Sweden for the first time, alongside naval vessels from 10 NATO countries. Norway, one of the founding members of the NATO alliance, is one of three Nordic country, including Denmark and Iceland, which are a full members. Finland and Sweden, while officially remaining neutral, have developed strong ties to the military alliance, especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The games, dubbed Dynamic Mongoose, are scheduled to take place over the next two weeks and will involve four submarines from Germany, Norway, Sweden and the United States that will practice avoiding underwater detection and simulating assaults on enemy ships.

Thirteen combat vessels from Canada, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States will simulate hunting for the submarines in the waters off the Norwegian coast. The NATO research vessel Alliance, based in La Spezia, Italy, will also participate in the exercise for the first time in order to test new underwater drones and sensor buoys. France and Germany will contribute maritime patrol aircraft.

Simultaneously with the North Sea operations, Estonia and Latvia, which both border Russia, are holding their own military war games. Latvia will hold military exercises codenamed Zaibo Kiritis, involving 3,000 soldiers. More significantly, the Estonian war games, Siil-2015, will involve 13,000 military personnel, including members of the paramilitary

Estonian Defense League; British, German, and Belgian jet fighters; and four Abrams battle tanks manned by American troops.

Last year US President Barack Obama traveled to Tallinn, Estonia, where he gave a speech in which he committed the United States to war with Russia over the Baltic States under the collective defense clause of NATO's charter. "An attack on one is an attack on all. So if, in such a moment, you ever ask again, 'who will come to help,' you'll know the answer—the NATO Alliance, including the Armed Forces of the United States of America, 'right here, present, now!' We'll be here for Estonia. We will be here for Latvia. We will be here for Lithuania...," the president pledged.

Rear Admiral Brad Williamson, the US commander overseeing the North Sea war games, told reporters that the operation was not a direct response to recent alleged activity of Russian ships in the Baltic Sea. He made clear, however, that Russia was the target. "This is not a response to that, but provides relevance to the exercise," Williamson said. "Russia has a right to be at sea, just as we do, but the incidents we have seen are not in line with international regulations...and that's been the cause of concern," Williamson concluded.

The reported detection of unidentified objects in the Baltic and Nordic region in recent months has been used to whip up anti-Russian sentiment and justify the remilitarization of Eastern Europe.

The Latvian military reported on Monday that it had spotted two Russian warships and a submarine near its maritime border. The ships were detected within Latvia's exclusive economic zone approximately five miles from the border. Russian warships routinely pass through the area, as Moscow maintains the Baltic Fleet at its naval base in Baltiysk in the enclave of Kaliningrad.

Last week, the Finnish navy dropped depth charges and launched a surveillance operation against a possible underwater object detected in the country's territorial waters. While the Finnish armed forces have yet to confirm that the object was a foreign submarine, the media has presented it as a foregone conclusion that it was a Russian submarine.

Prior to this incident, Finnland's incoming Centre Party Prime Minister Juha Sipilä indicated that his government, which shares an 833-mile border with Russia, will intensify its cooperation with the NATO alliance in the coming years.

The recent incidents follow similar activity last October, when the Swedish armed forces launched a weeklong hunt in the Baltic in response to the sighting of an unidentified object in Stockholm's territorial waters which the media claimed was a Russian vessel. While what was initially spotted has yet to be confirmed, the Swedish military admitted last week that a second reported sighting of a Russian submarine was actually a civilian work boat.

While Sweden is not yet an official member of the NATO, its involvement in the alliance's operations have grown over the last two decades. Sweden has participated in the so-called Partnership for Peace since 1994, and has deployed troops to Afghanistan since 2006 to assist in the American military occupation of that country. The Swedish Air Force also participated in the brutal US-NATO assault on Libya in 2011, flying reconnaissance and refueling missions and assisting in the enforcement of a no-fly zone over the country.

In the aftermath of the US- and German-backed right-wing coup in Ukraine and Russia's subsequent annexation of Crimea last year, leading government officials, including former Liberal People's Party Deputy Prime Minister Jan Björklund, have called for the country to follow in the footsteps of the nearby Baltic states and become a full member of the alliance.

The US government has encouraged every Eastern European country to significantly boost its military spending, justified by a supposed military threat from Russia. Lithuania will increase its arms purchasing budget this year by 50 percent, Poland by 20 percent, and Latvia by 15 percent. Defense spending by the Ukrainian government increased by 20 percent last year and is expected to double this year. Sweden plans to

increase its military budget by 15 percent over the next five years.



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