

Finland establishes rapid response units to patrol Russian border

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The newly installed Finnish government has revealed plans for a reorganisation of its armed forces with the creation of rapid response units (RRUs), with a particular focus on its 1,300-kilometre border with Russia.

The Finnish army announced on June 25 that the units had been quietly set up months ago and had already begun recruiting from among the ranks of army reservists. According to army spokesman Mika Kalliomäki, the move would involve reservists signing a contract exempting them from the current three-month mobilisation period, which is part of Finnish law. The goal was to mobilise “a very large” number of soldiers in a short period, Kalliomäki said to *Helsingin Sanomat*.

“The deployment of troops is our touchstone. Both the Air Force and Navy have a rapid-response capability, and this is the challenge that the Army now has,” explained Defence Minister Jussi Niinistö. The units are likely to be modelled on the already existing rapid deployment force (RDF), an army unit established in the 1990s capable of operating in joint taskforce operations with international allies.

The creation of RRUs is only the latest in a series of aggressive moves taken by the Finnish government. In late April, the army mobilised naval and air forces to search an area close to Helsinki after reports of an unconfirmed underwater object were made public. As with a similar case in Sweden last October, the media presented the unidentified object as a Russian submarine.

In May, the army wrote to more than 900,000 military reservists informing them of where they would be deployed in case of war and requesting that they update their locations with the army. A separate letter was sent to firms in the defence and security sector to inform them about changes in the army’s strategy. The

companies are members of the state industrial service wartime partnership.

After coming to power following April’s parliamentary elections, the Centre Party-led government of Juha Sipilä indicated a major shift in foreign and defence policy by reserving the right to join NATO. Helsinki maintained its non-aligned status throughout the Cold War, and previous governments ruled out the possibility of NATO membership.

Foreign Minister Timo Soini, leader of the right-wing nationalist Finns Party, pledged that a report evaluating the benefits of NATO membership would be prepared.

While Sipilä’s Centre Party is less keen on the idea, his governing partners in the conservative National Coalition Party are firmly in favour.

However, all of the political parties are united on Finland’s closer integration with the US-led alliance, above all through the Partnership for Peace programme. Through this mechanism, soldiers from Finland and neighbouring Sweden have participated in numerous NATO military drills, such as June’s Baltops 2015 in the Baltic Sea, and the Arctic Challenge air exercises conducted in May from bases in Norway and Finland. Finland sent troops to Afghanistan as part of the NATO occupation.

In May, NATO secretary general and former Norwegian prime minister Jens Stoltenberg announced that the alliance was developing plans for more military exercises to include Finland and Sweden, while improving information sharing with the non-NATO members.

Since the US- and German-orchestrated coup in Ukraine in February 2014, spearheaded by fascist forces, the US and its NATO allies have engaged in one provocation after another against Russia. Troops have been deployed along its borders from the Black Sea to

the Arctic Circle. This has led to a sharp increase in tensions between Finland and Russia. In talks with Finnish president Sauli Niinistö last month, Russia's Vladimir Putin warned that Finland should maintain its non-aligned status to create the best conditions for trade and cooperation with Moscow.

The Russian Duma strongly criticised the Finnish government's decision earlier this month to block a delegation of Duma representatives from attending an Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) summit in Helsinki. The Finnish government denied a visa request from lower house speaker Sergei Naryshkin and five other parliamentarians because they were on the European Union's sanctions list, imposed by the major powers on Moscow over the Ukraine crisis.

Finland is being drawn ever deeper into US-led efforts in the Nordic and Baltic regions to intensify pressure on Moscow. In April, Helsinki signed a joint defence agreement with the other Nordic nations, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The agreement contains proposals for closer security cooperation through initiatives such as joint air surveillance, as well as plans for a more coordinated approach to defence production and procurement (see "Nordic countries sign defence cooperation agreement").

Both Sweden and Finland subsequently announced proposals to increase military spending between 2016 and 2020, with the budget in Stockholm to rise by more than \$1 billion. Two of the Baltic republics, Latvia and Lithuania, aim to almost double their military budgets to meet the NATO target of 2 percent of GDP by 2020.

Last year, for the first time, Finnish defence forces personnel held joint exercises with US Marines, which included cold weather training in Lapland and urban warfare training in Helsinki. In June, Finnish soldiers participated in the US army-led Sabre Strike annual exercises, which took place in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Training more than 6,000 troops from the Baltic Republics, Poland, the US, UK, Canada, Denmark, Slovenia, Germany, Portugal, Norway and Finland, the exercises aimed to improve interoperability and provide experience to the Baltic republics in hosting significant contingents of soldiers from NATO and allied countries.

Earlier this month, US speaker of the house John

Boehner headed a delegation to Finland to meet with defence and security officials to discuss joint initiatives. From there, they travelled on to the neighbouring Baltic republics.

A report by the US Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) points to Washington's determination to use Finland and the neighbouring Nordic and Baltic States to step up confrontation with Russia. Provocatively entitled "The Coming Storm," the CEPA document identified serious concerns about the defence and security policies of the "Nordic-Baltic-Polish 9 (NBP9)"—the five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden), the three Baltic republics, (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), and Poland.

The report complained that in spite of a combined GDP a third greater than that of Russia, these nine countries had a weak and uncoordinated approach to defence. As author Edward Lucas wrote in the study, "These countries' strategic incoherence, their resulting inability to defend themselves without outside help, and the threat this creates to NATO's credibility in the region make the NBP9's security an issue of global importance. Only the United States can spur the NBP9 to start the close security and defence cooperation needed to counter the Russian threat."

The report made 10 recommendations, including an expansion of the purchase of offensive weaponry, a deepening of the collaboration between intelligence agencies, the prepositioning of more military equipment and personnel in the Baltic states, and even the creation of a missile defence system for the region.

Lucas backed up his aggressive agenda by claiming that 33,000 Russian soldiers had rehearsed the invasion of Scandinavia in a recent military exercise. Targets were the Danish island of Bornholm, the Swedish island of Gotland, northern Norway, and the Finnish Aaland Islands. Lucas claimed that in the event of such an invasion, NATO would not be able to supply its Baltic members.



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