

Finland announces defence agreement with the US

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Finland's government announced this month that it hopes to conclude a defence cooperation agreement with the United States prior to the US presidential election in November.

Defence minister Jussi Niinistö explained in a Reuters interview that the deal would cover joint military training, information sharing and research. Stressing Helsinki's full commitment to deepening ties with Washington, Niinistö remarked with reference to the US elections, "It's one of the reasons to have it done this autumn. But I'm certain we will continue to work together with either one of the main candidates winning."

Conclusion of the deal would mark a further step in Finland's integration into the aggressive drive of US imperialism to encircle and isolate Russia in Eastern Europe, the Baltic and the Nordic region. Finland and neighbouring Sweden, which were traditionally non-aligned during the Cold War, have both taken a series of steps over recent years making them NATO members in all but name.

Although no binding commitments are expected in the Finnish-US defence deal, it would provide for stepped up joint military exercises. Finnish and US troops trained in bilateral exercises for the first time in 2014, including cold weather training in Lapland and urban warfare in Helsinki.

The Centre Party-led government of Juha Sipilä, which also includes the conservative National Coalition Party and right-wing populist Finns Party, has made no secret of its desire to expand ties with NATO and the United States since coming to power last summer. In an unprecedented move in Finland, where opposition to NATO membership is strong among the population, Sipilä's government refused to rule out considering NATO membership. This position was confirmed in a recent defence policy review, which acknowledged that a move to join would trigger a crisis with Russia.

Finland has, undoubtedly with US backing, also taken a series of provocative moves against Russia, with which it shares a 1,300 kilometre border to the east. In May 2015, the Finnish government wrote to over 900,000 reservists in the military to advise them of new deployment instructions during a potential war crisis. Just a month later, it was revealed that rapid response units (RRUs) had been quietly established several months before to patrol the Finnish-Russian border.

Earlier last year, it mobilised a significant contingent of military and coastguard forces to search for an alleged "unidentified object" off the coast of Helsinki. Although the media widely reported claims that the object was a Russian submarine, no evidence for this was ever found.

Finland's expanding ties with US imperialism and increased integration into NATO are part of a broader process which is seeing the Nordic region becoming transformed into another front in the imperialist powers' offensive against Moscow. Finland and Sweden have been integrated into NATO structures via the Partnership for Peace initiative launched in the 1990s. Soldiers from both countries participate in almost every major NATO exercise and have also deployed in NATO wars such as the occupation of Afghanistan, where both Finnish and Swedish troops served, and the bombardment of Libya in 2011, in which Swedish Saab Gripen jets took part.

Earlier this year, President Obama invited Finnish President Sauli Niinistö, Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg, Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen and Icelandic Prime Minister Sigurdur Ingi Johannsson to a joint Nordic summit at the White House. According to president Niinistö, the meeting focused heavily on security and the Baltic Sea in particular, where the Obama administration has repeatedly vowed to go to war with Russia in defence of the tiny Baltic republics Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia.

In a joint statement issued following the meeting, the six

leaders launched a broadside against Russia. Vowing to deepen military and security collaboration, including through exercises and strengthening defence capabilities, the statement declared, “The United States and the Nordic countries share a firm conviction that there can be no compromises over the international security order and its fundamental principles. Russia’s illegal occupation and attempted annexation of Crimea, which we do not accept, its aggression in Donbas, and its attempts to destabilize Ukraine are inconsistent with international law and violate the established European security order. The United States and the Nordic countries reaffirm our support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders.”

It continued, “The United States and the Nordic countries are concerned by Russia’s growing military presence in the Baltic Sea region, its nuclear posturing, its undeclared exercises, and the provocative actions taken by Russian aircraft and naval vessels. We call on Russia to ensure that its military maneuvers and exercises are in full compliance with its international obligations and commitments to security and stability.”

In reality, the portrayal of Russia as the aggressor is a transparent lie, aimed at concealing the central role being played by Washington in ratcheting up tensions in the region. Washington and its allies triggered the Ukraine crisis by sponsoring a pro-western coup in Kiev led by fascist forces, and followed this up by implementing vast deployments of NATO forces from the Black Sea in the south to the Arctic Circle in the north.

As part of the Pentagon’s dramatic increase in military spending on its defence assets in Europe beginning in 2017, US forces are to play a much more prominent role in military exercises in the Nordic area. The US military has established new forward bases in NATO member Norway where M1A1 Abrams tanks and amphibious assault vehicles are being stored.

US forces already took part this year in the Norwegian armed forces’ Cold Response 2016 exercises in February and March with equipment including mobile artillery, special operations units and Abrams tanks. Swedish and Finnish forces were also involved.

US troops followed this up in May with mechanised land exercises and air combat training in Finland. The air exercises saw eight F-15 US fighter jets participating with F/A-18 Hornets from Finland’s Karelia Air Command in training in the east of the country, near the border with Russia. Defence minister Niinistö said of the stepped-up US presence, “As a result the US is seeking out exercise

opportunities on a broad front. This means we can take advantage of a higher level of US training activity to develop Finland’s defence capabilities.”

Both Finland and Sweden participated in last month’s NATO summit in Warsaw, where the US-led alliance finalised plans to deploy a total of 4,000 troops to the Baltic republics and Poland, which will be backed up by a rapid response force of 40,000 capable of deploying to the region within days. Justifying the presence of non-NATO members at the alliance’s talks, an official pointed to the close collaboration that would take place in the event of a conflict in the Baltic region.

Defence minister Niinistö reinforced the message, noting that the interoperability between Finnish and NATO’s armed forces was more effective than that between NATO and some of its newer members.

On the sidelines of the summit, defence minister Niinistö signed a defence cooperation agreement with his British counterpart, Michael Fallon. The deal provided for increasing information sharing and joint exercises, with a particular focus on repelling chemical and biological arms.

The US is also actively encouraging the further integration of the Nordic countries’ militaries. In April 2015, NATO members Norway, Denmark and Iceland signed a defence cooperation agreement with Finland and Sweden which contained provisions to enable shared use of air space for military purposes, as well as joint planning on procurement and production of defence equipment.

Sweden and Finland are in the process of considering further developing their military collaboration into a treaty-based defence union, which is widely interpreted as the prelude to NATO membership. Talks are weighing the possibility of joint military units and the shared use of infrastructure.

Former Finnish Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen spelled out the implications of the move, stating, “I support the school of thought that one must be very precise in respect of questions dealing with war and peace. We can never be sure if the resources of our neighbour are at our disposal in times of need if our cooperation with Sweden is established on a voluntary basis.”



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