Sweden and Finland negotiating bilateral military agreements with the US

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Sweden and Finland are moving ahead with negotiations to finalize defence cooperation agreements (DCA) with the United States in what amounts to a further escalatory step in the US/NATO war with Russia. The agreements, which would allow US troops to operate unhindered on both countries' territories, and store weaponry and other equipment at advanced bases, would strengthen Washington's ability to open up a northern front in its drive to subjugate Russia to the status of a semi-colony and seize control of its natural resources.

Sweden's right-wing coalition government led by Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson declared in its announcement of bilateral talks with Washington that the DCA would enable Stockholm to "get more effective and faster support from the US in crisis or war situations." Defence Minister Pål Jonson told the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* that the deal will allow the US to store weaponry at bases in Sweden during peacetime and deploy more rapidly in a crisis, adding, "We are moving from being close partners to allies."

A similar process is underway in Finland, where Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto told *Iltalehti* on January 8 that talks on the bilateral deal are in the preliminary stages. Haavisto's ministry said in a statement that the agreement would "create conditions for closer cooperation if the security situation so requires." Washington is "the most important external actor in Northern Europe," the statement continued, before adding that Washington "is committed to security in Finland and Europe."

Finland and Sweden's joint application to join NATO last May marked a major escalation of the US-led military confrontation with Russia in northern Europe. While Finland shares a 1,300-kilometre border with Russia, Sweden is strategically positioned on the northwest of the Baltic Sea, placing forces based there in easy striking distance of St. Petersburg and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, which lies just 300 kilometres southeast of the Swedish island of Gotland.

While the vast majority of NATO members, including the European imperialist powers, are determined to integrate Sweden and Finland into NATO as quickly as possible, Turkey has refused to approve the applications, citing Sweden's alleged protection of Kurdish nationalists with ties to the PKK. Unanimous consent by all NATO members is required to approve a new member.

DCAs are critical in facilitating the deployment of American military personnel on foreign soil. They regulate the extent to which American soldiers will be subject to local laws, grant Washington sweeping authority to move troops as it sees fit, and allow the US military to create forward supply bases for weaponry and military equipment. The US currently has 17 DCAs with EU members and six with non-EU states.

Last June, Washington and Oslo announced the finalization of a DCA to facilitate the expansion of American military activity, especially in Norway's Arctic, where it shares a 196-kilometre border with Russia. It included four "agreed areas," zones to which US forces have unhindered access. In and around these "agreed areas," US forces can exercise authority over Norwegian citizens, including by taking a "proportionate" response to any perceived security threats. The areas include Ramsund Naval Base and Evenes Air Base in the arctic.

In a submission to the Norwegian parliament, the country's Judge Advocate General, Sigrid Redse Johansen, noted, "The access to exert authority (and power) is located with each troop member, and authority can be exerted towards anyone who comes into contact with the agreed area or who, in extraordinary cases, comes in the way of an American operation … Power can thus be exerted by any American troop member towards Norwegian civilians to restore order or protect the force."

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Johansen also addressed the lack of controls in place for Norwegian authorities to challenge US decisions or actions, writing in somewhat understated language, "Genuine Norwegian control over the conditions for the USA's exertion of power do not appear prominent."

The agreement also gives US authorities the first right to prosecute soldiers who commit crimes off-duty, and define what is considered an act of duty. In other words, American forces can act with virtual impunity while in the country.

The agreements Washington is negotiating with Finland and Sweden appear set to contain similarly sweeping provisions guaranteeing US military operations and legal immunity. As Teemu Tanner, Finland's ambassador to Norway, put it in an interview with *High North News*, "I think we can learn a lot from how Norway builds its NATO activities."

In November, Finland, Sweden and Norway announced the upgrading of a trilateral defence agreement to enable joint military activities in the Arctic areas of all three countries. The agreement allows for joint exercises, military planning and the carrying out of joint military operations in a crisis situation. It followed the participation of Finnish and Swedish troops in a joint brigade under Norwegian command in NATO's Cold Response exercise last August.

Also in November, Sweden's new right-wing government announced a plan to massively increase military spending in order to reach the NATO target of spending 2 percent of GDP on defence. The coalition, which is led by the conservative Moderates but relies on support in parliament from the fascistic Sweden Democrats to obtain a majority, intends to hike military spending by 64 percent by 2028. Just days after this announcement, the government unveiled a military aid package to Ukraine worth 3 billion kronor (about €270 million). It included an air defence system and light armoured vehicles, and totalled 1 billion kronor more than all Sweden's previous aid packages to Ukraine combined.

Earlier this month, the government revealed a plan to reintroduce civilian conscription. Young people will be trained in disaster relief and other emergency services at the municipal level in a move that the government explicitly linked to the need to strengthen Sweden's defensive capabilities in the event of a war. Military conscription was already reintroduced by the Social Democrat government in 2017. The latest plan commits to doubling annual military conscripts to 10,000.

A major factor driving the intensifying conflicts over the Arctic is the vast quantities of oil, gas, and rare earths in the region, which are becoming easier to access due to the impact of capitalist-induced climate change. Territorial claims involving Arctic states, which include Canada, Denmark, Russia and the United States, are also being driven by the opening up of new trade routes as the ice coverage in the Arctic Ocean recedes. The US, Canada and the European imperialist powers are determined to strengthen their respective positions in the region, recognizing that it could mean access to the resources necessary to play a big part in the clean energy economy of the future, control the flow of world trade, and gain a military-strategic edge over their rivals.

Underscoring the vast economic interests at stake in the region, Swedish iron ore miner LKAB revealed last week the discovery of a huge deposit of more than 1 million tons of rare earth oxides in Kiruna in the Swedish Arctic. While the site represents less than 1 percent of global rare earth deposits, according to US Geological Survey estimates, it is the largest such find in Europe. LKAB explained that the deposits were sufficient to supply a "substantial part of Europe's needs" for electric vehicle production as part of the so-called "clean energy transition."

Far from being motivated by the desire to stop climate change, the key concern of the European powers is to reduce their dependence on Russia and China for critical economic supplies so that the European imperialist powers can act more aggressively on the world stage, not only against Russia and China, but ultimately, where necessary, the United States. As Ebba Busch, Sweden's Minister for Energy and Business, and leader of the right-wing Christian Democrats, put it, "electrification, the EU's self-sufficiency and independence from Russia and China will begin in the mine."

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