



# PERSPECTIVES

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## Is War Looming in the Baltic Sea?

by Rauf Baker

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Russia and Sweden have fought 12 wars over the course of their histories. In recent years, relations have grown tense once again between the expansionist superpower and the peaceable Scandinavian state. At issue is the Baltic Sea as an energy source.**

Last April, in a move that has been repeated quite a few times over the past couple of years, the Swedish authorities issued a warning to civilian maritime traffic in the Baltic Sea. The warning was about military drills and missile tests being conducted by the Russian Navy in an area very close to the southern Swedish city of Karlskrona, home to a key naval base.

Then, in May, the Swedish government sent a booklet to every household in the country detailing how to prepare for and resist a foreign invasion. “The level of preparedness for peacetime emergencies is an important basis of our resilience in the event of war,” the booklet said.

A month after that, Sweden marked its national day by calling up 22,000 reservists for the country’s largest national exercise since 1975.

Russian troops have conducted nearly 20 exercises in northern Europe since 2014, some of them simulated nuclear attacks. Sweden has ended the demilitarized status of the strategic island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea and reestablished a military unit there. Russian-Swedish relations are rife with tension and uncertainty, with signs pointing to the possibility of a war brewing.

The two countries exchanged control over many strategic territories and fought 12 wars between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Estonia and Finland, for instance, were under Swedish control before being annexed by the Russian empire in 1712 and 1809, respectively. Sweden then maintained a position of neutrality until the late 2000s, when it entered into various defense arrangements with the

EU and its Scandinavian sisters. But Russian President Vladimir Putin's expansionist tendencies – which are drawn to easy targets (e.g., Georgia and Ukraine) and which benefit from the West's retroversion - might well drive Stockholm into closer military alignment with the Western powers.

Stockholm stood firm against Moscow's invasion of Georgia and Ukraine, and the two capitals expelled one another's diplomats. Sweden's Security Service issued a report concluding that almost a third of the Russian diplomats in the country were spies.

Tensions began in March 2013 when a squadron of Russian warplanes flew about 30 km from Gotland. The island, which is around 3,183 square km in size and has a population of 58,000, is only 190 km from Stockholm (and approximately 500 km from mainland Russia). A year later, Russian fighter jets violated Swedish airspace on five occasions.

Consequently, there has been a growing debate in Sweden on the necessity of joining NATO as a preemptive move. Moscow is threatening military retaliation if Sweden takes measures in that direction, threats that Stockholm has derided as "Nazi behavior." The Supreme Commander of Sweden's Armed Forces, Micael Bydén, has ordered a rifle battalion of 150 troops to be permanently deployed in Gotland, citing a need to "look realistically at the world around us." In September 2017, Sweden held a major military exercise, Aurora 17, with the participation of NATO countries, including the US. The main focus of the exercise was defending Gotland.

While the Swedish defense budget saw a sizable \$1 billion increase for the 2016-20 period, many in policymaking circles in Stockholm advocate a defense budget that, in 10 years' time, will reach the recommended NATO target of 2% of GDP. Swedish defense spending currently stands at a historic low of 1.03%. Under a force development plan, defense expenditure would grow yearly to reach \$9 billion by 2025 and \$12 billion by 2035, when the number of Swedish Armed Forces personnel is set to triple to 120,000. The Russians, in their turn, have heavily fortified the enclave of Kaliningrad in the Baltic Sea. In this tiny Russian pocket, the Kremlin has deployed Iskander ballistic missiles, which can reach Stockholm, along with the Bastion coastal missile system and Kalibr cruise missiles. Russia has also installed the renowned long-range air-defense missile system the S-400.

The Kremlin has repeatedly been accused of interfering in Sweden's political arena. Swedish officials have warned of an increase in hacking and dissemination of fake news – especially before the September elections, which saw a surge in popularity for the Sweden Democrats, a party with Nazi roots. This far-right party has come under scrutiny in the last couple of years for

alleged links to Russia, which has been praised by the Sweden Democrats as a “stabilizing and peace-making power.” Just recently, a Russian spy was accused of infiltrating a course funded by Swedish aid money to improve Russian journalists’ investigative reporting proficiency.

One of the prime motivators behind Russia's behavior is energy. The Russian gas giant Gazprom holds a 51% share of the Nord Stream AG consortium, which operates the Nord Stream submarine pipeline between Russia and Germany through the Baltic Sea. The 1,200 km Nord Stream 2 project has drawn much criticism from Swedish officials who consider it a security problem, as the pipeline creates a Russian naval presence in Sweden’s economic zone and the Kremlin can use this for military intelligence should it wish to do so. Stockholm reluctantly granted a permit to Nord Stream 2 last June, as it did to Nord Stream 1 in 2009, on the grounds that “international law does not give the government the scope to reject Russia's application.” This means Russia will lay two pipelines through Sweden's Baltic Sea waters, notwithstanding the objections of those Swedes who advocate rerouting them onto dry land.

Swedes insist that a lesson should be learned from Tbilisi and Kiev, which feared Moscow's fury more than they should have and were too reluctant to join NATO. Russia-Sweden tensions are rising amid calls for a European military doctrine, especially in light of the isolationist ideology of the current US administration as well as the rise of far-right parties in many EU countries. The question must be asked: Will the next war break out in the Baltic Sea?

*Rauf Baker is a journalist and researcher with expertise on Europe and the Middle East.*

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