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Front Cover: Marine amphibious assault vehicle exits well deck of USS Bataan (LHD 5). Source: MC1 RJ Stratchko
Back Cover: French troops disembark from landing craft (L-CAT) onboard LHD FS Tonnerre. Source: French Navy
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“Organized force alone enables the quiet and the weak to go about their business and to sleep securely in their beds, safe from the violent without or within.”

Alfred T. Mahan

JOINTLY NAVIGATING THE BALTIC-ARCTIC STRATEGIC SPACE - The Case of Sweden and Finland

Small states have always been at risk when great power competition intensifies in a region, those in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) and the Arctic being no exception. Sweden and Finland are located at a strategic crossroads between Russia and NATO, which “Northern Flank” once again receives serious attention from defence planners. Russia is pursuing a strategy of military dominance in the BSR and the European Arctic, and its perceived assertiveness is a major concern among its neighbours. China, for its part, pursues a multilateral approach as a “near-Arctic state”, seeking to make the BSR a strategic springboard to the Arctic by investing in joint ventures with small states. The U.S. more competitive stance on China globally, and on China and Russia in the Arctic, has implications for the security dynamics in the BSR. In the resulting Baltic-Arctic Strategic Space, Finland and Sweden opts for navigating jointly.

Finland and Sweden: Post-Cold War Defence Cooperation and Integration

In October 2013, the Chiefs of Navies in Finland and Sweden signed an important restricted armed forces document including elements of strategy, titled “Vision for the Swedish Finnish Naval Task Group 2023”. From the outset, the task group was launched as a tangible instrument for focusing the efforts of two small navies’ personnel and an operational tool for crisis prevention and crisis management. Their emphasis on interoperability with EU and NATO member states explains the logic behind their decision to direct their forces to operate according to NATO standards and use English language in command and control (C2) procedures. One year later, Russia’s actions in Ukraine altered the calculus and provided strong political impetus for a wider and deeper bilateral cooperation, including all military services. In May 2014, an action plan outlined areas of bilateral cooperation at the military and political levels and set short-, medium- and long-term time frames for the project. In June 2014, an implementation plan set the agenda for making it a reality, while policy decisions were presented in February 2015. The two navies envisaged a two-tiered objective: establishing a bilateral Naval Task Group with initial operational capability to conduct Surveillance and Reconnaissance Operations in 2017; and a standing Swedish-Finnish Naval Task Group (SFNTG) with full operational capability to conduct operations up to and including Protection of Shipping Operations in 2023.
The two navies launched combined exercises in the 1990s, when Finland was no longer bound by the 1948 Soviet-Finland Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance Treaty. Their cooperation deepened significantly after the turn of the millennium. They launched a combined Swedish Finnish Amphibious Task Unit, engaged themselves in joint acquisition projects and established an interface between their autonomous sea surveillance systems for the Baltic Sea – the Sea Surveillance Cooperation Finland Sweden (SUCFIS). Since 2015, Finland and Sweden act united within existing multilateral forums, such as the Nordic Defence Cooperation, the EU, NATO and the UN.

The July 2018 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) extended their defence cooperation beyond peace and crisis situations, but despite the fact that it sets no priori limits on military cooperation the MoU fails to include formal mutual defence obligations. Notwithstanding, non-aligned Finland and Sweden now jointly plan and prepare for wartime cooperation at “all levels of the Participants defence, the policy and military levels including the strategic, operational and tactical level”. The MoU added strategic communication, Host Nation Support (HNS), as well as protection against WMD and hybrid threats to their defence cooperation. In December 2017, the Swedish Minister for Defence explained the decision rationale, declaring that “Finland is worth defending” and “Swedish and Finnish everyday life and history are since long intimately intertwined, since we were one and the same country for over 650 years”.

In July 2017, Finland enacted a law on the exchange of operational military support with Sweden in a war situation. Alas, the corresponding law in Sweden put forth by a governmental report in April 2018, continues to be delayed with reference to its legal complexity. In May 2019, the Parliamentary Defence Committee stressed the need for implementing the proposed law as soon as possible. Implementing this law is critical to removing a major restriction imposed on their bilateral cooperation on the basis of sovereignty and allow Swedish forces to engage in combined territorial defence operations with Finland. That would strengthen the effectiveness of their defence cooperation and increase its deterrent effect.

Weaving a Web of Multilateral Defence Cooperation

The limited military capabilities of Sweden and Finland make them dependent on international defence cooperation to ensure their national security. They define their national security in a regional context and need shelter from the U.S. and NATO, although they are not members of the alliance. In response to Russia’s actions in Ukraine, Finland and Sweden agreed to upgrade their NATO Partnership for Peace member status by jointly signing NATO HNS agreements and becoming NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partners in 2014. In 2018, Finland, Sweden and the US upgraded their respective bilateral cooperation to a trilateral cooperation. Key phrases in their Statement of Intent (SOI) are to “strengthen transatlantic links, increase security in northern Europe, and build interoperability
between the United States and two of its most capable and like-minded partners”. These agreement and the increasingly advanced NATO exercises that involve Sweden and Finland testify to their mutual dependence. The territories and military capabilities of Finland and Sweden are vital to facilitate U.S. and NATO military action in the BSR or in the Arctic.

Since 2010, Finland and Sweden – who still vacillates regarding NATO membership – pursue defence policy discussions in the informal Northern Group with key NATO members in the region, including the Baltic and Nordic States, the Netherlands, Poland, the UK and Germany. Following a confidential process, Finland and Sweden joined the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force at a signing ceremony in Stockholm in 2017. Both contributed to the high-readiness Joint Expeditionary Force-Maritime (JEF-M) that deployed to the Baltic Sea in May-June 2019, demonstrating collective resolve and exercising multi-domain operations during Baltic Protector. Although this maritime-focused force is distinct from NATO, the fact that they are closely related and mutually supporting is well illustrated by the close coordination between the Baltic Protector and the BALTOPS 2019. As the exercise scenario of Baltic Protector escalated, the JEF-M coalition of 9 states smoothly merged into a wider coalition of 18 states under command of Vice Admiral Andrew Lewis and U.S. 2nd Fleet.

The naval strand of the Finnish-Swedish bilateral defence cooperation – the SFNTG; composed of task units for surface warfare, mine countermeasures, amphibious operations and logistics – reached Initial Operational Capability as planned in 2017 and is an operational tool for crisis prevention and crisis management. It sends much needed diplomatic signals of resolve. SUCFIS provides a high level of shared Maritime Domain Awareness by the exchange of information at secret level. They presently focus on achieving full C2 interoperability at tactical level by integrating NATO Tactical Data Link Systems 16 and 22 in the Combat Management Systems of their naval vessels and aircraft. As a step in the process of reaching Full Operational Capability in 2023, SFNTG staff embarked on HSwMS Carlskrona successfully exercised command of a multinational Task Group composed of 14 units from Finland, Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden during the German-led exercise Northern Coast in September 2019. The exercise served to demonstrate their tactical interoperability.

As a means of strengthening bilateral security policy relations, Finland and Sweden joined the German-led Framework Nations Concept group in 2017 and 2018 respectively. However, they have not yet decided which pillar they will contribute to, while its larger formations are intimately linked to NATO’s deterrence and defence. In 2018, Finland joined the European Intervention Initiative. Sweden followed suite in September 2019. It provides yet another platform for security policy dialogue and possible cooperation linked to different types of crisis situations. However, the web of bilateral and multilateral security mechanisms that Finland and Sweden adhere to fails to include defence obligations or guarantees, except for the solidarity clause enshrined as Article 222 of the Treaty of Lisbon. This limits the credibility of their present security policies. Also, the legal mandate to use force on each other’s territory is wanting. While Finland enacted a law that regulates the exchange of operational military support with Sweden in a war situation already in 2017, the implementation of a corresponding law in Sweden – presented by a governmental report in April 2018 – continues to be delayed with reference to its legal complexity.

Engaging with China and Russia in the BSR and the European Arctic

Key drivers for the growing great power competition in the increasingly accessible Arctic are control of oil, gas, minerals, as well as physical and digital lines of communication. Here, the Northern Sea Route (NSR) is of particular importance. In 2010, President Putin declared that Russia
would make it an “international transport artery capable of competing with traditional sea routes”. In 2012 and 2013, Russia strengthened its control over the route by adopting national laws and regulations. Since 2013, Russia has built or upgraded seven military bases on islands and peninsula along chokepoints of the NSR, while deploying advanced radar and missile defence systems. In 2019, plans to introduce foreign sailing restrictions were presented and President Putin offered to connect the NSR to the Chinese Maritime Silk Road. The fact that the European Arctic is host to Russia’s Northern Fleet and its nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines is a concern for all states on the Scandinavian Peninsula. So are Russia’s recent display of its military capabilities, including the launch of a Kalibr cruise missile from K-560 Severodvinsk in a berthed position — a capability that drastically shortens the time needed to prepare a missile launch.

At present, the sea lanes of the Baltic Sea are central to Russian container transports and the Baltic Sea is a terminal point for the Belt and Road Initiative. However, the BSR might become a Chinese strategic springboard to the Arctic if China and Finland continue their joint investments in digital and physical communication infrastructure. Key projects in the making are the Rail Baltica Global Project — aimed at extending the Silk Road Economic Belt from Poland to Finland by rail through a 100 km subsea tunnel between Tallinn and Helsinki — and the Arctic Connect, a fibre-optic communication cable located on the seabed along the NSR to China — linked to its Digital Silk Road initiative. The envisioned Arctic Railway between Kirkenes, Norway, and Rovaniemi, Finland, is a project for the long term. These projects have the potential to strengthen economic growth in Finland and enable business development in its largest and northernmost county Lapland.

The April 2019 U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) Arctic Strategic Outlook and the June 2019 U.S. Department of Defense Arctic Strategy outline a competitive approach towards China and Russia in the Arctic. Both documents identify China and Russia as challengers to the rules-based international order, while the latter also stresses the need for U.S. “investment in capabilities and capacity for polar operations”. The validity of the USCG motto “Semper Paratus - Always Ready” with regards to the Arctic is questionable. Its present capacity shortage to conduct operations in support of freedom of navigation in the European Arctic — and thus execute the new strategy — is obvious, given that its icebreaking capabilities are limited to the USCGC Polar Star (1976) and USCGC Healy (1999). Here, the USCG missions in Antarctica must also be taken into consideration.

However, U.S. partners Finland and Sweden possess excess icebreaking capacity in summertime, i.e. the period when the NSR is commercially navigable. Extending the geographical coverage of the U.S. trilateral cooperation with Finland and Sweden to the European Arctic would demonstrate strategic thinking outside the box. Yet, the BSR and the European Arctic are geostrategically interconnected and will become increasingly so if the Sino-Finnish investment plans are realised. Also, both regions are arenas for great power competition in which Russia — the named adversary of Finland and Sweden — challenges international maritime law. Finland and Sweden might thus be induced to jointly navigate more saline waters than those of the brackish Baltic Sea with their Arctic capable vessels. That would influence the geostrategic
calculus in the Arctic and cause reverberations in the BSR.

Disclaimer: The views presented in this article are those of the author and not the Swedish Defence University or the Swedish Armed Forces.


2. Ibid., p. 349. 358.


4. Peter Hultqvist, 2017, Finland värjt att försvaa [Finland is worth defending], DI, 5 December (available online at: https://www.di.se/debatt/peter-hultqvist-finland-vart-att-forsvara/, accessed 26 October 2019).


15. This topic was discussed at the conference "The Arctic as a Strategic Space: Geopolitics of the Northern Flank", 22–24 May 2019, co-arranged by the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies and the Swedish Defence University, Stockholm.

**WORD SEARCH**

**AIRCRAFT**

**ANTIACCESS**

**AMPHIBIOUS**

**CJOSS**

**AREADENIAL**

**FRIGATE**

**DRONE**

**MARINES**

**JFCNF**

**NORFOLK**

**NATO**

**SEACONTROL**

**SAILOR**

**SUBMARINE**

**SCNFLT**

**USFFC**

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