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Sweden's security policy in the Baltic Sea region: the jigsaw puzzle continues

In order to strengthen its security, Sweden is increasing its defence capabilities, according to the conception of the security strategy 2021-2025. An intensification of internal activities within the so-called total defence is accompanied by enhanced regional cooperation with the Nordic states within the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO), two trilateral formats and bilateral cooperation with Finland. Sweden plays the role of a connector that cares about the development of military cooperation and readiness to act in times of peace, crisis and conflict, and therefore improves the security situation in the Baltic Sea region (BSR).

Conditions. Sweden's latest security strategy, adopted on 15 December 2020 by the Riksdag, underlined that international military cooperation, along with increasing the defence budget and strengthening civil defence, is of key importance. Russia's military activity in the BSR is of particular concern, recently including violation of Swedish airspace by Russian combat aircraft and the Zapad 2021 military manoeuvres, some of which were carried out in the Kaliningrad Oblast. Despite these events and the increased involvement of Russia in the internal affairs of neighbouring states (the annexation of Crimea, support for separatists in eastern Ukraine, and disinformation activities), Sweden remains a non-aligned country that has developed special relations with NATO. Due to internal divisions, however, these relations do not lead to NATO membership or the inclusion of the so-called 'NATO options' (['IEŚ Commentaries', No. 300](#)).

Security and defence policy is very rarely the subject of internal discussion in Sweden, so there is little evidence that this situation will change with the start of the election campaign before the parliamentary elections scheduled for 11 September 2022. Public opinion polls indicate that the attitude of Swedes towards membership in NATO has been stable for years – now, there is a slight advantage of opponents over supporters among the public (32% vs. 27%). However, as many as 41% of respondents indicated a lack of positive/negative feelings, which shows that this is not a topic around which any political party could gain an advantage.

Regional multilateral military formats. Relations with NATO are complemented by developing military ties with the Nordic countries, both NATO members – Denmark and Norway – and Finland, which is outside of the alliance. Despite the fact that Nordic cooperation has been very much weakened by the uncoordinated actions of states in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic (['IEŚ Commentaries', No. 321](#)), the region is still one of the most integrated in the world. Political and security cooperation are integral elements of Nordic cooperation, that can be seen, for example, in the sphere of international organizations (['IEŚ Commentaries', No. 370](#)).

Sweden remains a very active partner when it comes to military cooperation in the BSR, hoping to complement the limited capabilities of its armed forces to fulfil their primary task, namely the territorial defence of the country. As a result, Sweden is present in all regional formats, among which the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO)¹ is the largest structure. NORDEFCO's main goals include strengthening the national defence of the member states of the pact, searching for possible areas of cooperation and effective implementation of solutions for joint defence. Cooperation within the framework of NORDEFCO is developed at the political and military levels, and its characteristic feature is comprehensiveness, visible in five areas of cooperation and 16 specific objectives. Their implementation allows, among other measures, for joint training, arms purchases or the creation of cooperative armaments programmes.

¹ It was established in November 2009 and includes Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

In practical terms, NORDEFCO's aims are realised through trilateral military cooperation agreements. On 23 September 2020, the defence ministers of Finland, Norway and Sweden signed a declaration on strengthening military operational cooperation. It extends an earlier agreement between the three countries on security of supply in the field of defence, which entered into force on 11 June 2020. In the light of the new declaration, the three Nordic states intend to achieve the ability and readiness to conduct coordinated military operations in crisis and conflict situations that may occur in the northern parts of their territories. This is to be made possible by both joint strategic planning (with the possibility of extending this to operational planning), which will allow for the coordination of current and future plans for military operations and exercises based on prepared scenarios. This, in turn, is expected to increase interoperability between the armed forces and thus strengthen the ability to conduct joint military operations, if such a decision were to be taken in each country.

Cooperation in the north of the region is complemented by an agreement on military cooperation between Sweden, Denmark and Norway, which was signed by defence ministers on 24 September 2021. Its aim is to improve the joint response of the three countries to threats or breaches of security in the area of common interest, i.e. the southern parts of Scandinavia, the Danish straits (including Kattegat and Skagerrak) and the North Sea. Joint exercises are expected to improve military interoperability and enable joint military action (if such a decision were to be made). It may apply to protecting maritime communication lines and patrolling maritime areas that are critical to security of supply in the BSR.

Bilateral cooperation with Finland. Despite Swedish commitment to multilateral formats, Finland remains an important strategic partner for Sweden, a partnership that includes advanced military cooperation. This partnership was created systematically since the end of the Cold War, but after 2014, it gained in importance and was significantly intensified. Today, it includes the partial integration of the armed forces, building interoperability through joint exercises, operational planning of joint military actions, and new legislation that will lead to the signing of an agreement on mutual host nation support for allied forces. It is based on the need to strengthen the coordination of activities in the immediate area. Both states believe that Swedish and Finnish units must be able to operate and carry out their tasks on the territory of each country, which in practice requires both military and civilian, as well as administrative, support.

Bilateral cooperation is also visible in the completed purchases of armaments, e.g. Finnish Pohjanmaa-class multi-role corvettes will be equipped with a Swedish Saab combat management system (CMS) onboard (9LV Mk4), radar (Sea Giraffe 4A FF AESA 3D), fire control systems (Ceros 200) and torpedoes (Torped 47 cal. 400 mm). In 2013, the Finnish Patria started the delivery of AMV (Patgb 360) armoured wheeled vehicles, and Patria Helicopters AB received a contract for repairs of Swedish Hkp16 helicopters (UH-60M Black Hawk). In addition, the Finnish government should decide by the end of 2021 to purchase a new multirole aircraft (HX Fighter Program) to replace the F/A-18 Hornet fleet – one of five candidates is the Swedish Saab Gripen E/F.

Conclusions. Sweden's activity in regional multilateral military formats in the southern and northern part of the BSR in conjunction with intensive cooperation with Finland in the central part of the region allows it to be assigned the role of a connector. All these structures contribute to increasing the sense of security, and their development is a response to Russian military exercises, which are leading to a deterioration of the security situation in the area surrounding Sweden. This means that a non-aligned Sweden very often shares the same perspective of threats to security in the region as formulated by NATO, including the Baltic states and Poland.

The main added value of regional military cooperation is to complement the capabilities of the Swedish Armed Forces to defend its own territory. In this context, it is worth noting that Sweden is also developing cooperation with states from outside the region, especially the United States and European countries. Thereby, they are included in the stabilization of the situation in the immediate area of Sweden, and more broadly in the whole BSR. Sweden is a member of new formats, such as the French-initiated European Intervention Initiative (EI2) and the Joint Expeditionary Forces (JEF) led by the United Kingdom. In addition, Sweden has traditionally been involved in activities at the UN, EU and OSCE forums – in each organization, Sweden emphasizes that it supports the protection of the European security order based on international law.