



Winter is coming

Chilly winds across northern Europe

by Jan Joel Andersson and Erika Balsyte

An arms build-up is quietly but steadily taking place in the Baltic Sea region and beyond. While officials are loath to call the current increase of weapons and soldiers in northern Europe an arms race, large amounts of military equipment are nonetheless being deployed to the area. Although perhaps not a new Cold War, winter is fast approaching in the north and there may be little choice but to man the wall.

During the Cold War, the Nordic-Baltic region was one of the most heavily militarised areas in the world. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union not only allowed the Baltic states and Warsaw Pact countries to regain their independence, it also made it possible for the region to largely disarm. With post-Soviet Russia in disarray and no longer perceived as a military threat, countries like Denmark, Norway, Poland and Sweden abandoned their traditional focus on territorial defence and turned to out-of-area expeditionary crisis management operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan and elsewhere. However, Russia's recent actions in eastern Europe and significant military build-up along its Western border and in Kaliningrad has rattled many nerves. As a consequence, all the countries in the Nordic-Baltic region are now rearming.

Russian actions

Tensions in the Nordic-Baltic region have been running increasingly high since the Russian annexation of Crimea and the abduction of an Estonian counter-intelligence officer in a cross-border raid just days after a US presidential visit to Tallinn in 2014. Moscow's willingness to use military force and intimidate its neighbours was clearly proven. Numerous violations of Nordic and Baltic airspace by Russian fighter aircraft and repeated undersea intrusions by suspected Russian submarines in Norwegian, Finnish and Swedish territorial waters have further heightened tensions in the region.

Even more worrying to many in the region is Moscow's ability to quickly move troops to and along its borders – as demonstrated in the growing number and size of Russian snap exercises and surprise military inspections. Some of these exercises involve tens of thousands of soldiers and hundreds of armoured vehicles and aircraft. In addition, the increasing sophistication of Russian long-range surface-to-surface missile and air defence systems along its western border and in Kaliningrad would make any air or sea movements to and within the area difficult, thereby making the sending of any



S-400 land-based air-defence missiles

● NATO member ○ Missile range



Source: The Washington Post

reinforcements dangerous, if not impossible, in the event of a conflict.

Russia's considerable Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities were further enhanced in late October when two Russian warships entered the Baltic Sea heading for their new homeport of Kaliningrad. While seemingly small, the Buyan-class corvettes are heavily armed with Kalibr cruise missiles, which have a range of at least 1,500 km and are capable of hitting targets across central and western Europe. This latest addition of Russian military hard power to northern Europe follows the earlier deployment of nuclear-capable ballistic Iskander-M missiles to Kaliningrad this autumn. With a range of 500 km, the Iskander can reach targets such as military airfields and army bases across Poland and southern Scandinavia. Russia has also announced plans to send three new army divisions (about 10,000 soldiers each) close to its western and southern borders.

Fortress Kaliningrad

Separated from Russia proper and sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania, Kaliningrad was

hit hard by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The region was forced to fight for its economic survival as traditional economic links were broken and most of its industry collapsed in the post-Soviet economic transition. However, the enclave has undergone profound change since the early 2000s. Thanks to its status as a special economic zone and agreements with the EU on transit traffic, the region's local economy has been revived, but more worryingly, it has also returned to the agenda in a hard security context.

Kaliningrad has also long been home to the Russian Baltic Fleet. Reduced to a dire state after the end of the Cold War, the Baltic Fleet has been steadily rebuilt and military bases in Kaliningrad have undergone numerous upgrades as part of Moscow's military modernisation programme. Russia also actively conducts military exercises in the region. In particular, Russia has also improved the readiness of its army forces, rapid-reaction units, and frontline air force units.

Kaliningrad is also home to upgraded strategic early-warning radars, as well as coastal defence missiles systems. In addition to the Iskander missiles, Moscow announced in early November



2016 that it will deploy S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems to Kaliningrad. The S-400 missile is the most advanced Russian long-range air defence system and can engage aerial targets within a range of 400 km, and up to an altitude of 30 km. This means that Russia is able to create anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) zones that are extremely well defended and which cover many EU and NATO member states. In the event of the deployment of Russian hybrid tactics, or the need to invoke NATO Article 5 due to direct aggression, this poses a serious problem as some states will be totally cut off (by land and sea) and others severely impeded in their military capabilities.

NATO reactions

Not surprisingly, the three Baltic republics have taken steps to improve their defences since the conflict in Ukraine began in 2014. An increased focus on national defence led Estonia to call up reservists for military exercises. In late September 2016, the Estonian parliament passed a new budget that saw defence expenditure increase to 2.19% of GDP in 2017, the largest defence budget increase in Estonia's history. Neighbouring Latvia's defence budget is also expected to grow to 1.7% of GDP in 2017 and the government has committed to further increasing its defence spending to 2% of GDP in 2018 and 2019.

Lithuania reinstated military conscription in 2015 and will increase its defence budget from 1.5% of GDP in 2016 to 1.8% of GDP in 2017. All three countries are focused on enhancing combat and combat support capabilities by acquiring light armour and modern anti-tank and air-defence systems.

In order to reassure its eastern allies after the annexation of Crimea, NATO immediately increased the size of its rotational Baltic air policing detachment of fighter jets and will soon deploy a newly formed Baltic Brigade. This formation will consist of battalion-sized battlegroups – led by the UK, Canada, Germany and the US – and will be based in the three Baltic republics and in Poland. In addition, NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), that was agreed to at the Wales summit in 2014, will be able to deploy to the region on short notice with the UK's 20th Armoured Infantry Brigade as its lead land formation in 2017.

If activated, the deployment of the VJTF will be facilitated by small command and control units called NATO Force Integration Units

(NFIUs). These seek to improve planning between national forces and NATO forces and to identify necessary transportation nodes and supporting infrastructure. NFIUs are currently in place in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Additional NFISs also exist in Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia and one will be set up in Hungary in 2017.

EU-NATO Strategic Partnership

In July 2016, the President of the European Council, the President of The European Commission, and the Secretary General of NATO signed a joint declaration agreeing to give new impetus and new substance to the EU-NATO strategic partnership. The leaders called on both organisations to invest the necessary political capital and resources to make this reinforced partnership a success.

Following the joint declaration, the EU and NATO have significantly strengthened staff-to-staff interaction at various levels. Contact points have been established in both organisations to ensure better communication. Given that member states in both organisations only have a 'single set of forces', the coherent development of capabilities through EU and NATO respective processes will help to strengthen capabilities available, potentially, for both organisations.

On 6 December, the EU and NATO presented a common set of proposals for the implementation of the EU-NATO joint declaration made in July. The proposals include increasing cooperation in the following areas:

- Countering hybrid threats
- Operational cooperation
- Cyber security and defence
- Defence capabilities
- Defence industry and research
- Exercises and training
- Defence and security capacity-building

Moreover, the US is preparing to send more troops to Europe, including US special operations forces, and provide additional equipment



Kalibr nuclear-capable ship-based cruise missiles



Source: The Washington Post

and improve base facilities so that more forces can be deployed in the event of a crisis. In 2017, the US will ensure the persistent rotational presence of three Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) in Europe. By late 2017, the forward stationing of equipment for another armoured BCT and a divisional headquarters should also be in place in Europe. Together with heavy equipment already in storage on the continent, these new assets will allow the US to form a combined US armed ground force of more than a division in strength.

NATO member Norway announced in October that it will allow more than 300 US troops to be permanently stationed on its soil on a rotational basis beginning in January 2017. The US troops will draw on pre-positioned heavy equipment, such as M-1 tanks, that has been in long-term storage in Norway since the Cold War. Ahead of their deployment, US Marines have already conducted winter training close to the Russian border in northern Norway. To further boost its defences, the government of Norway unveiled in October its 2017 defence budget that includes a significant increase in the funding level to address shortfalls in maintenance, spare parts and ammunition, as well as improving training and readiness. Norway's plans include the acquisition of F-35 fighters, new helicopter-capable coast guard vessels and new submarines.

In Poland, the government has undertaken the biggest increase in military spending of any country in Europe since 2014. Earlier this year, the Polish defence minister announced that the Polish army will grow by at least 50% over the coming years – up to 150,000 troops. The recruitment of a new 35,000-strong paramilitary defence force especially aimed at countering 'hybrid' kinds of warfare has also bolstered

capabilities. Moreover, facing a growing missile threat from Russian forces in Kaliningrad, Poland has ordered Patriot missile systems from the US, and has developed advanced plans for acquiring new helicopters, submarines and corvettes.

Non-aligned no longer in-between

Meanwhile, EU member states Finland and Sweden have taken several steps to increase their defences, too. In 2015, the Finnish armed forces sent a letter to its all reservists informing them of their expected role in a 'crisis situation'. Finland has also increased its defence budget and is creating new Rapid Reaction Units (RRUs) to add a front-line rapid deployment combat force along its long border with Russia.

Sweden, in turn, is also increasing its defence budget and has ordered new fighter jets and submarines. Perhaps even more significantly, Stockholm is set to re-activate national military service, suspended since 2010, with the first new conscripts already being called up in 2017. Sweden is also permanently re-garrisoning the strategic island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea a year earlier than previously announced. In a snap decision in September this year, the Supreme Commander ordered the strategic reserve of the Swedish armed forces to deploy to the island and to remain there. A further sign of Sweden's urgency to boost its defences was the recent reactivation of previously decommissioned mobile coastal missile batteries by combining surplus equipment and, reportedly, parts taken from military museum displays.

The two militarily non-aligned Nordic EU member states have initiated close bilateral defence collaboration between each other, but have also increased their participation in regional NATO exercises and signed Host Nation Agreements with NATO in 2014. Finally, both Finland and Sweden signed separate bilateral defence cooperation agreements with the US in 2016.

The winters in the north are dark and cold. While spring will eventually arrive, careful preparation and constant vigilance are necessary before it does.

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