

Sweden and Finland Move Closer as Relations With Russia Cool

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STOCKHOLM — Sweden and Finland plan to extend their cooperation on defense and set up a joint naval task force as the two neighbors respond to rising tensions with Russia in the Baltic region.

Sweden and Finland have both have been alarmed by increased Russian military activity in the Baltic Sea and by Moscow's actions in Ukraine. Neither is part of NATO.

Swedish Defense Minister Peter Hultqvist said closer future cooperation would make a would-be attacker think twice.

"If we use our common resources and work in a coordinated way, it will ... be a signal to the wider world that raises the bar," the newspaper Dagens Nyheter quoted Hultqvist as saying.

He dismissed a suggestion that the move could anger Russia.

"In that case, it is their problem. We have a completely defensive agenda. We cannot act

on what other countries may feel and think," he said.

The two countries will not formally be committed to come to each other's aid in time of war, but Hultqvist said common defense was an option in such a scenario.

In a joint report, the two Nordic countries proposed a Swedish–Finnish naval task force that would become operational by 2023. Other plans include increased access to each other's marine bases and joint submarine chase drills.

Russian support for separatists in Ukraine has raised tensions across Europe and particularly in the Baltic states. NATO fighters scrambled more than 100 times in 2014 to intercept Russian aircraft, about three times as many as in 2013.

Sweden, Denmark and the UK have all summoned the Russian ambassadors to each country to complain of Russian military flights posing a danger to civil aircraft.

Sweden also conducted the biggest submarine chase in decades last year after sightings of a sub in the Stockholm archipelago. Although the defense forces said it could not identify the nationality of the submarine, most analysts suspected it was Russian.

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