Back to the future

As Russia flexes its military muscle, Sweden’s air and naval forces find themselves adapting to a changed Baltic security environment with echoes of the Cold War. Gareth Jennings and Richard Scott report

Although avowedly neutral during the decades-long stand-off between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, Sweden’s robust defensive posture during the Cold War was very much focused on the threat from the eastern side of the Baltic Sea.

So the end of the Cold War, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, and the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 heralded fundamental changes in Sweden’s defence and security outlook. Not least, the policy of neutrality was officially dropped in 1992 in favour of ‘military non-alignment’.

Two Gripen C fighters fly above the Baltic on a training mission. The Gripen C/D fleet will receive a substantial capability enhancement with the delivery of the MS20 material release next year. (Richard Scott/NAVYPIX)

With the Soviet threat gone, the previous focus on forces that were configured for anti-invasion operations was turned on its head. Successive governments instead espoused a security policy that was more outward
looking and distinctly international in its flavour; this was shown by increasing participation in 'out of area' peacekeeping and stabilisation missions far from its own borders under the umbrella of, or in co-operation with, organisations such as the UN, the European Union, and NATO.

More cordial relations with newly independent Russia, struggling with its own internal chaos, radically changed threat assessments. And with fears of invasion gone, politicians took the opportunity to reap a 'peace dividend', with personnel, equipment, and infrastructure scaled back across the armed forces.

"At the end of the Cold War, Sweden could mobilise about 850,000 soldiers," Brigadier General Gabor Nagy, Commander Air Component Command in the Swedish Air Force (SwAF), told the EW Europe 2015 conference in Stockholm in May this year. "We had over 20 brigades and 20 fighter squadrons [and] 40 air and naval bases."

Today, the picture is very different. The army can now mobilise one or two brigades, and the air force operates just two fighter squadrons. The navy has also shrunk significantly, with its main combat component now standing at four submarines and seven corvettes.

While the country remains militarily non-aligned, Swedish defence planning has subtly changed over the last two decades to reflect membership of the EU, and a much closer relationship with NATO through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) initiative. "We are building security together," said Brig Gen Nagy. "We have a close and extensive co-operation with NATO and have been participating in PfP since 1995."

Sweden has made a valued contribution to a number of multinational operations, notably Afghanistan, throughout the first one-and-a-half decades of this century. It was even said in some circles within the government and armed forces that the first line of defence for Sweden was the frontline in Afghanistan.

Underwater activity

If the air force got its wake-up call in March 2013, then it was the week-long search for a suspected foreign submarine in waters in and around the Stockholm archipelago in October 2014 that threw Sweden's naval capabilities into sharp relief. Indeed, this incident had far greater resonance across politicians, military, media, and public alike.

Following reports of 'foreign underwater activity', a major operation was launched on 17 October last year to try to detect, classify, and identify the suspected submarine. The search, involving units from all branches of the armed forces, continued for a week.

In a statement released in November 2014, the then Swedish Armed Forces Supreme Commander General Sverker Göranson said that, having further analysed the results of the intelligence operation, there was no doubt that a submarine had entered the archipelago and violated Sweden's territorial integrity. "The decisive observation is made by the Swedish Armed Forces' sensors," he said, without detailing the specific sensor type on the grounds that "it could disclose information on Swedish abilities and capacities". Furthermore, the analysis was unable to determine the nationality of the intruder.
A sign marks the spot where the infamous 'Whisky on the rocks' incident took place in 1981. A Russian Project 613 submarine became stranded on rocks just outside Karlskrona. (Richard Scott/NAVYPICX) 1643596

For Rear Adm Grenstad, the search operation rekindled memories of the Cold War era. "The first time we had a submarine problem was in the 1980," he recalled. "In 1981 we had the so-called 'Whisky on the rocks', [when] a Soviet submarine [Project 613/NATO reporting name 'Whiskey'] came into one of our restricted areas [becoming stranded on a rock] claiming a navigation error."

Further incidents, widely believed to have involved Soviet midget submersibles and swimmer delivery vehicles, were recorded in Harsfjarden naval base just outside Stockholm. "We were hunting a lot of submarines then," Rear Adm Grenstad said. "We never caught anybody, but there were 'fingerprints' two or three times."

[Continued in full version...]

Response force

With President Putin using his strategic bomber force as a key instrument by which to demonstrate his strength and resolve to the wider world, it has fallen in large part to Sweden's air force to take the lead in responding to Russian intrusions. Yet with its frontline strength now reduced to just 100 fighters, the service has latterly found itself somewhat ill-prepared to take on its 'new' role of homeland defence.

The lack of an appropriate capability for this new paradigm was articulated to reporters in May this year by Major General Micael Bydén, then SwAF Chief of Staff and since 1 October this year Supreme Commander of the Swedish Armed Forces. "We have a saying [in Sweden] that for the past 15 years we have been living under a 'strategic time out', when our entire focus was directed at being interoperable with others for
overseas missions. If I’m to be honest, though, we lost track of national defence [during this time] and we need to rebuild [that capability]."

The wake-up call for the SwAF came very early on the morning of 29 March 2013. According to an account published in the newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, Swedish radars detected six aircraft, flying at speed, approaching from the east. These were subsequently confirmed to be two Tu-22M3 'Backfire' bombers and four escorting Su-27 'Flanker' fighters.

The route itself was not unusual: Russian bombers periodically fly across the Baltic Sea to the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad (between Lithuania and Poland).

However, what was different this time was that the operation took place in the dead of night and that the aircraft then followed a flight profile consistent with a simulated attack on targets in the Stockholm area and southern Sweden. Furthermore, while the bomber group came close to Swedish airspace, the SwAF was caught off-guard: not a single Saab JAS 39 Gripen fighter was scrambled to intercept.

This led to much criticism in the national media. "The Swedish public's expectations were much higher than we delivered at the time," said Maj Gen Bydén. "It used to be easy for us - we were just looking east and we knew where the threat was coming from.

"All of a sudden, [in the early 2000s] we were expected to operate with others, far away from home, and this was a major change for us."

This swing towards international operations reached something of a climax in 2011 with the participation of eight Gripen C fighters, plus a single C-130 transport configured for aerial refuelling, as part of Operation 'Unified Protector' over Libya. This was the first time since the 1960s that Swedish combat aircraft had been sent into a 'hot' conflict.

According to the SwAF, the Gripen detachment, operating from Sigonella in Italy, flew 580 missions (mainly reconnaissance, but some defensive counter air). The deployment confirmed that investments in Gripen upgrades, efforts to ensure NATO interoperability, and participation in international exercises such as 'Red Flag' had all paid real dividends.

But 2013 brought a sharp jolt, with the operational pendulum swinging back towards the Baltic. By the end of that year, the number of QRA scrambles being conducted by the SwAF Gripen fighters had topped 400. And while this number dropped to about 340 in 2014, this may be attributed in part to the increased presence in the region of other NATO fighters to take on more of the air policing burden.

However, the reduction in the number of fighters and personnel is only part of the story of the SwAF’s struggle to readjust to the neo-Cold War reality. During the Cold War the SwAF was renowned for operating its fighters from dispersal bases and public highways scattered throughout the country, particularly in the far north. This all changed with the shift away from such a defensive mentality: the SwAF adopted a more conventional force structure, with assets and personnel located in just four permanent bases (but with some additional forward dispersal bases retained).

If the SwAF’s numerical strength is already reduced to the point where it is struggling to cope with the increased threat from Russia, then it is set to be reduced still further when the current 100 Gripen C/D fighters are replaced by just 60 Gripen Es from the early 2020s. Although significantly more capable platforms, they can only be in one place at one time and there is the very real danger that the SwAF’s frontline force might be stretched too thin to deal with the increased threat from the east.
With this in mind, the Swedish government is now looking to increase the Gripen E buy to 70 aircraft (although the air force still maintains a requirement for up to 80).

Further to this, for the first time Sweden is looking to equip its frontline fighter with a stand-off cruise missile. In the case of the Gripen, this will see it most likely equipped with the Taurus KE PD 350 to give the future 'E' variant fighter a greater offensive range (the current Gripen C is already provisioned to carry the Taurus KE PD 150 and KE PD 350 cruise missiles, but Sweden does not have these weapons in its inventory).

In the meantime, a series of planned block upgrades will see the existing Gripen C/D fleet further modernised in the coming years. Next year will see the SwAF field aircraft at MS20 (Materiel System 20) standard; this provides for integration of improved PS-05/A Mk 3 radar modes, the Boeing GBU-39 Small-Diameter Bomb, and MBDA's ramjet-powered Meteor beyond-visual-range air-to-air missile.

![Gripen E](image)

*The new Meteor BVR air-to-air missile is viewed as a 'game changer' in a high-threat defensive counter-air environment. (MBDA)*

**ASW on the agenda**

Changed strategic circumstances are also impacting on Sweden's maritime forces, particularly in the undersea domain. "We are in the middle of a trend shift," Rear Admiral Jan Thörnqvist, Chief of Staff of the Royal Swedish Navy (RSwN), told *IHS Jane's* during a briefing in May. "In my 39 years in the navy, the money has steadily gone down, but now we see a slight increase."

As with the air force, the RSwN has seen the focus of its operations shift back to the Baltic in recent years. And of course, the events that occurred in the Stockholm archipelago in October 2014 continue to resonate: it was as recently as September this year that the armed forces submitted their final analysis of the suspected undersea incursion to the Ministry of Defence. In a statement noting its receipt of the report, the government reaffirmed its conviction that it was "beyond reasonable doubt" that Swedish waters had been violated.
Swedish forces were mobilised in October 2014 after foreign 'underwater activity' was reported. The corvette HMS Visby is pictured patrolling the Stockholm archipelago on 19 October. (PA)

Reflecting on last year's operation, Rear Admiral Jan Thörnqvist explained, "It was started by an observation reported by civilians. We set up an intelligence collection operation, not an ASW operation. We wanted to find out if there was any underwater activity ongoing, or had there been any before.

"I should add that this was not just a navy operation; the air force was involved, civilian authorities were involved, [as were] the army security battalion and coastguard units. It was an operation that involved a lot more than the navy."

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The new Meteor BVR air-to-air missile is viewed as a 'game changer' in a high-threat defensive counter-air environment. (Saab)
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