

US, Sweden, Finland Launch New Format Talks: Dancing to Washington's Tune

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US Defense Secretary James Mattis visited Helsinki on Nov. 6-7 to attend a meeting of the Northern Group, a multilateral forum of 12 countries: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

Before the event, the secretary was received by Finnish President Sauli Niinistö and then met his counterparts from Sweden and Finland. This is the first time a US Defense Secretary held talks in this format. Looks like the tripartite format talks are going to become a regular event as a similar meeting was announced to be planned for 2018.

Finnish Defense Minister Jussi Niinistö [explained](#) that the goal of this format was meant to supplement, rather than replace, Finnish and Swedish bilateral relations with Washington. According to him, no new alliance is being built despite the expanded military cooperation with the United States. The minister also invited the US military to participate in large-scale military drills in 2020 or 2021. According to him, Finland started preparations for a major military exercise of a scale it had not arranged since the end of the Cold War.

“If there’s a crisis, it will be good for us to practice receiving help,” Jussi Niinistö said.

Formally a neutral country, Finland is offering a scenario which envisages receiving US-led NATO reinforcements, like if it were a full-fledged member of the North Atlantic Alliance to be defended in accordance with Article 5 of the Washington Treaty!

Erkki Tuomioja, a former foreign minister and member of the Social Democrat Party, [said](#) he believes the defense minister is skirting parliamentary procedures in pushing to host such a large exercise and that he intends to oppose the drills.

A poll [published](#) on Nov.5 suggested 59 percent of Finns are opposed to NATO membership. Only 22 percent support the idea. Finland is to hold presidential election on January 28, 2018. None of the current presidential candidates support NATO membership except for Nils Torvalds of the Swedish People’s Party, who is polling a meager 1 percent. Sauli Niinistö, the incumbent [who enjoys 76 percent support](#) ahead of the election, has pushed to keep the prospect of NATO membership open to be backed by a majority of Finns, possibly via a referendum. But Finnish Defense Minister Jussi Niinistö [keeps on stubbornly pushing](#) his country into NATO’s arms without taking political reality into consideration.

He also said that cooperation to combat hybrid warfare was a priority item on the agenda. The term hybrid warfare is used in the West to label Russia. The Helsinki-based hybrid threat center – the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats – commenced its operation on Oct. 4. 11 European governments plus the United States have joined forces to build it. Similar centers exist in other countries but this one is the first to link NATO with the auspices of the EU. Federica Mogherini, the European Union’s foreign policy chief, said the center is a sign that the two organizations are cooperating at “an unprecedented level,” as evidenced by Finland, an EU country that is not a NATO member, being the host.

Swedish Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist, a tripartite talks participant, sent a very important security policy message. Following the meeting with Mattis, the Swedish defense chief informed the parliamentary defense committee that the government had chosen the US missile system Patriot as a replacement for the current outdated defense Robot System 97. The idea is to equip Sweden’s two air defense battalions with Patriot missiles until 2025. Sweden — Finland’s closest military ally and another non-NATO member — [remilitarized the island of Gotland](#) in the Baltic Sea for the first time since the end of the Cold War and reintroduced conscription, among other things, to gradually move the country to war footing.

Some US-NATO deployments take place in the region for the first time ever. For instance, Baltops-2016 was [the first NATO exercise](#) to be held on Finnish territory. In September, US military made their first appearance on Swedish soil during the Aurora 17 military drills, the country’s largest training event in decades. Norway, a NATO member, [welcomed](#) an extended deployment of US Marines in June. It’s [the first time](#) a foreign force had been posted on Norwegian soil since World War II. Thus, Norway has actually shifted from the “no foreign forces on national soil” true-and-tried policy with political implications to follow. The Marines also have large stockpiles of tanks, artillery and other weaponry, which fill a network of caves. The equipment can accommodate roughly 14,000 troops, or a full Marine Expeditionary Brigade.

In June, Sweden and Finland joined the United Kingdom-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) – a rapidly deployable unit capable of conducting the full spectrum of NATO operations.

The countries of Northern Europe, including non-NATO Sweden and Finland, support the Permanent Structured Cooperation, or PESCO, to pull together at least 20 EU countries in jointly planning, developing and coordinating weapons and equipment for military. The initiative is complementary to the operations of NATO. [According to](#) the *Financial Times*, more than half the EU’s member states are expected to sign up within days to a landmark joint defence [effort](#) at a meeting of European foreign and defence ministers on November 13 and launch the project in December.

The militarization of Northern Europe rarely hits headlines, but a look at the facts shows the trend [is gaining momentum](#). It does not go unnoticed in Russia, prompting it to take appropriate measures. The recent [Zapad exercise](#) is an example. There is little wonder that Russia is concerned about the growing US influence in Northern Europe. After all, Russia belongs to the region, while the United States has no territorial or any other justification for its military presence there.

There will be a reaction if [Sweden](#) or [Finland](#) joins the North Atlantic Alliance. Even without formal membership, there is very little space between “being in NATO” and “being outside

the alliance.” Evidently, no such thing as military neutrality on the Scandinavian Peninsula exists anymore to make the abovementioned countries priority targets for Russian response in case a military conflict sparks. Russia did not start it but it has to react as the countries of the region appear to abandon traditional good neighbor policies in favor of dancing to US tune.

Peter Korzun is an expert on wars and conflicts.

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