

Despite Swedes' Sub Panic, Russia's Baltic Fleet Is Far From Fearsome

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Swedish corvette HMS Visby patrols the Stockholm Archipelago Oct. 19, searching for what the military says is a foreign threat in the waters.

As Sweden's navy goes on its sixth day of hunting a suspected Russian submarine, Swedish defense officials announced on Tuesday that they intend to force the mystery vessel, if found, to surface "with armed force, if necessary," the English-language Swedish newspaper The Local reported.

The announcement that Sweden is prepared to force the alleged submarine to the surface with depth charges represents a significant sharpening of rhetoric over what Swedish officials initially described as a maritime courtesy — seeking to help a ship possibly in distress.

Meanwhile, Sweden appears to be engrossed in full-on panic, with the Dagens Nyheter newspaper reporting that over 100 sightings of a suspect vessel have been called in to Swedish authorities in the past day, The Local reported Tuesday. Russia, for its part, has denied any

emergency situations involving a submarine.

But the possibility of an incursion into Swedish territorial waters, coming hot on the heels of NATO exercises in the Baltic, would not be unusual. In the past several years Russia has developed a pattern of provoking Western military powers in order to test their prowess, a sign that analysts say indicates Russia will continue to develop an antagonistic relationship with the West.

And while Sweden's fears may be overblown — Russia's Baltic Fleet is hardly Moscow's top priority, and some allege that the Swedes have even engineered the scare — the military game of chicken is worrying sign of declining diplomatic relations.

Resurgent Threat

While some scoff at Sweden's search, noting Cold War panics that turned up nothing more than wayward otters, the hunt comes hard on the heels of more explicit provocations.

The Russian Air Force in the last year openly practiced bombing Stockholm, violated Swedish airspace with fighter jets, and buzzed a Swedish surveillance plane — flying as dangerously close as 10 meters off the wing.

Russia's increased naval and air presence, however, is not an exception but the rule. Nations with borders or interests that rub against Russia's have reported a flurry of Russian sorties and patrols in and along their territories.

"There has been a gradual increase in Russian 'patrolling' over the last few years that has reflected a more confident and assertive Russian position, which has consolidated over the past decade," Dr. Neil Melvin of the Stockholm Peace Research Institute told The Moscow Times.

For example, last month has seen a Finish research vessel harassed at sea by Russian ships, and the abduction of an Estonian intelligence officer by Russian intelligence services at a border checkpoint.

Moving beyond the region, the U.S. and Canada intercepted six Russian MiG-31 jets off of Alaska in mid-September.

In early September, two Russian Tu-95 long-range strategic bombers were reportedly found to be practicing nuclear cruise missile strikes against the U.S. from the northern Atlantic.

"I think it has to do with signaling that Russia needs to be taken seriously, and that its all part of this effort to create an image that the Russian government is tired of being dismissed, or at least having its security concerns dismissed," Dr. Dmitry Gorenburg, a Harvard naval analyst who also works for the Virginia-based CNA think tank, told The Moscow Times by phone Tuesday.

NATO Targeted

Russia, however, is far from blindly pushing the West's buttons. Instead, analysts say that Moscow is particularly targeting countries belonging to NATO, likely in an attempt to get

a feel for its cohesion and propensity for action.

"Countries that have been particularly targeted for operations are those that are central to the Transatlantic alliance, and which are generally perceived to be critical of President [Vladimir] Putin's regime in Russia," Melvin said.

"The Baltic nations have a particular relevance given their former incorporation in the Soviet Union and their current NATO 'front-line' statuses. Russia appears to be nibbling at the edge of [NATO's commitment to defend members] to see how far it can go before there is a reaction," he said.

And just because neither Sweden nor Finland are NATO allies, it doesn't mean the current provocations aren't tied to the Western alliance. In the case of Sweden, "it's obvious that Putin doesn't like it when Finland and Sweden cooperate with NATO. So Russia is sending signals that it could get dangerous if you operate on military exercises with NATO," Tomas Ries of Stockholm's National Defense Academy told Vice News on Monday.

Sweden's Overreaction

But Sweden, in fact, may have little to be worried about when it comes to Russia's Baltic presence.

Although Russia's navy is one of the primary beneficiaries of Putin's ambitious 20 trillion ruble (\$500 billion) rearmament program, little funding has gone to the Baltic Fleet, where the suspected submarine in Swedish waters would be based.

"Progress is being made on the Baltic Fleet, but its quite slow," Mikhail Barabanov, a naval analyst at the Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST), told The Moscow Times on Tuesday.

Part of the Baltic Fleet's misfortune is a loss of infrastructure. While the outfit was very important to the Soviet Navy, its infrastructure was spread from Kaliningrad to Leningrad along the Baltic coast. Now, with the Baltic states independent, Kaliningrad is cut off from Russia, making it difficult to support a large fleet.

According to Russian analysts, Stockholm's domestic politics may be driving the Swedish sub hunt far more than any real threat. The Swedish navy, once flush with cash spent on chasing off suspected Soviet submarine activity, has been unable to justify those levels of funding in the last 20 years.

Sweden's ongoing hunt "is all nonsense," Barabanov said. "Maybe there is something there [in the archipelago], but most likely this is a traditional Swedish style fabrication to justify increasing the military budget."

The Swedes raised several notorious false alarms during their sub scares in the 1980s, sometimes identifying sounds made by otters as possible foreign intruders.

In any case, Swedish claims of a Russian submarine strain credulity today because Russia's Baltic Fleet has become largely demilitarized, Ruslan Pukhov, the director of CAST, told The Moscow Times on Tuesday.

"The number of submarines in the Baltic is close to zero, and obviously the submarines that can perform the type of mission alleged by the Swedes are stationed with the Northern and Pacific fleets," Pukhov said.

Harvard's Gorenburg underscored these points: "It is pretty unlikely to talk about sea battles between the Russian and Swedish navies. If something like that were to happen, the Baltic Fleet itself wouldn't be much of a threat but it would be reinforced by the Northern Fleet."

"As far as the Russian Baltic Fleet itself, well its not much of a fleet," he added.

Aside from a handful of Sovremenny-class destroyers, the fleet only has two small Kilo-class diesel-electric submarines, a frigate, and four corvettes. These forces are complemented by a number of smaller surface patrol ships — which are actually ideal for the shallow waters of the Baltic.

Bad Blood

The Swedes, of course, might be forgiven for thinking differently, given that the Soviets were caught red handed on one occasion. In what became known as the "Whiskey on the Rocks" incident, a Soviet Whiskey-class submarine ran aground near a Swedish naval base in 1981. Subsequent investigations into the incident revealed that the submarine was loaded with nuclear torpedoes.

And whether or not a Russian submarine is in Swedish territorial waters, the poor quality of diplomacy between the two over the hunt is telling, with Moscow doing little to assuage Sweden's fears that Russia is again a problem. Besides Russia's curt treatment of the ongoing search, this year has brought with it renewed talk of a Swedish bid to join NATO, a notion directly prompted by a sudden and unmistakable outburst of Russian military encroachments against Stockholm in particular, and the nations on the Baltic Sea in general.

"From a political point of view, the worst thing we can do is mess with neutral Sweden," Pukhov added, explaining that hawkish Swedish politicians may be seeing a mirage — something that isn't there but conforms to what they want to see.

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