

“Total Defense” —an Interview with Swedish Minister of Defense Peter Hultqvist



Last year the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency sent a pamphlet called “If Crisis or War Comes” to all households in Sweden; why was that needed?

Because we need a higher level of knowledge of how to handle a crisis situation, from an individual, family, and the whole society point of view. We must prepare people for every situation. During the Cold War, we did provide that sort of information on a regular basis to all households in Sweden. We ceased doing it after the Cold War ended, but now we have started it again, and it deals with both civilian and military crises.

What recent developments motivated you to revive this practice?

We have had a lot of problems with forest fires and climate-related developments that have had a direct impact on peoples’ standards of living. Moreover, recently our security situation has worsened; in 2008, we saw Russian aggression toward Georgia and then in 2014, Russia’s annexation of Crimea, as well as an ongoing war in Ukraine. We have also had Russian military activities and, from time to time, provocative behavior in our own neighborhood. So there is another security scenario today; that is why we sent out the pamphlet to all households.

Will you elaborate on the provocative Russian behavior you mentioned? What are its characteristics or the incidents you are referring to?

We have had, for example, Russian aircraft flying very close to our aircraft, as close as 10, 15, or 20 meters—very close and very dangerous. It is a way to show that they want to intimidate us, even when we are flying

PRISM Editor-in-Chief, Mr. Michael Miklaucic, conducted this interview on March 20, 2019.

in international airspace. We have also had similar incidents with vessels on the Baltic Sea, approaching even naval ships of the U.S. fleet. So, we have had provocative behavior toward naval vessels and aircraft, and we have also had activities in our neighborhood that you might characterize as information activities, that I believe are closely followed by the STRATCOM Centre of Excellence in Riga.

If you detect a higher level of threat, shouldn't there be an increase in Swedish defense spending?

We have invested a lot since the Crimean events of 2014 and will continue to do so. For the period 2016 to 2020, the early level of military expenditures has been raised with 15 billion kronor (SEK). It's a lot of money—a huge amount of money for Sweden. We are investing in new weapons systems, we invest in more exercises, we have reactivated conscription services. We have done a lot in the last four years to increase the Swedish military capability, and I think that has been noticed in the neighborhood as well as in the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] partnership.

And yet during the Cold War, Sweden invested as much as 4 percent of its gross domestic product [GDP] in the defense sector; today, defense spending is hovering at just over 1 percent.

I am not sure this GDP percentage approach is the best way to describe what we are doing in investments. It is more important to see which systems we are investing in, and how we are developing our army, our navy, and our air force; that is the real substance. And then you have differences in economic growth, which makes direct country-to-country comparisons not useful. We speak of what we are concretely doing, and what we are doing is respected by others.

What is the current personnel strength of the Swedish Armed Forces? At one time it was more than 600,000.

Currently around 60,000, but we must have the ambition to increase the number. After the end of the Cold War, different parts of the armed forces were reduced by 70 to 90 percent; it was a huge reduction. We must start building from that level. The problem is that it will take time. We have started a new trend to rebuild military capability; it will take a long time, but we will try to reduce that time by acting fast.

With the reinstatement of mandatory conscription, have you experienced any growth problems, such as a reduction in the quality of Swedish forces?

It was necessary to make this decision to reactivate conscription, because with a professional force of full-time soldiers only, we could not field full and exercised units that could be used in times of need. We needed more personnel, so we had to revive conscription; we now have 2018 first-year conscripts who are very motivated. We have the same system now as our neighbors in Norway, with part full-time soldiers, and part conscripts, which enhances our military force.

At one time there was talk of the Swedish armed forces being able to withstand an armed attack for at least one week. What is the current expectation regarding withstanding an armed attack from a major adversary?

That is a very complicated question that is directly connected to the specific scenario and what is actually happening on the ground, so, you cannot say one day, three days, one week, one month. It depends entirely on what we are discussing, and I do not want to speculate about that because it will likely be wrong. The important thing is that we are investing in a higher level of capability and that we are delivering it. We are placing military forces on the island of Gotland, for example, which we have

not done before. We have a higher level of exercises than before—we do more in bilateral, multilateral, and NATO partnership–related exercises based on different scenarios. We have these two legs in our strategy; one is to upgrade our national military capability, and two is to upgrade and deepen international cooperation.

Will you please explain the concept of “Total Defense” and how it works?

Total Defense is the total mobilization of a society in a war situation—what you can mobilize on the civilian side and on the military side together, and what you can do on the civilian side to support the military effort. It includes what you can do in private companies, as well as in the public sector and authorities. We had a huge civil defense organization during the Cold War, but since then it has atrophied, and now we are starting the complicated process of rebuilding that capacity. If the military organization is to work in reality, you need this support from the civilian side, such as infrastructure, healthcare, and all these things that are required for effective military operations.

Does Total Defense provide a strategy of resistance in case of occupation?

Our strategy is to defend Sweden and Swedish territory. We will continue to fight under all circumstances without any time limits.

Do you find your civilian counterparts willing to cooperate voluntarily in this Total Defense?

We are finding more and more interest. People are waking up and are really interested in being in these organizations. We have had a lot of public education as well as within our public authorities and in different companies and municipalities around these questions. Most of the military exercises we field today have direct connections to the civilian society.

Is the Swedish public as sensitized to the new threat environment as the defense authorities are?

There is a growing interest about this in public opinion; many citizens are interested in volunteering if something happens. We have seen this with the forest fires last summer; many people wanted to be engaged and be helpful. The problem is almost what to do with all these volunteers. We see direct interest if something happens; the challenge is to prepare and educate people beforehand, so that we can deploy them effectively in a peaceful environment or when a security crisis comes.

How are you preparing them?

We have voluntary organizations and exercises and education programs directly connected to local municipalities, in official authorities, as well as in private companies.

You mentioned provocative Russian behavior earlier; has Sweden experienced any form of Russian information or influence operations or interference in election processes?

We were very clear in this last election that if we were to see any tendency to interfere in some way, we will make it very clear to the Swedish public that someone is trying to interfere. We were very clear on that and gave instructions to our authorities to follow up closely, what is happening in social media and what is happening all around us. We did not see anything that we had to take to the public or debate—nothing to the level that you had in the United States.

What is Sweden doing to defend its cybersecurity?

We have groups of companies in different sectors working together and sharing experiences and technical solutions for how to handle such activities and attacks, and how to develop the techniques and the ways to handle such situations so we are more effective in defending ourselves. We have the same

process taking place in our public authorities and in the public sector. In addition, we made a decision in the Parliament that the defense forces should develop what we call “active cyber capabilities,” and they are working on that.

Could you describe those “active cyber capabilities?”

Without going into detail, this is an ability to defend ourselves and respond appropriately when provoked or attacked in the cyber domain.

Sweden recently purchased a Raytheon Patriot missile system; why does Sweden need a Patriot missile system?

Because we need new air defense capabilities. We have older systems today, and we need to invest in something new. We evaluated and analyzed different systems through our procurement process. The Patriot system was the best choice.

The Patriot system is a very competent ground-based air defense system and has a verified capability against tactical ballistic missiles. That was, among others, one of the reasons the Swedish Armed Forces decided to choose Patriot.

You mentioned stationing troops on the island of Gotland; is the troop presence there sufficient to defend Gotland from Russian encroachment?

We gave an instruction to the Defense Commission to present a report on this on 14 May. One element of the report will be the next step on Gotland. In my view, we need to do more there. At present, we have a mechanized company and a tank company and national guard and air defense capability, but we need to do more. We have the possibility today to have the air force as well as a naval presence there.

There is concern about the vulnerability of the Baltic nations to the kind of Russian aggression seen in Georgia and Ukraine. If Russia were to take

aggressive action in the Baltics, is Sweden prepared to come to the defense of your Baltic neighbors?

What we would do in an actual wartime scenario is not easy to say beforehand. What we are doing today is to increase cooperation with the Nordic and Baltic countries, with the NATO partnership, and other countries through exercises to increase interoperability. Interoperability is what is needed if we come to a situation where we need to help another country in a crisis situation. From my point of view, it is hard to imagine that only one country would be affected if something were to happen. In a very short time, all of us would be involved in some way. If we want to raise the threshold, we must build it on cooperation between countries before anything happens because that makes a real threshold. What we will do in an actual situation, we won't know until we are there. We have already provided aid to France connected to the Lisbon Treaty, when they required support after the terrorist attacks in Paris.

Why hasn't Sweden joined NATO?

We are not currently interested in changing our military and security doctrine. Anything Sweden does has a direct effect on Finland, which has a long border with Russia. Our analysis is that if we change our security doctrine, we immediately come into a situation of heightened military tension and activity in the region. We would also be pushing our neighbors into a more complicated situation. The best we can do is to see the situation around us as it is, not changing our basic doctrine, but upgrading our military capabilities, deepening cooperation with other countries, and preparing to take or give help to others if it is needed. We have now an agreement with NATO for host nation support, and today we have direct operational planning with Finland. That provides for direct cooperation in a wartime scenario. But we need to make a political decision to do so at the specific time (it will not be automatic).

When U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis was here last year, you discussed the status of the bilateral Statement of Intent to promote military cooperation. What does Sweden hope to gain from that Statement of Intent?

Yesterday I met with U.S. forces up in the north of Sweden participating in Exercise Northern Wind. The U.S. Air Force will be participating in the Arctic Challenge Exercise in June this year. We have many other exercises with American units working with Swedish units. Having a U.S. presence in our exercises is very helpful because it gives a clear security signal. I hope we can continue to develop what we are doing together in exercises. Information sharing, cooperation, international operations, research—all these things are regulated in the Statement of Intent. This Statement of Intent gives a very clear signal within our organization—and to our authorities—about our ambition to develop the Swedish–U.S. relationship. I believe it is perceived in the United States that the Statement of Intent is a clear signal from Sweden to the U.S. authorities and the Administration that Sweden is going to cooperate in an increasingly beneficial way. What we are doing now, connected to our strategy of cooperation with other countries, Nordic and Baltic countries, the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, France—we are building stability step by step in our part of the world, in our part of Europe. NATO's enhanced forward presence in the Baltics will also have a very positive impact on the security situation and build greater stability there. Our focus is to enhance our own national defense capabilities and to form partnerships with others, partnerships that stabilize the situation in our close environment. **PRISM**