Tomorrow's Affairs

Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

NATO war game in Sweden tests response to Russia

The war game scenario was this: One of NATO 's newest members, Sweden, was under threat by an unnamed country that was building up troops along the military alliance's eastern border.

And in an unusual twist, non-NATO member Ukraine was there to advise on drone warfare.

The Associated Press was allowed to witness the Swedish-led military exercise this week as Europe faces not only the threat of Russia but the wavering of NATO's most powerful member, the United States.

The war game that also involved U.S. forces played out with a real threat in mind. For months, Russia has ramped up sabotage including cyberattacks against critical infrastructure and disinformation against countries across Europe, as detailed by an AP investigation.

The war game scenario — with the Swedish island of Gotland in theory facing power outages and food shortages because of sabotage — tested what NATO members might do before NATO's collective defense clause, Article 5, has been invoked.

"In theory, it could happen tomorrow," said Rear Adm. Jonas Wikström, director of the exercise.

Europe considers Trump's volatile approach to NATO

Sweden's chief of defense, Gen. Michael Claesson, noted that the U.S. is Europe's most militarily capable ally so "any change in the American presence" affects the overall dynamics.

He told the AP that announcements by President Donald Trump of troop reductions in Europe are interpreted "as the Americans are leaving — and they are not."

Europe's military leaders, however, are watching closely how Trump and his administration treat NATO, which Trump has described as a "paper tiger."

> Everything that offers European allies freedom of action is good - Gen. Michael Claesson

Most recently, he has ordered the withdrawal of at least 5,000 U.S. troops from Germany and threatens to remove more.

Trump also has criticized allies, and NATO, for not coming to the aid of the U.S. in the Iran war, while U.S. air defense systems and missiles have been moved toward the Middle East from Europe, raising concerns about gaps in protection.

Some European nations have been told they will face delays to their orders of U.S. weapons.

Claesson denied that recent announcements — including that of a "hybrid navy" by a group of Nordic and Baltic nations, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands — was a hedge against a possible future where the U.S. does not come to the aid of NATO allies.

But, he said, "everything that offers European allies freedom of action is good."

The U.K. and Norway also aim to build a combined frigate fleet, said Marte Gerhardsen, state secretary at the Norwegian Ministry of Defense.

Ukrainian drone forces destroy Swedish troops in exercise

Since Trump returned to the White House in January 2025, he also has paused intelligence sharing with Ukraine and at times aligned with Moscow in negotiations to end the war.

In the war game scenario this week, Ukrainian forces had a chance to demonstrate what they have learned on the battlefield and why their country might be a worthy NATO member.

A group of Ukrainian drone pilots, invited to teach Western forces how to win at drone warfare, destroyed Sweden's troops in an exercise, a 24-year-old drone pilot told the AP.

"They stopped the training three times" for troops to work out what to do better, but if it were real life they would have been dead, he said, giving his call sign Tarik in line with Ukrainian military regulations.

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Swedish troops have potential but need to improve their drones and tactics and commanders need a deeper understanding of drone warfare, said another pilot with the call sign Karat.

He described flying small, first-person-view attack drones on the front line against Russian forces. Sometimes drone pilots are supported by reconnaissance drone teams but other times they are "working blindly."

Western forces cannot understand what it is like, he added: "You need to see this with your own eyes."

All Western forces need to "learn rapidly" how to perform drone and counter-drone operations, and the "fastest" way is to listen to the Ukrainians, Claesson said.

"What they've taught us is you have to really focus on your survivability and how you can't be detected," said Brig. Gen. Curtis King with the U.S. military. At the same time, he said, Western nations need to focus on "deep" detection capabilities to spot drones from far away.

Such knowledge is desperately needed along Russia's border with NATO where there has been a spate of drone incursions in recent months, including from Ukrainian drones sent off course by Russian jamming.

The goal is to have systems that work together so that radar made by different companies in different countries can be integrated to share data and track threats, King said. That process has started but, "we're not there yet."

Putin could use Gotland to test the alliance

The war game exercise focused on the Swedish island of Gotland because it is strategically located in the Baltic Sea between the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad – where Moscow has stationed missiles – and Sweden.

"If you control Gotland, you pretty much control the central part of the Baltic Sea," Claesson said.

> A very reasonable scenario is that Putin could use Gotland to test NATO - Gen. Michael Claesson

The Baltic Sea is a financial lifeline for Russia as vessels with its "shadow fleet" carry oil and liquefied natural gas that Moscow uses to fund its war in Ukraine.

After the Cold War, Sweden effectively abandoned its military presence on Gotland but Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 prompted a rethink and a strengthened military presence there. And Sweden, along with Finland, decided to join NATO in 2024.

"A very reasonable scenario" is that Russian President Vladimir Putin could use Gotland to test NATO by trying to take a thin sliver of alliance territory to probe the collective reaction, Claesson said.