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**Key note speech by Minister for Defence of Sweden
Peter Hultqvist at seminar arranged by Institut Français
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2015**

*Regional and Global Impact: The Changing Situation in
Northern Europe and the Baltic Sea Area*

This year we commemorate the end of the Second World War, 70 years ago.

Time to reflect over the trauma and devastation this war caused in Europe.

Time to reflect on the time consuming and hard work carried out to recover.

Time to reflect over the efforts made to prevent war from threatening our lives and our way of living again - the European Union still being one of the best examples of this.

The lessons provided 70 years ago must be repeated, again and again. Especially at times like this when in and around Europe security is challenged, putting our core values and solidarity at test. European unity is key when responding to these challenges.

We are facing serious challenges in our southern neighbourhood. The conflicts and crises in North Africa and the Middle East have serious implications for Europe as a whole. The brutality of ISIL has shocked the world. The reintegration of foreign fighters poses a huge challenge to Sweden and other European states. The risks of terrorist attacks in European states being one obvious example from which France has suffered tremendously.

The events of the Second World War caused millions of people in Europe to leave their homes. Today, 70 years later, approximately 60 million refugees from other parts of the world

leave their homes because of war and persecution. Most of them stay in their own or neighbouring countries. A small number of these desperate people put their lives at risk to cross the Mediterranean. Many of them do not make it to the shores of the EU. This is a concern for all of us.

At the same time Europe is facing a more provocative and destabilising Russia that has lowered the threshold for using military force, a Russia that violates international law and dissociates itself from Western values.

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and support of separatists in eastern Ukraine is the greatest challenge to the European security order since it was established 25 years ago.

The Russian actions are not only an aggression on Ukraine but constitute a threat to the right to make free policy choices of all countries in Russia's neighbourhood. This is a cornerstone in the EU and the European security order.

Therefore, the Russian aggression against Ukraine is a concern to us all and makes our response all the more important.

We need to increase our common understanding of Russia's actions. Russia is continuously using a broad spectrum of means to assert influence over neighbouring countries. Russia is also active in dividing Western countries in order to complicate our decision-making.

Europe and the USA need to stand together on our policy towards Russia.

- Firstly, we need a united Europe, in cooperation with the USA, in order to be resilient to Russian pressure and vigilant to Russian inducement.

- Secondly, we need a policy towards Russia which makes aggressive actions more difficult and expensive but leaves the door open for a peaceful solution. The EU must meet

Russia's actions with firmness as well as with dialogue. The sanctions policy is the expression of the first, while our support to a diplomatic solution is proof of the latter.

- Thirdly, we need a successful Europe that can show how open societies work, demonstrate cooperation and show a democratic alternative to Russia.

The success of the Ukrainian reform process is of strategic importance - to Ukraine, to the broader region and to Europe. A successful, democratic and prosperous Ukraine can serve as a powerful rebuttal of Russia's policy to exercise influence over its neighbours, using force and coercion. A successful development in Ukraine will serve as a role model for other countries aspiring to build a democratic and economically sound future.

It would be a serious blow to Europe, the EU, European and transatlantic security if European core values are not defended and if we cannot stand up against Russia and support Ukraine.

The Swedish neighbourhood is a tangible border area between Russia and the West. The significance of the Baltic Sea Region to European security has increased. Russia is clearly seeking to increase influence over, what it considers as its area of interest. I believe this area includes parts of the Baltic Sea region.

There are clear signs of Russian military activity intensifying in the Baltic Sea region. Russia is showing a more challenging behaviour and violations of territorial integrity are more frequent than before. The military-strategic situation has deteriorated and the region has become less secure.

Russian military capability has increased since 2008. To my judgement this is a continuing process. By investing almost 5 percent of GDP in the Russian Armed Forces Russia sends a clear message about their priorities. Investments in the Armed Forces are at the highest level since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Let me give you a few examples to illustrate developments in the Baltic Sea region:

- During the last two years we have seen a steady increase in Russian military exercises and intelligence operations in the Baltic Sea Region. Russian exercises are more complex and of higher quality than seen before. All branches are included – land, sea, air.
- We have seen an increase since 2011 in Russian strategic bombers (Backfire) flying over the Baltic Sea. For the first time since the breakup of the Soviet Union we identified long-range strategic bombers (Bear) flying over the Baltic Sea in 2013.

Sweden believes that challenges to European security must be met through cooperation and joint action. But on the national level, every country must take their share of the responsibility.

Sweden is pursuing a two-tiered defence policy: reinforcing our military capability by increasing defence spending by 11 per cent from 2016 to 2020 and building increased security in our region and Europe as a whole by cooperation with other countries and organisations.

The most recent Swedish Defence Bill was agreed by a broad majority in Parliament early this summer. The bill was produced in the context and in light of the developments in Russia and the Russian aggression towards Ukraine and developments in the Baltic Sea Region.

The Swedish government has decided to make substantial increases in defence spending for the first time in many decades. This is a clear sign of how serious my government assesses the developments in our region and a deteriorated military-strategic situation for Sweden.

The key priority is to enhance the warfighting capability of the Armed Forces, as well as to develop a new Total Defence concept which includes both military and civilian defence.

After many years of substantial contributions to international crisis management the new defence bill calls for a renewed regional focus, with emphasis on national defence and planning for wartime scenarios.

Sweden builds security together with others. This is a core principle in Swedish security and defence policy. We are deepening our cooperation with our Nordic countries, in particular with Finland, the Baltic States, the EU, NATO and the USA. The transatlantic link is of key importance, as well as a unified European response to the events challenging European and global security.

International exercises play an essential role in upholding operational capability and by sending a distinct political signal about our determination to defend ourselves as well as about our solidarity with Western countries and NATO.

Sweden wants to deepen regional cooperation to allow us better work together in upholding the security situation and raise the threshold for military incidents and conflicts. Cooperation must also include the Baltic States and other countries around the Baltic Sea such as Poland and Germany.

Equally, and by necessity, the United States plays a key role. The Transatlantic link is decisive for European security and should be strengthened.

Sweden welcomes the enhanced collective defence measures taken by NATO. NATO has a key role to ensure stability in and around the Baltic Sea.

The challenges we face in the European neighbourhood point to long term destabilization. Europe has a key role in meeting the global challenges and threats we are facing. Only a united EU ready to stand up for its principles, will be able to contribute to European peace and stability in close cooperation with NATO and the USA. We should stay the course.