



Ålands fredsinstitut

The Åland Islands Peace Institute

NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations

”Military exercise to be held near Åland in the fall”

In early September, the Finnish Navy is again hosting a multinational crisis management exercise, in this case the exercise ”Northern Coasts 2014” (NOCO). Just like in autumn 2010, soldiers, ships, submarines and aircraft from many different countries, mostly NATO members, are to participate. Most of the participating countries are bound by the demilitarization conventions of 1856 and 1921.

In 2010, following discussions in the Contact Group between Åland and the Foreign Ministry of Finland and in the media, the Government of Åland decided to submit to the leadership of the forces involved in the NOCO exercise of 2010 an information dossier on the demilitarization and neutralization of Åland. The aim was to provide information on applicable legislation and to clarify the implications of the demilitarization and neutralization regime.

The NOCO exercises have been conducted annually since 2007, at different locations and with different hosts. It is an international exercise where fighting techniques and tactics are in focus. The goal is to practice these techniques with a complex, multinational battle group in a fictitious crisis scenario. In 2013, Sweden for the first time hosted and acted as planning manager for the exercise. There is no indication on whether the Swedish commanders in this case received a similar information package about demilitarization as was distributed in 2010.

In advance of the upcoming NOCO exercise in 2014, the Navy Commander Kari Takanen has said that the exercise, that is at this point fully planned, builds a scenario of two fictitious countries in crisis who need the help of an outside nation or organization. It will be the Navy's chief of staff Juha Vauhkonen who will lead the entire exercise.

In November 2013 the Government of Åland has presented a comprehensive policy paper for the Åland demilitarization and neutralization. The policy describes the experience of the Northern Coasts exercise in 2010, when the demilitarization was confirmed and respected. An overarching conclusion in this policy paper is that the Åland government and parliament will pursue efforts to ensure that the significance of Åland's status as a demilitarized and neutralized area maintains its relevance and continues to be considered as part of valid international law.

It is reasonable to expect that also in 2014 the leadership of the NOCO exercise, in Finland as well as on the international level, should receive an updated information dossier in English. The matter concerns not only the status of Åland. Long-term or temporary demilitarization can play a role in many conflicts, before and after a potential armed conflict. During the war phase also neutralization can be a solution that suppresses the war's devastating effects and allows for discussion and confidence-building. In those instances, just like in the case of Åland, the demilitarized and neutralized zone needs to be respected by all parties involved, including international military forces.

Finally, however, it is also necessary to question if frequent military exercises in the Baltic Sea is really an opportune instrument at a time when military escalation in the immediate area and globally makes the risk of war all the more palpable. How can we and our governments best work in order to actively promote contacts, trust and military detente?

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