
FINLAND TO RAMP UP TROOP LEVELS AMID HEIGHTENED RUSSIAN TENSIONS

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Worried about increasing East-West tensions in the Baltic Sea, Finland announced plans on Thursday to increase its wartime troops by 20 percent, from 230,000 to 280,000.

Finland - which is not a NATO member but has compulsory military service - cut its army down from 350,000 troops to 230,000 in 2012.

The troop boost will "improve the capability to defend the entire territory of the country," the government wrote in a defense report. Finland shares a 1,340 kilometer (830 mile) border with Russia.

"Russia aims to strengthen its great-power status, and it has expressed the goal of a sphere-of-influence based security regime," the report said.

The Nordic country also plans to replace its aging naval fleet and its 62 Hornet fighter jets during the next decade.

The government also said it wants to add 55 million euros (\$58.6 million) to its annual military spending of 2.4 billion euros (\$2.56 billion). However, Helsinki said it want to greatly increase annual defense spending by 150 million euros (\$160 million) starting in 2021.

The measures are part of a defense policy report that the government will present to parliament next month.

Finnish Finance Minister Petteri Orpo said the investments would raise the country's defense expenditure to 1.5 or 1.6 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) by the 2020s.

Currently, the country's defense budget is around 1.4 percent of its GDP.

In October 2016, Helsinki signed a bilateral defense cooperation deal with the US.

Finland stepped up its military cooperation with neighboring Sweden following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Finland's decision to increase its defense measures follows the arrival of NATO troops from the United States and Germany in several other Baltic states.

rs/kl (AFP, Reuters)

Kaynak/Source: