

Europe scrambles to defend underwater infrastructure

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Western and Central European countries have been taking rapid action to defend what they perceive as a growing threat to the region's critical infrastructure.

Italy's Defence Minister Lorenzo Guerini said that the country's military would take immediate steps to reinforce the protection of trans-Mediterranean gas pipelines. The Italian navy will deploy remote-controlled submarines to monitor key areas of the Mediterranean, particularly around infrastructure used to transport gas from northern Africa. Long-dependent on Russian supplies of energy, Italy has assured sufficient alternative supplies of gas from northern Africa to make up for any shortfalls in deliveries from Russia, and the latest moves appear to be an added precaution that such alternative sources do not suffer a similar fate as befell the Nord Stream pipelines last week.

Sweden sent a diving vessel on Monday to the places where Nordstream 1 and 2 ruptured last week in the Baltic Sea, following explosions in the area.

"The coast guard is responsible for the mission, but we are supporting them with units," a spokesperson for the Swedish navy, Jimmie Adamsson, told *Reuters*. "The only one we are naming is HMS Belos, which is a submarine rescue and diving vessel."

The Swedish coast guard said Nord Stream 1 had stopped leaking, but an overflight suggested gas was still draining out of Nord Stream 2 and bubbling to the surface over a 30 metre radius.

Meanwhile, Norway's armed forces has increased the number of patrols of the country's energy facilities. NATO allies have offered assistance.

Norwegian prime minister Jonas Gahr Store said Norway had accepted offers of assistance from Germany, France and the UK as it increases its presence around oil and gas installations in the North Sea. NATO is also using its naval and air capabilities to monitor the Baltic and North Seas.

The prime minister visited a platform on the Equinor-operated Sleipner field in the North Sea on Saturday to meet with oil workers, he said.

“This sends a message of allies’ and NATO readiness to protect and defend each other, also critical infrastructure,” NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg told reporters. “These allies, these capabilities, these planes, these ships are also collecting information — data which can be helpful both for the ongoing investigation but also to monitor these critical energy infrastructures.”

Norway has also pledged to make its defence forces “more visible” around the oil and gas facilities and energy giants Equinor ASA, Var Energi ASA and other firms are adding to the security at their facilities.

The country’s pilot union on Friday called for immediate measures from the government to ensure the safety of helicopters flying out to offshore installations. It has asked for technical equipment that may be available aboard military vessels to track the drones and find out who is operating them.

There remained concerns about Europe’s ability to protect all 8,300km of pipeline used by Norway. The Norwegian security service has also noted that it was not allowed to use wiretapping and data mining for that purpose. The government plans to propose changes in parliament later this year to the legal framework for the security police, allowing them to “adapt to the changing and developing environment that they’re working in,” Justice and Public Security Minister Emilie Enger Mehl said on Friday September 30th.

Norway has also increased preparedness in the electronic communication sector, with particular attention around marine fibre cables. Earlier this year, a data cable connecting the Arctic islands of Svalbard to Norway’s mainland was damaged, with officials concluding “human action” had led to the subsea cable’s rupture.