

BURDEN SHARING AND SPECIALIZATION

AFTER SWEDEN AND FINLAND'S NATO ACCESSION

On May 18, 2022, the Swedish and Finnish NATO ambassadors formally submitted their membership applications to the alliance. In doing so, they ended decades – in Sweden's case, centuries – of military nonalignment and overlapping but varied security arrangements in the Nordics and Baltics. Sweden and Finland, whose bilateral defense cooperation has deepened substantially in recent years, will now contribute to NATO's defense of the Arctic and the Baltic Sea region.

In the anthology "Stronger Together", published in cooperation between Stockholm Free World Forum and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, authors from Sweden, Finland, and beyond will explore how Sweden and Finland will adapt to NATO and vice versa. This report is adapted from a chapter in the book.



Major General (ret.) Karlis Neretnieks is a member of the Swedish Royal Academy of War Sciences and was previously President of the Swedish National Defence College.

Sweden and Finland joining NATO will increase security and stability in the Nordic-Baltic region. The Nordics, the Baltic Sea and the Baltic states must be considered as one area of operations. An attack against any of the countries will affect the territories of the others. Now, with all countries in the region soon to be members of NATO, it is possible to coordinate operational planning, create a common command environment and develop national force structures that complement each other.

The fact that the entire region, except Russia, will consist of NATO members does not change the overall threat picture. Russia's interests will essentially be the same. To protect its SSBNs (Ballistic Nuclear Submarine) and its Northern fleet is of utmost strategic importance to Russia. The

desire to increase the safety zone around the bases on the Kola Peninsula in case of a crisis or war will therefore remain. The wish to influence its "near abroad", primarily the Baltic states, but also the Nordics, will not disappear. The ambition to weaken NATO and the EU will continue on the agenda. The resurgence of Russian imperial ambitions cannot be ignored either.

The frontline states will remain the same, and the threats similar to those of today. Norway will still need to pay close attention to the defense of its northern parts and the Norwegian Sea. Finland will still have a long border with Russia. Finnish Lapland, with its proximity to the Russian bases on the Kola Peninsula will continue to pose a special problem. All the Baltic states will remain vulnerable. For these countries, the main question will be: how can the defense problems we already have today be solved in a better way when put in a Nordic-Baltic NATO context? On the other hand, one country will need to radically reconsider its military planning and defense posture: Sweden. In addition to countering an attack through northern Finland, the need for Swedish military capabilities has, until now, been linked to a possible threat to the Baltic states. By taking parts of Swedish territory, Russia would be able to largely isolate the Baltic states from the outside world, cutting off shipping and air traffic across the Baltic Sea. That is a threat that still has to be taken into consideration, but now Sweden will also have an opportunity – and an obligation – to support the frontline states in its defense efforts. It will no longer just be a question of defending its own territory.

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was before 1809, when Russia conquered Finland, which had until then been a part of Sweden. The defense of Norway will also become a clear Swedish concern. What does it mean that the Baltic Sea, from having been a moat protecting Sweden, will now be a NATO Mare Nostrum tying the alliance together? Apart from Sweden's new role, what kind of synergies can be achieved by pooling resources and coordinating military activities in a Nordic context? This short chapter will not give all the answers, just point at some areas where Finland and Sweden joining NATO could lead to substantially increased common Nordic capabilities, and increased security for the Baltic states.

Regarding possible Swedish measures, the suggestions below are based on possibilities if the defense budget was increased from the present planning level of 1.5 percent of GDP (to be reached in 2025) to 2 percent of GDP. This is a level all political parties have agreed on, but there is no decision on when it should be reached. Norway, Finland, Poland and the Baltic states are already spending 2 percent of GDP or more. Very roughly, this means that only Sweden has money not yet allocated to specific projects that could be used to develop capabilities to fulfil specific NATO needs. This opportunity should not be wasted.

Despite NATO's aim to create a high-readiness force of 300,000 personnel prepared to deploy within ten to thirty days – as presented at the Madrid Summit in June 2022 – there will always be an uncertainty regarding how much can be allocated to the Nordic area, and when help can be in place. In war, unfore-

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seen events are a common occurrence. Although help might be forthcoming from larger and more powerful allies, these uncertainties make a strong argument to organize matters in a way to ensure a decent fight before the cavalry arrives. Let us call it Article 3 in the North Atlantic Treaty (the obligation of all members to defend their own territory) in a Nordic context, instead of binding it to purely national capabilities. As already mentioned, Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO will not radically change the challenges the countries in the region are facing, except for Sweden.

Sweden will, to a large extent, become a hub or a staging area, from where resources from Sweden and other NATO members can be deployed in different directions to support neighboring countries. Sweden's defense structure should be optimized primarily to protect “hub functions”, including infrastructure, lines of communication on land, sea and in the air, and generating assets that can be sent to the frontline states. Possible Swedish support to the frontline states could be described either as indirect or direct, although the boundaries between the two categories will be fluid. Indirect support would primarily be measures ensuring the frontline states' resilience. Direct support would entail operations with Swedish units on other allies' territory. The indirect support would, among other things, mean keeping lines of communication open to neighboring countries, on land, sea and in the air. This task will place very high demands on Swedish air de-

fense capabilities and the ability to protect shipping across the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Bothnia, to Finland and the Baltic states. The number of ships in the Swedish Navy would have to be increased, especially in such areas as anti-submarine-warfare, air defense and mine countermeasures. Secure communications between Sweden's eastern neighbors and the outside world are crucial to keep their economies running and for them to receive military assistance from NATO allies.

Another form of indirect support could be to adapt some Swedish air bases to handle the F-35 system, as a joint Nordic project. This would not only create a more sustainable base system in the region, but also give greater freedom of action to utilize the different types of aircraft in the Nordic air forces when tackling different tasks. When looking at military operations in the Nordic region, one should keep in mind that the distances involved are very long in a European context. The distance, as the crow flies, between Nordkapp in northern Norway and Copenhagen is longer than the distance from London to Palermo on Sicily, 2,000 km. If you fly west-east, it is 1,000 km between Værnes (Norway's main base for their F-35s) to Riga. In addition, such an enhanced basing concept would make it easier for American air assets to quickly deploy to the Nordic area, which is probably the kind of support that could be expected to arrive earliest in a tense situation or in case of war.

What could, then, be a realistic ambition when it comes to direct support that would also make a difference? The greatest weakness regarding the defense of the Nordic-Baltic area is the lack of ground forces in the two most threatened directions, the High North

and the Baltics. In both cases, Sweden could make substantial and important contributions. Within the framework of the ongoing Swedish rearmament program, it would be realistic to create another brigade – in addition to the existing one – in northern Sweden. Together with Norwegian and Finnish units, this would form a credible deterrence in the High North when it comes to capabilities on the ground.

The lack of sufficient ground forces is an even more acute problem in the Baltic states. The countries are small and the possibility to exchange ground for time, something that exists in the North, is not an option here. An attacker must be stopped very early. In addition, the proximity to more resource-rich parts of Russia means that Russian possibilities of maintaining momentum in a military operation there are considerably greater. If it were possible to deploy one or both of the two Swedish brigades presently being formed in southern Sweden across the Baltic Sea at an early stage in a conflict – or preferably already before a crisis escalates to war – that would make a considerable difference when it comes to halt a Russian attack.

This option is especially interesting since Swedish units are likely to be the ones that can get to the Baltics first. There is a considerable difference between moving resources from, for example, the US or the UK, compared with moving them from Sweden. The distance from the ferry port Nynäshamn in Sweden to Ventspils in Latvia is less than 300 km, a distance that is easily covered in ten hours by the civilian car ferries that already travel the route. Perhaps Finland, despite being a frontline state, should also consider the possibility of contributing ground forces to the defense of Estonia. In this context, it would also be natural for

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Sweden and Finland to participate in NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence scheme in the Baltics.

This way to reorientate Swedish (and Finnish) defense planning is underscored by NATO's new, or rather revived, concept of "forward defense" with the aim to stop a Russian attack early on. The strategy of creating a tripwire with limited forces and then retake lost ground with follow-on forces is no longer relevant. Overall, Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO offers several options to develop mutually supporting structures in the region. Making the most of it may be primarily a mental process, rather than overcoming practical problems.

Within a Nordic framework, there is one fundamental weakness for which the Nordics require immediate and substantial support from larger allies: the protection of sea lanes to the Scandinavian Peninsula. This is a prerequisite for receiving seaborne reinforcements, as well as importing various commodities. Gothenburg on the Swedish west coast is the most important port in Scandinavia. It does not just serve Sweden; it is also Norway's most important importing centre. In case of hostilities affecting the Baltic Sea and large-scale shipping Gothenburg would serve as a reserve facility for moving assets over land to Finland, or across the Gulf of Bothnia between northern Sweden and Finland. Should the sea lanes to Scandinavia be cut off, the Baltic states would also be affected. Or to put it another way, without open sea lanes to Scandinavia it will be very difficult – if not impossible – to move large reinforcements to the

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Nordic-Baltic area. Necessary imports and exports to continue most industries, including agriculture, would also be seriously affected. This means that it is critical to look beyond the region for burden-sharing arrangements that must come into play at very short notice in case of a conflict.

To keep sea lanes open across the North Sea to Scandinavia, will require advanced, large ships – frigates. Sweden, Norway and Denmark can not afford a sufficient number of such ships dedicated to tasks in the North Sea, not even if the countries pooled their resources. Norway needs its frigates in the High North, Denmark must take care of the Baltic approaches and Sweden's main naval tasks are in the Baltic Sea. Neither of the Nordics can afford to substantially increase their blue-water capabilities. Large investments will be needed simply to handle present tasks. One solution could be to involve Germany in the Nordic burden sharing scheme, since it is the only country in Europe that has limited naval obligations elsewhere while also having the economic resources to build and maintain the necessary number of ships. The concept would then entail Sweden (and to some extent Poland and Finland) taking care of the Baltic Sea, and in exchange Germany would carry the main burden of keeping sea lanes to Scandinavia open.

Pooling Nordic assets

The U.S. is the backbone of NATO. However, the increasing challenge that China poses in the Pacific region reduces U.S. possibilities to quickly deploy

large resources to Europe. This, in turn, increases the demand for perseverance and self-sufficiency of the alliance's European members. There could be a Nordic dimension, at least in part, on how to handle that problem.

Around 2030, the joint Nordic air forces will have more than 200 of the world's most advanced fighter aircraft: the JAS 39E and F-35. A well-designed scheme for close cooperation between the Nordic air forces would greatly enhance their common sustainability and combat efficiency, compared with having four national air forces fighting their own battles. Having two types of planes, with different weapon suites, would also increase the possibilities to tailor sorties depending on the task.

Acquiring expensive weapons systems always poses a trade-off problem. They often run the risk of becoming a 'cuckoo in the nest'. Today, all the Nordic countries lack resources to carry out aerial refueling of their fighter aircraft. Aerial refuelling aircraft have simply been too expensive to procure. A co-ownership of a Nordic air refueling pool, on the other hand, may be more affordable. This would increase the number of options when planning air operations anywhere in the Nordic-Baltic region. It would also increase the number of planes available for certain tasks by giving the planes “longer legs”. Furthermore, this technology would be a readily available asset in the Nordic-Baltic area rather than a coordination between multiple countries, with different interests, when the need arises. This is not an insignificant risk when it comes to obtaining support from NATO MMF (Multinational Multi-Role Tanker and Transport Fleet).

Similarly, heavy transport aircraft and helicopters are currently missing in the Nordic armed forces. The ability to quickly move supplies and units is a crucial element in a common Nordic defense concept considering the vast distances in the region. The fact that Nordic air refueling and heavy transport capabilities would also help to facilitate efforts by other allies in the Nordic-Baltic area does not make these capabilities less interesting, quite the opposite.

The Swedish decision to acquire two early warning/command and control aircraft (GlobalEye) could also be the start of a joint Nordic resource. Although Sweden has an option for two more planes, even four such aircraft does not provide sufficient volume to cover the needs of all Nordic countries. Nor does it provide a margin for probable losses in war. Moreover, when it comes to land and sea operations, there are opportunities to create effect-enhancing synergies in a Nordic context – but that deserves a chapter on its own and can not be covered here.

Command structures

The clear-cut operational tasks of the Nordic-Baltic area and its geography provides good conditions and a strong motive to create a bespoke command structure for the region.

The defense of the High North is dependent on facilities in the southern parts of Norway, Sweden, and Finland when it comes to logistics, basing of air assets, and reinforcements. The ground battle there will be conducted by three countries, and most likely across the territory of all of them. The defense of the Baltics depends on NATO using Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish territory on land, at sea, and in the air. All four

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air forces (Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland) will conduct combat operations in the whole region. It will be the same ships that will protect sea lanes across the Baltic Sea or the Gulf of Bothnia. All these activities and resources must be managed and coordinated by experts well aware of how they fit into the overall picture across the region. In addition, most of the assets that will have to be coordinated are already in the area. A regional staff team will therefore have a good idea of the capabilities and limitations of subordinate units. This knowledge is invaluable, especially in the early stages of a conflict. Being well-acquainted with the different political environments in the Nordic countries will also make it easier to handle a crisis or run an efficient military campaign in the region.

One solution that should be considered is to revive AFNORTH (Headquarters Allied Forces Northern Europe), but with a considerably larger geographical area of responsibility ranging from Denmark in the south to Spitsbergen in the north. It should stretch from the Norwegian Sea in the west to, well, where should the eastern border be drawn?

There are two options: the Baltic Sea or the Baltic countries border with Russia. That the Baltic Sea should be part of a future AFNORTH is clear. The protection of sea and air transport across the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Bothnia will largely depend on forces provided by Sweden and Finland. Weapons systems on the Swedish island of Gotland will also play a key role. Much of what will be transported to the Baltics

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will also, in one way or another, pass through one of the Nordic countries. Weapons systems such as cruise missiles, attack aircraft, naval assets, and others based in the Nordic countries may also be important means to support the Baltic countries in the early stages of a conflict.

But what about moving AFNORTH's eastern border even further east to include the Baltic States as well? Should NATO defense planning be designed so that air support, reinforcements and logistics are based on resources provided from staging areas in the Nordic countries and substantial ground forces contributed by Sweden and Finland? In such a case, including the Baltics in the AFNORTH area of responsibility could be considered.

On the other hand, neither Sweden nor Finland will ever be able to contribute resources on a par with those Poland and Germany could deploy in the Baltics at a later stage of a conflict. The problem here is Kaliningrad. The Russian forces in the exclave will likely have to be eliminated before Polish and German help on the ground can have any major impact on operations in the Baltic States. This might take time. Before that, only forces that are either in place from the beginning or that can be moved in over the Baltic Sea, by sea or air, will have to carry the load. One more factor must also be considered: the political significance of Poland and Germany being clearly singled out as responsible for bearing the main burden of

defending the Baltic States on the ground, making it clear that some of the larger NATO members will be seriously engaged from the first shot. Although such a solution might not be optimal from a military point of view, at least not in the early stages of a conflict, it most likely has a greater deterrence value than an “AFNORTH solution”.

Without going into all the details, there are some operational tasks that deserve their own command functions, and should therefore be directly subordinate to AFNORTH. The most obvious need is to create a common air command for the entire Nordic area. It should coordinate the operations of the more than 200 state-of-the-art fighter aircraft (F-35 and JAS 39E) that the combined air forces of the Nordic countries will consist of, a “Nordic air force” similar in size to the Royal Air Force or the Luftwaffe. Apart from that, there is a need to coordinate air operations with ground-based air defense systems in the whole region, coordinate air transport movements both within the Nordic area and between the Baltics, regulate basing and logistics depending on losses, damage to infrastructure, and so on. Most likely, there will also be a need to coordinate Nordic air operations with operations by other allied air forces.

Similarly, there ought to be a joint naval command for the Baltic Sea directly subordinated to AFNORTH. Here, too, there are several countries' armed forces, different systems and activities that must be coordinated. This includes submarines, surface combatants, mine clearing, air defense, escort activities and base operations. It requires its own command authority, which is familiar with the local challenges of the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Bothnia and has good knowledge

of the naval capabilities and procedures of the coastal states.

The defense of the High North poses a particular problem as it involves the handling of forces from several countries and from all branches, both at the operational and tactical level simultaneously. Although the forces involved will not be that large, in terms of numbers, they will require particular solutions. Neither AFNORTH nor, for example, a divisional staff, with its focus on leading ground combat, will be an optimal solution. What is required is a hybrid that could be

described as a small corps staff with enhanced capabilities to handle naval and air assets.

These proposals do not meet all command needs in the region. They only highlight three areas that should be given a command structure clearly designed for a defined task. There are additional problems that must be solved. How should territorial defense on the ground in Sweden, Finland and Norway be organized? Who should oversee the Baltic inlets and Denmark? Is it time to revive COMBALTAP? A lot of thinking remains to be done.

Conclusions

There are several measures that can and should be implemented in order to obtain the greatest possible effect out of Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO. What is being suggested here is in no way unrealistic from an economic point of view. It could quite easily be accommodated within defense budgets of between 2–3 percent of the countries' GDP. The biggest obstacle to overcome appears to be the transformation of the mindset in Sweden and Finland – perhaps mostly in Sweden – on how to build military security within an alliance.

This chapter has explored how the Nordic countries, through increased cooperation and some structural changes in their militaries, could strengthen the capabilities of NATO. The alliance in general, and its ability to reinforce the Nordic-Baltic region, is touched upon quite little. This is deliberate. Considering that it would take at least several days for air support to materialize, perhaps weeks for naval forces to appear in the Baltic Sea, and probably months for substantial ground for-

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ces to arrive, it would be speculative to include them in a basic set-up for Nordic military security. This, of course, does not exclude well-prepared or ongoing operations, such as the joint Norwegian-British antisubmarine activities or flying in personnel to marry up with prepositioned equipment. Another reason to place great emphasis on Nordic co-operation is that regardless of formal obligations within an alliance, cultural similarities and understanding of each other's ways of thinking is an important "force multiplier". This is a fact that also recommends itself to seek Nordic solutions, where possible, within the framework of NATO.

There is a danger that must be kept in mind when creating a structure with a heavy emphasis on Nordic capabilities. If the scheme is successful and creates an impression that the Nordics can fend for themselves (which they will never be able to), other members

of the alliance might use it as an excuse not to plan for operations in the Nordic-Baltic area. However, this risk is worth taking. It would be a bit odd, and morally dubious, not to prepare oneself as well as possible with the resources available in the region. Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO creates great poten-

tial for increasing the alliance's deterrence in Northern Europe. Hopefully, national prestige and inter-service jealousy will not become obstacles that hinder new thinking and necessary adaptations to a changing security environment.
