

A NEW SECURITY LANDSCAPE IN NORTHERN EUROPE

NATO'S EMERGING NORDIC DIMENSION

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.



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Russia's unprovoked and illegal war of aggression in Ukraine upended the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe.

The changes have been most profound and visible in the Nordic region: less than three months after Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Finland and Sweden decided to abandon their long-standing military non-alignment and applied for NATO membership on May 18, 2022. Russia's aggression against its neighbor Ukraine has a lasting impact on the whole neighborhood: it became clear once and for all that no amount of self-restraint can guarantee a country's security in Russia's direct vicinity. The post-Cold War emphasis on good neighborly relations and regional cooperation is now shifting toward a focus on deterrence.

Although the threat that an aggressive Russia poses is more direct in Finland, which shares a 1343 km long border with its eastern neighbor, Sweden is no stranger to Russia's intimidation tactics either. Both Finland and Sweden have frequently been subject to provocations from the Russian side, such as airspace violations or Russian ships sailing too close to Finnish or Swedish waters – most notable is Gotland, a Swedish island in the southern Baltic Sea in a strategically crucial location only 330 km from the Russian exclave Kaliningrad where Russia's Baltic Sea fleet is headquartered and, where there have been a frequent airspace violations.

Furthermore, Finland and Sweden share a long history of wars with Russia. Finland was part of the Kingdom of Sweden for centuries until the Finnish War in 1808–1809, when Sweden lost Finland to Russia. Until then, the Kingdom of Sweden had been at war with different Russian state formations at least once every century since the Middle Ages. Although wars with Denmark were also frequent, Russia posed a more existential threat and frequently challenged Sweden's attempts at regional dominance. More recently, in the Winter War 1939–40, when the Soviet Union attempted to invade Finland and failed, thousands of Swedish volunteers came to fight alongside Finland. Thus, Finland and Sweden both share a threat perception of Russia that goes back centuries.

Ever since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, both Nordic countries started to prepare for worse to come. For Sweden, it was a particularly rude awakening after two decades of disarmament of its defense forces as a result of the "end of history" moment following the end of the Cold War. For Finland however –

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with its long border with Russia – history never ended, and it maintained a well-trained and well-equipped conscription army. Sweden reintroduced conscription in 2017 and re-established the Gotland regiment, which had been discontinued in 2004, in the process of rearming its defense forces following the annexation of Crimea.

Finland and Sweden have also significantly deepened their bilateral defense cooperation since 2014¹, as well as trilaterally with Norway. Both countries became NATO's Enhanced Opportunity Partners in 2014, after having participated in the Partnership for Peace since 1994. Although the final trigger to apply for full membership was provided by Russia's invasion of Ukraine only in 2022, Finland and Sweden had both been working deliberately toward the closest possible cooperation and partnership with NATO for years, in order to be able to join quickly if necessary according to the Finnish 'NATO option' policy, or, in the Swedish (Social Democrats') case, trying to stay out of NATO while simultaneously improving cooperation. As a result of the efforts to increase the interoperability of Finnish and Swedish armed forces with NATO to the highest possible level outside the Alliance, the two new members will bring almost instant operational readiness to NATO once the ratification process is finalized.

1 Salenius-Pasternak and Vanhanen, "Finnish-Swedish Defence Cooperation."

Same same but different

Finland and Sweden are each other's closest international partners and the countries cooperate in many policy fields, including foreign and security policy. The long shared history and cultural similarities contribute to the feeling of proximity between the neighbors. Thus, Finland and Sweden often coordinate pivotal foreign policy decisions, such as on EU accession in 1995 and now on NATO membership. In a curious reversal of roles, however, it was Finland that led the process on the joint NATO bid; in 1995, Sweden decided to apply for EU membership without much coordination with Finland and Finland subsequently hurried to submit its application at the same time. The swiftness and determination of Finnish decision-making took Sweden somewhat by surprise and Stockholm had to accelerate the domestic process to keep up with the pace at which Finland was striding into NATO. Indeed, Finland hijacked the Swedish NATO debate to such an extent that in a televised debate on May 8, 2022² between the party leaders ahead of the September parliamentary elections in Sweden, the debate on NATO was not so much about whether Sweden should join NATO, but whether Sweden should "go along with Finland to NATO". In an historic headline, the Swedish newspaper Expressen declared Finland 'Sweden's big brother' and thanked Finland for "NATO help", stating that Sweden would never have made it without Finland – in Finnish.³

Since Finland and Sweden are both like-minded Nordic welfare states – and because the two frequently come as a pair in international politics – foreign

² SVT, "Partiledardebatt".

³ Expressen, "Kiitos Nato-avusta".

” Until now, full-fledged NATO membership was not considered necessary and was rather seen as a potential provocation toward Russia.

observers and analysts often have a hard time distinguishing their national characteristics. The processes leading to the submitting of the Finnish and Swedish NATO membership applications are an illustrative case in point.

Finland has a pragmatic and largely non-ideological approach to security policy. Hence, both the long-term policy of staying outside of NATO and the decision to join the Alliance were made on essentially practical grounds. Until now, fully-fledged NATO membership was not considered necessary and was rather seen as a potential provocation toward Russia. Because of its long border and history with Russia, Finland was keen to maintain good relations with its eastern neighbor to avoid costly tensions at the border. Russia's invasion of Ukraine changed that calculation overnight, however. A remarkable aspect of the Finnish NATO process was its bottom-up nature: support for Finland's NATO membership had been at around 20-25 per cent for decades, but in a poll published only four days after the beginning of the invasion, more than half of Finns answered in favor of Finland joining NATO.^{4 5} The swift and fundamental change in public opinion drove the political process: before February, only two parties had been advocating for NATO membership, but in the final vote in the Parliament on May 17, 188 of 200 members (minus the speaker who

⁴ YLE News, "2017 poll: Only a fifth of Finns back NATO membership".

⁵ YLE News, "For first time, YLE poll shows majority for NATO".

” For a long time, it looked more likely that Sweden rather than Finland would decide to join NATO.

does not participate) voted in favor of Finland's NATO bid.⁶ In the last poll before submitting the membership application, public support for it had reached an overwhelming 76 per cent – and it has risen further since, reaching 79 per cent by the end of June.⁷ It was indicative of the central position security policy has in the Finnish public debate, as well as the high level of awareness of national security in society, that the opinion on the necessary course of action was so clear and the consensus so broad.

The remarkable swiftness of the change in both public opinion and Finland's long-standing non-alignment policy puzzled many outside of Finland. It even took the Swedes by surprise – for a long time, it looked more likely that Sweden rather than Finland would decide to join NATO. But in fact, the Finnish NATO bid did not come as out of the blue as it appeared. The NATO debate has been ongoing in varying intensities since the 1990s, and the somewhat peculiar policy called the 'NATO option' had been an integral part of Finnish security policy for decades. It implied that while remaining outside of the Alliance, Finland would keep the option to join NATO should the security environment change. Such a change started to be evident already with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 but culminated in the latest Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, marking a point of no return. With its

unprovoked attack on a neighbor, Russia crossed a red line for Finland. The NATO option had an important signal function toward Russia, as a reminder that Finland may change its mind about non-alignment if Russia goes too far. Russia, for its part, has regularly issued threats regarding possible consequences of Finnish NATO membership.

For Sweden, in contrast, the NATO decision was much more of an identity crisis.⁸ Indeed, the narrative of more than 200 years of neutrality – or at least not being party to a war – and an emphasis on peace promotion and disarmament going back to the Cold War Social Democrat Prime Minister, Olof Palme, have shaped Sweden's foreign policy identity. In addition, not sharing a direct border with Russia and 200 years of peace allowed Sweden to keep a bigger distance from security issues in the public debate. As a consequence, the Swedish NATO debate was much more strongly characterized by the domestic political cleavages instead of a clear focus on security policy and implications for national defense as in Finland. The support for Sweden's NATO membership is lower than in Finland at 62.5 per cent,⁹ and the Left Party and the Green Party remain opposed to it – however, the two parties had only 43 of 349 seats in parliament.

Despite the official neutrality during the Cold War and the subsequent military non-alignment policy of the past three decades, Sweden nevertheless always maintained close relations with the U.S. and even had secret security assurances from the Americans

6 YLE News, "Finland's Parliament approves NATO application".

7 Huhtanen, "Enemmistö suomalaisista ei halua lainsäädäntöä tai luopua periaatteistaan Turkin vuoksi".

8 Kaljurand, "The Hem and Haw of Sweden's Relationship with NATO".

9 Statistiska Centralbyrån SCB, "Väljare ger svar om Nato i Partisymptatiundersökning".

during the Cold War.¹⁰ Without an official commitment, Sweden coordinated closely with NATO on defense matters: for example, in the 1960s, the Americans talked Sweden out of developing its own nuclear weapons while including the officially non-allied country in the US policy toward Scandinavia and extended its nuclear umbrella to Sweden.¹¹ After the Cold War, the focus changed toward peace-building operations, but the Swedish cooperation with NATO continued. Both the Swedish defense industry and the equipment of Swedish armed forces have been fully NATO interoperable for many decades already, in contrast to Finland which has partly also used Soviet equipment. Sweden is therefore a very natural member of the Western Alliance. Considering the long history of cooperating both “behind the scenes” with NATO and the US¹² and officially participating in several NATO missions and operations, there is more continuity behind the Swedish decision to apply for membership than meets the unobservant eye.

A game changer for Nordic and Baltic Sea security

For decades, the Baltic Sea security architecture remained fragmented along the lines of different alliance memberships of the Nordic countries. Finland and Sweden were EU members but not in NATO, Iceland and Norway are NATO members but not in the EU. Denmark is a member of both organizations but had an opt-out from the EU's Common Security and De-

10 Sveriges Radio SR, “Claims of secret NATO cooperation”.

11 United States National Security Council (NSC), “300. National Security Council Report, NSC 6006/1, 1 April 1960”.

12 Neuding, “The end of Nordic neutrality”.

” Without Finland and Sweden in the alliance, the practical implementation of a strengthened forward defense “to defend every inch of Allied territory at all times” would not be feasible.

fence Policy (CSDP) – which was scrapped in a referendum in June 2022¹³ – while Norway has an opt-in in the EU's CSDP. This is indicative of the fundamental nature of the changes underway that these two structural hurdles to defense cooperation in the Baltic Sea region have been overcome: Finland and Sweden decided to abandon their long-term non-alignment and the Danes voted in favor of abolishing their EU opt-out.

For NATO defense of the Baltic states, which are in a particularly vulnerable position sandwiched between Russia and the Baltic Sea, Finland and Sweden's membership in the alliance is a game changer. Finland's and Sweden's NATO accessions come at a particularly crucial time, with the realization that the combination of enhanced Forward Presence (tripwire) and Defence in Depth (attempting to reclaim territory already seized) approach to Baltic defense is no longer an option, seeing how brutal Russian troops have treated occupied territories in Ukraine. Without Finland and Sweden in the alliance, the practical implementation of a strengthened forward defense “to defend every inch of Allied territory at all times”¹⁴, as foreseen in the Madrid Summit Declaration on NATO's new Strategic Concept in late June 2022, would not be feasible. The Swedish marine can shift the geo-

13 Schaart, “Denmark votes to scrap EU defense opt-out”.

14 NATO, “Madrid Summit Declaration”.

” The combined strength of the Finnish and Swedish maritime capabilities tilts the balance across the region in NATO's favour.

graphy of warfare in the Baltic Sea, forcing Russia to consider new angles of attack, and Finnish territory adds a whole new dimension of strategic risk to Russia, including to the crucial military capabilities (including nuclear) in the Kola Peninsula, as well as the defense of St. Petersburg and the Gulf of Finland. Finland and Sweden's membership in the alliance will significantly simplify the defense of the Nordic-Baltic region by clarifying lines of communication, providing unified command and control of air, land and sea, and establishing a common operational picture and unified target sets.

Together, Finland and Sweden bring considerable defense capabilities into NATO. Finland has a wartime troop strength of 280,000 plus additional 870,000 reservists, one of Europe's largest artilleries with 1,500 systems,¹⁵ and a well-equipped air force – the government's latest purchase was 64 F-35 fighter jets that will become operational from 2026 onwards, adding to the 52 Norwegian and 27 Danish F-35s and thus making the combined Nordic F-35 fleet 143 aircraft strong. Together with Sweden's home-produced Jas Gripen fighter jets, the Nordic countries boast a combined force of more than 200 aircraft. While the Swedish defense forces are significantly smaller in terms of troops (55,000 reserve included), Sweden has a notable national defense industry that is fully compatible with NATO standards. Furthermore, the combined strength

¹⁵ Ossa and Koivula, "What would Finland bring to the table for NATO?"

of Finnish and Swedish maritime capabilities tilts the balance across the region in NATO's favour. For example, the Russian exclave Kaliningrad between Poland and Lithuania loses much of its strategic value as a launch pad for aggressive action and becomes a major vulnerability for all forces stationed there, as it can now be targeted by NATO from 360 degrees. With Russia identified as "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area" in NATO's new Strategic Concept, the decades-long experience of dealing with Russia and the special knowledge of regional security that Finland and Sweden will bring to the table are valued assets for NATO. Finland and Sweden's NATO membership thus significantly reduces the room for maneuver for Russia to intimidate the Nordic and Baltic States and increases stability in the region.

A new era of Nordic cooperation

Throughout the process leading to Finland and Sweden applying for NATO membership, the US has shown strong commitment to the Nordic countries' ambition to join the Alliance. Frequent visits on very short notice at the highest level – such as Finnish President Sauli Niinistö's Washington visit on March 4, only a few days after the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and a joint visit of Niinistö and Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson on May 19 – are not everyday protocol for two so remote and small countries in their relations with the US.¹⁶ ¹⁷ Several bipartisan groups of US senators also visited the Finnish and Swedish

¹⁶ President of Finland, "Niinistö in Washington: Security and defence cooperation with US will be deepened".

¹⁷ President of Finland, "Niinistö in Washington: Finland takes NATO step to strengthen own security and transatlantic security".

capitals in the months following the invasion, which demonstrated an acute understanding in Washington of what is currently at stake in Northern Europe. Furthermore, impressive US navy ships have visited both Sweden and Finland throughout the spring and summer. For example, in March the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Forrest Sherman arrived in Stockholm for a port visit, and later in the summer the amphibious assault ship USS Kearsage visited both Stockholm and Helsinki and conducted exercises with the Finnish and Swedish navies.^{18 19 20} In early August, USS Arlington sailed to the Baltic Sea in connection with exercises.²¹ US troops have participated in several military exercises with their Finnish and Swedish counterparts throughout the spring and summer, such as the long-planned Cold Response in Northern Norway with the participation of more than 30,000 troops from 27 NATO and partner countries.²² Moreover, there have been smaller-scale bi- and trilateral exercises throughout the summer, such as “Ryske”, together with Norwegian troops in Finland in late June.^{23 24} The joint exercises have a twofold function: to demonstrate NATO's presence and support before

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re Finland and Sweden become fully-fledged NATO members covered by the Article 5 security guarantee and to further increase interoperability with future allies in the special climatic and geographical conditions of Northern Europe. Finnish Defense Minister Antti Kaikkonen announced on May 27, eight new and 12 new or partly modified exercises with key NATO partners in 2022 alone.²⁵

US support has been decisive in the process and the US remains by far the strongest – and thus most important – NATO ally. It was a strong sign of overwhelming bipartisan support that the US Senate ratified Finnish and Swedish NATO membership with 95-1 votes, after a series of speeches praising the two Nordic countries.²⁶ But the Trump years have shown that US support can be a fickle thing. The Nordic countries can rely on their American allies now, but will it remain so through thick and thin – i.e. changing US administrations in an era of increasing volatility and polarization in American politics?

What any American president, a Trumpian one including, would welcome is a strong Nordic region within NATO capable of defending itself. With the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF), the five Nordic countries will bring a new phenomenon into NATO: for the first time, there will be a group of member states with a high degree of pre-existing regional integration.

²⁵ Ministry of Defence of Finland, “Kaikkonen päätti kumpanimaiden kanssa koulutus- ja harjoitusyhteistyöstä”.

²⁶ Wise and Michaels, “U.S. Senate Ratifies Adding Finland and Sweden to NATO”.

¹⁸ United States Navy, “USS Forrest Sherman (DDG 98) Arrives in Stockholm”.

¹⁹ Cooper, “US Warship Arrives in Stockholm for Military Exercises, and as a Warning”.

²⁰ YLE News, “Amphibious assault ship USS Kearsage heads to Helsinki”.

²¹ Försvarsmakten, “Amerikanskt fartyg besöker Stockholm”.

²² NATO, “Exercise Cold Response 2022 – NATO and partner forces face the freeze in Norway”.

²³ YLE News, “US soldiers train with Finnish forces in Helsinki”.

²⁴ Nilsen, “War games in boreal forest spotlights changing security architecture of the North”.

NORDEFECO's dynamic radically changed in 2014, when Russia's annexation of Crimea gave the Nordic countries both a new urgency to upgrade their cooperation from the previous buzzword "smart defense" to a format of serious strategic value.²⁷ A shared threat perception of Russia since 2014 has led the Nordic countries to re-prioritize regional security and defense and to seek closer cooperation in the region.²⁸ The combined weight of the five Nordic countries is not to be underestimated; add the three Baltic States and eight of 32 NATO members, making up one fourth of the alliance, will have a direct stake in prioritizing Baltic Sea and Nordic security. This can lead to a shift of focus within the alliance, but more importantly it enables the Nordics to continue intensifying their defense cooperation on a hitherto unlocked level, once

27 Dahl, "Back to the Future: Nordefco's First Decade and Prospects for the Next", pp. 172–182.

28 Haugevik et al., "Nordic partnership choices in a fierier security environment: Towards more alignment".

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the structural hurdles of inconsistent alliance memberships have been removed.

While the US is a natural and long-standing partner for the Nordic countries and the strong bipartisan support of Finland and Sweden's NATO membership is a good sign for the future, the Nordic countries – together with their Baltic neighbors – have a unique and ideal opportunity to strengthen their own defense capacities in a way that optimizes Nordic potential. The Nordic countries also already have the frameworks in place on which to continue building a strong Nordic NATO, as an essential part of the wider process of strengthening Europe's own defense capacities independently of the US. The Nordic countries can lead the way and show how robust defense cooperation can be built to mutual benefit.

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