

PEACE AND SECURITY

NO LONGER OFF THE RADAR – NATO'S ENLARGEMENT TO THE NORTH AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE BALTIC STATES

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Until now, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have been NATO's strategic Achilles' heel. The accession of Finland and Sweden to the transatlantic alliance will change this geopolitical situation and will make the defence of the Baltic states much easier for the Western alliance in the future. Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius will therefore be the main beneficiaries of the newly emerging security architecture in the Baltic Sea region.



For NATO, the accession of Finland and Sweden is a military and political gain. The two new members will bring along stable democratic institutions, well-equipped, technologically advanced and high-quality armed forces to the Alliance. As a result, NATO's force portfolio is being noticeably improved, particularly in the navy, artillery and air defence domains.



Russia, on the other hand, is getting into a defensive position in the region. The Baltic Sea effectively becomes somewhat of a "NATO lake". The operational capabilities of the Russian air and naval forces are being severely curtailed. In the future, a rapid fait accompli in the Baltics can no longer be shielded from the sea side by the occupation of the island of Gotland. At the same time, Kaliningrad will become even more of a neuralgic point for Russia. Nevertheless, the Kremlin has refrained from taking military reactions so far.



Finland's accession will create an additional 1,300 border kilometres between Russia and NATO and thus effectively more than double the current length of the border. With his aggressive expansionist policy, President Putin has thus achieved exactly the opposite of what he originally intended.

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The imminent NATO accession of Finland and Sweden is significantly changing the security architecture in the Baltic Sea region – the main beneficiaries of which could turn out to be the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Defending these states will be much easier for the Western alliance in the future.

1.

GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

60 hours – this time figure is notorious among military experts in the Baltics. In 2016, a study undertaken by the American RAND Corporation concluded that in the event of a large-scale conventional attack on the Baltic states, Russia could gain control of the capitals of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania within just this short period of time (Shlapak/Johnson 2016). The armed forces of the three EU and NATO members would hardly have anything to counter the Russian superiority. They would simply be overrun. Ever since, fears have haunted European military headquarters that Russia's President Vladimir Putin could use a quick push against the Baltics to test the Alliance's resolve and to undermine the credibility of the promise of collective defence as enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

Even if these findings must be re-assessed given the Russian army's disastrous record since the beginning of its invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 – its catastrophic operational planning, the obvious problems with logistics and supplies, the inadequate equipment and the poor morale of the soldiers – there is no doubt that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania form the geopolitical Achilles' heel of the transatlantic alliance. Their immediate geographical proximity to Russia makes them particularly vulnerable to the Kremlin's revisionist and expansionist desires for which they would (supposedly) be rather easy targets.

A reconquest by the other allies would only be feasible with great logistical effort and heavy losses, because the three Baltic states can be thought of as a "peninsula" (SWP podcast 2022/P-21) wedged between Belarus in the southeast and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad (the former German Königsberg) in the west. They are only connected to the rest of the Alliance by a narrow corridor on the Polish-Lithuanian border. Known as the "Suwalki Gap", this narrow line has a width of about 65 kilometres and could quickly be taken over by enemy forces in the event of a conflict, effectively cutting off the Baltic states from the other NATO members. Moreover, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania lack a strategic depth of their own that would allow them to cushion an attack further inland at a later point in time. Along the Suwalki Gap, the Western alliance therefore remains particularly vulnerable to any form of disruptive manoeuvres (Strittmatter 2022).

If a military confrontation with Russia were to take place in the Baltics, NATO would face a dilemma: either to accept a Russian *fait accompli* and thus deprive itself of any credibility. Or to launch an attempt to reconquer the seized territories

and thereby risk a large-scale war with Russia, in which, additionally, there would permanently loom the danger of nuclear escalation.

2.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE NATO ACCESSION OF FINLAND AND SWEDEN

The prospect of Finland and Sweden joining NATO fundamentally changes this military calculus. The northern enlargement of the Alliance will be a “geopolitical gamechanger” (Dempsey 2022), which will greatly simplify the defence of the Baltics. Accordingly, Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius were delighted when the two Nordic states decided to apply for membership of the transatlantic defence organisation in May 2022. This is further illustrated by the fact that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were among the first member states to ratify the accession (cf. Atlantic Council Ratification Tracker 2022).

A few weeks earlier, the governments in Helsinki and Stockholm had announced a review of their national defence policies in an immediate response to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in which they concluded that NATO membership was the best – if not the only – way to ensure their national security. In May 2022, just three months after the war of aggression began, the two countries decided to jointly apply for membership and submitted their applications to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. This was preceded by a significant shift in public opinion in Finland and Sweden, whose populations had traditionally been sceptical of NATO membership (cf. on the polling data, among others, Ålander 2022, Ålander/Paul 2022). At the NATO summit in Madrid one month later, the accession protocols were signed and the heads of state and government of most member states signalled their intention to rapidly conclude the parliamentary steps necessary to formalize the accession process.

As of February 2023, 28 of the 30 NATO allies have ratified the accession of Finland and Sweden (cf. Atlantic Council Ratification Tracker 2022). However, Turkey and Hungary have so far refrained from giving their final consent and insist their say is still to be heard on the matter. As a consequence, the accession process has been derailed and formally remains open. Ankara and Budapest seem to use the situation as an opportunity to extort concessions on a range of other issues (Alaranta 2022). Erdoğan has used the threat of a veto as a tactical leverage to demand that Sweden extradite more than 70 people accused of being linked to the PKK or the Gülen movement. Furthermore, an arms embargo imposed on Turkey by Sweden and Finland has to be lifted immediately. In a similar vein, Viktor Orbán - who had previously claimed a partial exemption for his country from the EU’s common oil embargo against Russia as well as a renegotiation of the EU

sanctions packages (removal of Patriarch Kyrill from the sanctions list) (Ruhl 2022) - might find himself tempted to use the NATO issue to bring about a different decision by the EU institutions after the freezing of Brussels’ funds in reaction to the deficient rule of law situation in Hungary.¹

With their NATO accession, both Finland and Sweden have undertaken what has been described as a “Copernican turn” (Carati 2022) from a long history of military non-alignment which had traditionally been uncontroversial within their societies. Sweden has not participated in any military alliance since the end of the Napoleonic Wars more than 200 years ago. Finland too chose the path of non-alignment after the end of the Second World War and pursued it for almost 80 years. In both countries, neutrality became a central pillar of their respective self-images in foreign and security policy as well as an important aspect of their role as honest and trusted brokers in international diplomatic negotiations.

After the end of the Second World War, Sweden had initially favoured the idea of a Nordic Defence Union. After Denmark’s and Norway’s accession to NATO in 1949 however, it became clear that this ambitious vision could not be realised – even more so considering that such a project was politically outright impossible in Finland as for Helsinki anything other than strict non-alignment would have meant further curtailment of its sovereignty by the Soviet Union. Ultimately, for Sweden there remained no other way than to “go it alone” and pursue an independent defence policy (Claesson/Carlander 2022). However, while the Swedish freedom of alliance was more or less freely chosen, in the Finnish case it was at least in part a forced result.² In the course of the Second World War, the Soviet Union invaded Finland in 1939. While the young nation succeeded in repelling the Soviet invasion and in preserving its political independence, it did so at a high price. Finland lost vast parts of Karelia as well as its

¹ Nevertheless, in the meantime both countries have announced that they intend to approve the applications for membership within the first months of 2023 (FAZ agency report of 26 November 2022, Lis-sok 2022). In the case of Turkey, however, any decision on the matter should not be expected to take place before the elections scheduled for May of this year.

² Nowadays, when calling for a neutrality solution for Ukraine, many commentators often overlook the fact that the so-called “Finlandisation” was by no means a free decision or the consequence of equal negotiations, but rather the result of a determined defensive struggle against a militarily far superior opponent.

second largest city, Vyborg, and had to make painful concessions to Moscow in a dictated peace treaty. The 1948 “Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance” (in the Finnish abbreviation infamously known as the YYA Treaty) imposed restrictions on the size of the Finnish armed forces and gave Moscow the right to demand consultations on any question of foreign and security policy (cf. Bildt 2022).

Nevertheless, Finland’s and Sweden’s *military* non-aligned status should never be mistaken for *political* neutrality. On the contrary – both countries made no secret of their clear orientation towards the West long before the end of the Cold War. Finland pursued a policy of “active neutrality” which enabled it to secure some room for manoeuvre in international affairs. Therefore, non-alignment did not mean giving up an independent role in international politics, nor did it mean turning away from the military as a means of defending one’s own territory (Carati 2022). While the Winter War of 1940/41 had partially limited Finland’s scope for sovereign decisions on foreign policy, one of its key lessons was that survival as an independent state could only be guaranteed by devoting sufficient resources to its own defence and the maintenance of significant capable armed forces. It is true that Finland’s formal non-alignment was the prerequisite for maintaining cooperative – or at least stable – relations with Moscow. But no one in Helsinki was under the illusion that their own independence could have been preserved if it hadn’t been for the military’s determined defensive struggle against the Soviet invaders. The Finns always kept in mind the historical lessons they had drawn from the war and therefore remained fairly consistent in their doctrinal conviction that powerful combat units were required which could defend the territorial integrity of the country for at least a certain amount of time in order to maintain a minimal credible deterrent against Russia.

The role as a channel for communication between East and West remained constitutive of Finland’s foreign policy identity for a long time. This is illustrated best by the numerous meetings and negotiations that took place in Helsinki within the framework of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and which finally led to the ground-breaking Helsinki Final Act of 1975 being signed in the Finnish capital. However, neutrality was not nearly as significant for Finland as it was for Sweden. Proximity to Russia had always remained the key geopolitical and military strategic determinant of Finnish defence policy. Russia is and continues to be a reality that must and will be dealt with in Helsinki. The NATO option has therefore been on the table at all times since the end of the Cold War (cf. Ålander 2022, Bildt 2022). Helsinki only refrained from playing this card because Finnish governments had so far been convinced that they could guarantee their own security and maintain stable relations with Russia even without NATO membership. In this respect, the departure from non-alignment represents far less of a “break with self-image” (Wäschenbach 2022) for Finland than it does for Sweden. Since the tradition of foreign and defence policy neutrality had a much stronger identity-form-

ing effect for Stockholm, the Swedish debate on NATO membership was also shaped more strongly by arguments about Sweden’s new role in European and global politics.³ Although Finland and Sweden are similar in many respects regarding their national and strategic culture, the debate on the abandonment of non-alignment in Helsinki and Stockholm took place on different levels, each reflecting individual strategic considerations and historical experiences of the two countries. In both cases, however, the governments were primarily concerned with providing additional cover beyond their national capabilities. NATO accession is being seen in Helsinki and Stockholm as the only reliable guarantee not to stand alone against Russia in case of increased tensions.

³ However, in view of Sweden’s long-standing, close relations with Western institutions (see section 3), some observers rightly question whether military non-alignment was not more of a domestic myth than a foreign policy reality (Wäschenbach 2022).

3.

TOWARDS A NEW SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION

How will the strategic situation in the Baltic Sea region and in North-Eastern Europe transform concretely as a result of Finland’s and Sweden’s accession to NATO? Which capabilities do the two countries bring to the alliance?

(A) MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF FINLAND AND SWEDEN

Militarily (and even more so politically), Helsinki and Stockholm will be an enormous net gain for NATO. They both dispose of modern, highly technological and well-equipped armed forces that can be integrated into existing NATO structures relatively easily. Therefore, only few commentators seriously opposed the admission of both countries to NATO (see i.e. Friedman/Logan 2022).

The Swedish army commands some 14,600 active soldiers and a reserve of another 10,000 men (cf. Military Balance 2022).⁴ As was the case in most other European countries, the Swedish military has been affected by austerity policies and various downsizing measures in recent years. Perhaps the most striking example is the suspension of compulsory military service (conscription) in 2010. The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia four years later was a sharp wake-up call for Sweden – especially as several cases of alleged sightings of Russian submarines in the archipelago off the Swedish coast became known around the same time (cf. Wäschenbach 2022). The intrusion of Russian submarines into Swedish territorial waters set the alarm bells ringing in Stockholm. The Swedish government recognised the need to initiate a turnaround in national defence politics. Under the then red-green coalition government, conscription was reintroduced in 2017/18; regular exercises and patrols were resumed, old training locations were modernised and, in particular, the presence on the island of Gotland was massively expanded.

The trend towards strengthening and modernising the Swedish armed forces has since continued for several years and is set to intensify even further under the impression of the war in Ukraine. By 2025, the army will grow to 90,000 soldiers (Carati 2022). Currently, Sweden spends about 8.4 billion US dollars on defence, which amounts to about

1.3% of its gross domestic product (Military Balance 2022). While at this level the country fails to meet NATO’s target of spending at least 2% of national GDP on defence, the government in Stockholm has announced its intention to reach this figure by 2028 (Bildt 2022, Forsberg et al. 2022).

Sweden is particularly strong in the naval domain and holds competitive advantages in air defence. The Swedish Navy counts (among others) five corvettes for coastal defence, five submarines (plus two more under construction) and seven minelayers (Gutschker 2022, Hackett 2022). NATO’s Standing Maritime Group 1, which is responsible for securing and defending the Baltic Sea, the North Sea and the North Atlantic, would benefit enormously from these valuable capabilities. In addition, the Swedish Air Force owns 96 Saab *Gripen* fighter aircraft and is involved in the British *Tempest* programme aimed at developing a new generation of fighter jets. In November 2021, Sweden became the first non-NATO country to be supplied with a battery of the modern American *Patriot* air defence system.⁵

As mentioned earlier, Finland continued to focus on maintaining a fully operational and effective military after the end of the Cold War. Conscription has never been suspended, unlike in most other European states. The vast majority of the Finnish population supports the continuation of compulsory military service (Military Balance 2022). The active force comprises about 20,000 soldiers. However, due to a unique reserve system, an additional 240,000 reservists can be mobilised within a very short time. In the event of war, the Finnish army could even grow up to 800,000 – 900,000 men and women (e.g., Friederichs 2022, Gutschker/Wyssuwa 2022). This number is quite impressive given the size of the Finnish population of about 5.5 million.

Finland is also known among experts in the security community for its concept of “integrated” or “comprehensive” defence, an important part of which are regular reserve exercises and defence courses for citizens which have resulted in a comparatively high level of awareness in the

⁴ See also Table 1 on page 9.

⁵ In December 2022, US President Joe Biden announced the delivery of several *Patriot* batteries to Ukraine, which will thus become the second non-NATO country in possession of these systems.

Finnish population of the risks and behaviour in the event of a crisis or war. Another focus of the concept is overall societal resilience (Ålander 2022). Early warning systems and air raid shelters exist everywhere throughout Finland. The government maintains stocks of medical equipment and food reserves. In Helsinki alone, there are places in metro stations and tunnels to provide shelter for up to 900,000 people seeking protection – which is even more than the city’s total population.

The experiences of the Winter War against the Soviet Union codified a focus on strong territorial defence capabilities in the Finnish military strategy that continues to be the centrepiece of more recent doctrines as well. Accordingly, Finland’s strengths lie primarily in the areas of infantry, artillery and missile/air defence. With over 670 systems, Finland maintains one of the most powerful artillery forces in Europe (Gutschker/Wyssuwa 2022). The army, which is mainly comprised of mechanised infantry units, owns some 200 Leopard 2 tanks (which is almost as many as the ailing German Bundeswehr...). Together with various Multiple Launch Rocket Systems, Helsinki acquired most of these tanks from the Netherlands in 2014. In addition, the Finnish government also ordered K9 armoured howitzers from South Korea in 2017 (ibid.).

The Finnish defence budget already amounts to 2% of the national gross domestic product. In 2021, approximately 6 billion US dollars were spent on the armed forces (Military Balance 2022). Nevertheless, the Finnish Ministry of Finance announced a further increase by a total of 2.2 billion US dollars for the years from 2023 to 2026. By far the most important armament project in Helsinki in the coming years is the

so-called *HX programme*, within the framework of which the 62 FA-18 Hornets currently in use by the Finnish Air Force are to be decommissioned by the beginning of the 2030s and to be gradually replaced by 64 newly acquired F-35 fighter aircraft from the US. The corresponding agreement with the US government was signed in February 2022 and amounts to € 8.4 billion, making it the largest military procurement project in Finland’s history (Forsberg et al. 2022). In another project, four *Rauma-class* patrol boats and two *Hämeenmaa-class* minelayers are to be replaced by a total of four new multirole corvettes (Military Balance 2022). This will also significantly strengthen the capabilities of the Finnish Navy.

Finland and Sweden each have globally competitive defence industries that are particularly specialised on niche capabilities in the cyber and digital domains. In Finland, the defence company *Patria* is worth mentioning, as is the company *Rauma Marine Constructions* or the Finnish-Norwegian ammunition manufacturer *Nammo*. Sweden is home to another big defence company, the *Saab Group*, which offers air defence products, but also aircraft (“Gripen”) and products in the maritime sector. These industrial capacities too will be a valuable asset for NATO.

(B) DEFENCE COOPERATION AND INTEROPERABILITY WITH NATO

The cooperation between Finland and Sweden on defence issues is one of the closest in the world. The armed forces of both countries are integrated to a very high degree. Planning for joint operations ranges from crisis and rescue missions to concrete tactical and operational interaction in the event

Table 1
Defence budget and troop strength of selected states in 2021.

	Defence budget in 2021		Troop strength in 2021				
	Absolute (in \$ billion)	Proportionate (as % of GDP)	Total active*	Land	Air	Sea	Reserve
Baltic states							
Estonia	0.79	2.19	7,200	4,100	500	300	17,500
Latvia	0.84	2.26	8,750	1,700	550	550	11,200
Lithuania	1.25	2.01	23,000	14,500	1,500	700	7,100
Nordic countries							
Finland	5.96	2.01	19,250	13,400	2,700	3,150	238,000
Sweden	8.36	1.34	14,600	6,850	2,700	2,100	10,000
Norway	7.46	1.67	25,400	8,300	4,300	4,600	40,000
Denmark	5.42	1.37	15,400	8,000	3,000	2,250	44,200
Selected NATO members							
Poland	13.42	2.05	114,050	58,500	14,300	6,000	None
Germany	56.10	1.33	183,400	62,650	27,100	16,250	30,050
France	59.34	2.02	203,250	114,700	40,450	34,700	41,050
United Kingdom	71.63	2.30	153,200	85,800	33,350	34,050	75,450
United States	754.02	3.29	1,395,350	489,050	329,400	349,600	843,450
Other							
Russia	45.80	2.78	900,000	280,000	165,000	150,000	2,000,000

* Usually includes more organisational units and personnel than just the three branches of land/air/sea and therefore does not add up accordingly.

Source: All data according to IISS – The Military Balance 2022, especially pp. 521-526.

of a high intensity conflict. In recent years, Helsinki and Stockholm have even signed several agreements that allow their armed forces to operate on each other’s territory (Hackett 2022). A *Joint Amphibious Task Unit* (SFATU) and an Integrated *Naval Task Group* (SFNTG) are to be established by 2023. Apart from that, Finland and Sweden already grant each other rights for reciprocal use of their ports and naval bases (Forsberg et al. 2022).

In addition to bilateral cooperation, Helsinki and Stockholm are part of numerous multilateral cooperation formats on defence and security. Together with Denmark, Norway, and Iceland, they form the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NOR-DEFECO), which was founded in 2010. Both states have also concluded separate defence agreements with the United States. Moreover, there exists an important partnership on security issues with the UK. In Europe, the United Kingdom can be considered to be the closest ally for the Nordics (Billon-Galland/Jermalavičius 2022). Finland and Sweden – like the Baltic states – are members of the British-led *Joint Expeditionary Force* (JEF). Furthermore, they belong to the *Northern Group Security Forum*, which also links them to the Baltic states. An ongoing joint project on the common procurement of wheeled armoured vehicles by Finland, Sweden, and Latvia serves as a good example to illustrate the fruitful dynamic of Nordic-Baltic cooperation on defence issues (cf. Friederichs 2022). This suggests that training and joint procurement will be particularly promising starting points for an even more integrated cooperation scheme between the two Nordic countries on the one hand and the three Baltic states on the other hand once the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO will have been completed.⁶

Finland’s and Sweden’s relations with NATO have developed gradually and steadily. Even before applying for membership, there were close institutional ties. In 1994, both countries joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme. In 2014, they became Enhanced Opportunity Partners, i.e. privileged partners of NATO, which is the highest possible status apart from full membership. Both countries have been part of the *NATO Response Force* and have participated in various out-of-area operations since the early 1990s (Solli/Solvang 2022). Finland and Sweden were present in the Balkans and in Afghanistan – Helsinki even took on the role of a “Framework Nation” in the force in Kosovo (KFOR). In both countries, “Host Nation Support” agreements with NATO are in place, which regulate the modalities of support for NATO troops. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 led to an even further intensification of Helsinki’s and Stockholm’s relations with NATO. Therefore, observers have long since described both states as “members in all ways except for Article 5” (Brommessen 2022: 7).

Regular exercises and joint manoeuvres take place both bilaterally and with the other Nordic countries. The air forces of

Finland, Sweden, and Norway train with each other almost on a weekly basis (cf. Bildt 2022, Solli/Solvang 2022). Similarly, the Finnish and Swedish armed forces have repeatedly demonstrated their formidable interoperability with NATO forces in the past by participating in a wide variety of manoeuvres – such as the exercises “Arctic Challenge 2021” in Finland, “Cold Response 2022” in Norway or “BALTOPS 2022” in Sweden (Ålander/Paul 2022). Finnish and Swedish troops are therefore experienced in interoperating with NATO partners which guarantees their quasi-immediate joint operational readiness after accession. For some years now, Finland and Sweden have also been part of NATO’s “Planning and Review” process, in which capability standards for allies and partner countries are defined and reviewed. This adds further to their high degree of interoperability with NATO.

Both the high standard of training and equipment of the Finnish and Swedish armed forces as well as their long experience of cooperation with NATO make the two Nordic countries excellent candidates for the transatlantic alliance. In fact, Finland and Sweden are “more NATO capable than most NATO countries themselves” (Alexander Stubb in Podcast Hold Your Fire! Episode 24/06/22). Therefore, no one in Brussels, Washington, London, Paris, or Berlin has serious doubts about their suitability for NATO membership. Quite the contrary: the democratic character of Sweden and Finland is beyond question. Politically as well as militarily, both countries are a valuable net gain for NATO. Not only do they expand the Alliance’s capability profile, but they also strengthen its European pillar and the democratic core of the Alliance based on functioning institutions and the rule of law.

(C) STRATEGIC SHIFTS IN THE REGION

A quick look at the map reveals most of the enormous implications that Finland’s and Sweden’s accession to NATO will have on the region both from a military and a geographical perspective. The Northern Enlargement will greatly enhance the defence outlook of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The Alliance’s possibilities for rapid force projection into North-Eastern Europe will be significantly increased – even without the permanent deployment of allied troops on Finnish or Swedish territory. NATO’s operational radius both at sea and in the air will be expanded noticeably. Redeployment of troops and logistics of supply can now be ensured much more quickly and reliably via air and sea routes. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO will lead to a new division of labour in ensuring military security – and defence if necessary – of the Baltic states (Busse 2022, Dempsey 2022, Gutschker/Wyssuwa 2022, Pesu/Paukkunen 2022).

More broadly, the inclusion of the two Nordic countries will bring about a fundamental reshaping of NATO’s defence structure along the Alliance’s Eastern flank. In this sense, allies such as Poland, Germany, Norway or Great Britain will primarily bear responsibility for logistical issues, i.e. the sup-

⁶ I am indebted to Toms Rostoks of the National Defence Academy of Latvia for this point, who pointed it out to me in a personal conversation.

ply of material and medium-term personnel replenishment, during the initial phase of a conflict. Finland and Sweden, on the other hand, will form the first line of defence in the event of a conflict in North-Eastern Europe. They would have to shoulder the brunt of the initial fighting and defence efforts. Since the Finnish and Swedish armed forces are capable of ensuring the territorial integrity of their respective countries on their own, they would also have to take over the main responsibility for the defence of the Baltics. Helsinki and Stockholm will thus have the most important operational role in the defence of the Baltic Sea region in the future.

Finland's and Sweden's large territories, their airspace and territorial waters will provide NATO with the strategic depth necessary to plan (and execute) the (re-)conquest of potentially occupied territories in the Baltics.⁷ In this regard, Sweden will become a crucial logistics hub for the alliance. Supply and reinforcements will be matters of days rather than weeks or even months (cf. Busse 2022, Gutschker/Wyssuwa 2022, Ladurner 2022). Finland and Sweden fill the strategic gap – the “blind spot” – in NATO's area of operations in North-Eastern Europe. A key gain for NATO lies in the geographical dimension of the Northern Enlargement: Finland will serve as a crucial link between the Alliance's Northern and Eastern flanks, thereby integrating several previously separate theatres of operation. Henceforth, the Baltic Sea, the North Sea, the Baltic states, Scandinavia, the North Atlantic, and the Arctic can be thought of as a single integrated area for military planning and operations.

The Finnish air defence, the powerful Swedish Navy as well as the air forces of both countries will help to strengthen NATO's superiority in the air domain and to shield the Alliance against landing attempts from the sea. At the same time, the Swedish island of Gotland allows for control over airspace and maritime activities in the Baltic Sea. The Baltic Sea will effectively become a “NATO lake”. “Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO would eventually unify the hitherto very fragmented security architecture in the Baltic Sea region, because all littoral states except for Russia would be members [of the transatlantic Alliance] [...]” (Minna Ålander in an interview with Markus Lippold for NTV dating 05/03/2022 [Lippold 2022]). Ideally, these circumstances will be sufficient to deter Russia from undertaking any provocative operation in the region in the future.

Another aspect worth mentioning in this context is that as a consequence of its Northern Enlargement it will be possible for NATO to defend the Estonian airspace from Finnish territory. The capitals of Tallinn and Helsinki are only a little more than 80 kilometres apart – a distance which is no obstacle for modern artillery and air defence systems (cf. Pesu/Paukunen 2022). Since Estonia does not have an air force of its own, this makes a real difference for the country. In addition,

medium- and long-range weapons (e.g., anti-ship missiles) could be stationed and early warning systems could be established in Finland and Sweden. Once Finland will have joined NATO, nearly 120 F-35 fighter jets will be operational in the region by the end of the 2020s, enabling permanent air surveillance, reconnaissance and – if necessary – defence. If other ongoing acquisitions in Norway and Denmark are included, there will be even more than 250 state-of-the-art fighter aircraft operating in the Baltic Sea region in the foreseeable future (Bildt 2022, Dempsey 2022). NATO's maritime posture will be further enhanced by the Finnish and Swedish capabilities for coastal defence (corvettes, amphibious formations) as well as for enemy engagement in deep waters (submarines). Additionally, in the event of a conflict Finnish mine-laying capabilities and the mine-clearance capabilities of both countries will change the strategic dynamics in the Gulf of Finland just off the major city of Saint Petersburg (see below).

Overall, these strategic shifts mean that Russia will be pushed into a defensive position in the Baltic Sea region. The operational capabilities of Russian air and naval forces in the region will be severely curtailed. In the case of conflict, they would be bound early on and face serious resistance. Moreover, they would have to operate against an opponent which is both numerically and technologically superior. Russia's access to the Baltic Sea and adjacent regions is also decreasing due to three major reasons.

Firstly, Sweden's accession to NATO deprives Russia of the opportunity to play its most valuable tactical trump. A hypothetical Russian incursion in the Baltics can no longer be covered by a quick “coup de main” against Sweden which would entail the (temporary) occupation of the island of Gotland to shield land operations from the sea side. Many military planners in NATO countries are convinced that Gotland would be a high priority target for Russian occupation in the event of a conflict in the region due to its high geostrategic value as a hub for controlling civilian and military activities in the Baltic Sea (cf. Busse 2022). In this regard, it was nervously being noticed in January 2023 that three Russian landing ships from Murmansk had entered the port of the Baltic Fleet in the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad (Ålander/Paul 2022). Sweden's accession to NATO, however, will significantly complicate the possibility of a successful Russian landing operation on the island 350 kilometres off Kaliningrad. In the future, Gotland will rather be an important outpost for the defence (or reconquest) of the Baltic states, and will serve to “back up” Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in case of emergency. Under such conditions, the overall operational value of the entire Russian Baltic Fleet is decreasing: “The Baltic Sea Fleet becomes more of a token rather than a serious strategic asset for Russia” (Toms Rostoks in a personal conversation with the author).

With regard to Kaliningrad, however, another aspect must be considered. The exclave is known to be one of the most highly armed cities in Russia. Approximately 30,000 soldiers

⁷ The Baltic allies, however, would naturally prefer to see a Russian conquest to be ruled out categorically from the outset.

are stationed in the restricted military area around the city.⁸ Moreover, numerous A2AD (“anti-access – area denial”) capabilities such as S-300 and S-400 missiles are stationed throughout the oblast. Nuclear-capable *Iskander missiles* are also stationed there (SWP podcast episode 2022/P-21). Given the tectonic shifts taking place in the Baltic Sea region following NATO’s Northern Enlargement, Kaliningrad is becoming even more of a neuralgic point for Russia. As seen from this perspective, the initial geostrategic situation is being reversed. This in turn might result in an increased likelihood of confrontation and a significantly higher danger of military escalation in the region as for Russia it inevitably follows a new strategic reasoning: „[An exposed Kaliningrad] maximises Russia’s imperative to close the Suwalki Gap in any given conflict scenario in order to deny the enemy access to the city and its military facilities. This will lead to an even greater militarisation of the region and some sort of ‘besieged fortress’ mentality” (Toms Rostoks in a conversation with the author).

Secondly, Finland’s accession to NATO will bring Saint Petersburg closer into the orbit of military planning of the Alliance – as the city is located directly on the Gulf of Finland and would thus inevitably become part of any conflict in the Baltic Sea region. Russia’s second largest city is of great economic, cultural, and symbolic importance for the country. As things stand, it will soon be in close proximity to Finnish NATO territory. It is true that in any conceivable conflict scenario, NATO would be extremely unlikely to take direct action against Saint Petersburg. However, depending on the level of escalation of the conflict, it could be considered an option to close the Gulf of Finland for the purpose of controlling incoming ships, which could result in seaward access to the metropolis being disrupted temporarily (Forsberg et al. 2022, Pesu/Paukkunen 2022).

Thirdly, the Northern Enlargement also brings NATO closer to the Russian bases on the Kola Peninsula. In the event of a conflict, the Alliance would thus have quick access from the Finnish border to Murmansk and the headquarters of the Russian Northern Fleet in Severomorsk, from where the Russian nuclear submarines in the Barents Sea are being commanded (cf. e.g. Bildt 2022, Busse 2022). NATO’s enlargement to the North will therefore also have significant repercussions beyond the Baltic Sea region to other areas such as the North Atlantic and the Arctic.

⁸ Other sources estimate a troop strength of around 12,000 soldiers (Axe 2022). Both figures refer to the situation prior to the Russian invasion on 24th of February 2022. Since then, the number of stationed personnel has decreased significantly, which is mainly due to the transfer of troops from the region to Ukraine. Some commentators even assume that up to 80% of the Russian troops originally stationed in Kaliningrad are now deployed in Ukraine (cf. Gramer/Detsch 2022).

4.

REACTIONS FROM THE REGION AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS BEYOND THE BALTIC SEA

(A) REACTIONS FROM THE BALTIC STATES

Given the significance and strategic consequences of the Finnish and Swedish decision(s) to join NATO, reactions from the Baltic states were not long in coming. It is no surprise that the move was more than favourably received in Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius. As Latvian President Egils Levits stated on Twitter: “Latvia has always appreciated the close cooperation of [Sweden] and [Finland] with #NATO and their high defence capabilities. Their accession to NATO will not only boost the security of the Baltic Sea region and the Eastern flank but strengthen the security of all Europe and NATO” (Tweet from 07/14/2022). Commenting on the decision, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas wrote: “Cannot overstate the importance of these steps for our NATO family and Nordic-Baltic security. Look forward to the day we can say #WeAreNATO together with Finland and Sweden” (Tweet from 05/15/2022). As early as in March 2022, Kallas had described her country as “Finland’s closest friend in NATO” in a conversation with her Finnish counterpart Sanna Marin and had made it clear that her government intended to wholeheartedly support Finnish NATO accession, should it be considered in Helsinki (Republic of Estonia Government 2022).

Only one day after the announcement of application for membership had been made, Kallas, together with the prime ministers of the other two Baltic countries, Arturs Krišjānis Kariņš and Ingrida Šimonytė, published a joint statement in which they warmly welcomed the decision of Finland and Sweden. The accession to NATO was described as a “historic step” which would significantly improve the regional security situation. Both countries were seen to share the values of the transatlantic community and would therefore strengthen the Alliance politically: “The accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO will help to achieve [a peaceful, secure, and prosperous Nordic-Baltic region] and open new opportunities for our countries for closer and stronger cooperation in the fields of security and defence”, reads the statement (Kallas/Kariņš/Šimonytė 2022). A timely implementation of the accession is now being considered a top political priority in the Baltic states. For Lithuania in particular, the successful completion of the accession process by July 2023 is an important foreign policy goal – as that is when the country is set to host the next summit of NATO Heads of State and Government. Accordingly, the Bal-

tic states set a good example to the other allies in proceeding with their national ratification processes. On 6th of July, the Riigikogu in Estonia became the fifth NATO parliament to approve accession. Only a few days later, the Saeima in Latvia (on 14th of July as the twelfth) and finally the Seimas in Lithuania (on 20th of July as the sixteenth) followed suit (cf. Atlantic Council Ratification Tracker 2022).

Overall, Finland’s and Sweden’s accession to NATO is seen in the Baltic states as an important reinforcement for the Alliance and the broader security architecture in the Baltic Sea region. Nevertheless, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania do not seize to emphasise that the accession of the two new members as such will not be sufficient in order to guarantee regional security in the long-term. Hence, the Baltic states continue to press for further reinforcement of Western troop contingents in their countries as they are convinced that security risks for the region remain imminent regardless of NATO’s new enlargement round (cf. Milne 2022).

(B) RUSSIA’S REACTION

Even before the decision on an application for membership was made in Helsinki and Stockholm, Russia had repeatedly stated that it strictly rejected the accession of the two Nordic countries to NATO and that it would consider such a step a threat to its security interests. In the event of accession, Moscow had therefore threatened to take retaliatory measures. In the past, the Kremlin had repeatedly used martial rhetoric to dissuade Helsinki and Stockholm from joining NATO. This time, however, the attempt backfired spectacularly. The blatant threats from Moscow rather strengthened the feeling among the Finnish and Swedish population that NATO accession – now more than ever – was necessary to meet their increased security needs.

In view of the statements from the Kremlin, Helsinki and Stockholm had prepared for various disruptive manoeuvres – especially such below an open threshold of escalation which had been proven to be preferred instruments in Russia’s foreign policy toolkit in the past. These scenarios included, for example, the violation of the national airspace by Russian fighter planes or hybrid actions such as cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns (Ålander in Lippold 2022). In addition, security guarantees from the US and other key NATO

members had been negotiated for the transition period before the official membership applications were submitted.

On 14th of May 2022, Russia cut its electric supplies to Finland with only one day’s notice. However, imports had already been reduced in anticipation since April of the same year and therefore only amounted to about 10% of Finland’s total electricity demand (Ålander 2022). In the gas sector, Finland was well positioned too following the timely construction of three LNG terminals. In 2020, Finland was still purchasing a good two-thirds of its gas imports from Russia. However, this only accounted for about 6% of consumption in the Finnish energy mix, so that the Russian sanctions were largely ineffective (ibid.). Similarly, the termination of the treaty on Finnish rights of use in the Russian part of the Saimaa Canal remained mainly symbolic. Infamous Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov railed against the “destabilising influence” of the accession decision and announced a review of the stationing of conventional troops near the border with Finland, but beyond that had little to show apart from a vague reference he made to answers at the “military-technical level”. In the end, the Kremlin obviously had no choice but to grumble.

There are two reasons for this. For one thing, large troop deployments on the border with Finland are simply not feasible for Russia at the moment. The conventional threat to both Nordic countries (as well as to the Baltic states) has decreased as a consequence of the commitment of Russian troops in the war in Ukraine. On the other hand, Finland and Sweden, as long-standing EU members and stable, Western liberal democracies, were “lost cases” for Russia anyways. Historically, they play no prominent role for the Kremlin and are therefore not an object of the Russian president’s neo-imperial desires.

(C) IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ARCTIC AND THE HIGH NORTH

With Finland and Sweden joining NATO, the Russian war of aggression will also have an impact, albeit limited, on the security dynamics in the High North and the Arctic, where tensions between littoral states have steadily increased in recent years in the face of advancing climate change and the region’s abundance of resources. The war in Ukraine thus puts an end to the long-held view among experts that, from a security and defence perspective, the Arctic can be conceived of as an exceptional area that stands on its own, and, moreover, is characterized by its relative stability and crisis-resistance thanks to its high level of legalisation and institutionalization (cf. Caleb 2022, Hilde 2022). Even if the impact on the Arctic has been moderate (at best) so far, a confrontation between Russia and NATO in the region cannot be ruled out in the future. Just like the Baltic Sea, the Arctic is now surrounded by NATO members, with Russia being the only country outside the common regional security framework. As a result of the invasion of Ukraine, all cooperation with Russia in the Arctic Council has been suspended until further

notice. Therefore, no institutionalised dialogue is currently taking place with Moscow on matters of Arctic security (nor on other issues such as environmental protection or climate change). Depending on its foreign policy behaviour, Russia therefore holds a considerable “spoiler potential” (Hilde 2022) in the Arctic.

A similar consideration also applies to the High North and the North Atlantic. Both are of crucial importance for supply routes and the deployment of US reinforcements to Europe in the event of a major crisis. Moreover, important but hardly protected submarine cables are located there which direct data flows and enable telecommunications connections between the continents (cf. e.g., Claesson/Carlander 2022). The recent acts of sabotage against the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines in the Baltic Sea have shown how vulnerable critical maritime infrastructure is.⁹ Far better anti-submarine warfare capabilities are required to protect this infrastructure from attacks (Hunter Christie 2022). These are all the more urgently needed in the region for there is another strategic problem for NATO in the North Atlantic: The great distance between Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom, the so-called “GIUK gap”, opens up wide operational areas for enemy forces. It is not possible for NATO fleet units to conduct reconnaissance or defence operations which would cover the entire area. Therefore, there exists a permanent latent risk of enemy forces bypassing the Alliance’s defences and carrying out surprise offensive strikes from unexpected directions. Finland’s and Sweden’s maritime capabilities are indispensable in order to reduce these risks and for the GIUK gap to be closed eventually (cf. Ålander/Paul 2022, Carati 2022, Pesu/Paukkunen 2022).

⁹ For a more in-depth discussion of this topic, it is worth reading the interview that the head of the Swedish Navy gave to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung on 10/28/2022 (Wyssuwa 2022 [in German language only]).

5.

CONCLUSION

Which changes will the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO bring for security policy in the Baltic Sea region? It is certain that Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has shaken the foundations of the European security order which had been negotiated after the end of the Cold War. The Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris lie in shambles. In this situation, even countries with a decades and centuries-long tradition of non-alignment, such as Finland and Sweden, feel forced to play the safe card. Military neutrality does no longer serve as a guarantee of stable relations with Moscow. There is no reason left for self-imposed restraint on foreign policy choices.

A deterioration of the security situation had long been observed in the Baltic region. With their recent steps, Helsinki and Stockholm have done nothing but to consequently re-calibrate the relation between ends and means in their defence and alliance policies. At the same time, the decision to join NATO must be understood as part of a broader Scandinavian "Zeitenwende", which also includes Denmark's opening up to cooperation within the framework of the EU's CFSP/CSDP (Detlefsen 2022; I'm indebted to Minna Ålander for pointing this out to me). While Chancellor Scholz's "Zeitenwende" is still being planned and has met various difficulties to materialize in Germany, the Nordics have shown that they have learnt their lessons from the new chapter that has opened up in European politics since February 2022.

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has created a new strategic reality in Europe. Finland's accession will create about 1,300 new kilometres at the border between Russia and NATO which will now be twice as long as it used to be (Ladurner 2022). With his aggressive expansionist policy, Putin has thus achieved exactly the opposite of what he had originally intended. Putin's attack on Ukraine has indeed had a unifying, even revitalising effect on the transatlantic alliance, which French President Emmanuel Macron, only a few years ago, had infamously declared to be "brain-dead". In all these respects, the war of aggression on Ukraine has turned out to be a "boomerang" for the Russian political leadership (Muti 2022).

In a full-scale conflict scenario, however, NATO would have had to defend Finland and Sweden anyway. So to what extent does formal accession make any difference at all? Is it little more than a storm in a teacup? It is true that for the time being membership will have little impact on the situation "on the ground" in Finland and Sweden. Everyday politics will not

change noticeably as a result of this step. The military infrastructure in both countries, too, will most probably remain in its present form. And yet, NATO's Northern Enlargement is significantly altering the overall dynamics of the regional security situation in the Baltics, just as it is changing the Alliance itself and the two new members.

The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO is a clear security gain for the alliance. NATO will greatly benefit from its two new allies which bring along stable democratic institutions, well-equipped, technologically advanced, and high-quality armed forces. As a result, the military balance of power in the Baltic Sea region will (further) shift in favour of NATO. Helsinki and Stockholm can furthermore serve as models for the other Allies with regards to closer bilateral and multilateral integration of national military structures. Accession also increases the political and geographical overlap between the EU and NATO in Northern Europe. Hitherto, the security and defence policies of the Nordic states had been extremely heterogenous. The expansion of the alliance now connects several previously separate regions which will form a single, homogeneous and cohesive operational space in the future. The overall defence of this space on land, sea, and in the air is thereby greatly simplified.

At the same time, the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO raises some open questions. Their membership will not only mean a change in the tactical requirements and opportunities of the Alliance as a whole, but will also trigger a wider reflection process in Helsinki and Stockholm on their specific contribution(s) as members of the Alliance as well as on the formation of their respective national forces (Brommesson 2022, Hunter Christie 2022). One particularly interesting question is whether Finland and Sweden will station troops outside their own territory and where or to what extent they will participate in ongoing NATO operations such as the alliance's air policing mission in the Baltics. Moreover (and perhaps even more explosive), will the governments of the Nordic countries allow for the stationing of NATO troops on their own territory? "All of NATO's Eastern Flank nations now host multinational NATO forces. Militarily speaking, Finland will be an Eastern Flank nation. The natural question is whether Finland should also host Allied forces on its territory" (Hunter Christie 2022: 5). As of today, the idea of an "Enhanced Forward Presence in the North" (Podcast "Sicherheitshalber", episode 58/2022), i.e., a rotating deployment of NATO contingents in Finland and Sweden, seems rather unlikely. However, it should not be ruled out in the future.

Important details of such a deployment (such as duration and troop provider) would then have to be specified. For the time being, however, Finland's and Sweden's participation in NATO missions outside their own territory remains the more likely option.

From a broader perspective, the Finnish and Swedish decisions to join NATO point to a more general trend towards the dissolution of the long-standing non-aligned buffer zone between Russia and NATO since the beginning of the war of aggression. In his reckless quest for the re-establishment of geopolitical spheres of influence, Vladimir Putin has pushed numerous states to make a fundamental decision on the direction of their foreign policy. As a consequence, Europe appears once again to be facing a disintegration into two blocs. On the one hand, Finland, Sweden, Moldova, and Georgia, which in view of the war have hastily decided to apply for membership in the EU and/or NATO. On the other hand, Belarus, which has become a mere vassal state of Russia since the beginning of the war (at least on the official level). The formerly neutral space in Europe is melting away – and with it the possibilities for negotiations and mediation. From a historical perspective, this trend towards (re)polarisation in Europe must be seen as very worrisome with regard to the stability of the continent. Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO may well have heralded an “end of neutrality” (Näbig 2022) and dealt the final blow to this “third way” option. This, of course, would have to be considered a serious wake-up call for the continent.

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NO LONGER OFF THE RADAR – NATO'S ENLARGEMENT TO THE NORTH AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE BALTIC STATES



By joining NATO, Finland and Sweden bring their decades-long tradition of military neutrality to an end. NATO membership is seen in Helsinki and Stockholm as the only reliable guarantee not to stand alone against Russia should tensions increase in the Baltic Sea region. At the same time, this move must be understood to be part of a broader Scandinavian “Zeitenwende” which also includes Denmark’s opening up to cooperation on security and defence issues on the EU level.



The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO will lead to a new division of labour in ensuring military security in the Baltic region and in the defence of the region. In the future, Finland and Sweden will form the first line of defence to the East in the event of a conflict in North-Eastern Europe. This does also mean that they will have to shoulder the lion’s share of the defence of the Baltic states.



The defence outlook of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania will improve significantly as a result of NATO’s Northern Enlargement. The Alliance’s ability to rapidly project forces into North-Eastern Europe will be significantly enhanced. The redeployment of troops and the delivery of supplies can now be ensured much faster and more reliably via air and sea routes. In this regard, Sweden will become the new logistics hub of the alliance.



Finland’s and Sweden’s accession to NATO will close the strategic gap – the “blind spot” – of the Alliance’s operational planning in North-Eastern Europe. In the future, the Baltic Sea, the North Sea, the Baltics, Scandinavia, the North Atlantic and the Arctic will be considered a unified and integrated strategic and operational theatre. The implications of NATO’s Northern Enlargement will therefore be felt far beyond the Baltic Sea and its immediate neighbourhood.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
<https://baltic.fes.de>