

The Road To Alignment: Prospects Of Finnish and Swedish NATO Memberships

WRITTEN BY OLYMPIA ILIOPOULOU

Image credits: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/nato/51942155994/in/photostream/>



The 18th of May 2022 marked a major moment in the history of Finland and Sweden. After years of commitment to neutrality and non-alignment, both countries handed their official letters of application to join NATO. Their applications were warmly welcomed by most of the Allies, except for Turkey. Even though nothing has been concretised yet, the prospects of such an integration seem as exciting as they seem challenging.

1. A sisterhood

Finland and Sweden have followed similar (but not identical) paths in terms of their defence policies and attitudes. This similarity is linked to historical reasons and has been acknowledged by both sides. Finnish foreign minister Tarja Halonen once referred to the countries as “sisters but not twins”, with this description becoming widely popular to characterise the dynamic between the two (Forsberg & Moyer, 2022). Even though Finland was once part of Sweden, before it was lost to Russia in 1809, it is considered that the two have never been as coordinated as they are today, mainly on security policy issues.

Historically, both Helsinki and Oslo have maintained a politically neutral profile. During the Cold War, they chose to not align with external alliances, although for different reasons (Vaahtoranta & Forsberg, 2000; Eellend, 2016; Forsberg & Moyer, 2022). For Finland, non-alignment came as a condition to maintain good Finnish-Soviet relations. Finland committed to neutrality by signing the 1948 Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance (FCMA) with the USSR. This treaty largely allowed the country to maintain freedom and stability during this turbulent era (Forsberg & Moyer, 2022). On the other hand, Sweden’s non-alignment can be described as more of a strategic choice (Eellend, 2016). Sweden had not (and to this day has not) participated in any war since 1814, hence remaining neutral was thought to be the safest way to ensure stability (Forsberg & Moyer, 2022).

For decades, this attitude was considered the optimal choice for both countries to avoid unnecessary tensions and survive great power competition. Indeed, neutrality has allowed the two to maintain their relationships with both the US and Russia. Russia has made it abundantly clear that a possible alignment of Finland or Sweden will not be left without a firm reaction, although details on the nature and scale of this reaction have not been specified. On the American side, it is no secret that a potential alignment would be more than welcome. Thus, considering the contradictory interest, maintaining a balance was vital for the countries’ security.

In 1994 Finland and Sweden joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program and one year later they became EU member states with full commitment to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). These steps ultimately drew them away from political neutrality as they once claimed it, even though their political alignment to this day hasn't been followed by a military one (Forsberg & Moyer, 2022). Nevertheless, both Finland and Sweden have been progressively increasing their cooperation with NATO, for example by participating in NATO's Response Force, and have kept the option of one day joining the Alliance open.

2. A change of heart?

As explained earlier, so far military non-alignment has been proven to be efficient in ensuring stability and security in the Nordic region. The Nordic countries have also achieved great internal cooperation, most notably through The Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) and haven't been faced with any direct threat in a long time. However, recently, the European security landscape has been violently transformed due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This transformation is bound to have an impact on every European country's security strategy. The Nordic countries are not immune to this shift.

Russia has long been the primary security threat in the Nordic region. While Iceland, Denmark, and Norway are fully covered by the security guarantee of the Washington Treaty, as full NATO Member States, the same cannot be said for Finland and Sweden, which merely hold the status of Enhanced Opportunities Partners (EOP). Russia's aggression against Ukraine showed that the Kremlin has no intention to maintain the status quo, hence non-alignment could potentially prove to be insufficient to ensure safety for Finland and Sweden in the future. Most importantly, it showed that Ukraine's status of EOP, the same status that both Finland and Sweden enjoy, is not enough to guarantee deterrence (Solli & Solvang, 2022). Even though the Alliance has declared its intention to protect both countries if needed, in the absence of memberships, there is no legal bind to these claims. While a verbal commitment might have been enough to reassure the Finnish and Swedish public opinion in the past, in the light of the Ukrainian war it falls short.

Indeed, although so far public opinion in the two countries was predominantly opposed to joining NATO, now research shows that there has been a "change of heart" (Forsberg & Moyer, 2022; Kirby, 2022). This swing in public opinion is considerable, especially in Finland, which shares a 1,340-kilometre-long border with Russia. Sweden does not share the same sentiment of urgency in the strict sense (Kirby, 2022). However, considering the close coordination between the two, a joint move towards alignment was anticipated. Additionally, moving together reduces some of the risks of "retaliation" from the Russian side. Although there is at least some sense of urgency to join NATO now, we cannot say that this decision constitutes a sudden change of heart.

Progressively both countries have sought closer ties with the Alliance and have always considered the scenario of joining plausible. Joining NATO constitutes a radical change in the geopolitical identity of Finland and Sweden and, as such, took some time and convincing. While the Russian invasion might have been the catalyst, this decision has been years in the making.

3. Great power and responsibility

Assuming that Finland and Sweden's applications were to be accepted by all Allies, as required by the procedure, NATO would be achieving a huge enlargement in the northern flank. Hence, if the invasion in Ukraine was Putin's attempt to put a stop to the Alliance's enlargement, then his plan has severely backfired. By trying to keep the Alliance as far from Moscow as possible, he only managed to draw it even closer. Notwithstanding, some critics insist that the accession of Finland and Sweden is dangerous as it could turn them into Russian targets. While a military reaction from Putin is never completely off the table, it does seem highly unlikely now (Stavridis, 2022). Finland and Sweden have submitted their membership applications at a time when Russia already has its hands full with Ukraine. Hence, the prospect of opening new fronts is unlikely in the short term. Nevertheless, Russia possesses other means, such as cyber-attacks i.a., that could be used against enemies or whomever it considers as such (Stavridis, 2022). In any case, the Alliance will try to keep the accession procedure as short as possible (Kirby, 2022; Siebold & Irish, 2022). For as long as the procedure lasts, the two countries are stuck in a "grey zone" considering that NATO's collective defence guarantee (Article 5) kicks in only after a full membership is granted. Hopefully, some Allies have already gone out of their way to reassure the two Nordic states in this "vulnerable" time. Recently, British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson travelled to both countries to sign mutual security agreements, committing to assist them "in a variety of ways, which may include military means" in case either is faced with an attack (Walker, 2022).

The addition of the Finns and Swedes to the Alliance will offer a wide range of enhanced possibilities. Their armed forces might be relatively small compared to some other Allies. However, they are highly capable and fully compatible with NATO standards due to their long-lasting cooperation. Furthermore, their inclusion would allow for deeper Nordic interoperability. More specifically, NORDEFCO could particularly benefit from all its members joining a common military alliance.

Nevertheless, the greatest advantage of such an enlargement stems from the strategic geographical position of Finland and Sweden in the northeastern flank of the Alliance, which is arguably the most vulnerable. The three Baltic Allies -Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania- are currently geographically isolated from the other members (Coffey & Kochis, 2016; Eellend, 2016). Adding to that their complicated neighbourhood with hostile (Russia), questionable (Belarus), or neutral (Finland, Sweden) bordering states, one can easily understand why the Baltic region has been called the "Achilles heel" of NATO.

Currently, the Suwalki Gap, a 100-kilometre Polish piece of land cramped up between the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad and Belarus, is used to connect the Baltic States with the other NATO members. Due to its location, the Suwalki Gap is as strategic as it is vulnerable. It is important to remember that Russia has invested in A2/AD capabilities in the region, with Kaliningrad playing a central role in its strategy (Coffey & Kochis, 2016; Eellend, 2016). Hence, a potential seizure of this piece of land could paralyse communications between the Baltic States and the rest of NATO. However, with the addition of Finland and Sweden, the dynamic in the region changes completely. History has shown that the Nordic region plays a crucial role in ensuring Baltic security. Three Baltic Sea islands -Bornholm, Gotland, and Åland- are significant for security in the region (Coffey & Kochis, 2016; Eellend, 2016). Bornholm is already allied as it belongs to Denmark but Åland and Gotland are not. Åland is recognised as an autonomous Swedish-speaking province within Finland that has been demilitarised after the end of World War II. Gotland is a Swedish island with great strategic importance as it offers control and access to the Baltic Sea and States (Kirby, 2022; Eellend, 2016). Whoever holds these islands has a significant strategic advantage in the Baltic region. It is worth noting that Russia has had an eye on these islands for a long time and has even conducted military exercises simulating their seizure (Coffey & Kochis, 2016). Thus, the military alignment of Finland and Sweden would solidify the north-eastern flank and provide stability and security guarantees to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Furthermore, with their alignment, Finland and Sweden could also give NATO a strategic advantage in the Arctic. It is well known that the Arctic is increasingly attracting interest from various stakeholders. Currently all the big international players -the U.S., China, Russia, India, and the EU- have some kind of Arctic policy laid down. For most, the Arctic presents a great opportunity for economic growth but Russia sees much more potential. Indeed, Russia's Arctic policy is twofold encompassing an economic as well as a military pillar (Sergunin & Konyshv, 2019). Moscow's increasingly militarised approach is not of course going unnoticed. Already since 2006 NATO is organising the bi-annual Exercise Cold Response (traditionally hosted by Norway), aiming at joint military training under special weather conditions and preparing the Alliance for any scenario. Cold Response 2022, which took place recently, was reportedly one of the largest NATO exercises in the Arctic since the 1980's, involving 30.000 troops from 27 countries (NATO, 2022). Finland and Sweden participated in this year's exercise, as they have been doing for more than fifteen years, with about 700 Finns and 1,600 Swedish troops (Edvardsen, 2022). Their military contribution is highly desirable and valuable since together with the other Nordic countries they possess specialised knowledge and experience in cold-weather warfare. The Swedish Norrland Brigades and Finnish Jaeger Brigade are just two examples of such highly specialised units. And while these brigades already cooperate between them and with the Norwegian arctic forces, being part of the same Alliance and thus, a having common standardisation system, could bring enormous benefits in terms of interoperability. Most importantly, together these forces could form a considerable arctic division overseeing the region.

However, with great power comes great responsibility. If Finland and Sweden were to be granted full NATO memberships, they would likely have to reconsider their security policies and identities. As Allies, they would be safeguarding not only their national territories but also the Alliance's borders (Eellend, 2016; Kirby, 2022). This is especially true for Finland due to the long border it shares with Russia. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, the two countries would likely be committing to play the role of the primary security guarantors for the Baltic States (Coffey & Kochis, 2016; Eellend, 2016). Finally, while both countries fulfil the political criteria to join NATO, the membership comes with certain budgetary commitments, most notably the 2% of GDP to military expenditure pledge. According to the most recent World Bank data (2020), they fall short in that regard with Helsinki spending 1.5% and Oslo 1.2% of their GDP on defence. However, two things should be taken into account here. Firstly, both countries have the financial capabilities to support increased military spending and both governments have announced such plans. Secondly, the 2% target is only met by a slim minority within the Alliance. Admittedly, there is an unspoken understanding of the fact that not every Allie has the same defence needs, which explains why Greece comes first with spending exceeding 3.5% of its GDP and Luxembourg comes last with a little over 0.5%. Thus, the financial aspect is something to be considered but realistically it does not constitute a substantial concern.

4. Conclusion

Finland and Sweden have gone a long way in their journeys to alignment. Even though the decision to apply for NATO membership was encouraged by the rapidly deteriorating security environment, it can also be seen as a natural next step in the countries' relationship with the Alliance. For years, Finland and Sweden have been valuable NATO partners. Now the time has finally come for them to reap the fruits of their labour. Their accession would inevitably transform their identities and the architecture of the whole Alliance. However, in this rapidly changing security environment, remaining still or rigid is no longer a viable option.

Bibliography

Coffey, L., & Kochis, D. (2016). The Role of Sweden and Finland in NATO's Defense of the Baltic States. ISSUE BRIEF-the Heritage Foundation, 4554.

Edwardsen, T. A. (2022, March 23). Swedish Top Politicians at Cold Response: Important Signal about Defense Cooperation. *Www.highnorthnews.com*. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/swedish-top-politicians-cold-response-important-signal-about-defense-cooperation>

Eellend, J. (2016, June 13). Friends, But Not Allies: Finland, Sweden, and NATO in the Baltic Sea. Foreign Policy Research Institute. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/06/friends-not-allies-finland-sweden-nato-baltic-sea/>

Forsberg, R., & Moyer, J. C. (2022, February 2). Sisters But Not Twins: Prospects of Finland and Sweden's NATO Accession. Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/sisters-not-twins-prospects-finland-and-swedens-nato-accession>

Kirby, J. (2022, May 13). Finland and Sweden's historic shifts on NATO, explained. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/2022/5/13/23069341/finland-sweden-nato-membership-russia-ukraine-war>

NATO. (2022). Exercise Cold Response 2022 – NATO and partner forces face the freeze in Norway. NATO. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_192351.htm

Sergunin, A., & Konyshv, V. (2019). Forging Russia's Arctic strategy: actors and decision-making. *The Polar Journal*, 9(1), 75-93.

Siebold, S., & Irish, J. (2022, May 15). NATO official "confident" about finding Finland, Sweden consensus. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germany-says-all-ready-quick-ratification-finnish-swedish-nato-membership-2022-05-15/>

Solli, P. E., & Solvang, Ø. (2022, April 13). Finland and Sweden's Path Towards NATO. *Www.rusi.org*. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/finland-and-swedens-path-towards-nato>

Stavridis, J. (2022, May 18). Finland and Sweden Joining NATO Is the Latest Example of Putin Miscalculating the Ukraine War. *Time*. <https://time.com/6177971/nato-finland-sweden-russia/>

Bibliography

The World Bank. (2020). Military expenditure (% of GDP) - Sweden, Finland | Data. Data.worldbank.org. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=SE-FI>

Vahtoranta, T., & Forsberg, T. (2000). POST-NEUTRAL OR PRE-ALLIED? Finnish and Swedish Policies on the EU and NATO as Security Organisations. <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/19260/WP29.pdf>

Walker, P. (2022, May 11). UK pledges to back Sweden and Finland against Russian threats. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/may/11/uk-pledges-to-back-sweden-and-finland-against-russian-threats-nato>