

The New Scandinavian Asset: To What Extent Sweden and Finland NATO's Membership Will Strengthen The Alliance?

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By Tom Mantelet

Introduction

Since the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1949, the Nordic countries or Scandinavian countries remained divided on their willingness to join the Alliance. Whereas Norway, Denmark, and Iceland directly joined NATO, Sweden and Finland chose not to. In the case of Finland, it is mostly due to its proximity to Russia, sharing a 1300 km border, with whom after the end of World War II they signed a mutual assistance and cooperation agreement in 1948 (Henley, 2022). Therefore, to join NATO would have been seen as a provocation towards Moscow, in disagreement with Finland's neutrality position and non-alignment policy in international relations.

In the case of Sweden, it has long been a peaceful actor, promoting nuclear disarmament and playing the role of mediator, largely reducing its military spending at the end of the Cold War. Therefore, adhering to NATO would have compromised Sweden's multilateral, non-aggression policy and increased regional tensions.

Nonetheless, since the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 both countries have increased their defence spending. Since 2014 the Swedish defence budget varied from 1% to 1.3% in 2022 and could reach 2% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2028 (Johnson, 2022). On the other hand, Finland's military expenditure reached 1.96% of GDP compared to 1.29% in 2014 (Puolustusministeriö 2022).

The recent invasion of Ukraine by Russia has re-shaped how the two Scandinavian nations viewed their national and regional security policies. Following the Russian attack, Finland and Sweden formally affirmed their willingness to join the Alliance and confirmed their ability to meet the "political, legal and military obligations and commitments of NATO membership" (NATO 2022). For these two countries, NATO membership would mean, for the first time, a military and nuclear security guarantee against Russia (Henley, 2022).

Nevertheless, although NATO's security provision and mutual military assistance is apparent, it is less evident what Finland and Sweden would provide to the North Atlantic Alliance and how they would strengthen NATO's strategic position.

An Undeniable Strategic Posture

Despite Ukraine being the actual theatre of operations, the Baltic States represent the principal point of focus in case of a Russian attack on NATO. The Baltic Sea is surrounded by Sweden and Finland to the North and Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Russia to the East and Southeast.

In this sense, the Baltic Sea is a strategic area for NATO's defence posture and a potential supply route for the Baltic States in case of a Russian attack. Therefore, apart from the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad and its North-Eastern access to the Baltic Sea, NATO has the largest presence in the Baltic. Moreover, it has the tools to avoid Russian ships reaching the North Sea by closing the Danish Strait (Kuczyński, 2019).

Over a century Finland has gathered valuable intelligence and experience as Russia's neighbour. Furthermore, Sweden and Finland have a lot of practical knowledge regarding sub-Arctic climates and how to manoeuvre or operate in extremely cold weather (Forsberg, Kähkönen & Öberg, 2022).



Source: Google Earth - Landsat/Copernicus

This new NATO position in the North complements Denmark's large territories in the Arctic Ocean. With Sweden and Finland joining the alliance, NATO's Arctic reach will extend from Greenland to Finland. As the ice diminishes, new passages are opening up, causing a renewal of interest in the region. Both China and Russia are increasing their ice-breaker fleet and are cooperating on the development of the Northern Sea Route. Furthermore, Russia is re-militarising the Arctic, re-opening more than 50 Soviet bases that harbour strategic ports with the intention to use them for military and commercial purposes (Gricius, 2021).

With a new NATO member at its door, Russia is likely to increase its military and intelligence resources to its Northern border at a significant economic and strategic cost.

Furthermore, the integration of Sweden and Finland into the Alliance would tremendously increase NATO's airspace, providing new access to the Baltic Sea to defend the Baltic States.

Moreover, Sweden and Finland possess islands in the middle of the Baltic Sea such as Sweden's Gotland Island which harbours a military facility that would disturb potential Russian naval operations.

Finally, the Baltic Sea is a strategic passage for underwater communication lines. Sweden and Finland would increase naval presence to protect these communication lines from being hijacked and destroyed by Russia in case of an attack on a NATO member state. The destruction of these lines could undermine NATO's ability to organise a response and would further isolate the Baltic States.

Furthermore, the gas Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines are passing through the Baltic Sea to reach Germany. This strategic passage gives even more importance to Nordic countries' role in monitoring the Baltic Sea against potential sabotages of critical infrastructures as it has been observed recently.

The military and technological component

As previously mentioned, Finland and Sweden have boosted their defence expenditure since 2014. Both countries will bring significant military capabilities and advanced militaries into NATO. Furthermore, they are employing similar equipment to NATO members, greatly facilitating their integration into NATO's military command and interoperability around the Baltic Sea. To replace its F-18/Hornet fleet, Finland has settled for 64 F-35 fighters (Sprenger, 2022). Possession of an F-35 fleet greatly enhances NATO's nuclear deterrence position, bolstering interoperability capacities due to F-35 compatibility with NATO nuclear weapons delivery systems. In this manner Nordic countries would be able to deliver NATO's nuclear warheads through the Northern border of Russia.

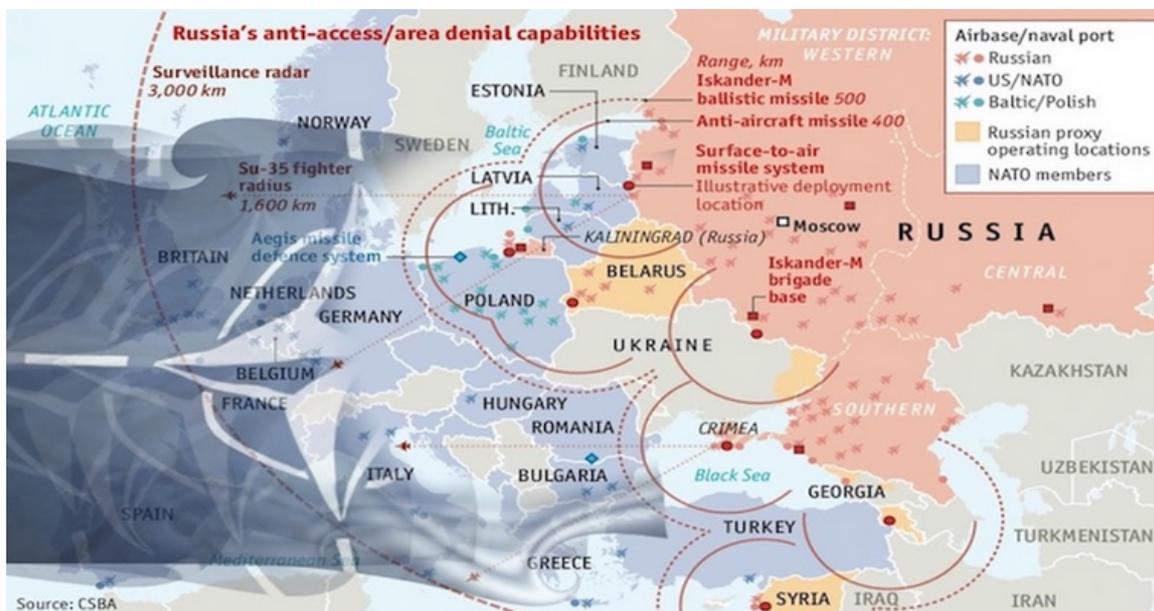
In total, Finland and Sweden will contribute 150 aircraft. On the other hand, Sweden intends to acquire two advanced GlobalEye Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft to better monitor NATO's airspace (Bowman, Brobst, Sullivan & Hardie, 2022). In terms of air defence systems, both countries are looking to obtain Israel's equipment which, once again, would reinforce NATO's defensive posture.

Sweden has a well-developed navy with capable corvettes and submarines. These would be a key asset in the Baltic Sea but also in the Arctic where Russia is looking to expand. Regarding land warfare capabilities, Finland maintains "M270 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems and hundreds of towed howitzers", making it one of the most capable artillery forces in Europe (Bowman, Brobst, Sullivan & Hardie, 2022). Furthermore, the two countries could provide 220 active Leopard main battle tanks.

Finally, Sweden, Finland, Norway and Denmark are also key actors in 5G development, with ambitious digitalisation strategies aiming to be "the first and most integrated 5G region in the world" (GSMA, 2022). Although the impact of 5G on the military is still little known, the Nordic countries could become an essential partner in NATO's quest for military digitalisation.

Russian A2/AD and Nordic countries

A2/AD refers to anti-access/area denial capabilities. In other words, it is the ability of an actor to “use a combination of sensors and long-range missiles to prevent an adversary from operating in an exclusion zone” (Dalsjö, Berglund & Jonsson 2019). Russia is employing such a strategy to create a “bubble” around its zone of influence and counter NATO’s defensive position. In other words, if NATO is willing to defend an attacked country in this “bubble” it would be extremely costly.



Source: CSBA <https://behorizon.org/russian-a2ad-strategy-and-its-implications-for-nato/> (Dec 6, 2018)

When looking at the map, most of Russian A2/AD is regrouped around NATO’s Eastern and Southern European flank. The integration of Sweden and Finland in the North Atlantic Alliance would give options to counter Russia’s A2/AD from the north.

As previously mentioned, a new NATO flank along the Finnish-Russian border would require Russia to mobilise additional resources to reinforce its northern flank. On the other hand, Finland has already been preparing to defend against a Russian attack and joining NATO will only strengthen its defensive capabilities.

Conclusion

With its decision to invade Ukraine, Russia has pushed Finland and Sweden into the hands of NATO after decades of strategic neutrality and non-alignment policy. It can be considered as an astounding foreign policy failure by Russia which has not only participated to NATO’s revitalization but also expansion. This integration is greatly increasing NATO’s military capabilities and geographic position against Russia, opening a Northern front and possibilities to counter Russia’s A2/AD.

Moreover, the two countries have developed, well-equipped armed forces which can be easily integrated, making them highly interoperable with NATO's command structure.

Therefore, the Nordic countries will not only strengthen NATO's position in the Arctic and in the Baltic but also bolster the ability to conduct joint operations in North-Eastern Europe.

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