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# REFUSING A SECOND “FINLANDIZATION”? THE DRIVERS AND THE IMPACT OF FINLAND AND SWEDEN’S NATO MEMBERSHIP ON THE ARCTIC REGION



## REFUSING A SECOND “FINLANDIZATION”? THE DRIVERS AND THE IMPACT OF FINLAND AND SWEDEN’S NATO MEMBERSHIP ON THE ARCTIC REGION

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## Director's Editorial

Europe is again amidst a security crisis, the roots of which go far beyond the unsolved issues with post-Soviet Russia and NATO enlargement towards the East of Europe. The current invasion of Ukraine shows that two opposing international concepts are on the battleground. On the one side, there is a vision that officially supports the right of non-interference in a multipolar world whilst, in reality, abusing sovereign power, imposing it on other nations and dividing the world into areas of one-dominant country influence. On the other side, there is an international concept based on the willingness of populations that claim the right to national self-determination as a core value based on democracy. Considering the price at stake in this fight is necessary to comprehend the different moves the stakeholders decide to play in the international scenario, and analysing the rationale behind the decisions made by parties is fundamental to predict future decisions. The goal of this research is not to provide precise predictions of future developments, but instead to attempt to investigate the reasons that led two of the most prominent European neutral nations – Sweden and Finland – to take sides in the current conflict between the two contrasting visions of the international order joining the Atlantic Alliance. The paper is therefore relevant because it uses a historical analysis of Finland and Sweden, looking at the lessons learnt from past experiences to determine the present-day challenges that Sweden and Finland face due to their geopolitical position in the Arctic region. In doing so, this paper aims to understand the past, present and future international arrangements involving the Arctic as the next battlefield where the two contrasting international order visions will collide.

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## Abstract

The formal submission of the application letter to become a NATO Ally by Sweden (SE) and Finland (FI) (NATO, 2022) is undoubtedly a geopolitical milestone that will be a game-changer in future years. An additional 1.300 kilometres of NATO will now stand directly in front of the Russian border, and all the countries facing the Arctic Ocean are now part of the Atlantic Alliance, except for Russia. The ongoing Ukrainian conflict and the renewed pressure on the Western borders cause the break with traditional neutrality by SE and FI. However, this decision will have a great impact on what has been described as "the next Middle East"(Tommerbak & Trevellik, 2019), the Arctic.

To evaluate these two nations, the paper will clarify primarily the rationale behind the refusal of the two Scandinavian countries for another so-called "Finlandisation" – understood as the historical attitude of a state to adjust its policies to the demands of a more powerful and threatening state – and to what extent the previous lessons of the past have exercised an influence on the latest decisions. Consequently, it will highlight the relevance of the Arctic, focusing on the recent militarisation of the region and explaining how the entrance of SE and FI into the NATO Alliance could lead to a possible escalation in the area. Finally, the research will focus on the strategic role of the two countries from a military perspective and the potential Russian response to the new alignment.

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## Introduction

The recent NATO membership requested by Finland and Sweden on the 18th of May 2022 is a milestone for the revival of the Atlantic Alliance that must be carefully analysed and that will require significant changes to NATO strategy in the hotspot Arctic area. Certainly, the membership request has been driven mainly by the *casus belli* of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, to understand the rationale behind the decision to break the historical neutrality of the two Scandinavian countries, it might be helpful to analyse the past relationship of these countries with Russia. One of the aims of this paper is to evaluate whether the present decisions of entering NATO have been driven by the lessons learnt from the foreign policies adopted in the past, referred to by many scholars as the controversial “Finlandisation” process (Lacquer, 1977; Lacquer, 2017), (Quester, 1990), (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016). Therefore, an historical analysis will be conducted to assess whether the limits of Finland and Sweden's past foreign policies towards the Soviet Union exceeded the risks of overturning historical neutrality. Furthermore, behind such a crucial decision, other drivers shall be investigated. A brief but thorough description of the militarization of the Arctic and the High North region will be provided, presenting it as a potential cause of FI and SE's recent NATO membership. Then, after having illustrated the increasing geopolitical tensions in the Arctic, the research will assess the military benefits that NATO will experience with the contribution of the two Nordic members and the future Russian military response in the Arctic region.

### I. Lessons learnt from the Past

#### a. The risk of overturning a historical neutrality

Finland and Sweden are two of the most important Scandinavian countries, and they present a long history of neutrality in the domain of international relations both with the European and Russian geopolitical spheres (Henley, 2022). Indeed, the traditional definition of the Swedish approach to other countries has been referred to as “freedom from alliances in peace aiming for neutrality in war” (Sundelius, 1990), while in Finland, the Military Non-Alignment (MNA) policy and the Credible National Defence (CND) have been the basic foreign policies since the end of the Second World War (Arter, 2007). The purpose behind the neutrality approach is to avoid conflict even at the cost of allowing some concessions, even in wartime, such as providing aid to its neighbours or facilitating the passage of armies to gain an economic and military advantage after the war, as it was for Sweden after the Second World War (Sundelius, 1990).

The policy of “armed neutrality” (Sundelius, 1990), combining the strengthening of national military defences with Stockholm's policy of avoiding alliances, has traditionally represented the Scandinavian approach which allowed Sweden to effectively stay out of both the two world wars (Thompson, 1952; Sundelius, 1990). However, armed neutrality gained particular attention during the period of the Cold War when taking sides between the US and the USSR was considered a necessary step (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016). Particularly in the 1970s, Finland's relations with the USSR stood out among the European and American public opinion and scholarship to the point that it became a metonym: the Finnish experience began to be used to designate a typology of foreign policy in the theory of International Relation adaptable to any country.

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Indeed, Finland's foreign policy of neutrality during the Cold War era was defined - usually in a pejorative manner - as a policy of "accommodation and collaboration" with the USSR (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016), especially by the representatives of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and Western media (Quester, 1990). Therefore, particularly after the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance (FCMA) of 1948 between Finland and the USSR, the term "Finlandisation" was created to refer to those countries as Finland, unwilling to challenge a Great Power to maintain their independence and sovereignty even if it implied adapting their policy to the interests of a more powerful state (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016).

However, the majority of Finnish people criticised and still do not accept the neologism in question because they simply conceived Finland's posture towards the USSR as in line with the Finnish non-alignment policy (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016). Finnish diplomatic elites described the neutrality policy as simply a way to peacefully coexist with a different political system and a strategy to not antagonise any Great Power (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016). Furthermore, among Finnish scholars, it is a widespread opinion that Finland's foreign policy of neutrality has been rather successful, especially if **compared to the Soviet satellites**, such as the case of the Baltic countries, which lost their political rights and were completely embedded in the communist economic system (Quester, 1990; Forsberg & Pesu, 2016). Indeed, its position allowed Finland to maintain positive ties both with Western and Eastern powers making Finland appear as a respectable state **well-defended on both sides**, distinguishing it from other examples such as Afghanistan in the 1980s, which was considered a "vacuum" territory that could be easily influenced (Quester, 1990). This position of compromise enabled Finland to maintain a **neutral reputation**, distancing itself from both the image of a communist state and, at the same time, from the "corrupt bourgeois capitalist states" of Switzerland or the US (Quester, 1990).

Moreover, it is equally important to highlight the **effective economic profits** that the stability caused by the accommodating approach has provided Finland during the Cold War period surpassing Sweden's per capita income (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016; Quester, 1990). Indeed, the creator of the containment strategy against the communist influence G. Kennan labelled Finland's foreign policy as a respectable and **legitimate strategy** to face security issues (Kennan, 1974). Naturally, the spectre of the Soviet invasion of Finland during the Winter War of 1939-1940 was the main security concern for Finland in the aftermath of the Second World War and maintaining stable and friendly relations with its most threatening neighbour appeared a rational choice to **escape a second invasion and safeguard national sovereignty** (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016).

Therefore, the current risks of overturning Finland's historical neutrality consist mainly in the **destabilising effects** that Finland and Sweden's membership in the NATO Alliance will cause destroying "the neutral buffer in the North", separating even more Europe from Russia (Sundelius, 1990). Whereas the increase of tensions in the Scandinavian area was overall avoided during the Cold War thanks to the "Finlandisation" of both Sweden and Finland, the addition of Allies bordering Russia will pose a major threat to Putin's regime, making the North a potential battleground between the Western and Eastern forces (Chatterjee, 2022). For the first time, Article 5, which contains NATO's *casus foederis*, will be applied to Sweden and Finland, so an assault on one member state will mean an attack on all, providing the two nations with security assurances from nuclear states for the first time in their history (Chatterjee, 2022).

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Sweden and Finland's accession into the alliance has already been perceived as a provocative move by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who views NATO expansion as a direct danger to the security of his nation (Chatterjee, 2022). According to the foreign ministry of Russia, both nations have already been informed of the repercussions of such action, and former President Dmitry Medvedev has warned that the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad between Poland and Lithuania might get nuclear weapons following Sweden and Finland's accession (Chatterjee, 2022). However, while not discounting these risks, former Finnish Prime Minister Alexander Stubb argued that Russian cyberattacks, misinformation tactics, and sporadic airspace violations presented a more pressing concern than a nuclear response (Shilton, 2022).

Overall, the accession of SE and FI into NATO might break the logic of the "Finnish paradox" theorised by the ex-President of Finland Kekkonen, according to which the more Finland was perceived as a neutral and peaceful neighbour of Russia maintaining friendly ties with it, the more the country moved closer to Western states gaining more benefits from cooperation with them (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016). Indeed, there are already some authors who are discussing a possible destabilisation within the European zone (Banerjee, 2022). The centre of strategic autonomy for Europe was shifted northward, notably toward the Arctic and the Arctic Council. Furthermore, the entry of SE and FI into NATO could bring back tension inside the EU between those who want a solid transatlantic alliance and those that want to promote the EU as a leading player in international security. This, in turn, risks highlighting the difficult compatibility between the general ambiguity of the clause of mutual assistance and solidarity contained in Article 42(7) TEU and Article 5 of NATO (Banerjee, 2022).

Therefore, the decision to break with the traditional neutrality posture of two of the most strategic countries from a geopolitical point of view in the domain of Russia-Europe relations does not come without risks and sacrifices. Although there can be contexts in which maintaining a compromising attitude to achieve stability and peace might not be the appropriate solution, recent evaluations of past SE and FI approaches have been characterised by criticism rather than praise.

#### b. The limits of "Finlandisation"

In this paragraph, the shortcomings of neutrality in the foreign policy of Finland and Sweden during the Cold War will be presented, which might have led the two countries to overturn their historical neutrality.

The most known criticism is that even if the policy of neutrality exercised by **Finland** after the Second World War succeeded in preserving territorial integrity, it inevitably undermined the independence of the country, which some claimed to be **politically controlled by the Soviet Union** (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016). Several famous scholars, such as Raymond Aron and Walter Lacquer, defined Finland respectively as a **"semi-independent"** state or a state without proper independence at all (Lacquer, 1980). In support of this part of Western public opinion, historical events confirmed the significant influence of the Soviet Union on Finnish internal affairs, such as the **"Night Frost" of 1958** or the "Note crisis" of 1961 (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016). In the first episode, the newly appointed Finnish government was forced to quit after Moscow refused to recognise it and withdrew its ambassador from Helsinki.

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The second critical event emerged after the 1948 Soviet-Finnish Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance (FCMA), when Moscow demanded military discussions with Finland, citing the alleged heightened military danger presented by Germany and its allies (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016). **The "Note crisis"** was then resolved with a political conference in Novosibirsk in late 1961 between Soviet Chairman of the Council of Ministers Nikita Khrushchev and Finnish President Urho Kekkonen (Ibid).

These episodes clearly show the consistent Soviet interference in Finland's political structure, which, for instance, controlled the Finnish Intelligence Service through the communist party between 1944-48 (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016). Nevertheless, it has to be said that Finland escaped the destiny of Czechoslovakia with the defeat of the communist party in the elections of 1948, leading to its eradication from security policy decision-making (Ibid), **Finland's reduced leeway in the area of foreign affairs** was particularly evident on the occasion of potential cooperation between Nordic countries and the European Economic Community (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016).

**Finland's membership of the EEC** became possible only after the dissolution of the Soviet Union because of Moscow's opposition to Finland entering an anti-Soviet organisation such as the EEC or NATO (Ibid). The USSR allowed only free trade agreements between Finland and the EEC that presented unique clauses that excluded political development and had a shorter abrogation period (Ibid). Furthermore, **Finland could not openly oppose Soviet internal or international policies**, for instance, the Soviet invasions of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan were not denounced by Finland. "Finlandisation" became more noticeable during the rule of Urho Kekkonen, who became President of Finland from 1956 until 1981 (Ibid). Kekkonen continued former President Paasikivi's policy of active neutrality, which later became known as **the Paasikivi-Kekkonen Doctrine** (Maude, 1990) and developed close personal ties with the Soviet leaders, regularly travelling in Russia to meet them (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016). Moreover, Kekkonen urged the public to actively support his foreign policy following the "Note crisis", and led a top-down effort to incorporate official foreign policy concepts into every aspect of society, from the top political levels to regular people (Ibid).

The peak of "Finlandisation" was reached during the period of détente in the 1970s when the Finnish **President started exceeding his constitutional authority**, using individualised networks, and withholding crucial information from others as a technique of control, compromising the transparency of the work of the presidency (Ibid). Nevertheless, the Finnish political élite, as well as the general public, were ready to grant him these powers and allow him to maintain his dominance, as doing so would maintain the system of protection of Finnish integrity (Ibid). Overall, the accommodating approach or "Finlandisation" in terms of foreign policy was adopted after the Second World War, and it persisted until Finland began to direct its international relations towards the EU after the USSR collapsed, unleashing in Finland a severe recession (Ibid). Moreover, Finland's exclusion from important Western organisations hindered Finnish development of new technologies and general democratic management of the political structure, with several instances of interference and self-censorship as a result of Moscow's influence (Lacquer, 2017). Therefore, although Finland's territorial integrity and stable relations with the USSR were achieved as the main objectives of the Finnish neutrality policy, they were not obtained without significant costs in political independence (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016).

Having presented the downsides of Finland's experience of acquiescing to the USSR's willingness, it would not be wise to propose it as a prudent strategy for a country that finds itself in an inconvenient geopolitical position (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016).

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Nevertheless, after the invasion and illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 by Russia, the term "Finlandisation" regained popularity and was proposed as a potential resolution to the Ukrainian situation by veterans of American foreign policy, such as Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016). They suggested Finland as a possible role model for Ukraine's international stance: Ukraine's independence and its status as a sovereign state would never be doubted if it would remain outside NATO, avoiding enmity with Russia while also benefiting from strong economic cooperation with both the EU and Russia (Ibid).

However, History has proved on multiple occasions that appeasement of a threatening state is not the ideal solution above all when it comes to infringing Article 2.4 of the UN Charter, so when the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of a State is threatened or exercised (Johnson, 2017). Furthermore, Kissinger and Brzezinski's suggestion was also supported by the mind behind the Putinism ideology Alexander Dugin who recommended the "Finlandisation" of the whole of Europe (Child, 2022). However, the current invasion of Ukraine by Putin's Russia reveals that the "Finlandisation" of Ukraine has not proved to be a winning strategy (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016). Therefore, in the face of these events and considering the side effects that an accommodating attitude has already brought to Finland in the Cold War and Ukraine in the last decade, the recent announcement by Finland's President Sauli Niinistö and Prime Minister Sanna Marin to accede to NATO appeared to borne out of necessity rather than free choice.

On the other hand, **Sweden** was not involved in any sort of ambiguity and compliance attitude towards the USSR, and it was thus not accused of "Finlandisation". However, Sweden's neutral position during the Cold War period also started to be in the spotlight following the disclosure of archival findings and interviews that presented significant disparity between the official political statements and the major defence, socioeconomic planning policies and ideological affiliation of the majority of the Swedish public opinion about Sweden's Cold War position (Tepe, 2007). It has even been said that the strong connections with NATO countries may raise the question of whether Sweden should be regarded as NATO's seventeenth member rather than neutral in this aspect (Malmberg, 2001).

Publicly, Sweden maintained its active policy of neutrality during the Cold War to maintain stabilised the region and to benefit from the privileges of being neutral such as chairing multilateral summits or acting as a mediator but according to the latest revelations both from an economic and political point of view Sweden was a Western country that considered the Soviet Union as a threat, not the United States (Tepe, 2007). Furthermore, more than once, Sweden acted in compliance with Western actions, such as during the embargo on the USSR, and it is said to have exchanged with Western forces "extensive contacts and plans for mutual support, formulated for the eventuality of Sweden being involved" in a military conflict (Herolf & Lindahl, 2000). That said, after the dissolution of the USSR, public perception of neutrality changed in Sweden and a closer step towards the Western world was taken when it became an EU member in 1995 (Tepe, 2007). From that moment, the concept of "armed neutrality" entered the discussion, viewing neutrality as military non-alignment in peacetime to maintain the possibility of remaining neutral in potential wartime (Ibid). Therefore, while ideologically, economically and politically, Sweden was entering the Western sphere, it was keeping the military domain within its national borders (Ibid). However, differently from the Finnish case, several scholars agree that Swedish membership of NATO could be envisioned as a natural passage to complete a redesigning process of Swedish security policy officially begun after the end of the Cold War (Ibid).

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In conclusion, the two Scandinavian countries' historical rationales behind NATO membership requests differ significantly (Huhtanen, 2022). Overall, Finland's NATO application marked the end of "Finlandised Finland", driven by Putin's actions in Ukraine and based on broad public concern about a repeat of previous Soviet violations of Finland's independence (Arter, 2022). For Sweden, accession to NATO can instead be considered the completion of a gradual programme of harmonising national security priorities with the Western security structure (Tepe, 2007).

## II. The Arctic hotspot: are we facing a new arms race?

### a. Why will the Arctic be in the spotlight?

Nevertheless, apart from historical reasons that could have led Sweden and Finland to embrace a sharp West-oriented course of national foreign policies, another driver of this watershed decision could be searched in the security concerns about the growing destabilisation of the Arctic region that the climate crisis will bring in the near future.

According to data collected by the satellite dedicated to environmental monitoring since the 1970s, the Arctic region is overheating at speeds four times higher than the world averages (La Rocca, 2022). Notwithstanding the repercussions that the thawing of the Arctic pole will generate on an economic, social, energy and transport level, it will certainly have an enormous impact on the security, stability and defence of the region (Ferrari & Ambrosetti, 2022). The melting of the ice implies the rise in sea levels but also the thinning of the permafrost, resulting in the **release of methane and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere that was previously** trapped in the centuries-old layers of ice (La Rocca, 2022). Furthermore, the reduction of icy and snow-covered surfaces implies a decrease in the **albedo effect**, preventing the reflection of the sun's rays which are instead absorbed - directly affecting ocean warming and meteorology (Bird, 2010).

By 2050, it is believed the region above the polar circle will be completely free of ice, considering the rate at which the ice cap is shrinking and the multiplier effect of warming seas and surface temperatures, with irreversible effects on flora and fauna, fishing and inhabitants of the area (La Rocca, 2022). Furthermore, based on geological studies, the Arctic is believed to hold a large number of **reserves of oil, gas and critical natural resources**: the United States Geological Survey estimates that the Arctic region contains roughly 90 billion barrels of oil, 1,669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids (Pérez & Scopelliti, 2016; Birds, 2008). In addition, the melting of the ice has drawn attention to the **Arctic trade routes** that are experiencing an increase in ship traffic in recent years, particularly along the Northwest Passage, the Northern Sea Route or what is foreseen to be the Central Arctic Route by 2050 (La Rocca, 2022; Ferrari & Ambrosetti, 2022).

These routes could bring significant changes in maritime trade, considering the reduction in travel times and fuel costs, in particular from Asia, attracting the expansionist ambitions, particularly of China which is envisioning a **"Polar Silk Road"** within the programme of the Belt and Road Initiative (Ferrari & Ambrosetti, 2022). Indeed, even though **China** is not the only Asian state to have commercial and scientific interests in the Arctic - for instance, Taiwan has opened a scientific base in the Svalbard islands - China proves to be particularly attentive, also to the development of technological capabilities, and inclined to invest in order to impose itself on energy dossiers, raw materials and rare minerals navigation calling itself a "near-arctic state" (La Rocca, 2022).

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However, the leading state in the race between nations bordering the Arctic, which is laying claims on the region and its important riches under the ocean's surface is **Russia** (Gatopoulos, 2022). Indeed, one of the most ambitious Russian projects is the Northern Sea Route (NSR) consists of a 5500 kilometres shipping lane under Russian legislation that lies in Arctic waters that are free of ice for only two months per year, connecting the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. As a result, Moscow considers the NSR a historical national corridor under its sole authority. Its claims are supported by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), in particular by Article 234 on ice-covered regions in nations' exclusive economic zones (EEZs), even though an expanded interpretation of article 234 could underpin Russian jurisdiction on the NSR (Ferrari & Ambrosetti, 2022).

In addition, the predominance in the area has always been of primary importance for Russia due to the high dependency of its economy on the Arctic for energetic resources (Ferrari & Ambrosetti, 2022). It should be taken into consideration that Russia's interest in the Arctic stretches back hundreds of years (Rumer, Sokolski & Stronski, 2021). The twentieth-century discovery of oil and gas in Siberia, both below and above the Arctic Circle, supplied richness and hard currency, satisfying domestic demand, supporting the Soviet military gear and providing the economic underpinning for the Soviet Bloc to accomplish its goals in foreign policy (Ibidem). In post-Soviet Russia, the mining of Arctic assets escalated. Oil and gas were critical in rebuilding the country's economy in the 2000s, ensuring domestic stability, boosting Putin's rise as the country's sole leader, and reintroducing Russia to the world stage as an ambitious great power seeking to reclaim its rightful place in the international system (Ibidem). Coherently with the past relations between the Arctic region and Russia, the energy sector of the Arctic continues to be critical to Russia's existing and future business, accounting for around 10% of Russia's GDP and 20% of Russia's exports (Ferrari & Ambrosetti, 2022). This explains why Russian politicians have often asserted with a special emphasis that the country's future lay in the Arctic (Ibidem).

To understand the significance of Russian control of the Arctic, it could be useful to look at *The Basic Principles of the Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic to 2020*, one of the main government documents outlining Russia's Arctic objectives which describes the exploitation of the Arctic by the Russian Federation as a strategic resource outpost as well as the utilisation of "hydrocarbon resources, water biological resources, and other kinds of strategic raw materials" for social and economic development as a national priority (Ferrari & Ambrosetti, 2022). This concept has been reiterated in a 2020 document that details Russian strategy in the Arctic until 2035 (Ibidem). The official document underlines Russia's high dependency on the Arctic for combustible natural gas deposits which account for more than 80% of gas and 17% of its national oil reserves (Ibidem).

Using this data, the same document affirms that despite the threat of severe climate warming in the Arctic which is putting Russian infrastructure at risk, including roads, pipelines and railways damaged by degrading permafrost that covers 65% of Russian territory energy remains a fundamental engine of economic growth for Russia, with the Arctic serving as a strategic energy reserve (ClimateChangePost, 2022; Ferrari & Ambrosetti, 2022).

Therefore, it is clear that a **security "Arctic paradox"** exists: climate change is creating a vicious circle wherein the heightening of temperatures causes even more competition for natural resources which is increasing maritime navigation and triggering a snowball effect with a resulting increase in gas emissions, pollution and 'black tides' (Brzozowski, 2020).

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However, it would not be a surprise if the balance between accounting for serious environmental risks or taking advantage of economic opportunities would lean towards the exploitation of natural resources neglecting harmful ecological consequences (Ibidem).

b. The militarisation of the Arctic and “High North” Regions

As Audun Halvorsen, state secretary of the Norwegian foreign ministry has argued (Brzozowski, 2020), the fact that the region is on many countries' radars as they develop their national Arctic policies illustrates why it is essential now to have a thorough knowledge and in-depth assessment of the regional context, including the **political and military structures that are already in place** in the Arctic region (Brzozowski, 2020). In 2019, France referred to the Arctic region as the “New Middle East”, foreseeing the destabilisation of the area and the growing tensions linked to resource exploitation and commercial routes (Tommerbak & Trevellik, 2019). The statements of the French Defence Minister Florence Parly on the occasion of the presentation of the new defence strategy of France in the Arctic shocked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway, in describing the Arctic region as a “no man's land” which is completely unregulated and desolated (Brzozowski, 2020). It is not the first time the Arctic has been depicted in the political debate as an isolated, unspoiled, exotic environment that must be protected by external intervention (Ibidem). Conversely, Arctic regional stakeholders underline the exact opposite: the Arctic is inhabited, controlled, and not that far away (Ibidem). Plus, there is no legal vacuum in the Arctic and national and international legal processes exist and are currently in use (Ibidem).

The *gaffe* of the French Ministry shows the general shortcomings of the legal, military, international and national agreements that regulate the Arctic region (Ibidem). According to international law, since the Arctic is an Ocean, it is regulated by the UN Convention on Law of the Seas (UNCLOS), which declares the coastal Arctic states' responsibilities in the Arctic region (Tommerbak & Trevellik, 2019). Furthermore, the eight nations that face the Arctic Ocean are already engaged in several international organisations, including the Arctic Council, the Barents Cooperation, and the Law of the Seas, which help the process of negotiating agreements among all Arctic governments (Brzozowski, 2020). Among them, the **Arctic Council (AC)** is the most influential organisation, and it aims to encourage cooperation between the Arctic states but explicitly exclude military security from the Council's mandate (Demirci, 2022). The eight members of the AC are Canada, The Kingdom of Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States (Arctic Council, 2022). Following the Madrid Summit and, therefore, the entry of Finland and Sweden into NATO, seven out of the total eight AC states are part of the Atlantic Alliance (La Rocca, 2022).

Even though the French Ministry reflected European public opinion in showing little knowledge about Arctic governance, the Ministry was nevertheless significant for having raised the debate about the **increase in geopolitical tensions** around control of the geographical “High North” region (Paul & Swistek, 2022). The term “High North” was coined by Norway for security purposes to encompass the whole area from the Norwegian Sea to the Pechora Sea, including nearby coastal regions and land masses, as well as the contained islands (Skagestad, 2010): these regions are of fundamental importance to NATO operations since they are considered the “northern flank” (La Rocca, 2022). The latter term is a relic of the Cold War that now is used to refer to the growing tensions between the Atlantic Alliance and the Russian state, especially after the invasion of Ukraine (Ibidem).

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From the 24th of February 2022 onwards, **the activities of the Arctic Council were initially stopped**, putting the regional cooperative system in crisis (Ibidem). Subsequently, Russia, which was supposed to preside over the Council's two-year period, was excluded from the slow resumption of activities desired by the other states. Furthermore, the progressive **remilitarisation of the region** is real, as demonstrated by the strengthening of the Russian Northern Fleet, which is the largest of Russia's four fleets and is based on the ice-free coast of the Kola Peninsula bordering Finland (Nilsen, 2022). Since January 2022, the Northern Fleet has sailed out several of the largest warships from the harbour of Severomorsk, carrying out military exercises beyond the Kola Peninsula's shore to prepare for an attack on Russia from the Barents Sea (Ibidem). On the same occasion, a US Air Force P-8 Poseidon maritime surveillance aircraft flying out of Keflavik, Iceland flew above the Russian warships, and a US KC-135T tanker aircraft based in Mildenhall, UK, went North across the Norwegian Sea to deliver gasoline to the P-8 from Keflavik, which had been tracking the Russian navy group for hours (Ibidem). The phenomenon intensified after the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict with Russian surface warships, submarines, and aircraft active in operations in the seas stretching from the Kola Peninsula to Franz Josef Land and Novaya Zemlya, including also "*Pyotr Velikiye*", the Northern Fleet's large nuclear-powered battle cruiser (Nilsen, 2022).

Due to the late events, it could be particularly relevant to analyse **Russia's present military buildup in the Arctic**. Two of the most significant developments that will be investigated are the establishment of a single Arctic military command, which forced a rethinking of the Arctic's strategic direction, and the physical expansion of the Russian Arctic military footprint, which will include both the construction of modern facilities and increased activity by its armed forces there (Kjellén, 2022). 2014 was the turning point for the **modernisation of Northern Fleet Command**, which then became the fifth Joint Strategic Command (JSC) which has direct authority over all Russian military forces operating in the Arctic as well as over the Russian navy's nuclear strike capability (Ibidem).

Since then, high readiness and joint operations were prioritised over territorial military-administrative responsibilities, like conscription and mobilisation, enabling the Northern command to deploy rapid force readiness by reinforcing the Kola Peninsula with soldiers and equipment by rail and air (Folland, 2021). Moreover, a presidential order on the first of January 2021 upgraded Russia's Northern Fleet autonomy and recent armament plans indicate that the Northern Fleet has received preferential treatment over the Pacific Fleet (Paul & Swistek, 2022). Indeed, the Northern Fleet will get more Borei-class fourth-generation nuclear submarines than was initially anticipated, becoming the most modern and comprehensive arsenal of nuclear strategic weapons systems of Russia (Paul & Swistek, 2022). Furthermore, the relocation of command from the Western JSC of St. Petersburg to the Northern Fleet JSC of Severomorsk shifted the emphasis to the Arctic, and the closeness to Murmansk enabled cooperation with major Arctic state and non-state entities based there (Kjellén, 2022). To evaluate **Russia's reach over the Arctic** area, it is then necessary to keep in mind the geographical collocation of Russian military bases in the High North region.

The Northern Fleet's facilities and defence units are concentrated in a narrow region in the westernmost portion of the Kola Peninsula as a result of the ice melting in winter that enables year-round access to the southern Barents Sea (Ibidem). Its main bases are five operational formations, each of which has several tactical units. Three of them are naval formations, while another one is the air and air-defence forces army (AADA), and the other is an army unit.

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In addition, the shores of the naval units are protected by a tight network of air defence units, aviation regiments, and land forces (Ibidem). However, although this garrison can mobilise a sizable military force for operations in the Barents Sea region, its further reach into the Arctic is severely limited by distance and temperature (Ibidem).

In conclusion, Russian military deployment has reached the central Arctic marginal waters to secure the shipping Northern Sea Route, but historically its activity has mainly focused on the Barents Sea region, and its strategy seems to aspire more to intimidate its Northern neighbours than to effectively reach the Arctic pole, making the “High North” the actual hotspot of a potential increase of tensions (Skagestad, 2010; Kjellén, 2022). Moreover, after the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO - two states known to be particularly attentive to defence policies and focused on preparing their armed forces in hostile contexts such as the Arctic - the shift in the balance of power in the region will almost exclude the possibility of discussion with Russia on Arctic governance, risking to bring the area nearer to armed conflict than at any point since the Cold War (Demirci, 2022).

### III. The new «Allies of the High North»

#### a. NATO's military benefits from Sweden and Finland's Membership in the Arctic

Russia is by no means the only state that has a firm interest in the Arctic region and NATO, even though it has never described itself as geographically tied to the Arctic region, it could be a potential geopolitical and military player in the area (Paul & Swistek, 2022). NATO's Western members can be considered Arctic states if their territorial seas and exclusive economic zones (EEZs) are located in both the Arctic region and under the Supreme Allied Commander Europe's sphere of responsibility (SACEUR), which is responsible for carrying out all military interventions within its power and authority to defend or restore territory security of the Alliance (NATO, 2022).

This is true of the Atlantic's Northernmost countries, such as Canada and Denmark, as well as Greenland's independent region, and even the adjacent demilitarised archipelago of Svalbard which belongs to Norway (Paul & Swistek, 2022). Moreover, **NATO's Arctic members** include Iceland, which borders the Northern Polar Circle and the United States, which has direct access to the Arctic Ocean via Alaska (Paul & Swistek, 2022). Therefore, geographically the zone of interest of the Atlantic Alliance comprises the Greenland Sea, Labrador Sea, Baffin Bay, Norwegian Sea, and North Polar Sea (Ibidem). That was the geopolitical arrangement until the Madrid Summit of 2022; now, with the entry of the last two Scandinavian countries, Finland and Sweden, NATO military outreach covers also the Western part of the Barents Sea, while the Baltic Sea will be nearly surrounded by NATO members, which is excellent news for Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia since it will make NATO's defence against a future Russian invasion more manageable (Huhtanen, 2022).

**The military benefits that SE and FI memberships will bring to NATO** are of utmost significance (Huhtanen, 2022). Both nations have strengthened their defence capabilities per NATO criteria, making them even more compatible with NATO than some of its current members (Ibidem). Both Nordic nations already spend close **to 2% of their GDP on the military sector** and have participated in NATO exercises (Demirci, 2022). Finland's military budget was roughly \$6 billion in 2022, whereas Sweden's is \$8 billion.

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Due to changes in the operating environment following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in May 2022 the Finnish Ministry of Finance proposed an extra 1.1 billion EUR spending increase, and he decided on an annual increase of 408-788 million EUR for the 2023-2026 period for the Defence Force's running costs and purchasing expenditure reaching 2.2 billion EUR (Forsberg, Kähkönen & Öberg, 2022).

Meanwhile, the Swedish government stated in March 2022 that it would increase defence expenditure by around 3 billion SEK this year. According to the Swedish Armed Forces, its military spending is predicted to rise by 40% by 2025, reaching 2% of GDP by 2028 (Ibid). Therefore, the rise in the defence budget demonstrates Finland and Sweden's commitment to enhancing Baltic Sea region security.

On the one hand, Finland's current **military personnel** amounts to 280,000 troops, with 870,000 men and women in reserves, built to specifically oppose a Russian assault (Huhtanen, 2022). Sweden, on the other hand, despite having one of the largest military powers after WWII, with a force structure in 1989 of 44,500 with 550,000 reserves, in 2021, its regular forces amounted to 7,000 due to spending cuts (Finlan, 2021). However, as already mentioned, due to the increasing security tensions, Sweden has begun to rebuild its army with powerful aviation capabilities provided by an effective military industry (Huhtanen, 2022). Beyond troops numbers, according to the Military Balance of 2021 study by the International Institute for Strategic

Studies, the two Scandinavian countries will contribute to NATO's **air forces by** providing over 150 fighter aircraft, including 96 JAS-39 Gripens and 62 F/A-18 Hornets (Bowman, Brobst, Sullivan, and Hardie, 2022). Furthermore, Finland plans to buy 64 fifth-generation F-35 fighter planes before the end of the decade. At the same time, Sweden has already shown an interest in purchasing two modern GlobalEye airborne early warning and control systems (AEW&C) aircraft, which are key components of a successful air defence system and will be more competent than the old E-3A AWACS planes now used by NATO to monitor European airspace (Ibidem).

Sweden also possesses a capable **navy**, which includes Visby-class corvettes and Gotland-class submarines, enabling NATO to prevent and repel maritime aggression, as well as secure marine routes of communication using Sweden and Finland's islands, particularly Sweden's Gotland Island in the Baltic Sea that could be a useful base to hinder future Russian naval operations (Ibidem). In terms of **land warfare capabilities**, Finland will put at NATO's disposal one of the most formidable artillery units in Europe: possessing alone more artillery than France, Germany and the United Kingdom combined, including M270 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems and hundreds of towed howitzers (Ibidem). Moreover, Finland and Sweden currently have 220 Leopard main battle tanks, virtually matching Germany's 245 Leopards, making another significant contribution to deterring a potential attack on NATO (Ibidem).

Finland and Sweden's NATO membership will have geostrategic consequences in the High North, where both countries present high levels of **interoperability** with the other Northern countries (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2016). In this regard, the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) will soon be able to unify the five Nordic nations' defence planning, and for the first time since the demise of the Kalmar Union in 1523, all Nordic countries will be members of the same military alliance (Forsberg, Kähkönen & Öberg, 2022).

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To this end, the strengthening of cooperation between the Nordic countries will also continue through intergovernmental organisations such as the Nordic Council, the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Defence Cooperation, aiming to remove legal and regulatory constraints to create border-free military interoperability between Northern states and NATO activities (Ibidem).

To sum up, given their geostrategic realities, NATO will entrust Finland and Sweden with Nordic defence and Arctic security through Baltic Sea operations and border surveillance, benefitting from the modern military apparatus of the two Scandinavian states reinforcing the so-called North-eastern NATO flank to protect Europe from a potential Russian strike (Forsberg, Kähkönen & Öberg, 2022).

b. Should we expect a Russian military response?

Having presented both NATO and Russia's military posture in the Arctic, it is now easier to perceive the overall tensions that are effectively heightening in the Arctic region. In particular, the new membership of Finland and Sweden after August 2022 (Sweden Embassy, 2022) might have "awoken the neighbour" (Giles & Eskola, 2009), causing a potential Russian military response. Several scholars have already started to discuss a revival of the "Arctic security dilemma" in 2016 (Scopelliti & Pérez, 2016). In other words, according to the theory of International Relations, a security dilemma is faced when the expansion of the power of an actor is regarded as hostile, and it may lead to the adoption of foreign policy initiatives that generate concern among counterparts (Ibidem). In such circumstances, a security conundrum arises, resulting in an action-reaction mechanism that, in the worst-case scenario, escalates into a violent confrontation (Ibidem). The outcome of the dilemma depends on the ability of the actors to distinguish between offensive and defensive power and the willingness of nations to divulge their reciprocal postures or the presence of a feeling of community (Ibidem).

Analysing the geopolitical arrangement in place after the entering of FI and SE in the Atlantic Alliance, Russia's solid presence in the Kola peninsula and its growing military reach of the Central Arctic waters, it seems that both actors are expanding their military influence over the Arctic area and that probably an effective security dilemma in the Arctic will be in place again (Paul & Swistek, 2022). It is not the first time that a security dilemma presents itself in this region: already in the Cold War era, the region was a hotspot of superpower conflict, and the security issue was a key feature of Arctic politics. However, tensions were de-escalated at the beginning of 1987 thanks to the Murmansk Initiative promoted by Gorbachev to reach the region's pacification (Scopelliti & Pérez, 2016). With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decrease of the Arctic's political and strategic importance, a normalisation was finally achieved through states' cooperation in non-military issues, allowing the region to develop as a low-tension area throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Ibidem). Therefore, the Arctic crisis during the Soviet era was solved through an *institutionalised dialogue* between the two actors: the US and the USSR (Ibidem).

However, comparing the current Russian leader with Gorbachev would be inconceivable and actually, Putin has already warned publicly that if military contingents and infrastructure will be built in the territories of the new NATO members, Russia will be obligated to respond *symmetrically* and raise the same risks in those regions where threats have emerged for Russia (Shtepa, 2022; Roth, 2022).

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Furthermore, Russia has frequently cautioned Finland and Sweden against joining NATO, claiming that the grave military and political consequences of this decision would force Russia to assert a "military balance" in the Baltic Sea area, including the deployment of nuclear weapons (Roth, 2022). Resting on previous solutions to the Arctic dilemma during the Cold War, a common institutionalised ground to promote dialogues and address security concerns would constitute a potential way to defuse tensions between the parties (Scopelliti & Pérez, 2016). It appears that the major stakeholders of the Arctic region are already involved in an international organisation, the Arctic Council that could potentially work for an easing of the pressure on the Arctic region. However, it is important to remember that following the recent invasion of Ukraine, the relations between Russia, the US and the EU have deteriorated (Rehman, 2022).

Denmark, Canada, Iceland, Finland, Sweden, Norway, and the US refused to attend meetings presided over by Russia and suspended the Arctic Council activities for six months (Bloom, 2022). Although this decision effectively isolates Russia in the Arctic region, combined with Putin's pledge to respond militarily to the effective Sweden and Finland military cooperation with NATO military plans on their territory, it is fair to say that it cannot be foreseen that easily a Russian military response in the near future, since the country does not have economic resources to open another front after the invasion of Ukraine (Rehman, 2022). Therefore, even though it is correct to state that the security dilemma in the Arctic has returned to prominence as a matter of NATO security, the fear of an imminent nuclear strike should be excluded. What can effectively be foreseen is an increase of aggressive and intrusive foreign policy by Russia towards the NATO members and, in particular, Finland and Sweden through other unconventional tools such as cyberattacks or increasing military exercises in the waters of the Barents Sea.

Furthermore, it is important to notice that the consequences of Moscow's isolation due to Western sanctions and suspension from the Arctic status quo may push Russia even more toward Chinese investments and export markets (Buchanan, 2022). However, China is not the only non-Arctic country interested in an isolated Russia in the Arctic. Many more would like to expand their presence in the Arctic theatre: India, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and several ASEAN states are now exploring new ways to enter the Arctic (Ibidem). Isolating Russia from the Arctic debate and key organisations such as the Arctic Council will have long-term effects. New actors, such as the UAE and several other ASEAN states, will emerge in the Arctic arena, while China and India will strengthen their Arctic interests (Ibidem). The United Nations Security Council's decision on February 25 to condemn Russian aggression against Ukraine is a vivid example of the political perils of not exactly democratic states tacitly backing the Russian conception of the international order. On that occasion, China, India, and the UAE refrained from condemning the Russian incursion in Ukraine, while just one of ASEAN's ten members (Singapore) signed the proposed resolution. These decisions indicate internationally where these nations' goals and beliefs lay, suggesting that as far as Russia remains isolated in diplomatic relations, other countries will take its side (Ibidem).

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## Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be affirmed that Sweden and Finland's accession to the Atlantic Alliance is a turning point not only for the two Scandinavian countries but for the political relations between NATO, Europe and Russia, with a global resonance. Although the present fear generated by Russian aggression to Ukraine cannot be neglected as one of the main drivers of the new NATO membership of SE and FI, it is reasonable to think that the decision could have been steered also by lessons learnt from historical experiences (La Rocca, 2022; Arter, 2022). However, as this research paper has demonstrated, when considering the historical factors that led Sweden and Finland to the recent decision of joining NATO, it is fundamental to distinguish the two countries due to their historical differences in foreign policy.

Whilst the reason that has led Finland to break with its traditional neutrality position might lie in the previous experience of Soviet interference in Finnish internal and external politics (Arter, 2022), for Sweden, it appears to be more of a natural consequence of previous historical processes started during the Cold War (Tepe, 2007). Moreover, the research has concluded that another potential driver of Sweden and Finland's NATO Membership can be found in the increasing militarisation of the Arctic region due to the foreseen effects that climate change will bring in the near future in the area, exposing new resources and faster trade routes through the Arctic Sea and luring new actors in the Arctic zone. Russia especially has been strengthening its position in the Arctic area, reaching the Central Arctic waters and enhancing the Russian Northern Fleet based in the Kola Peninsula bordering Finland (Nilsen, 2022).

The so-called "High North" region, which in political terms encompasses the states of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia has increasingly appears to be the main potential battleground which explains the decision of SE and FI to join NATO to safeguard their borders from a Russian attack (Skagestad, 2010). Therefore, an assessment of the benefits that NATO will enjoy from Sweden and Finland's accession has been conducted to illustrate the strengthening of the "High North" region by the NATO Allies. Finally, a potential Russian response to the event has been provided, excluding an imminent attack but warning of the long-term risks of Russian diplomatic isolation.

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