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WHAT BENEFITS AND DISADVANTAGES DOES SWEDEN AND FINLAND GET FROM NATO?



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WRITTEN BY: LOUISA VON KLINGGRÄFF



WRITTEN BY

LOUISA VON KLINGGRÄFF

EDITED BY

MICHELE PUGGIA

SUPERVISED BY

MIGUEL ANDRES REYES CASTRO

Abstract

This Info Flash will firstly examine the international relations between Sweden, Hungary and Türkiye, which are tense since Sweden started its accession process to join NATO in the aftermath of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. With this context, the second part of the paper will conduct an analysis of the benefits and disadvantages for Sweden, Finland and for the NATO itself on accepting these new member states.

Introduction

After the full-scale Russian attack on Ukraine, Finland and Sweden applied for NATO membership in May 2022. This decision broke with their usual reserved position regarding international organisations, especially NATO (Forsberg, 2023). Both countries joined NATO's Partnership for Peace programme in 1994 and the European Union shortly after, in 1995 (Forsberg, 2023).

Still, the government and the population felt as if NATO accession would provoke Russia; consequently, there was a perception that "the greater levels of deterrence and protection conferred by membership would be devalued by the increased Russian threat" (Forsberg, 2023, p. 90). However, both countries kept working together closely with NATO and "politically backed the goals of the alliance" (Forsberg, 2023, p. 89).

Sweden in NATO: a Complex Relationship

Why Türkiye does not want Sweden to become a member

Soon after Finland and Sweden announced their decision to apply for NATO membership, Türkiye reacted negatively to Sweden's decision because, according to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, neither Finland nor "especially Sweden, were doing enough to fight terrorism" (Forsberg, 2023, p. 23). However, it is known that Sweden has been criticizing Türkiye and some of its policies on human rights for some time (Reuters, 2020; SCF, 2021). And after Erdogan's announcement, people protested in Stockholm, and an effigy representing Erdogan was publicly hanged upside down (Johnson, Hayatsever & Kauranen, 2023). These events worsened the relations between both states.

Sweden's and Finland's decision to apply for membership was, for most experts, a surprise, as they expected them to join for different reasons, for example to simplify administration regarding military projects organized by NATO and the EU (Forsberg, 2023). In the end, after complex talks, Türkiye only agreed to backtrack on its veto decision on Swedish and Finnish accession through a so-called "trilateral memorandum of understanding" (Forsberg, 2022, p. 93). Still, the list of demands that President Erdoğan set up have only partially been fulfilled by Sweden, such as reforming terrorism and arms exports legislation (Ahlander & Johnson, 2022). Moreover, the demand to hand over a Turkish journalist who sought refuge in Sweden has been, until now, strictly declined (Ahlander & Johnson, 2022).

Why Hungary Does Not Want Sweden to Become a Member

The Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán also reacted negatively when Sweden and Finland announced their ambitions to join NATO. Orbán argued that both states "were spreading 'outright lies' about his country's rule of law record" (Kottasová, 2023, para. 13). Later, Hungary and Türkiye softened their positions and agreed to Finland's accession. But in Sweden's case, as Hungarian Government Spokesman Zoltán Kovács publicly declared, "there is an ample amount of grievances

that need to be addressed before the country's admission is ratified." (Than, Charlish & MacSwan, 2023, para. 5).

What is the Current Relationship Between Both States

At the end of March 2023, the Turkish parliament unanimously voted to approve Finland's membership (Kottasová, 2023) and cleared the way for Finland to officially become a member. When Finland joined NATO on the 4 April 2023, Türkiye did not show any resistance and showed no hostility towards Finland; however, it stands by its decision regarding Sweden's accession. Consequently, this situation still presents a challenge, as Sweden cannot join without Turkish approval.

Nonetheless, despite Türkiye's benefits to NATO, the country also presents some challenges to the alliance, since it tends to disagree on various matters with the other members, for example on the war in Syria (Coşkun, 2022; Bormann, 2015). The problem with Sweden is a very different one, as it concerns terrorism, and Erdoğan has demonstrated to be clear in his stance in several interviews, such as when he criticized Sweden and demanded the extradition of members of Kurdish groups (Tagesschau, 2023; Forsberg, 2023).

Consequently, discussions are currently stuck, and it seems as if this situation will continue after Erdoğan's reelection for a new five-year term, on the 28 May 2023. It was argued that Erdoğan may benefit electorally, as the NATO discussion "may help divert voters' attention away from a cost-of-living crisis" (Johnson, Hayatsever & Kauranen, 2023, "When Will Turkey Agree To Swedish NATO Membership?", para. 14). The West still hopes that the inflation "and the likelihood that Mr Erdoğan will have to concentrate on stabilizing finances and attracting foreign investment – could prove a soft spot to push for Sweden's Nato accession as a quid pro quo [sic]." (Adler, 2023, para. 16).

Officials from the Hungarian Parliament, for their part, recently stated that there were still obstacles left regarding Sweden's wish to join NATO, and that they would not agree before these are removed, for example the way Sweden is criticizing Hungary and their "erosion of the rule of law" (Cooper, 2023, para. 14). Other sources claim that Hungary will follow Türkiye in their policy towards Sweden, agreeing to its accession or refusing it (Korsche & Holderried, 2023).

New Members: NATO's Gain

Political changes

Swedish officials already participate in NATO meetings, even though their accession is still in progress because many countries and NATO itself want Sweden to join. This procedure demonstrates the longstanding support for Sweden's entry in the alliance. With Finland's accession and Sweden's prospect to join, NATO gains more power and support in the international community. Consequently, the organisation will be a stronger community, but it could become harder to reach agreements due to the increased number of members.

Military changes

On the military side, NATO would be expanded and strengthened because “the availability of Swedish and Finnish territories will significantly increase NATO’s operational flexibility for the defence of its eastern flank” (Alberque & Schreer, 2022, p. 134). To increase this flexibility, the long-term demand for general military equipment needs to be addressed and the “national infrastructure to support military operations” (Alberque & Schreer, 2022, p. 126) should be developed for better defence. In this line, in an interview with the German online news media Tagesschau, Minna Ålander, an expert on Finnish foreign relations, argued that the country would be quick in mobilising 280.000 soldiers, with the total number of Finnish soldiers added to NATO possibly being 870.000 (Ålander, 2023).

Finland is perceived to be especially beneficial to the organisation, and due to the country’s long border with Russia, NATO could deploy personnel there. In Sweden’s case, the government focuses on ‘Total Defense’ in their budgetary plan and “aims to raise military spending to 2% of gross domestic product by 2026” (O’Dwyer, 2022, para. 3). However, since Sweden and Finland lack nuclear weapons, that they are both traditional supporters of nuclear non-proliferation, and that they “have a hands-off stance on their defence-industrial policy” (Alberque & Schreer, 2022, p. 126), rethinking these policy approaches appears as a necessity as they become (current and future) members. Nonetheless, NATO still gains more military personnel, equipment, intelligence and additional industrial expertise, for example with the Finnish company Patria, “an international provider of defence, security and aviation life cycle support services” (Patria Group, n.d.).

Impact on Russia

Russia disapproved of Sweden’s and Finland’s bid to join the alliance, feeling its national security would be threatened, which is why Moscow warned NATO to expect consequences that were not closer described by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BBC News, 2022). And while Finland’s accession represented “a political blow for the Kremlin” (Forsberg, 2023, p. 94), Russia reacted to it by announcing an increase in its military presence across Finland’s border (ABC News/Reuters, 2023). However, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has made clear that, even though Sweden is not yet an official member, NATO would react and protect Sweden (Wetzel, 2023). This is a warning to Russia to not conduct any intimidating movements or face a NATO defensive reaction, which also demonstrates NATO’s urgent wish for Sweden to join (Wetzel, 2023).

The Impact of NATO Ascension for Sweden and Finland

The Political Change

The perception of the populations in both states about Russia changed after the Russian attack on Ukraine, but the Finnish people became especially supportive of their country becoming a NATO member. Indeed, before the 24 February 2022, public opinion against NATO accession was always very stable; for instance, the “national broadcasting company YLE showed that public support for joining NATO had risen to 53 percent.” (Forsberg, 2023, p. 89). In the following month, this number increased, and 62 percent of the Finnish population now wanted to join while opposing voices decreased (Forsberg, 2023).

The Swedes, for their part, did support the accession of their state, but at a lower level, with more people supporting it if Finland joined too (Forsberg, 2023). Regardless “more than 50 percent of Swedes backed the move” (Forsberg, 2023, p. 90). For their part, the Finnish people, which in the past disagreed with US policies regarding, for example, the Iraq war, and did not fully support the presidencies of Bush and Trump (Forsberg, 2023). Since Joe Biden became President, however, more Finns feel like they share values and ideas with the new US administration (Forsberg, 2023). And while it could be argued that the Finnish population felt endangered when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, this event “was seen as a post-Soviet conflict that was not likely to spread to the Baltic region” (Forsberg, 2023, p. 90). This is why the perception towards joining NATO did not change drastically; nevertheless, by 2022, when Russia attacked again, the Finns became increasingly concerned for the security of their country.

Security

With Finland now a NATO member state, the government will need to reconsider many military and political decisions regarding its security, a legacy of the state’s long-time neutrality (Forsberg, 2023). Finland will be protected and supported by NATO and its members onwards, but it must still take over some duties now. And if both Finland and Sweden were to choose a low level of ambition, they would only protect their own national territory, as both are near Russia. Finland shares a long border with it and Sweden has a large coast on the Baltic Sea (Alberque & Schreer, 2022). Consequently, a possible duty could be the defence of the border with Russia and the general Baltic region (Alberque & Schreer, 2022).

This is to prevent Russia from entering the region and taking any area under its possession to operate from there (Alberque & Schreer, 2022). Still, many Swedish and Finnish policymakers and politicians would prefer the option with the lesser level of involvement, because then they wouldn’t need to take on any major challenges, and the current policy wouldn’t need to change much, as “it would be domestically uncontroversial and less resource-intensive” (Alberque & Schreer, 2022, p. 133).

In the end, Sweden will not enjoy NATO’s protection and support until Türkiye and Hungary positively agree to its accession. Still, as discussed earlier in the section on Russia, Sweden and NATO have engaged in mutual support. Indeed Sweden “has been one of NATO’s most active partners and a valued contributor” (NATO, 2023) to various NATO missions.

Conclusion

Since the full-scale Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, Sweden and Finland drastically shifted their foreign policies in the face of Russia's aggression. After decades of neutrality, the political and civil society called for more security. Consequently, both countries submitted membership applications and Finland eventually joined NATO in April 2023. However, Sweden currently experiences obstacles with its application process, as both Hungary, and especially Türkiye, are vetoing the request.

In this context, the benefits and disadvantages for Sweden, Finland and NATO on these countries' accession were discussed. Both states bring valuable, trained and highly professional military personnel and knowledge with them to NATO. Additionally, they can support NATO's future missions with their technologically advanced equipment. In exchange, the alliance provides them with the collective protection of conventional and nuclear deterrence against Russia. In the end, however, the overall real impact that NATO will have to these new members remains to be seen; this will mainly depend on how much priority they give to their new membership (Alberque & Schreer, 2022).

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