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FINLAND IN NATO- WHAT'S NEXT?

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Introduction

Finland's official entry into NATO on 4 April 2023 marked the culmination of a meticulously orchestrated 11-month accession process, catalysed by the destabilising events surrounding the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While Finland's accession to NATO may appear straightforward, it was expedited in light of the urgent security imperatives prompted by the invasion. Nevertheless, the transition to NATO membership calls for careful consideration of the multifaceted security dynamics between Finland and the alliance. In this context, this paper endeavours to cast a forward-looking perspective, examining the future trajectory of NATO-Finnish cooperation post-accession. Concretely, it will look at what the next steps are that NATO and Finland could and/or should take after the latter's accession to the former.

Central to this exploration is an assessment of the potential avenues for Finland to further integrate into NATO's operational framework. Specifically, a detailed analysis will be undertaken to evaluate the feasibility and implications of expanding NATO's presence within Finnish territory through initiatives such as the enhanced forward presence (eFP). Then, the paper will explore the prospects for enhanced collaboration within the Northern Group, leveraging Finland's NATO membership to deepen regional defence cooperation. Furthermore, consideration will be given to the merits of Finland joining the Bucharest Nine (B9) group, elucidating the potential benefits and strategic imperatives associated with such a move.

Finally, the paper will scrutinise the necessity for Finland to fortify its deployment capacities in alignment with NATO standards, reviewing the mechanisms and challenges inherent in meeting the alliance's expectations. By delving into these considerations, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive roadmap for charting the future trajectory of NATO-Finnish collaboration, navigating the complexities of regional security dynamics in a post-accession landscape.

EFP in Finland?

An enhanced forward presence (eFP) is a defence and deterrence military force formed by NATO allies within the framework of the alliance (NATO, 2023a). NATO's eFP battlegroups are positioned in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and the Baltic states (NATO, 2023a). The eFP was created as a response to Russia's invasion of Crimea to deter the Russian threat (Monaghan et al., 2022). Following this logic, eFP's extension to Finland is only natural. In fact, allies closer to Russia are more susceptible to Russian aggression due to geographical proximity and historical ties. Finland is the member of the alliance which shares the most extensive border with Russia and thus it has been experiencing considerable pressure as a result of the war, e.g. a massive flow of refugees which has potentially been orchestrated by Russia (Al Jazeera, 2023).

The main purpose of the eFP isto be able to act as a tripwire that would trigger substantial follow-on forces in case of aggression, ensuring the attacked member's security. An eFP battlegroup is a multinational force (Monaghan et al., 2022). This would be the first time a multinational military force is present on Finnish territory, which would generate essential debates in society and potentially accustom Finnish citizens to the idea of having foreign NATO-allied military troops on their territory. This is arguably part of the societal changes a country must go through to be a NATO member (Erlanger, 2023).

The Northern Group Should Do More and Better

The Northern Group is an informal cooperation format bringing together North European countries to develop defence-related joint projects. Members include all Scandinavian and Baltic countries, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, and Poland. Together, they carry out various projects, including better coordination of military exercises between member states (Prager & Brzozowski, 2019).

However, while the Group has issued multiple statements acknowledging the Russian threat on NATO's Eastern flank, it has taken no concrete steps to deter this menace (Ministry of National Defence- Republic of Poland, 2023; Ministry of Defence, 2022). This seems like a missed opportunity as multiple joint projects exist between Northern Group memberstates. For instance, Scandinavian countries have arranged to form a Joint Nordic Air Force, and the Netherlands, Germany and Poland have made significant trilateral efforts to reduce bureaucracy when transporting military equipment over each other's borders (Birkebaek & Gronholt-Pedersen, 2023; Euronews, 2024).

Finland's accession can significantly increase the importance of security for the Northern Group. Finland can play a catalysing role in expanding already existing joint projects to the whole of the Northern Group and, potentially, with Sweden's NATO accession, make the Northern Group into a formal format.

Finland Should Consider Joining the B9 Format

The Bucharest Nine States (B9) role is vital to NATO's Russian deterrence strategy. One of the ways in which B9 succeeds in this endeavour is by getting the attention of the United States on the importance of deterring Russia in the region. In fact, the US President often joins B9 summits, where the specifics of security needs in the region are emphasised (Gerasymchuk, 2021). For instance, the 2021 summit has called attention to various Russian acts of diversion on B9 member states, primarily the 2014 Russian-caused explosions at ammunition warehouses in the Czech Republic. Ultimately, this attention brings about concrete action from the United States, particularly when it comes to stepping up defence support in the Black and Baltic Seas (Gerasymchuk, 2021).

Finland would benefit from such increased attention. By joining the B9 format, specific issues such as the migratory pressure Russia exercises at the Russo-Finnish border and the necessity to reinforce border security would be prioritised. Moreover, the fact that NATO's Eastern flank, i.e. the countries closer to Russia, stand united in deterring a single threat would make for a strong statement.

Expanding the B9 format is not a new idea as some authors have proposed the expansion of the B9 to include Ukraine (Gerasymchuk, 2021). More importantly, the proposal that Finland should join the format is not without precedent either, as it has been made before by Colonel Vasile Simileanu (ret), PhD, with the argument of reinforcing NATO's Eastern flank (Defense Romania Team, 2023).

Finland Needs to Develop its Deployment Capabilities

As mentioned in the introduction, all NATO members are expected to develop their deployment capacities. The Riga Summit Declaration states that developing deployment capacities essentially means "improving ability to conduct and support multinational joint expeditionary operations far from home territory with little or no host nation support and to sustain them for extended periods" (Gorevski, 2015). This extended period is defined as a total of 18 months. This is what Finland needs to learn to do, as it has not faced the task of providing security outside of its borders for member states before (Erlanger, 2023), a need that Finnish military officials have also acknowledged. In fact, General Timo Kivinen, the Chief of Defence and commander of the Finnish Defence Forces, stated that Finland needs to develop its deployment capabilities because of NATO accession. From his perspective, it is Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty that demands such a development (Erlanger, 2023).

On the one hand, meeting NATO's expectations for deployment capabilities is lengthy and complicated. According to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, these capability targets are preceded by interim capability targets, which are to be developed by NATO and Finland together (NATO, 2023b). Thus, the process to reach such expectations is lengthy and requires Finland to first develop and meet its interim deployment capability targets; subsequently, it should set and, finally, meet the actual deployment capability targets. On the other hand, NATO provides the necessary tools and mechanisms to expedite this process as much as possible. NATO introduced various tools to enhance interoperability and standardise all procedures and methods (Gorevski, 2015).

These tools allow Finnish troops to participate in NATO joint military exercises and evaluate their forces through the Operational Capability Concept, determining, for instance, whether they are in line with Combat Ready Evaluation and Tactical Evaluation standards (Gorevski, 2015). In terms of the number of deployable forces a country needs to train and sustain, the current stated national target is 50 per cent of a country's strength, and most NATO members have attained this thanks to these mechanisms (Gorevski, 2015).

Conclusion

Finland's accession to NATO signifies a commitment to collective security and solidarity in the face of evolving security challenges. By embracing proactive measures and fostering closer cooperation with NATO allies, Finland stands poised to play a vital role in advancing regional stability and safeguarding the shared values of the alliance.

First, establishing an enhanced forward presence (eFP) in Finland is crucial in enhancing regional deterrence capabilities because it allows states to leverage multinational forces to uphold security and stability along NATO's Eastern flank. Finland's accession presents an opportunity to invigorate cooperation within the Northern Group, fostering deeper collaboration and synergy among Northern European states in addressing common security concerns.

Secondly, Finland's potential participation in the Bucharest Nine States (B9) format underscores the importance of concerted action in countering Russian threats and safeguarding regional stability. By amplifying its voice within this framework, Finland can elevate attention to critical security issues and strengthen transatlantic cooperation in deterring aggression. Moreover, Finland must prioritise the development of its deployment capabilities to fulfil its obligations as a NATO member, ensuring readiness to support collective defence operations effectively. Through alignment with NATO standards and mechanisms for interoperability, Finland can enhance its contribution to alliance-wide security efforts and bolster the resilience of the Euro-Atlantic region.

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