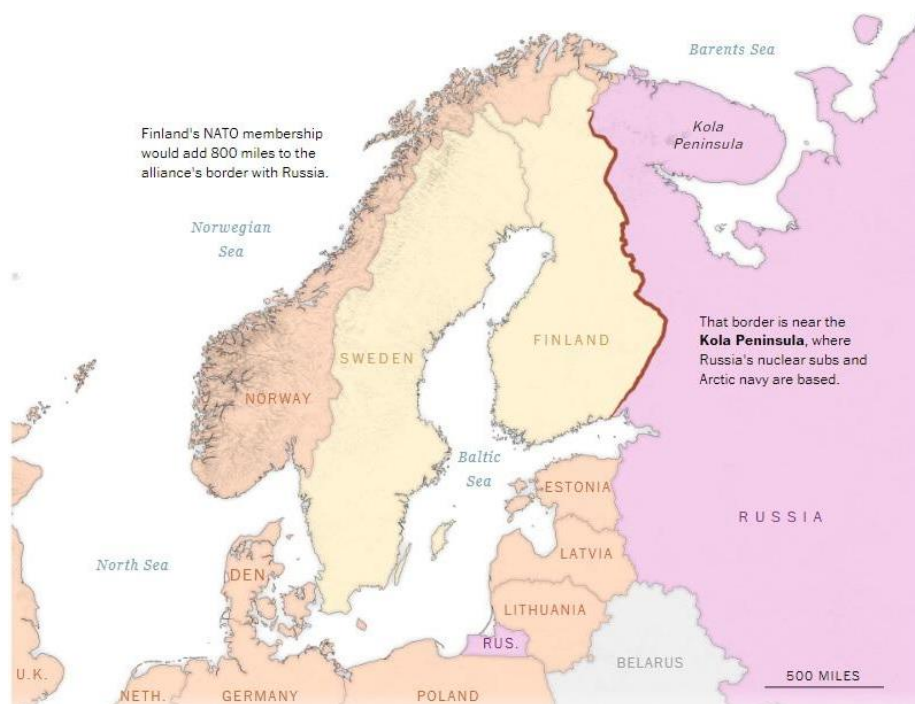


Finland and Sweden for NATO: Implications and Expectations

By: Marjuka Binte Afzal¹

Introduction

When Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine, he repeatedly mentioned that it was in part in response due to NATO expansion. Now, two months on, there is a good chance this invasion will lead to Russia's land border with NATO doubling, in length, because just as Ukraine borders Russia, so does Finland. And Finland may soon join NATO. Last month's announcement of Sweden and Finland joining NATO has come as the next strategic aftershock from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The two countries might have made such a drastic decision feeling the regional security threat, but the advantage falls squarely on NATO's side of the fence, which is now expanding. The Alliance's land, sea, and air capabilities may be enhanced as a result of the admission of the countries. Sweden has a strong fleet, which would help NATO's Baltic Sea defences, and it produces its own fighter jets, which it sells to countries all over the world. The Finnish defence forces are based on a universal male conscription, where men are still required to serve in its well-funded military². Moreover, the geographical location of the countries will provide NATO with a significant geostrategic advantage. The implications of the two countries joining NATO would therefore determine the geostrategic and economic status of Europe in the coming decades, exponentially changing global order.



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² Finnish conscription system. (2020). Puolustusvoimat. <https://puolustusvoimat.fi/en/finnish-conscription-system>

Figure- 01: Russia and Finland's Border, the New NATO Frontier (Source: Washington Post, 2022).

NATO Expansion

Sanna Marin, the current Prime Minister of Finland ensured in her address a few weeks back, that while there is no timetable as to when they would make the decisions, the move would happen within weeks, not months.

This would be a moment of huge significance. NATO is already the world's biggest military alliance, and its 30 members include the US, the UK, Germany, and France. Some of the members are situated in Eastern Europe. From the map given, it is clear that since 1997, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, most of the members joining NATO have been closer to the Russian border. NATO might deny this expansion to be a threat, but Russia sees it so since the expansion seems to continue. Finland is already a member of the EU and it cooperates with NATO. While Finland is unofficially neutral in military terms, it is a military player. Thus far, Finland's security tactics have been widely popular among the people. Finns have not forgotten the dire crises they had to face during the Winter War of 1939-1940 trying to fight back the Soviet forces³. There is still a sense of mistrust among them with regards to Russia, which further shifted when Russia attacked its neighbour, Ukraine.



Figure- 02: NATO Expansion Throughout the years (Source: CSIS, 2017)

³ Stavridis, J. (2022, Winter 3). What Ukraine Can Learn From Finland's Stand 80 Years Ago. Bloomberg.Com. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-03-20/russia-invades-ukraine-lessons-of-finland-s-winter-war-against-soviets>

Following the attack, a recent poll showed that 76% of Finns support the joining of NATO⁴, but in 2017, this was 21%. Finns are aware of NATO's Article 5, which ensures collective security mobilisation for any of the members under aggression. Seeing the way Russia has worked in the last few months might lead to Finland being prepared, firstly by joining NATO. But Finland is aware of the risks, as noted in a recent report by the Finnish Parliament that joining NATO could lead to, "...increased tensions on the border between Finland and Russia... move the Alliance closer to strategically important areas in Russia." This could be a vital advantage for NATO and simultaneously create a security dilemma in Russia.

Sweden and Finland Altering NATO's Security



Figure- 03: Kola Peninsula of Russia and the Finnish Border (Alamy, 2022)

The two countries joining NATO would move the alliance closer to one of Russia's most vulnerable and significant military outposts. The Kola Peninsula has the world's highest concentration of

⁴ Yle News. (2022, May 9). Yle poll: Support for Nato membership soars to 76%. Yle News. <https://yle.fi/news/3-12437506>

nuclear weapons. It provides access to the North and Barents Seas, as well as being the only ice-free port in Russia's Arctic. The Northern Fleet, which houses the majority of Russia's nuclear-powered submarines, is based on the peninsula. The fleet is an important part of Russia's nuclear triad and second-strike capabilities. Many military bases and infrastructure support the Northern Fleet and serve as testing grounds for its operations in the furthest north, which NATO experts feel is critical to Russia's defence⁵. Putin ordered the modernisation of Russia's military arsenal in 2012, with nuclear weapons being prioritised⁶. Because of the heavy concentration of such weapons on the Kola Peninsula, the region's navy and air force facilities were upgraded, expanded, and modernised. A significant naval and military base as such is in Murmansk⁷. From the map, it can be observed that a singular road beads together these geostrategic locations, which will be extremely vulnerable to NATO arsenal and attack if the alliance can build bases near the Finnish border.

NATO would find an increasing Baltic presence. To the south, the addition of Finland and Sweden would offer NATO a leg up in the Baltic Sea, a crucial waterway that is surrounded by Russia's St. Petersburg and some of NATO's most disadvantaged members, such as Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. NATO is now reliant on the Suwalki Gap, a tiny corridor separating Kaliningrad and Belarus that Russia could try to seal off in the event of a conflict⁸. NATO presence here would strengthen security for these countries.

Sweden and Finland joining would also mean an increased presence of NATO in the Arctic. Both countries are members of the Arctic Council, which oversees the world's most northern regions and includes Russia, Canada, and the United States⁹. Arctic security would continue to rise on NATO's agenda as a result of their participation. Because Russia owns more than half of the Arctic Ocean's coastline, it may rise to the top of Moscow's priority list, as security in the region is seen as an issue of national defence¹⁰.

Expected Hurdles on Sweden-Finland's Path: Turkey

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said he was not looking at both countries joining NATO "positively," accusing them of housing Kurdish "terrorist organizations."¹¹

⁵ Atlamazoglou, C. (2022, May 31). NATO's 2 newest members would move the alliance closer to one of Russia's most sensitive military outposts. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/finland-sweden-move-nato-closer-to-major-russian-military-bases-2022-5>

⁶ Kristensen, H. M., & Korda, M. (2021). Russian nuclear weapons, 2021. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 77(02), 90–108.

⁷ Franiok, N. (2022, April 22). Russian Arctic Military Bases. American Security Project (ASP). <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/russian-arctic-military-bases/>

⁸ Veebel, V., & Sliwa, Z. (2019). The suwalki gap, Kaliningrad and Russia's Baltic ambitions. *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 2(1), 111–121. <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.21>

⁹ Arctic Council. (n.d.). Arctic Portal. Retrieved June 5, 2022, from <https://arcticportal.org/arctic-governance/arctic-council>

¹⁰ Northam, J. (2022, May 12). Russia may become the only non-NATO nation in the Arctic, sparking fears of conflict. Npr.Com. <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/12/1098585422/russia-may-become-the-only-non-nato-nation-in-the-arctic-sparking-fears-of-conf>

¹¹ Haltiwanger, J. (2022, May 16). Turkey's Erdogan hints he'll hold Finland and Sweden's NATO bids hostage unless he gets concessions. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/turkey-erdogan-block-finland-sweden-nato-unless-he-gets-concessions-2022-5>

Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg was unable to move on with the membership process due to Turkey's opposition¹². It also snuffed out a historic moment for two countries that had adhered to military nonalignment until Russia's invasion of Ukraine shifted their security priorities. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has protested Sweden's decision to provide shelter to members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, and has stated that if the expansion is to go, he will require other concessions¹³. Turkey's objections to the expansion, which would quadruple NATO's land border with Russia, are still widely believed by NATO diplomats to be overcome. However, a procedure that was projected to take months could take longer and be more difficult than other alliance members had anticipated.

Spooking Foreign Investment

Whatever Finland and Sweden's decision may be, weeks and months of trepidation will follow while the dust settles and Russia's next move is determined. The uncertainty will be especially disruptive for potential foreign investors in the Nordic region, with many opting to wait and see. When foreign corporations establish new operations in a country, they do so with a long-term strategy in mind. For some of those contemplating Finland or Sweden, the decision to join (or not join) NATO could be a deal-breaker for boardrooms with strong feelings on the subject. Of all, because Finland shares a 1,300-kilometer border with Russia¹⁴, it stands to suffer the most from the aforementioned concerns and hazards (whereas Sweden shares no land border whatsoever). The economy of Finland and Sweden will be tested in the next months to see how disruptive, if not disastrous, the NATO decision will be. Military escalation is the black swan event, but the more likely scenario is the continuation of high-alert geopolitical tensions, which will, sadly, affect investor confidence in the region¹⁵. NATO countries directly bordering Russia, such as Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, will be particularly vulnerable to the economic consequences, as all four countries benefit greatly from the influx of new international enterprises.

Conclusion

With increased capabilities, closer coordination, and faster decision-making, the joining of Finland and Sweden in the Alliance will make the Baltic Sea region and all of Europe secured and safer. In times of peace, tension, and war, the two countries have developed approaches to total defence, or comprehensive security, that depend on their cultures to provide resilience, situational awareness, and cohesion. But the threat from Russia will probably start exerting the minute the countries get a positive decision, a perception that they might not be able to handle given the

¹² Rauhala, E., Birnbaum, M., & Nakashima, A. E. (2022, May 18). Turkey blocks start of NATO talks on Finland's and Sweden's applications. Washington Post.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/18/finland-sweden-nato-apply/>

¹³ Berlinger, J. (2022, May 16). Finland and Sweden want to join NATO. Here's how it works and what comes next. CNN News. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/14/europe/sweden-finland-nato-next-steps-intl/index.html>

¹⁴ A border that once divided now unites. (2014, June 11). ThisisFINLAND. <https://finland.fi/life-society/a-border-that-once-divided-now-unites/>

¹⁵ Shehadi, S. (2022, May 13). Opinion: The economic impact of Finland and Sweden joining Nato (or not) is a lose-lose situation. Investment Monitor. <https://www.investmentmonitor.ai/special-focus/ukraine-crisis/opinion-finland-sweden-nato-impact-no-win>

procedure for NATO to take Finland and Sweden in would take time, and hence Article 5 would not be invoked. And Russia will not take this lightly. Despite spending much of the post-Soviet years working on concerns like terrorism and peacekeeping, Putin sees the Alliance as a firewall directed at Russia. Before his invasion of Ukraine, Putin stated unequivocally that NATO had gotten too close to Russia and that it should be stripped back to its 1990s limits, before some nations that either bordered Russia or were ex-Soviet republics joined the military alliance. Finland joining would only exacerbate such feelings, as the major and most vulnerable military bases of Russia is right next to its border. Finland is the closest to the sun and will bear the immediate brunt. What will come of the Nordic region's economy is something that time would tell. Every phase of NATO enlargement has a significant impact on the alliance, but the addition of Sweden and Finland will have a greater impact than in earlier rounds. The addition of Sweden and Finland to the alliance may exacerbate long-standing disputes. In what looks to be a trying moment in the transatlantic relationship and European security, it will need a deft diplomatic touch to balance priorities and sustain alliance loyalty.

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