

# Finland's NATO accession

While formerly neutral, Sweden and Finland have jointly decided to join NATO in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Finland's accession in particular will impact the military balance in the Baltic-Nordic theater of contention between Russia and the alliance. Joining NATO would be the culmination of a longer alignment process for Finland.

By Eemeli Isoaho, Niklas Masuhr and Fabien Merz

The Russian invasion of Ukraine launched on February 24, 2022 has had far-reaching implications for the European security architecture and beyond. It has compelled European states to rethink their defense postures and reevaluate their existing security frameworks and partnerships. The readjustments to this new threat landscape were arguably nowhere as fast and far-reaching in terms of their implications as in Northern Europe. Finland, a member of the EU since 1995 but traditionally militarily non-aligned, which shares a 1344 km long border with Russia, saw a rapid shift in public opinion in favor of NATO membership. After an unprecedented and wide consensus emerged first among the public and then among the government and major political parties, Finland moved to officially apply for NATO membership together with Sweden on May 18, 2022.

Shortly afterwards, the Finnish and Swedish NATO accession protocols were completed following the alliance's summit in Madrid at the end of June. These protocols will now have to be ratified by all 30 NATO member states. Provided there are no major issues delaying the ratification processes, NATO could find itself enlarged by the two Nordic countries in the near future and would thereby also see its direct border



Finnish army K9 armoured artillery participates in Lightning Strike 22 exercise, in Rovajarvi, Finland, May 23, 2022. *Stoyan Nenov / Reuters*

with Russia significantly enlarged. This major strategic reconfiguration will thus not only have far-reaching implications for Finland and Sweden as well as for regional security and stability, but also for NATO's defense posture on its northeastern flank. The case of Finnish accession seems particularly interesting analytically not only in terms of how the domestic process unfold-

ed, but also regarding the militarily added value the country is likely to provide the alliance.

## Neutrality and Non-Alignment

In a strict sense of the term, Finland's Cold War status never amounted to full "neutrality". Rather, adopting a formal policy of neutrality while remaining indirectly with-

in Soviet gravitational pull was viewed as a means towards strengthening Finland's sovereignty in foreign policy. This is opposed to Sweden, whose neutrality was more genuine, and its Nordic neighbors, Norway and Denmark, who were founding members of NATO.

Soon after the end of the Cold War, Finland, together with Sweden, joined the EU in 1995. Political labelling thus shifted from being neutral to non-aligned or, more specifically, 'militarily non-aligned' which effectively meant inside the EU but outside of NATO. In a narrow sense, Finland was thus neutral only between 1991 and its EU accession. While the 1993 Treaty on European Union (TEU, 'Maastricht') does include a mutual defense clause in Article 42.7, staying outside NATO was Helsinki's way of communicating its status as militarily non-aligned vis-à-vis Moscow, in particular. Additionally, Finland joined the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) program in 1994 but deliberately did not take part in any exercises pertaining to NATO's Article V on collective defense obligations.

This configuration became at least partially unsatisfactory in 2008 as a result of Russia's war against Georgia and, especially, the annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. In this context, emphasis was placed on strengthening bilateral cooperation with key international partners, particularly Sweden, and minilat-

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eral cooperation in the the Nordic/Baltic Sea region ('Nordic' being a particularly well accepted label in Finnish political discussions). This minilateral integration and cooperation was largely achieved through the 2009 vehicle of the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF), which anchored voluntary and pragmatic defense integration geographically.

Still, Russia's 2014 military incursions into Ukraine provided an uplift to the so-called 'NATO Option', at least amongst Helsinki's foreign policy and defense establishment. Discussed since the 1990s, ensuring the viability of the Option became a serious priority. In political terms, the Option refers to Finland reserving its sovereign right or "room for maneuver" to join the alliance on short notice if necessitated by

changes in the security landscape. Communicated explicitly in multiple government programs, the NATO Option was viewed as a form of hedging and a bargaining chip vis-à-vis Moscow. In technical military terms, this required ensuring sufficient organizational, operational, and doctrinal alignment to satisfy alliance standards and to be able to plug into NATO's military architecture. This increased interoperability and alignment between NATO and the Finnish Defence Forces (FDF) was expedited by the FDF's participation in NATO's stabilization efforts in Afghanistan. From the vantage point of 2022, the Afghan mission is often considered a costly distraction for many Western armed forces with no strategic benefit. The links established in Afghanistan proved however crucial for Finland when deeper cooperation became a necessity after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. As a result of this alignment process, full operational compatibility had been achieved by the time Vladimir Putin's credible threats against Ukraine were extended to Finland and Sweden in late 2021. Bilateral ties with the United States were also strengthened to include a more explicit defense and security dimension than previously.

Despite this tighter alignment with NATO, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine demonstrates the gaps that exist without being covered by Article V. Russian forces have shown their willingness to harm civilian populations in a neighboring country at a large scale unrelated to battlefield successes or failures. Hence, even if NATO would likely support Finland indirectly in the event of Russian incursions, akin to its support for Ukraine, Finland requires (nuclear) deterrence through Article V in order to have the highest possible guarantee of protection for its population.

### Finland's About-Turn

Traditionally, most political parties in Finland and a large majority of the population have supported maintaining good working relations with Russia. Congruently, the Finnish public has also been rather critical towards the prospect of NATO accession, with support for the alliance somewhat fluctuating but never reaching more than 30 percent. This began to shift during the onset of the military buildup to the Russian aggression on Ukraine in late 2021. The first significant shifts in public opinion and among political elites began occurring after statements by Moscow singled out

and implicitly threatened Finland and Sweden in late 2021 – even if the threats were rebuffed by the Finnish President, Sauli Niinistö, who emphasized the country's sovereignty and right to make its own foreign policy decisions. Public opinion fully and comprehensively tilted after the shockwave caused by the onset of the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022. The numbers snowballed to a substantial majority being in favor of NATO accession in the immediate days and weeks following the onset of the Russian invasion. More recent polls have support for NATO membership at an all-time high of close to 80 percent.

The Government around Prime Minister Sanna Marin and President of Finland reacted by commissioning a report on the changing security environment and Finland's possible options therein. Published in April 2022 by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the report does not include explicit recommendations but describes joining NATO as Finland's most viable course of action to guarantee maximum security and "room for maneuver" in its foreign policy. The report was submitted to the Finnish Parliament, which discussed and analyzed the report in a total of eleven parliamentary committees. On May 17, the Parliament voted on the matter with 188 votes in favor and only eight against. The Finnish application for NATO accession was officially submitted one day later together with the Swedish application.

The last hurdle in the way of NATO's formal invitation to Finland and Sweden to join the Alliance was (and may continue to be) Turkey's opposition to their candidacy. Despite having expressed favorable views in bilateral exchanges with Nordic leaders, President Erdogan voiced concerns in early May about Finland and Sweden joining NATO if the two countries continued to politically support the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the People's Defense Units (YPG), amongst others. Turkey's demands, which many analysts have linked with domestic politics and President Erdogan's campaign in the run-up to the June 2023 elections, have included for instance the extradition of alleged terrorists and the lifting of restrictions on arms exports to Turkey. After several weeks of negotiations, a Trilateral Memorandum was signed by Turkey, Finland, and Sweden during the NATO Madrid Summit on June 28, 2022, allowing the alliance to extend its formal invitation to Finland and Sweden the following day. While it is still unclear how



long the ratification process in all 30 member states will take and whether Turkey will choose to stall the process again, it now seems almost certain that Finland and Sweden will join NATO in the not-too-distant future.

Despite its seeming expediency, the Finnish decision to apply for NATO membership was preceded by inclusive deliberations as well as underpinned by a broad consensus among the general population and political elites alike. Both the drafting of the April 2022 report and the parliamentary committee work have been described as inclusive and comprehensive by most observers. As a result, the inclusive, participatory process paved the way for the broad consensus within Parliament, which in turn will guarantee the sustainability of the decision even if the ratification process were to continue beyond the next parliamentary elections in April 2023. The broad cooperation throughout the decision-making process also underlines the genuine, home-grown nature of the decision, discrediting any potential accusations of foreign involvement in pushing Finland towards NATO.

### Military Implications

Even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the FDF procurement was informed by identifying Putin's Russia as a military threat and it therefore revolved around many of the systems that have received increased media and analyst attention because of the war's dynamics in Ukraine.

These include AGM-158 Joint-Standoff Missiles (JASSMs), air-launched cruise missiles that provide a long-range precision strike capability to Finland's air force, which has decided to replace its fleet of F/A-18E/F Super Hornets with the F-35. In terms of artillery, Helsinki procured South Korean K9 self-propelled howitzers and variants of the United States' M270 Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS). As a result of these and other modernization efforts, the FDF has long been somewhat of an envy to those advocating a return to a conventional deterrence and defense posture within NATO.

As a result, Finland would be a "net security provider" within the alliance, as opposed to creating additional vulnerabilities. After 2014, one of the refrains around NATO's Eastern defensive posture was the supposed impossibility of holding the Baltics against a Russian invasion and dealing with the vulnerabilities of the "Suwalki Corridor" which would have permitted Russia to at the very least dramatically complicate NATO logistics into the East. Conversely, extending the NATO-Russia frontier with Finland's 1344km of border will cause many more strategic headaches in Moscow than Brussels. In geographic terms, the strategic center of gravity moves north from NATO's Central European-Baltic joint, with Finnish and Swedish mil-

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itary installations and assets creating redundancies in Western defense plans. While predictions of the Baltic Sea turning into a 'NATO Lake' seem overdrawn due to the continued threat of Kaliningrad and its sensor and missile networks, the militarized enclave's deterrent value decreases as a result of the alliance expanding north. In effect, it would not be as vulnerable to Russian missile strikes against Western and Central European military infrastructure as alliance air force assets could redeploy further North.

However, beyond possessing military hardware and the ability to fight at larger scale than most European militaries, there is much that the FDF can teach its prospective allies. This not only pertains to military operations but extends to fields such as civil defense, resisting Russian cyber incursions, energy security, and configuration of

national service systems – competencies deemed outdated or politically neglected between 1991 and at least 2014 in most of Western Europe.

### Open Questions

On the political and strategic level, there are open questions as to what Swedish and Finnish membership means for EU-NATO relations, the balance of power within the West on future relations with Russia, Finland's role in NATO, and strategic stability between the alliance and Russia.

*First*, with Finland crossing the Rubicon by joining NATO, it is less urgent for it to push for the EU's integrated security policy to contain a clear defense (as opposed to stabilization and security management) dimension. This, and the clear and present threat of Russia might compel NATO and the EU to embark on more clearly delineated burden-sharing and division of labor with the latter taking care of security risks and threats and the former focusing on conventional territorial defense.

*Secondly*, Nordic expansion will impact political dynamics inside European decision-making. While Finland has clearly perceived Russia as a military threat, it has pursued very pragmatic relations on a variety of technocratic issues, such as fishing rights and environmental protection, particularly around the Baltic Sea. In this regard, Norway, which has followed a similar path despite being a NATO member, could serve as somewhat of a template for Helsinki, at least in the medium-term. However,

this does not necessarily mean that Finland will position itself necessarily on the 'softer' side on how the West should deal with Russia. While somewhat simplified, the invasion of Ukraine has illustrated a split between the Eastern European frontier states, the US and UK on one side with France and Germany advocating for less hawkish stances towards Moscow (see [CSS Analysis No.306](#)) Finland could have a significant voice in these debates due to its twin credentials of being a reputable advocate of deeper European integration while also being under more direct threat from Russia.

*Thirdly*, as NATO debates since 2014 have shown, the alliance's military posture is subject to context and negotiation. For the Finnish public, two issues might prove controversial down the road, with some commentators even suggesting an incom-

ing “NATO hangover” after the current levels of support. For one, there are fears that Finland could be dragged into NATO out-of-area missions and thus pressure FDF troops to serve operations deemed unpalatable by the public. However, with stabilization operations being very low on NATO’s current list of priorities, this may be unfounded and, as Finnish politicians often reiterate, each NATO member has the right to choose if and how to support a

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given operation. Furthermore, Helsinki can always point to its status as a net-security provider and argue NATO always gains security by the FDF holding its defense against Russia. The next contentious issue, however, would pertain to permanent US or NATO troop presence. However, a similar logic applies here, where Finland’s defense does not require US armored divisions – as Finland’s vulnerabilities outside

NATO may pertain to protecting the population and nuclear coercion, not Russian tanks rushing towards Helsinki.

*Lastly*, this leads to the issue of strategic stability. In particular, the Finnish air force already on paper has the potential to hit the Russian Northern Fleet’s submarine bases in Murmansk Oblast, only 400 km from the FDF’s northernmost active airbase in Lapland. Adding NATO and especially the US Air Force to this equation might cause concerns in Moscow that the seaborne component of its nuclear architecture is permanently under threat. Further South, NATO’s aerial firepower would equally put Kaliningrad under increased threat, especially once Sweden and Finland are added. This would likely force Moscow to increase its surveillance and air defense infrastructure in the Kola Peninsula, increasing the strain on its war and sanctions-hit economy or at least diverting resources earmarked for other areas of military modernization. In deterrence equations, perceptions are more important than one-sided inferences. With the attrition

suffered by conventional forces in Ukraine, Russia by default will have to lean on nuclear threats to coerce its neighbors and to, in its view, deter NATO. It may thus be an even more volatile actor in crisis situations if the Northern Fleet and Kaliningrad are deemed at threat. Consequently, while Finland NATO membership will likely increase its own and NATO’s security significantly, it will likely have side-effects that impact alliance-Russian dynamics going forward.

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