NATO's Nordic Enlargement with Finland and Sweden in the Context of the Ukrainian War

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Abstract: *This paper aims to analyze the differences between the previous NATO enlargement rounds that took place between 1999-2020 and the current process involving Finland and Sweden in several key aspects. Firstly, the candidate countries' status differs significantly. Unlike many of the countries that joined NATO in the past 25 years, Finland and Sweden are distinguished by their high level of security and a very efficient, well-organized, and technologically advanced armed forces sector. This suggests that their accession process may proceed more smoothly, given their already robust military capabilities and stability. Another important difference lies in the historical context surrounding this enlargement. While previous rounds of Eastern Europe NATO's enlargement occurred in the aftermath of geopolitical shifts such as the end of the Cold War, Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO is a response to the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. For Finland and Sweden, both non-aligned countries with long borders with Russia, the conflict in Ukraine has served as a stark reminder of their vulnerability to external aggression and the need for robust defense capabilities. The war in Ukraine led Sweden and Finland to seek membership within NATO, a membership accession process that, given the severe geopolitical and military crisis, will swiftly end.*

I. Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, a decade after the end of the Cold War, two major developments led to the transformation of European security architecture. The first seismic shift came with the enlargement of NATO toward

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Central and Eastern Europe, marking a profound increase in the Alliance's reach and influence. In the 1990s, in light of the transformed parameters of the security landscape in Europe and globally following the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, NATO embarked on a strategic realignment, extending its membership to include former Soviet bloc nations. This enlargement not only reinforced NATO's defensive capabilities but also signaled a strategic pivot towards safeguarding the security interests of Eastern European nations. Each of the five rounds of NATO enlargement since the end of the Cold War (1999, 2004, 2009, 2017 and 2020) has prompted similar questions and dilemmas regarding the role, purpose, and future of the transatlantic organization. Additionally, each round has been met with increasingly vocal objections from Russia, asserting that NATO's expansion poses a threat to its national security.[2] The redefinition of NATO's role from a purely defensive alliance to a proactive guarantor of stability across the European continent was a defining feature of this evolution. Moreover, in June 1992 NATO's decision to support peacekeeping operations conducted by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) represented a turning point in European security cooperation. By lending its resources and expertise to the OSCE, NATO provided the European organization with a robust framework for addressing regional conflicts and promoting peace and stability. This collaborative approach highlighted NATO's commitment to multilateralism and collective security, laying the groundwork for a more integrated and cohesive European security architecture.[3]

In December 1992, NATO declared that the organization was also prepared to support peacekeeping operations under the authority of the United Nations (UN), including in the former Yugoslavia.[4] This doctrine of liberal

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[2] Tuomas Forsberg and Tapani Vaahtoranta, *Post-neutral or pre-allied? Finnish and Swedish Policies on the EU and NATO as Security Organisations*, 2000, in https://ciaonet.org/catalog?f%5Bauthor%5D%5B%5D=&f%5Bcontent_type%5D%5B%5D=&f%5Binstitution%5D%5B%5D=Finnish+Institute+of+International+Affairs&f%5Blocation%5D%5B%5D=Kosovo&f%5Btopic%5D%5B%5D=Defense+Policy

[3] For more information, see Jonathan Dean, *OSCE and NATO: Complementary or Competitive Security Providers for Europe? A Long Range Perspective* in OSCE Yearbook 1999, Baden-Baden 2000, pp. 429-434.

[4] United Nations, *United Nations Protection Force,* September 1992 in https://peacekeeping.un.org/mission/past/unprof_b.htm

interventionism was translated into a new strategic concept of the Alliance, which was later applied in NATO's unilateral war against Yugoslavia in 1999 when Europe proved unable to stop an ethnic cleansing war without American intervention.[5]

The second evolution involved the enlargement of the European Union and the establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), commonly known as the CFSP, introduced in 1992 through the Maastricht Treaty and later nuanced by the Lisbon Treaty, which came into effect in 2009. The Lisbon Treaty added a defense component, namely the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Several modifications have been made, with the key difference being that from that point, the European Union would have been in closer contact with the Atlantic Alliance. Perhaps the most significant development was that the European Union was to act as a security provider. Through the CSDP, the EU seeks to complement and reinforce the efforts of NATO and other international organizations in promoting security and stability.[6]

Since 2004, significant European interventions have occurred in the Western Balkans, exemplified by the Althea military operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This operation, conducted under the auspices of the European Union as EUFOR, marked a pivotal transition from the previous peacekeeping mission, SFOR, led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization since 1996. The transition from SFOR to EUFOR - Operation Althea - reflected a strategic shift in the international community's approach to stabilizing Bosnia and Herzegovina. While SFOR was primarily a NATO-led mission, EUFOR represented a broader international effort with a significant European Union component. This change underscored the growing role of the EU in regional security affairs and its willingness to take on greater responsibilities in conflict resolution and peacekeeping operations. It encompassed a broad spectrum of objectives,

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[5] North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *The Alliance's Strategic Concept (1999),* https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_27433.htm; For more information, see Paul Latawski, Martin Smith, The Kosovo crisis and the evolution of ost-Cold War European security, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2003.

[6] European Union, *Common security and defense policy,* https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/159/common-security-and-defence-policy

including maintaining security and stability, supporting the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement, fostering reconciliation and dialogue among ethnic communities, and assisting Bosnia and Herzegovina's security institutions reform. Despite the formal transition from SFOR to EUFOR, NATO remained closely involved in providing logistical and operational support to the EU-led mission, demonstrating the alliance's ongoing engagement in the region's peacebuilding efforts.[7] Within this new framework of common foreign policy, the EU has initiated and conducted 37 operations and missions. Currently, there are 21 ongoing CSDP missions and operations, comprising 12 civilian and 9 military endeavors.[8] As a result, each country in Europe has been compelled to outline its interests and stance regarding these two developments.

Finland and Sweden have remained non-aligned countries, even though both countries had positively viewed the North Atlantic Alliance as a collective defense organization. Their accession to the European Union in 1995 led to the erosion of the neutral status applied to these two Nordic states, as both Sweden and Finland participated in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and advocated for a stronger role for the European Union in issues related to international security. On May 18, 2022, Finland and Sweden jointly submitted their application for NATO membership. Their ambassadors to NATO, Klaus Korhonen for Finland and Axel Wernhoff for Sweden, personally handed this historic document to the Secretary-General of the Alliance, Jens Stoltenberg, at the NATO headquarters in Brussels. The official request received immediate widespread appreciation, not only from the Secretary-General but also from all allies, except for Turkey. Turkey's objections included issues raised by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, such as the alleged support provided by Stockholm and Helsinki to Kurdish groups that Ankara considers threats to its security, classifying them as terrorist organizations. Turkey's objections were thus

[7] European Union, *EUFOR BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA Military Operation ALTHEA,* https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eufor-althea/eufor-bosnia-herzegovina-military-operation-althea_und_en?s=324

[8] European Union, *Missions and operations,* https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/missions-and-operations_en#9620

more focused on Sweden, with its substantial Kurdish diaspora, and to a lesser extent, on Finland.[9]

This major change was largely unexpected because until 2022, the two countries were not considered potential allies, and the Nato member status was not a priority on national political agendas. This accelerated request was triggered by Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its threats to neighboring countries, the European Union, and the North Atlantic Alliance. In this context, the public perception in the two countries has dramatically shifted towards the perspective that the current war signals a massive threat to regional security, possibly even a broader Moscow expansionist agenda aimed at neighboring countries of the Russian Federation.[10]

II. NATO's Nordic Enlargement: Finland and Sweden's Distinct Path from NATO's Problematic Enlargement toward Central and Eastern European Countries

The differences between the previous NATO enlargement rounds that took place between 1999-2020 and the actual process involving Finland and Sweden, from the perspective of the candidate countries' status, as well as the historical context are multifaceted.

Unlike the Eastern European countries that joined NATO, Finland and Sweden are two politically and institutionally stable countries with very strong democratic institutions. They have not undergone problematic processes of political transition in their recent history and are not shaken by internal conflicts. Therefore, their accession does not pertain to securing internal political structures through stronger integration into the international environment but rather involves participation in an international alliance. For the Eastern European

[9] David Mac Dougall & Kamuran Samar, *L'adesione di Finlandia e Svezia alla Nato: il "Sì" turco come merce di scambio,* in Euronews, 20 May 2022, https://it.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/05/20/l-adesione-di-finlandia-e-svezia-alla-nato-il-si-turco-come-merce-di-scambio

[10] The Guardian, *Sweden and Finland agree to submit Nato applications, say reports,* 25 April 2022, in https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/25/sweden-and-finland-agree-to-submit-nato-applications

states, NATO accession represented not only a guarantee of territorial integrity but also confirmation of political reform efforts and democracy consolidation. In the latter case, it served as a strong incentive for EU membership.

Finland and Sweden are not countries that belonged to the former Soviet bloc and the Warsaw Pact. On the contrary, even during the Cold War era, beyond their policies of neutrality, both countries gravitated towards the Western geopolitical orbit. Since 1995, they have been members of the European Union. Therefore, their entry into the North Atlantic Alliance would not result from a reversal of international alliances. For NATO, it is not an admission of former enemy countries, but rather the consolidation of a long history of close political and military cooperation.[11]

The joining of Finland and Sweden into NATO, compared to previous enlargement waves, represents a different geopolitical direction of the Alliance's policy. It is not an enlargement towards the eastern part of the continent but towards the North. The accession of these two countries would include also the so-called *High North zone,* which - compared to Eastern Europe - holds crucial importance, especially in the Arctic region, a region that, as a result of climate predictions, will prove to be extremely competitive commercially in the future. Moreover, with the enlargement of NATO to include Sweden and Finland, both NATO and Russia must adjust to the new realities of the NATO land and air bridge along NATO's eastern flank to the north, creating a 1,340-kilometer border with Russia. This will impact military planning, particularly concerning Russia's strategic bases in the Kola Peninsula, home to its advanced fleet, the Northern Fleet. Elevating the fleet's status to that of a military district underscores its critical role in Russia's national security, nuclear deterrence, power projection, and Arctic dominance. The shift from the "High North, low tension" adage to "High North, high tension" is evident. Russia aims to compensate for military losses in Ukraine, heightening the likelihood of tensions and suspicions in the short term. However, a strong NATO presence in the High North could enhance

[11] The first report of the Swedish government on the collaboration of this Nordic country with the Atlantic Alliance, starting from the 1950s, through the two Nordic allies of NATO, Norway and Denmark, see Robert Dalsjö, *Life-line Lost: The Rise and Fall of "Neutral" Sweden´s Secret Reserve Option of Wartime Help from the West*, Stockholm, Santérus Academic Press, 2006.

overall deterrence and mitigate the risk of escalation in the longer term. Collaboration with Russia may become feasible as perceptions of offensive advantage diminish. NATO's strategic planning should account for these dynamics, balancing the need for security cooperation and development with mechanisms to reduce tensions and deconflict with Russia.[12]

Finally, Finland and Sweden, unlike the countries that have joined NATO in the last 25 years, stand out for their high level of security and a very efficient, well-organized, and technologically advanced armed forces sector. The entry of these two countries could rely on a very high degree of integration into the existing military systems of the Alliance, which would occur immediately, and on a very high level of interoperability with NATO forces. As members of the Partnership for Peace, Sweden and Finland have been more security providers than consumers.[13]

The examination of historical events to identify potential parallels can shed light on the implications of this enlargement. One significant period to consider is the years following 1949, marked by the Berlin Crisis and the onset of the Cold War. During this time, NATO's enlargement and the establishment of military alliances played a crucial role in shaping the geopolitical landscape of Europe. Similarly, the year 1955, following the failure of the Pleven Plan amidst the Korean War, witnessed significant developments, particularly in Germany, where the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) and its integration into NATO had profound implications for European security. Drawing parallels with these historical moments allows for a deeper understanding of the potential implications of Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO. Just as NATO's enlargement in the aftermath of the Berlin Crisis and the Korean War reshaped the security dynamics of Europe, the inclusion of Finland and Sweden, after the Russian aggression on Ukraine, could have far-reaching consequences for the Nordic geopolitical space and the broader security

[12] Cmdr. Rachael Gosnell, U.S. Navy, Dr. Katrin Bastian, *Arctic Dynamics In An Evolving World,* in "per Concordiam Journal of European Security and Defense Issues!, 29 June 2023 https://perconcordiam.com/arctic-dynamics-in-an-evolving-world/

[13] Andrew Dorman, *Sweden brings benefits for NATO but accession delay raises difficult questions* https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/02/sweden-brings-benefits-nato-accession-delay-raises-difficult-questions

architecture. It may lead to enhanced cooperation and coordination within NATO, as well as a reconfiguration of strategic interests and alliances in the region.

Therefore, a preliminary conclusion would be that the current enlargement represents a different one than the recent past of the Alliance. Based on these premises, and following some already made statements, it is believed that the admission process for the two countries could be concluded more quickly than usual (the last admission to the Alliance, that of North Macedonia in 2020, took about two years, but shorter negotiation times are expected for Finland and Sweden).

B. The implications for the Nordic geopolitical region, for NATO, and the entire security architecture.

The first issue, naturally, concerns the new relations with Russia. NATO's enlargement has inevitably led to friction with Russia since 1990. These tensions began modestly during the Yeltsin administration, intensified under Vladimir Putin, and may persist beyond the current Russian president's political exit. In the case of this new enlargement, although the Russian president stated that it does not represent a "direct threat" to Russia's security and that only the enhancement of NATO's military infrastructure in these countries would provoke a response from Russia (such as deploying ballistic missiles or establishing permanent bases in the two countries), the new geostrategic situation created should be noted.[14]

The full integration of these two "security providers" would profoundly change the balance of power in the Baltic Sea. In other words, it would lead not only to the entire Scandinavian Peninsula entering NATO but also to the Baltic Sea becoming de facto a "NATO lake." Russia's actions would be significantly hindered, and the naval base in Kaliningrad, where the Russian Baltic Fleet is stationed, would be monitored by a third NATO member, Sweden, in addition to

[14] *Putin explains how Finland, Sweden membership in NATO different from Ukraine's* , 30 June 2022, in https://www.aa.com.tr/en/russia-ukraine-war/putin-explains-how-finland-sweden-membership-in-nato-different-from-ukraines/2627019

Poland and Lithuania, already NATO members. Moreover, a new NATO frontier would oblige Russia to deploy substantial military resources, in line with its self-assumed status and narrative as a "besieged fortress."[15]

After the war in Ukraine is over, a serious and pragmatic perspective on international relations cannot ignore Russia's displayed security paranoia. Real or simulated, Russia's suspicions about the deployment of military forces near its borders have already led to a major international crisis. It is already a question, following this uncomfortable logical line, whether the accession of Finland and Sweden might somehow provide Russia with additional legitimacy for more pronounced anti-Western discourse and/or actions. We should avoid giving Russia pretexts for future aggression or understand that by pursuing an expansionist policy, the Russian state will find them anyway, that's why Europe needs a strong and united alliance. This seems to be one of the dilemmas animating the international analysis scene.

At least at the theoretical level, one can argue that all alliances in history—regardless of their offensive or defensive nature, democratic or non-democratic—have generated security for allies and insecurity for those outside the alliance. Russia, so far, has pushed this type of logic to its limits, and other adversaries and international competitors of the West (such as China and Iran) have supported and adopted this rhetoric. In our opinion, NATO has managed to be the most powerful and credible alliance in history precisely because it knew how to remain firm in the face of challenges and accept cooperation on its terms. Why should NATO be more timid now, in the face of Russia, than it was against the Soviet Union?

The enlargement of NATO with Finland and Sweden will enhance security, both for the North Atlantic Pact as a whole and for the two states that will formally fall under the NATO security umbrella. However, at the same time, these two states and the Alliance will be exposed to an unprecedented situation. In other words, NATO's Nordic enlargement will intensify the already existing

[15] Jean-Sylvestre Mongrenier, *The Baltic as a Western Sea* in "Baltic Rim Economies, 1/2023, https://www.centrumbalticum.org/en/publications/baltic_rim_economies/baltic_rim_economies_1_2023/jean-sylvestre_mongrenier_the_baltic_as_a_western_sea

tension between NATO and Russia, an escalation that risks not limited to Eastern Europe, destined to open a new front of hostilities in Northern Europe.[16]

As for the benefits to NATO, it is clear, first and foremost, that the Alliance will undoubtedly be strengthened politically and militarily, with Finland and Sweden as members with significant military capabilities. Before the Ukrainian crisis, NATO was perceived as an inefficient and insecure organization, being in a deep crisis (this sentiment was officially articulated by prominent figures, such as President Trump in 2017 and French President Emmanuel Macron, who described NATO as an alliance in a state of "brain death" in 2019).[17] The North-Atlantic alliance should accept these memberships at a very brisk pace precisely because it is a historic moment, a direct threat to European security, and an attempt to redefine the characteristics of the international environment, bringing it back to a tragic past where the rule of force prevails over the force of law. In the past, NATO has been respected by its competitors and adversaries because it was strong through the solidarity of its members and because it used this formidable military capacity not for aggression but for defending the values of democracy and international stability.

The rapid admission of Finland and Sweden would send a clear message to Russia and other international actors that NATO is a strong and united alliance, capable of responding quickly and decisively to challenges to European security. Furthermore, the joining of these two states would consolidate NATO's position in the Baltic Sea region and strengthen the alliance's northern flank. This would enhance NATO's ability to deter any aggressive actions by Russia in this area and consolidate the security of the entire alliance. At the same time, the swift acceptance of Finland and Sweden's accession would reflect NATO's firm commitment to democratic principles and the rule of law, providing a concrete response to threats against these values in Europe. It is important to note that any decision regarding the accession of new members to NATO must be made with

[16] Henri Vanhanen, *NATO and Northern Europe: No longer the forgotten flank* in "Carnegie Endowment for International Peace", 19 December 2023 https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/12/19/nato-and-northern-europe-no-longer-forgotten-flank-pub-91297

[17] ***BBC, *Nato alliance experiencing brain death, says Macron,* 7 November 2019, in https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50335257

caution and take into account all geopolitical, military, and security aspects. Additionally, it is essential to ensure that new member states contribute appropriately to the goals and values of the alliance.

III. Similarities and differences between Finland and Sweden, as potential candidate countries for NATO

Finland and Sweden, in their decision to join the North Atlantic Alliance, exhibit some significant similarities but also some differences. The two countries are alike in terms of geographical positioning, political culture, Western orientation, and a similar degree of socio-economic development. However, we consider that the most similar aspects in their accession dossier are two issues: their historical neutrality and their cooperation with the Atlantic Alliance after the end of the Cold War. Both countries, through their NATO membership applications, put an end to a long tradition of military neutrality after the Second World War (in Sweden's case, the policy of neutrality has lasted for over 200 years and has become an element of its national identity). Neutrality during the Cold War and non-alignment in the post-Cold War period were the result of a strategic approach aimed at maintaining cooperation and formal equidistance between the Western bloc and the communist bloc first and then between the West and the Russian Federation. Although with different sensitivities, Finland and Sweden perceived non-alignment as a prerequisite for maintaining friendly relations and avoiding potential disputes with the Russian Federation. This strategic political choice was accompanied by broad popular consensus in favor of neutrality and, therefore, non-participation in the Atlantic Alliance (in the case of former communist states, the political choice was massively supported by public opinion).

Until a few years ago, according to various opinion polls, the majority of Finns and Swedes were against their country's entry into NATO. Public opinion began to shift partially with the war in Georgia in 2008, the crisis in Ukraine, and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and even more so in the current context of the war in Ukraine. From this perspective, for the foreign and security policies of both countries, the prospect of joining NATO represents a radical discontinuity, a

revolution in terms of the role and level of involvement in international affairs that NATO membership entails.[18]

The second aspect linking Finland to Sweden and strengthening the idea that this round of enlargement targets both states concerns their previous military cooperation with NATO. Since the 1990s, both countries have engaged in a process of modernization and transformation of security policies and defense structures, making military cooperation with the United States (at a bilateral level) and NATO (at a multilateral level) more accessible. Despite the official policy of military non-alignment, collaboration with NATO has progressively increased since the end of the Cold War for both Finland and Sweden. Both countries have been members of the Partnership for Peace since its launch in 1994. They have participated in peacekeeping missions conducted by NATO in the Balkans and Afghanistan. For example, Finland assumed the role of a lead nation in the KFOR mission in Kosovo, the highest role granted to a non-member country. Similarly, Sweden was the only European non-NATO country to lead a Provincial Reconstruction Team within the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), established after the American invasion in 2001 and maintained until 2014, which later transformed into the Resolute Support Mission (RSM). Sweden was involved from the beginning until the end of May 2021 when the last Swedish troops left Afghanistan.[19]

Furthermore, among various individual cooperation initiatives, Finland and Sweden in 1995 joined the Partnership for Peace Planning and Review Process (PARP), a program through which NATO identifies the military capability standards of the Alliance and shares them with partners within the Partnership for Peace. PARP has served as a forum where NATO and the two

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[18] A Gallup poll released in the Summer of 2022 confirmed that 81% of Finns and 74% of Swedes approve of the alliance's leadership, while their approval of Russian leadership dipped to a miserly 6% in Finland and 2% in Sweden in Voa news, *Finns, Swedes Overwhelmingly Back NATO, Poll Shows,* in https://www.voanews.com/a/finns-swedes-overwhelmingly-back-nato-poll-shows-/6751376.html Petra Karlsen Stangvik, *Sweden's road to NATO. A case study of systemic, regional, and domestic drivers of Sweden's NATO bid,* University of Oslo, 2023.

[19] Juha Pyykönen, *Nordic Partners of NATO How similar are Finland and Sweden within NATO cooperation?*, p. 49, https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/report48_finland_sweden_nato.pdf

countries have shared common planning models, developed similar military structures, and facilitated socialization and familiarization between officers and institutions in NATO's defense sector and partner countries, establishing common operational standards. These two common elements discussed - the similar transformation path in the defense sector and the history of neutrality - have contributed to solidifying the perspective of a joint accession to NATO.[20]

The joint accession of the two states is currently considered the best solution as it enjoys the highest popularity among both nations, as indicated by opinion polls. Finnish authorities have hinted that accepting only Sweden into the Alliance would turn Finland into the sole buffer state between NATO and the Russian Federation, with associated risks. Similarly, Sweden explains that if Finland alone joins NATO would create a situation of territorial discontinuity among NATO members, leading to unnatural isolation of Sweden (as well as difficulties in communication channels, supply lines between member countries, etc.). For these reasons, Finland and Sweden, despite not being NATO members, have been defined throughout the Alliance's history as "virtual allies."[21]

Upon a swift examination of security agreements, treaties, and guarantees, it appears that while Finland and Sweden possess certain differences, these variances do not appear to exert a notable influence on the accession dossier. Firstly, coming from a long tradition of neutrality, both countries feared Russia's reactions to the decision to join NATO, but Finland's fears were greater than those of Sweden. Swedish neutrality and non-alignment were determined by political considerations, unlike Finland, where they resulted from geopolitical necessity.

Finland

Finland has a border of over 1,300 km with Russia, and a significant part of Finnish trade was with Russia until the implementation of European sanctions.

[20] Tuomas Forsberg and Tapani Vaahtoranta, *op.cit*, p. 16.
[21] Eric Adamson, Minna Ålander, *What would happen if Sweden and Finland split up their NATO bids?*, in "Atlantic Council", February 7, 2023 in https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-would-happen-if-sweden-and-finland-split-up-their-nato-bids/

In February 2022, Finland, like many other EU countries, was highly dependent on Russian energy, Russian gas supplied represented approximately 6% of the country's energy consumption until the cessation of supplies by Gazprom.[22]

The historical memory reminds the drama of the Soviet invasion in 1939-40, making Finland more exposed to potential countermeasures Moscow might take in response to its NATO accession compared to Sweden. Sweden does not share a territorial border with Russia, has a smaller economic-commercial exposure, an extraordinarily long history of peace and neutrality (the collective perception sees Russian aggression as much more improbable), and geopolitically, it is less exposed (Sweden's major concern in a confrontation with Russia is the possibility of an attack on the island of Gotland in the Kaliningrad enclave, which would give Russia an advantage in controlling the Baltic Sea).

Secondly, Finnish military preparedness and its military capability surpass those of Sweden. Finland has never abandoned compulsory conscription (18-year-old males with a military service period of 6-12 months) and has continued to invest heavily and efficiently in its defense capabilities. Moreover, Finland has effectively modernized its armed forces in the last two decades, relying on top-notch technologically advanced military capabilities and making significant investments in new military equipment (in December 2021, Finland purchased 64 F-35 Lightning II fighter jets from the United States). This is, if you will, the strong point of Finland's entry into NATO: the military sector it brings to the Alliance represents a notable contribution. Finland's membership is perceived even by NATO as particularly attractive since the country is undoubtedly classified more as a security provider than a security consumer. The military budget amounts to $5.8 billion, which is 2.15% of the GDP, thus meeting NATO's objective for member states to allocate at least 2% for defense. With a population of 5.5 million, Finland has military personnel of 280,000 and 870,000 trained

[22] Veli-Pekka Tynkkynen, *The Finnish "Ruxit"* in "Debt Management Annual Review 2022" *https://www.treasuryfinland.fi/annualreview2022/the-finnish-ruxit-decoupling-from-russian-energy-speeds-up-energy-transition/*

reservists (the high number is explained by the inclusion of individuals with military training up to the age of 60).[23]

While Sweden has reformed and modernized its defense sector, it has a lower military potential compared to Finland, although it should be noted that Sweden possesses a high-tech arms industry. In line with a longer tradition of neutrality, an anti-war culture, and a less acute perception of threats from Russia to its national security, Sweden has invested proportionally less in the military than Finland. Specifically, it allocates 1.1% of its GDP to defense, with a military budget of around $7.2 billion. Sweden has a military force of approximately 60,000 soldiers (half of whom are in reserve) - a number that, according to recent government statements, is expected to increase to 90,000 by 2025. The Swedish army relies on voluntary military service for individuals between 18-47 years old, with a military service period lasting 11 months. In an exceptional case, it may have a potentially larger human military capacity compared to Finland, even though with a lower level of training.[24]

On the other hand, Sweden provides the NATO alliance with a significant contribution in terms of high-tech military industry. Despite the small size of its armed forces, Sweden has advanced military capabilities supported by a globally recognized national arms industry. Examples include the Gripen fighter jets, submarines, and infantry fighting vehicles (CV90, considered one of the best in the world). Additionally, the Swedish government has acquired robust military capabilities through the purchase of sophisticated equipment such as

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[23] HELJÄ OSSA AND TOMMI KOIVULA, *WHAT WOULD FINLAND BRING TO THE TABLE FOR NATO?* 9 May 2022, in https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/what-would-finland-bring-to-the-table-for-nato/; High North News, *Finland is Ready to Fight Russia if Attacked, Says Defense Chief* 23 June 2022 in https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/finland-ready-fight-russia-if-attacked-says-defense-chief; Essi Lehto and Mike Stone, *Finland orders 64 Lockheed F-35 fighter jets for $9.4 bln, 10 December 2021* in Reuters,https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/lockheed-f-35-jet-wins-finnish-fighter-competition-source-2021-12-10/

[24] Mina Ålander, Michael Paul, *Moscow Threatens the Balance in the High North In Light of Russia's War in Ukraine, Finland and Sweden Are Moving Closer to NATO,* in "Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik" 31.03. 2022, doi:10.18449/2022C24, https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C24/

German-made Leopard tanks and the recently acquired Patriot anti-aircraft defense system.[25]

It should be noted that Sweden has consistently increased its defense budget, with the pace accelerating significantly in 2020 when the Parliament approved a 40% increase. The budget is thus scheduled to grow from the current $7.2 billion to $11 billion by 2025, marking the largest increase in the past 70 years.[26] Although allocating less than the NATO target of 2%, the center-left government has recently announced its intention to immediately increase defense spending by $318 million to reach the 2% goal earlier than 2028.[27]

Sweden and Finland took separate paths during the NATO Unified Protector mission in Libya in 2011. While Sweden, as the only European non-NATO member, primarily fulfilled surveillance tasks and a no-fly zone with a group of JAS-39 Gripen fighter planes, Finland, mainly for internal reasons, chose to stay away from the conflict despite enhancing its air capabilities precisely for such missions. The strongest opposition came from the country's president at the time, who effectively blocked Finnish participation in that mission.[28]

Ultimately, the two countries differ in their political will. Before the war in Ukraine, the issue of Sweden joining NATO would have faced not only political opposition but also opposition from public opinion. The speed with which Sweden's NATO membership request materialized surprised many NATO allies. In the country, NATO membership has never enjoyed a majority popular consensus, and even the main political parties (except for the small Liberal Party)

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[25] Robin Forsberg, Aku-M. Kähkönen & Janna Öberg, *Implications of a Finnish and Swedish NATO Membership for Security in the Baltic Sea Region,* in Wilson Center, June 29, 2022, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/implications-finnish-and-swedish-nato-membership-security-baltic-sea-region

[26] Aljazeera, *Sweden's gov't proposes a 40% increase in defence spending,* 15 October 2020 in https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/10/15/swedens-govt-proposes-a-40-increase-in-defense-spending

[27] Johan Ahlander, *Sweden plans to up defence budget to 2% of GDP as Russia threat looms,* in *"Reuters"*, 10 March 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/sweden-finland-further-strengthen-security-cooperation-2022-03-05/

[28] Fredrik Doeser, *Finland, Sweden and Operation Unified Protector: The impact of strategic culture,* in "Comparative Strategy", 35:4, pp. 284-297, DOI: 10.1080/01495933.2016.1222842

have never considered NATO membership a short-term priority. Even when Sweden participated in NATO missions, it emphasized the UN mandate (in Afghanistan and the Balkans), framing its military engagement more as a contribution to the collective intervention of the international community than as participation in NATO missions. Generally, Sweden has often preferred a political orientation that does not jeopardize neutrality and avoids involving the country in conflicts provoked by others, where national security is at stake. NATO and cooperation with the United States have been predominantly interpreted in this light.[29]

Unlike Sweden, Finland's approach to NATO has been more robust. The internal debate has focused on the formal integration into the alliance, not on whether the country needs to establish active military cooperation with NATO, which has never been questioned. Furthermore, Finland, unlike Sweden, has been concerned with substantially investing in its defense policy. Therefore, NATO membership seems more like a consolidation of its defense policy rather than a political association where national interests might be absorbed by NATO imperatives.[30] Finland and Sweden have acted in concert so far, but if Sweden's candidacy is delayed due to Turkey, as it seems, Finland would have the opportunity to continue the accession process on its own. Currently, except for some speculations proposed by some analysts, there has been no concrete discussion about decoupling the two accession applications. Many experts consider it a "failure" if Finland proceeds without Sweden in the NATO accession process. However, there are also public voices stating that Finnish national security, currently threatened by Russia, should become a priority, and Finland should quickly enter under the security umbrella of the North Atlantic Alliance.

Conclusions

Today, NATO is recognized as the most powerful multilateral security organization in the international system (deterrence). This status is also

[29]Richard Milne, *Unlike Finland, Sweden inches reluctantly towards NATO* in "Financial Times"25 April 2022, https://www.ft.com/content/992c18d8-ab1e-4ef1-bd87-89527374f38b
[30] Ibidem.

attributed to its ability to attract new members. This aspect is essential for an alliance because NATO (like all alliances in history) is based on a promise of future military assistance, and therefore, its credibility is a crucial ingredient for its attracting power. Attracting new members to the alliance, especially if they have traditionally been reluctant to join any military groups, is precisely due to confidence in the collective defense that NATO still guarantees. However, NATO's enlargement rounds after the end of the Cold War have not been without criticism. The potential accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, after decades of non-alignment status, if it were to occur, cannot escape attention regarding issues highlighted after 1999 and the emergence of completely new ones. The first issue, highlighted by a series of commentators and international affairs experts since the 1990s, pertains to the effectiveness of the alliance's decision-making process and the internal tension between cohesion and the "open-door policy."

On one hand, the admission of new members confirms the alliance's well-being and expands its resources and geopolitical horizon. On the other hand, it increases the level of heterogeneity, which complicates decision-making processes and raises the risk of strategic inconsistency. This tension is reflected between Article 5 of the Atlantic Pact (which guarantees the unity of collective security among allies) and Article 10 (which establishes the "open-door policy"). This dilemma manifested within the Alliance during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where divisions between the "old Europe" (the established member countries) and the "new Europe" (the new members from Eastern Europe) created internal tensions and misunderstandings regarding NATO's objectives and operational horizon. Therefore, the accession of Finland and Sweden to a military alliance where decisions continue to be made by unanimity could involve different sensitivities and potentially further complicate decision-making processes.

In comparison with candidate states from previous accession processes, the rapid pace of this enlargement reflects the urgency of adapting to the shifting security landscape, particularly in response to the heightened threat posed by Russia. This current accession process will swiftly integrate only two states, both of which boast superior military preparedness compared to NATO’s candidates from previous accession rounds.