



Putin's Worst Nightmare: Finland and Sweden joining NATO and its implications for other aspirant countries

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Despite popular arguments based on the idea of great power politics (Kissinger 2014, Mersheimer 2014, Walt 2022) and the Russian leadership's wishful thinking, military intervention in Ukraine has actually strengthened the transatlantic bond. The so-called collective West is more united than ever before in its support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. One of the most unexpected developments for policymakers in the Kremlin is that not only NATO member countries are willing to spend considerably more on their defense and are reconsidering their security priorities (Howard 2022), but also the alliance is enlarging to the East. Finland and Sweden have officially submitted membership applications to the Secretary-General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and are expected to join as soon as possible (Reuters 2022b). This memo will examine the change of the security paradigm that was established in the region following World War II. It will also discuss regional security architecture and the possible implications of Finland's and Sweden's NATO membership for other aspirant countries, including Georgia, which has been in line to join the alliance for more than decade.

Change of the security paradigm in the Baltics and Scandinavia

It is very likely that, after Turkey's concerns are addressed, NATO will officially invite Finland and Sweden to join the alliance during the Madrid summit at the end of June. This

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will have paramount implications for regional security. In the words of the former head of the Finnish military intelligence, Major general (ret.) Pekka Toveri, after Finland and Sweden join the alliance, the Baltic Sea could become a “NATO lake.” The Russian Baltic coast will be 99% surrounded by NATO member countries making it almost impossible for the Kremlin to use the sea freely for military maneuvers (Tavberidze 2022). Therefore, it is not surprising that the Russian Federation considers NATO enlargement in the Nordic region a threat to its national security (Trevelyan 2022) and is willing to use natural gas export to Finland as leverage or a deterrent.²

Nonetheless, the threats from the Kremlin have not deterred Finland or Sweden from pursuing NATO membership. In the words of the Finnish president, it was the Russian invasion of Ukraine that changed the picture and Russia “has caused this”, *i.e.*, change to the decades-old security arrangements in the wider region (Sky News 2022). To be more exact, the Kremlin’s aggressive foreign policy over the last few years is responsible for undermining the Finnish model of security by drastically increasing Finns’ perception of the Russian threat and pushing them toward NATO (Warsaw Institute 2018). This means the reversal of the security paradigm that has been in place since the late 1940s and has guaranteed Finland’s independence in exchange for neutrality and territorial concessions with the USSR (Korpela 2008, Juntunen 2017). According to opinion polls, it is the first time that the majority of Finns and Swedes support joining the alliance (Joffre 2022, Aljazeera 2022). Considering the level of these countries’ integration with Western institutions and their close partnership with NATO, as long as the concerns of Turkey are at least partially met, the accession process for Helsinki and Stockholm will be smooth and quick, thus, probably the region will see a major geopolitical shift in a couple of months.

Security during the interim period and other challenges on the way

Despite Swedish and Finnish readiness and the overall consensus among the majority of NATO members about the enlargement, there are still some challenges that might make this process a bit bumpy. Firstly, there is a Turkey, which has blocked talks on Finland’s and Sweden’s NATO application (Kaplan 2022). The main concern for official Ankara is that these two Nordic countries shelter Kurds (*ibid*). Additionally, President Erdogan opposes their membership on the grounds that both Sweden and Finland imposed sanctions on

² A few days after Helsinki declared its wish to join NATO, the Russian Federation announced it was halting the supply of its natural gas to Finland (NPR 2022).

Turkey after its operations in Syria (Samkharadze 2022). Considering that Scandinavian countries have a long tradition of providing a safe haven for people fleeing oppression in their native lands, it is unlikely that either Stockholm or Helsinki will compromise on these fundamental principles of their humanitarian policies. Therefore, it is more likely that President Erdogan is going to negotiate a deal with the United States in exchange for its support for NATO enlargement to Scandinavia.

Another possible major challenge could be the Russian reaction to the process. The Kremlin has made it clear that it perceives Finland joining NATO as a threat (Chernova 2022). And considering that the process of integration will take at least several months, it is critical that policymakers in Helsinki and Stockholm find a viable security guarantee in the interim period. The United Kingdom has already struck a security pact with both countries and, in case of the Russian attack, London will provide assistance. The agreement also includes cooperation sharing intelligence and increased British military deployment in the region (Kaplan 2022b). The United States of America also have signaled that Scandinavian countries have “full, total, complete backing” from their side (CBS News 2022). In other words, as Finland and Sweden are still vulnerable to the Kremlin’s provocations due to their bids for NATO membership, the next couple of months are going to be a test for the alliance on how far it is willing to go to challenge the Russian Federation.

Implications for other aspirant countries

Two Nordic countries joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization will have major implications for other NATO aspirant countries.³ The inclusion of states that have been neutral for decades and are in close proximity of Russia suggests that almost a century of geopolitical realities are changing and the West is taking bolder actions. The alliance is ready to act more decisively to contain President Putin’s aggressive foreign policy and revive itself from its previous state, which President Macron in 2019 called “experiencing brain death” (BBC 2019). The resurrection of NATO’s potential and its increased presence on the European continent creates a window of opportunity for countries like Georgia, whose progress towards membership has been halted (Kakachia et al. 2020). It creates an important precedent that NATO is ready for the challenge and willing to confront the Kremlin, and

³ Countries that have declared their aspiration to join the alliance. Currently that includes Ukraine, Georgia and Bosnia Herzegovina.

undermines the argument (Mersheimer 2014, Walt 2022) that has been often used against Georgia or Ukraine joining the alliance.

Another important implication of this round of the enlargement will be the surge in pro-NATO sentiments among aspirant countries and beyond.⁴ If neutral states like Sweden or Finland are not able to guarantee their security and alleviate threats coming from Russia, small and economically less well-off states have no other viable option. A defense pact with the allies, which both Stockholm and Helsinki were able to secure, could be an option for Georgia, which is still waiting for its Membership Action Plan (MAP) and is vulnerable to renewed Russian aggression. However, Georgia is in a more difficult position than the Nordic countries and it might be challenging for Tbilisi to achieve the same deal with its Western partners. This is mostly due to the occupied territories, which remain an important form of leverage in hands of the Kremlin. One possible way to alleviate this challenge would be what former NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has called the German model for Georgia, a reference to how West Germany joined the alliance in 1955 with the precondition that NATO's 5th article⁵ would not apply to East Germany. Likewise, Georgia could join NATO with precondition that the collective self-defense clause does not cover Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region (Jamnews 2019). Yet, considering how sensitive this question is for the Georgian public, that won't be an easy task.

The significant military capabilities of the Nordic countries should also be mentioned when discussing Georgia. Finland has been long preparing for a possible Russian invasion. The country has stockpiled fuel, grains and medical supplies. All buildings are equipped with bomb shelters and underground parking spaces and swimming pools are ready to be converted into evacuation centers (Milne 2022). Similarly, Sweden has been preparing for a potential military conflict with Russia since the late 2010s. It has re-established military call-ups and is planning to increase the number of soldiers for the first time since 1970s (Warsaw Institute 2019). Along with economic development and the size of military spending,⁶ this suggests that Stockholm and Helsinki have the potential to become not only security consumers but also security providers. Unfortunately, Georgia lacks similar capabilities. Despite all the challenges and difficulties involved, Georgia needs to work in this direction

⁴ For instance, as neutral Moldova is facing a threat of Russian invasion, the UK Foreign Secretary has already suggested to equip it to NATO standards and the US is also willing to help more to modernize Moldovan army (Wesolowsky 2022).

⁵ An attack on one member is an attack on all the NATO members.

⁶ According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Sweden's military spending is around 7,2 billion US Dollar annually, Finland's - 5,8, while Georgia's annual military budget is around 300 million US Dollar. Detailed statistics can be found on the following link <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>

and closely engage with the United States, the Visegrad Four and the Baltic states in order to lobby this issue. Georgia's existing ties with NATO and potential EU membership candidate status could provide a provisional security guarantee in the interim period.

Conclusion

In the next few months both countries will officially join NATO, putting an end to the regional security paradigms in place since the late 1940s. These developments could be, without a doubt, viewed as President Putin's worst geopolitical nightmare: instead of pushing NATO back to its 1990s position, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is going to emerge much stronger and closer to the Russian border.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has revived the vital role NATO always had in the region—a security actor. It also challenged the assumption that the alliance is experiencing “brain death.” The enlargement to Scandinavia and turning the Baltic Sea into a “NATO lake” is pretty much already decided. These developments create an important precedent for other aspirant countries. More specifically, it illustrates that despite Russian threats, the alliance is willing to increase its engagement and even provide security during the interim period. Hence, it creates a precedent which Georgia could aspire to, if officials in Tbilisi are willing to do all the hard work it takes on the diplomatic and political fronts. NATO enlargement despite Russian threat refutes, at least to a certain extent, the long-standing skepticism that the potential reaction from the Kremlin was stopping the alliance from offering Georgia MAP.

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