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**Finland and Sweden on their way to NATO, Turkey willing**

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On 18 May 2022 Sweden and Finland formally applied to join the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance. These were historic decisions by both countries on their quite different national paths to actual NATO membership. This in Sweden’s case after over two centuries of non-alignment and for Finland with a final turn-around against Russia after years of co-habitation with its large neighbour. Both applicants were warmly welcomed by many NATO members, from President Biden to the Baltic states. However, Turkey which at first also blessed this NATO expansion, has raised objections, which are presently being negotiated and may for a time delay consensus approval of the two applications.

Sweden and Finland have a long common background from the 13th century, with Finland geo-strategically being dominated first by Sweden for some 700 years, then by the Russian Empire and its succession states. While Sweden came out of WWII largely unscathed and with an intact national defence, Finland had fought three wars to remain relatively independent, but with a fragile relationship with the Soviet Union. Finnish leaders handled this tactically well, but it meant that Helsinki remained non-aligned. During the late 1940s Denmark, Norway and Sweden together worked on a Nordic defence association which, however, was abandoned when Denmark and Norway, both occupied by Germany during the world, instead decided to join NATO from its inception in 1949. Sweden did not join them in this, partially because this may have triggered Moscow to more firmly push Finland into its sphere of influence.

However, while Helsinki for decades had to adopt and live within the constraints of a more careful foreign and security policy, Sweden from that time and on developed a close de facto working relationship with NATO. This was for decades primarily done via Copenhagen and Oslo, while Stockholm kept Helsinki informed and vice versa. In all, this served both Finland and Sweden quite well for decades. Nationally it meant that most Swedes and Finns until the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022 lived comfortably with their respective non-aligned status. This even if formal “neutrality in war” was abandoned when they both became EU members in 1995.
Militarily Sweden had come out of WWII quite well off and with a relatively strong army and navy, plus the world’s fourth largest air force. The gun manufacturer Bofors, SAAB\(^1\), Ericsson and other companies formed the basis of Sweden’s present day hi-tech arms export industry of everything from jet fighters, submarines, armoured combat vehicles (ACVs) and Next generation Light Anti-tank Weapons\(^2\). Finland has also built armoured military vehicles, often used in UN peace-keeping operations, as well as other defence materiel. Today Finland, among other strengths, has considerable hi-tech anti cyber capability.

The fundamental difference between the defence sectors of the two countries is that successive Swedish governments after the end of the Cold War naively disassembled most of its quite impressive civil defence structures, as well as terminated military conscription and dissolved most if its land combat units. Peace was perceived to have arrived at last. However, this while keeping its relatively sharp air force and navy at least partially intact. One example is that the highly strategic and militarised island of Gotland\(^3\) had its regiment, marine base and coastal defences largely closed down. As a result of its national defence decisions in 1999-2001 and in 2004 “all serious military planning for crises and war was basically abandoned”\(^4\). While in 1975 Sweden had 30 army brigades and in the 1980’s still could raise 23 brigades, these were subsequently quite recklessly done away with – and this including by a Conservative led non-socialist coalition government primarily focused on solidifying the Swedish economy. However, then foreign minister Carl Bildt ensured Swedish military participation in NATO-led discretionary operations in Afghanistan, in the skies over Libya, and also in Mali.

Finland, based on its national experience, never disarmed itself in this way. Instead, it gradually built up probably the world’s most modern civil defence and military structure for a nation of its size. This resilient structure is based on a concept of “comprehensive defence”, whereby the whole society can be mobilised at short notice in times of threats, or crisis. From, for example, buying East German artillery at the time of German unification it has continued to train and supply its defence establishment with modern equipment. Today it flies US F-18 Hornets, but has ordered 64 F-35 II Lighting multi-purpose fighter aircrafts to be delivered from the US by 2025. The Finnish standing army, while quite modest in term of regular forces can quickly mobilise 280,000 troops, with a total trained reserve of 870,000 men and women. The Finnish defence establishment cooperates closely with the country’s modern business sector and holds regular workshops and training events for executives and state sector officials, many of whom also are reservists, or part of a military volunteer force.

Sweden has since the Russian attack on Georgia 2008 and more so since 2014 played defence catch-up. In two separate all-party strategic defence reviews it was recommended to rebuild primarily the army, but also remilitarise Gotland, procure substantively more materiel and increase its now low effective defence spending at around 1.3% of GDP to the NATO standard of 2%. These rearmament proposals now include a new core army of three brigades, plus other reconfigured battle groups; as well as the reintroduction of conscription and the beefing up

\(^1\) Originally an aircraft company.

\(^2\) “LNAW” are hand-held weapons designed by SAAB Bofors Dynamic and produced with BAE systems, including in Northern Ireland. Ten thousand of these were this year donated to the Ukraine, where they have proved effective.

\(^3\) Often called “the world’s largest aircraft carrier”.

\(^4\) A quote from one of the quite scathing parliamentary defence reviews.
territorial and Home Guard units throughout Sweden\textsuperscript{5}. Sweden’s existing Patriot anti-aircraft missile systems are to be increased, new submarines will be added and the air force is soon to be upgraded by 60 new generation Swedish JAS 39 fighter planes.

While Swedish political parties debated these security reforms for a couple of years things definitely took on a sense of urgency from 24 February this year with Russia’s renewed attack on Ukraine. In mid-March all eight Swedish Riksdag parties\textsuperscript{6} agreed to raise defence spending as soon as possible to 2\% of GDP and also to accelerate the refurbishment throughout the Swedish Armed Forces. The politically broad agreement also gives room for more substantial defence spending over and above 2\% of GDP for urgent materiel in the near future. Voluntary Home Guard recruitment has grown substantially and for the first time in decades a large majority of Swedes are re-engaging in national defence.

The quick progress since February to Finland’s and Sweden’s coordinated NATO applications were helped by the constructive interaction of the two Social Democratic Party Prime Ministers, who worked closely to ensure majority political support for NATO in their respective parliaments. The advantage of guaranteed military assistance under the Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty was disseminated widely and taken to heart. Finnish President Sauli Niinistö played a key leading and widely appreciated role to ensure that both applications were ready within just two months\textsuperscript{7}.

With Finland and Sweden as full NATO members the Nordic defence systems can be integrated and would positively benefit from continuous joint defence planning. There will inevitably be some re-orientation from planning for national defence with partners to an element of a fully integrated Alliance political and command structure. This is broadly welcomed by both Finnish and Swedish military commanders.

By 2025 or so when Denmark, Finland and Norway all are upgrading their air forces with J 35 II Lightnings and Sweden also is modernising its air force, NATO would have over 200 co-ordinated fighter aircrafts in the Baltic area and in the southern Arctic region. More Swedish and Norwegian submarines and other naval units, plus a strengthened NATO presence on Gotland would make the Baltic Sea almost a joint NATO area\textsuperscript{8}, benefitting also the Baltic states and Poland.

It would also bring hitherto missing considerable strategic NATO depth to the region. Integrated command structures and sharing of assets would step by step cover the existing military weaknesses in the Northern Baltic area, as well as along NATO’s future and much longer border with a weakened Russian Federation.

\textsuperscript{5} Volunteers of both sexes presently sign up for the armed forces and territorial units as never before.

\textsuperscript{6} Including the Green Party and the Left (former Communist) Party.

\textsuperscript{7} Sauli Niinistö has for a long timed known Vladimir Putin personally and kept in regular contact with him.

\textsuperscript{8} Nato would control 95\% of the Baltic Sea coast, with the exception of the St. Petersburg area and the Russian militarised exclave Kaliningrad.

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