



**Putin's Folly: Anti-NATO Rhetoric Results in Expansion
The Russian Implications of Finland and Sweden Joining NATO**

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JCSP 49 DL

Exercise Solo Flight

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Introduction

Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014 was a test to NATO and the West which resulted in an underwhelming global response that largely rewarded Putin internally. Emboldened, Putin chose to press his luck again in 2022 when he invaded Ukraine hoping for similar results under the guise of a false flag operation. Putin's propaganda included his displeasure that Ukraine was seeking NATO membership. Ultimately his second gamble backfired and triggered Finland and Sweden to join NATO out of fear for Russian expansionism and regional influence.

Economically, and politically Sweden and Finland are insignificant to Russia and will only have minor impacts as singular countries. However, as a whole, NATO and the European Union have only strengthened their solidarity and amplified their influence. Russia now must spread its border forces along a much longer NATO frontier, transit NATO encircled waters to the Atlantic. This paper will discuss the strategic challenges, that may or may not be felt by Russia, as a consequence of Sweden and Finland becoming NATO member states.

Why so late to NATO? A History of Neutrality

To appreciate the impact that Finland and Sweden joining NATO will have on Russia, it is important to understand why they had waited so long to join in the first place. Based on events during the second world war, each had strategically chosen neutrality. Sandwiched between Soviet states and the Western alliance, not taking sides afforded them the ability to maintain somewhat neighborly relationships with both sides. Being geopolitically passive, they avoided direct confrontations that could threaten their sovereignty and security. During the Cold War when tensions were high, neutrality continued to make sense even though democratic Finland and Sweden were highly aligned with Western values. Essentially, they were appeasing the Soviets by being geographic buffers with NATO.

After the collapse of the USSR, there was a long period of uncertainty in Eastern Europe as former states broke away, the arms race rapidly declined, and security strategies were revisited. Former Soviet and Warsaw Pact countries embraced western democracy and joined NATO, expanding its frontier eastward. Russia viewed this expansion as a threat to its security and interests. The Kremlin took measures to prevent the continued erosion of their former sphere of influence and installed puppet governments in former breakaway states, often with bloodshed when met with resistance.¹

Russia's meddling and expansionist aspirations have long been visible through disruptions such as Ukraine's Orange Revolution and skirmishes in Georgia, Kazakhstan and Moldova. Ukraine's first public declaration that it would like to join NATO was in 2002 and was seeking an entry

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Marat, Erica. 2022. "Former Soviet States Are Distancing Themselves From Their Old Imperial Master." *ForeignPolicy.com*. May 10. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/10/soviet-imperialism-colonialism-ukraine-kazakhstan-georgia-moldova/>.

plan.² In Ukrainian politics, depending if a Russian backed President was in power or not, these NATO aspirations were on again off again. By 2008, NATO was expressing support for Georgia and Ukraine to join. Putin continued to voice that any NATO expansion was an existential threat to Russia and would be met with consequences. Foreshadowing for what was to come.

Neutrality Re-Considered

In the mid-1990's, Sweden didn't apply for membership, but it did become a NATO partner. This marked their departure from neutrality and saw them participate in NATO peacekeeping and training operations with other NATO nations.³

From 2004 forward, Finland's government adopted a 'NATO option policy' which stated that they would seek membership if geopolitical conditions justified that it was in the countries best interests. For Finland, this marked their willingness to depart from neutrality.⁴

For Finland, a loss of territory to a border neighbour, especially Russia hit home. The Russo-Finish war on 1939 saw the Soviets invade Finland on a false flag operation with the narrative that it was to prevent Nazi's on their border. Finland ultimately ceded 11% of its territory, built a great distrust for Russian expansionism, and triggered their original neutrality declaration.⁵

The Tipping Point

By the second decade of the new millennium, both Finland and Sweden had long been open to joining NATO and were increasingly finding it difficult to justify neutrality. Both countries had strengthened their cooperation with NATO and had become interoperable through their participation in many joint military exercises. An application for membership in NATO at this time would still have widespread consequences for regional stability and require a drastic shift in security posture.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 was an eye-opening turning point for Sweden and Finland. Although the Western world sharply condemned Russia's invasion, no physical intervention came to Ukraine's rescue as they were not an existing NATO member. Putin was largely rewarded for his behaviour with only insignificant consequences.

² McCarthy, Bill. 2022. "Ask PolitiFact: What's Ukraine's history of trying to join NATO?" *POLITIFACT The Poynter Institute*. April 14. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://www.politifact.com/article/2022/apr/14/ask-politifact-whats-ukraines-history-trying-join/>.

³ Billstrom, Tobias. 2024. "Why Sweden joined NATO - a paradigm shift in Sweden's foreign and security policy." *Government Offices of Sweden*. April 17. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://www.government.se/speeches/2024/04/why-sweden-joined-nato---a-paradigm-shift-in-swedens-foreign-and-security-policy/#:~:text=Sweden%20and%20Finland%20will%20allow,out%20operations%20in%20Northern%20Europe.>

⁴ Vanhanen, Henri. 2022. "Finland and NATO: When Push Came to Shove." *The Royal United Services Institute for Defense and Security Studies*. May 24. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/finland-and-nato-when-push-came-shove>.

⁵ Imperial War Museums. n.d. "A Short History Of The 'Winter War'." *IWM*. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/a-short-history-of-the-winter-war>.

Finland and Sweden were reaching a breaking point sitting on the sidelines of NATO. Each then reversed their Cold War military spending cuts and made efforts to expand their capabilities. Finland already had conscription in place, but Sweden reactivated theirs by 2018.

In February of 2022, Putin emboldened by his victory in Crimea, pressed his luck again and launched a false flag invasion of Ukraine again. This time his narrative included “De-Nazification”, to protect Russian interests, and to prevent Ukraine from posing a major security threat to Russia by joining NATO. Almost immediately, 10% of Ukraine was occupied by Russian forces, eerily similar to the Russo-Finnish War.⁶

Three months later in May of 2022, Finland and Sweden publicly made a joint application for NATO membership.⁷ Although with some initial challenges by outer member states, Finland was accepted as a member in April 2023 followed by Sweden in March 2024.

What strategically impacts Russia?

The prospect of Finland and Sweden joining NATO must have been met with alarm in Moscow. The very excuse put forward by Putin to invade Ukraine, to prevent NATO expansion, had resulted in the addition of two more countries. This would have been an immediate propaganda challenge internally to keep the Russian public suppressed and not protesting their dead soldiers over a failed plan. Putin’s credibility within the Kremlin certainly would have been damaged.

Even more alarming for Moscow would have been the loss of their neutral buffer on the western flank which is now had 1,340 km of direct additional NATO border. No longer a neutral country border, it would now require more protection and additional military personnel in proximity for reinforcement. With high attrition rates in the Ukraine war, Russian now has to dilute its available troops further and mobilize more to protect this new NATO frontier. Having NATO troops amassing in Finland for exercises, opening new military bases (potentially US), and the reduced flight time of closer missile batteries must certainly create immense fear in the Kremlin. As Russia has proven to stage training events near borders prior to invasions, they must also believe that their NATO adversaries could mimic such a manoeuvre on them.

Russia has resorted to hybrid warfare with Finland in response to their NATO admission and weaponized migration. Directing well over a thousand asylum seekers to overwhelm the Finnish border crossing points, Russia attempted to create an economic burden and disruption for their society. In response, Finland has been forced to close crossing points and block asylum seekers that enter through Russia.⁸

Finland as a neutral buffer state had always been a popular destination for Russians as it was one of the few Western democratic countries that historically did not require difficult visas for

⁶ Chatterjee, Phelan. 2023. "How Sweden and Finland went from neutral to Nato." *BBC*. July 11. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61397478>.

⁷ NATO. 2022. "Finland and Sweden submit application to join NATO." *NORTH ATALANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION*. May 18. Accessed May 20, 2024. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_195468.htm.

⁸ Lehto, Essi. 2024. "Finland extends Russia border closure indefinitely." *Reuters*. April 4. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/finland-extends-russia-border-closing-indefinitely-2024-04-04/>.

Russians.⁹ Even when visa's became more restrictive prior to Finland's NATO membership, it remained a favourite entry point for Russian's into the EU and an escape route for men evading mobilization. Losing this accessible taste of the Western world did little for the morale of the Russian people.¹⁰

Accession to NATO has also meant that Russia's sphere of influence has been reduced. First its ability to make provocations in Northern Europe now risks a NATO Article 5 response. This could rapidly escalate any country-to-country disagreements to include the entire alliance. Secondly, enforcement of sanctions for NATO member states leave no room for flexibility or negotiation. Although Finland and Sweden have always enforced sanctions, any opportunity for Russia to push these limits has now vanished. Hence economically and geopolitically, Russia has lost some of its leverage with Finland and Sweden.

Solidarity wise, NATO, the EU and the northern European states have become more unified and cohesive. Not only is this been a boost to morale, but it has a force multiplying effect with new resources and personnel. Again, making them less susceptible to Russian influence. The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania who feel under threat of Annexation must also gain some reassurance having additional NATO neighbors in close proximity. From a realist perspective, a larger and more unified NATO should present a significant deterrence for Russian aggression that may naturally instill regional stability.

Geographically, all of Russia's neighbours encircling the Baltic Sea are now NATO members, all whom have felt the negative effects of Russia's influence for decades. Strategically, free transit of the Baltic Sea is critical for Russian trade and for its Naval assets. In a time of conflict, Russia is now much more susceptible to denial of seas in the Baltic as NATO countries Denmark, Germany and Sweden could control the seaway to the Atlantic along with the rest of the NATO alliance. As it stands in peacetime, illegal shipping of Russian sanctioned goods has been challenging by way of the Baltic. Sweden is rapidly building up its forces on Gotland, a large Swedish island centrally located in the Baltic Sea.¹¹ The waters surrounding Gotland Island have been notorious for high amounts of clandestine Russian vessel traffic and even nefarious activities such as the Nord Stream pipeline sabotage. Whether for espionage with military vessels or illicit smuggling with Russia's 1,400 vessel strong shadow fleet equipped with surveillance gear, this is one of NATO's and the EU's hot zones to monitor. Additional enforcement of economic sanctions threatens Russia ability to profit from its natural resources and traffic in weapons.¹² Russia may also feel its ability to protect its sea floor assets such as pipelines and undersea cables has been compromised.

⁹ Reuters. 2022. "Finland limits visas to Russians amid rush of Europe-bound tourists." *Reuters*. August 16. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/finland-will-limit-number-visas-russians-2022-08-16/>.

¹⁰ RAJA Finnish Border Guard. n.d. "Restrictions on the Entry of Russian Citizens." *RAJA Finnish Border Guard*. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://raja.fi/en/entry-restrictions>.

¹¹ Pfitzenmaier, Marc. 2024. "The Swedish Island of Gotland Now Stands Between NATO and Russia." *WorldCrunch*. March 12. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://worldcrunch.com/world-affairs/gotland-russia-sweden-nato>.

¹² Braw, Elisabeth. 2024. "As Russia's shadow fleet menaces Sweden, here's how the EU could help." *POLITICO*. April 30. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://www.politico.eu/article/russias-shadow-fleet-gotland-sweden-nato-eu-sanctions-baltic-sea-action-plan/>

Lastly, similar to the Baltic Sea, every Arctic country except Russia is now a member of NATO. This presents additional threats to their security and sovereignty, particularly when it comes to their ambition to open Arctic trade routes and maintain superiority near their northern naval bases.¹³ Being the single non-NATO Arctic country also has the potential to dilute their voice in polar affairs such as the Arctic Council.

What has not hurt Russia strategically?

Economically, Finland has typically had a trade deficit with Russia (\$3B in 2022). Finland as a customer only represents 1% of all Russian exports, and of that, approximately 45% are energy products.¹⁴ Sweden does much less trade with Russia but has a small surplus (\$300M in 2022). Sweden as a customer only represents 0.1% of all Russian exports, and of that, approximately 57% are energy products.¹⁵ Therefore, a breakdown in trade relations with either country is somewhat financially insignificant for Russia. Energy products from Russia have been a leverage point to Europe and have funded much of Putin's war. As with the rest of Europe, Finland and Sweden are weening their energy dependence on Russia. Due to Europe's deep dependence on Russian energy, there has been much angst and disagreement with EU and other NATO countries about a complete ban. Putin must take great pleasure out of the turmoil and the remaining grip he holds on end users through Russian energy exports. Although many sanctions are in place to stem Russia's lucrative energy exports, countries such as China and India are relishing the cheap energy in vast quantities and providing Russia a constant stream of funding.

Particularly for the Russian people, Finland has been an easily accessible tourism gateway to Europe. A near closing of the border is likely a hardship and morale damaging for Russian travellers. However, for Putin it plugs an escape route for mobilized soldiers and disenchanted Russians. If there is a financial cost to Finland for the drop in Russian tourists, that is merely a bonus for Putin. For the Finns, border security and being wrapped in the NATO blanket are surely compensation enough.

Sweden is a well-known for its defense industry and arms exports. However, Russia is not a customer and therefore has not lost an arms supplier with Finland and Sweden joining NATO.¹⁶ Sweden and Finland reinforcing sanctions could be argued as slowing Russian weapons access but most of Russia's few remaining allies have been willing to sell to them. When it comes to home grown Russian weapons, many of the components are also under sanctions. Finland's main export to Russia had been copper but little other of their exports would impact Russia's access to weapon materials. From Finland and Sweden's perspective, being a member of NATO would open up their access to NATO arms and potential new defense industry customers.

¹³ Wall, Colin & Wegge, Njord. 2023. "The Russian Arctic Threat: Consequences of the Ukraine War." Center for Strategic & International Studies. January 25. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-arctic-threat-consequences-ukraine-war>.

¹⁴ OEC. n.d. "Russia/Finland." *The Observatory of Economic Complexity*. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/rus/partner/fin>.

¹⁵ —. n.d. "Russia/Sweden." *The Observatory of Economic Complexity*. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/rus/partner/swe>.

¹⁶ Statista Research Department. 2024. "Export of arms from Sweden in 2023, by recipient." *Statista*. April 22. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/865459/exports-of-arms-from-sweden-by-country/>.

Any distraction to take attention away from Russian aggression in the media is always welcomed by the Kremlin. Not only does it play into their disinformation campaigns, but it also sows discontent with their enemies. Finland and Sweden's joint announcement to join NATO immediately triggered NATO members Türkiye and Hungary to protest. Each had particular objections based on pre-existing disputes between the countries. It took many months and political energy amongst NATO countries to gain unanimous consensus for the accession. All of this benefitted the Kremlin and was fuel for Russian sympathizers and populist governments looking for media attention.

One of the requirements for NATO membership is the pledge to spend two percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defense. At the time of the membership announcement, Finland was already meeting its spending target and Sweden had pledged to fully meet its by 2026. This also triggered another round of debate and criticism to the many other NATO members, Canada included, that fail to meet this minimum requirement. Again, this created much angst for politicians trying to justify to their voters and other NATO countries why they were worthy contributors along with more spending promises. Russia was loving the distractions and the erosion of NATO cohesion. Meanwhile Russia was spending unprecedented money on its own defence, expecting to exceed 10% GDP.¹⁷ This seemingly was Russia thumbing its nose at the western alliance's 2% GDP rule and at the very sanctions put in place to curb Moscow's economy.

NATO is predominantly led by the US who disproportionately make more financial and military contributions than any other member. US political infighting between parties has also become a welcome distraction for Russia. Similar to the 2% GDP contribution criticism, populist political figures have taken a position that the US should stop funding aid to Ukraine as well as other allies. This rhetoric has slowed funding approval and delayed military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, unintentionally shifting the advantage towards Russia. Ukraine exhausting its arms and mobilized forces, have given up territory and allowed Russia enough time to regroup and strengthen. Populist political rhetoric against Ukraine aid and Pro-Russian sound bites are spreading in many countries, including the US, Slovenia and Hungary.

Conclusion

The NATO accession of Finland and Sweden has resulted in far reaching implications for the regional security and stability of Northern Europe. It has undoubtedly resulted in embarrassment and a loss of credibility for Putin both with the Kremlin and the Russian people. With a vast new NATO border, Russia is challenged to boost their security forces from its already taxed numbers fighting in Ukraine. As individual countries, Sweden and Finland are somewhat insignificant to Russia economically, but as members of NATO they have the potential to close sanction loopholes that will cost Russia.

With the eastern expansion of NATO, Russia is becoming more isolated, and its sphere of influence is diminishing. For fear of triggering an Article 5 response, this may deter aggression and bring stability to the region. As countries adapt to their new security concerns, policy makers

¹⁷ September 7. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/russias-unprecedented-war-budget-explained>.

should assess any potential consequences this new NATO expansion presents. Both Sweden and Finland have fully committed to NATO and are setting a strong example to follow with defense spending and mandatory military service.

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