

Finland and Sweden Walk a Fine Line Between NATO and Russia

Maria Savel



While it is unlikely that Finland or Sweden will join NATO any time soon, closer co-operation may be required in the face of growing Russian aggression.

Leaders from NATO's member states, as well as NATO partner countries, the EU and the UN, will be in Poland next month for the two-day Warsaw Summit, which NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said will be 'a landmark summit for sure.' On the agenda will be strengthening NATO's defence and deterrence capabilities, building partnerships and addressing hybrid threats.

The summit comes amidst rising tensions between NATO and Russia. Earlier this month, NATO launched the largest military exercise in Eastern Europe since the end of the Cold War. Held in Poland, Operation *Anakonda* brought together 31,000 troops from 24 countries over ten days, and followed Operation *Baltic Operations*, a three-week amphibious exercise in the Baltic Sea.

Many observers believe that at the summit NATO will finalise and agree to plans to deploy 5,000 troops to Poland, a move the Polish government has been advocating since January as a show of force against Russia. But it is not only Poland that is worried about Russia. The Nordic countries are also on the frontline of Russia's growing aggression and assertiveness in Europe.

Finland shares over 1,300 km of its border with Russia, and Russian jets reportedly violated Finnish airspace multiple times last year. Russia has also antagonised Sweden through regular airspace violations, and Denmark has intercepted nearly 100 Russian jets in its airspace since 2014. The Russian military has also carried out

two simulated attacks on Bornholm, a Danish island in the Baltic Sea. This Russian antagonism has implications beyond the Nordic countries, to NATO itself, since Iceland, Norway and Denmark are members of the Alliance.

While Sweden and Finland are not NATO members, they both have extensive ties and a long history of co-operation with the Alliance. Sweden first began co-operation with NATO in 1995 during the war in Bosnia. Since then, Stockholm has supported NATO missions in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya, and has participated in numerous NATO training missions. In late May, Sweden ratified a NATO co-operation agreement that will allow the Alliance to operate on Swedish territory during training missions and in case of a crisis.

Similarly, Finland's ties with NATO date back to the Balkan wars in the 1990s and have expanded considerably since then. Beyond participating in NATO missions and training exercises, Finland is working with NATO to develop cyber-defence capacity and has become a key NATO training partner.

Sweden and Finland have both expressed interest in further expanding their co-operation with NATO, as evidenced by their foreign ministers attending the NATO meeting in Brussels for the first time in May. This sentiment has been echoed by NATO, with Stoltenberg telling a press conference after the foreign ministers meeting in May that 'we have agreed to look at ways to hold more consultations and to share more information about

what is happening in the Baltic Sea region and beyond so that we all have the fullest possible picture'.

Public opinion toward NATO membership is the most favourable it has ever been in Sweden. A poll conducted by Sifo in September 2015 showed, for the first time, more Swedes in favour of joining NATO than remaining out of it: some 41% of respondents were in favour, a dramatic increase from 2012, when the figure was only 17%.

In Finland, public opinion is still against joining NATO. A poll from March 2015 found that 40% of Finns were against NATO membership. However, when respondents were asked if they would support membership if government leaders did, a majority of Finns said yes.

Even with expanding co-operation and shifting public opinions, NATO membership for both Sweden and Finland is off the table for the foreseeable future. The main reason for this is Russia. As the Atlantic Council's Magnus Nordenman recently explained in an interview with *World Politics Review*, among Swedish and Finnish leaders, 'there is a dawning realization that joining NATO may not be so easy at the moment, as it may draw pressure from Russia.'

Recent remarks by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov seem to confirm this. In an interview with Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* on 28 April, Lavrov said – according to an official Kremlin translation of the article from the Swedish – that if Sweden decided

to join NATO there would be serious consequences:

If Sweden decides to join NATO, we won't think that it intends to attack Russia. I can say this for certain. But, since the Swedish military infrastructure in this situation will report to the NATO headquarters, we will have to take the necessary defence measures on our northern borders, based on the fact that there is a military political bloc across the border, which regards Russia a threat and intends to deter it.

In response to the interview, Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström said on Twitter that 'Sweden's security policy is determined by Sweden, no other.'

Finland is also reluctant to antagonise Russia by pursuing NATO membership. In April, the Finnish government released a report called 'The Effects of Finland's Possible NATO Membership', stating that Russia views the expansion of NATO as a threat and that 'a possible Finnish (and/or Swedish) membership of NATO would trigger a Russian response. The geopolitical change would be too major for Moscow to ignore.'

There are also several NATO members, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, who do not want to provoke Russia by expanding NATO. Estonia and Latvia share a border with Russia proper, while Lithuania and Poland are neighbours of the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, home to its Baltic fleet.

As well as the fear of provoking Russia, there may be more practical obstacles to Finland and Sweden joining NATO, such as their relatively small defence budgets. According to data from the World Bank, Sweden only spends 1.1% of its GDP on defence, while Finland spends just 1.3%, well below the 2% benchmark NATO has set for its members. This lack of spending – in addition to the worries about Russia – all suggest that it is highly unlikely that the Alliance will expand in the near future to include Finland and Sweden.

Yet it is still worth considering why NATO's leadership might be interested in bringing Finland and Sweden into the fold. Both countries have strong air forces that could help shore up NATO's northern flank (although it should be noted that their close co-operation with



Norwegian military preparations during Cold Response, a military exercise that brought together troops from Norway, Sweden and various NATO countries. Image courtesy of Wikimedia.

the Alliance already goes a long way towards achieving this goal). Moreover, there are signs that – in Sweden at least – defence spending is due to increase. Stockholm has announced plans to increase defence spending by 11% over the next five years. It has also signed deals to boost bilateral defence co-operation with key NATO members such as Poland, Denmark and the US.

The Alliance may be hoping that, as full members of NATO, Finland and Sweden could take on the kind of involved role in defence displayed by those Nordic states who are already members of NATO, such as Norway and Denmark. According to a May report by the US Congressional Research Office on US–Nordic relations, Norway and Denmark have helped with the development of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. Norway plans to acquire up to 52 of these, while Denmark is debating the acquisition of either the F-35 or the F-18 for its next military upgrade.

Beyond security, the fact that Finland and Sweden share many of the core values of the most powerful NATO states – such as the US, Germany, France and the UK – makes them attractive partners to the Alliance. These shared values were highlighted in a recent op-ed in the Huffington Post jointly written

by the Icelandic, Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish and Danish ambassadors to the US in advance of the May US–Nordic Summit in Washington:

The Nordic countries and the United States have much in common. We all share the fundamental values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. We strive toward societies based on non-discrimination, equality and inclusion, regardless of ethnicity, sexual orientation or religious background.

President Barack Obama has long spoken highly of Finland, Sweden and the other Nordic states of Iceland, Norway and Denmark. One journalist writing in *The Atlantic* quoted Obama earlier this year as saying, 'if only everyone could be like the Scandinavians, this would all be easy.' And at the recent US–Nordic Leader's Summit in Washington, underscoring the importance of US ties with the Nordic countries, Obama said, 'Sometimes we have a tendency to take our best friends for granted, and it's important that we not do so.'

The US and its NATO allies also see the Nordic countries as global leaders on issues such as the refugee crisis and the Arctic. Sweden received the highest number of asylum applications per

capita of any European country last year, according to a 28 January 2016 BBC report. This was due in large part to the relative ease of getting permanent residency in the country and Sweden's generous welfare state, which includes housing benefits, employment help and language lessons. Despite a rise in far-right populist parties across the region, the Nordic countries continue to be a top destination for migrants and refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. At the Washington summit, the US and Nordic countries agreed that a more unified approach to the crisis is

necessary and that the US-led Leader's Summit on Refugees in September will be an excellent opportunity to discuss and advance comprehensive solutions to the challenges of irregular migration.

On the Arctic, the Nordic countries have co-operated with various NATO states – and also with Russia – for some 20 years through the Arctic Council, and they do important work on environmental protection and sustainable development in the region. Nordic efforts to fight climate change and its impacts in the Arctic and elsewhere have long been praised by the US.

Finland and Sweden, together with the rest of the Nordics, are clearly key partners of NATO. As Russian aggression continues, this partnership will only become more important. NATO has recognised this, and the two countries have been invited to a working dinner during the Warsaw Summit. While membership remains off the table for the foreseeable future, there is still plenty of room for even greater co-operation.

Maria Savel

Associate Editor at *World Politics Review*.

NATO Welcomes Montenegro into the Alliance

Petar Marković



Montenegro will soon become part of NATO. What will this mean for the Alliance, for Montenegro itself, and for relations with Russia?

At the beginning of June, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Iceland became the first NATO states to ratify the Accession Protocol between Montenegro and NATO. In so doing they initiated the process that should, within the next year, lead to full NATO membership for Montenegro, a country that only sixteen years ago found itself on the receiving end of the Alliance's firepower. Montenegro signed the Protocol during NATO's Ministerial Conference in Brussels on 19 May, only two days before celebrating its first decade of independence from Serbia. For the first time, a country once bombed by the Alliance is about to join its ranks. For some this is a vindication of international security co-operation, of the supremacy of Western norms and the values of democratic governance and market economics. But is this really the case?

To some extent, NATO's interests and those of the Montenegrin government go

hand in hand. NATO needs to reiterate its *raison d'être* – to promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area – and demonstrate its power in the face of the challenges posed by Russian aggression, dwindling European enthusiasm for partnership, and the crisis of legitimacy that the Alliance has been facing since its 1999 military intervention in Kosovo, which was undertaken without a UN Security Council Chapter VII mandate.

For its part, the government of Montenegro has been beset by accusations of corruption involving prominent members of the ruling party – the former speaker of parliament and president of the short-lived union between Serbia and Montenegro, Svetozar Marovic, spent five months in custody for allegedly leading a criminal organisation in his hometown of Budva. There have also been countless reshuffles of senior personnel in the lead-up to what it is hoped will be fair elections

in October 2016. The government desperately needs to portray its final acceptance into NATO as the culmination of a clever and consistent foreign and security policy. Indeed, the government is hoping to bolster its legitimacy in the eyes of its people through this kind of external confirmation – by NATO – that it has successfully conducted the necessary legal, democratic and military reforms.

Going beyond these immediate political concerns, what does the seventh NATO expansion – the last was in 2009, when Albania and Croatia joined – really bring to Montenegro, and how does it serve the Alliance? The answer is simple: it is all about Russia. To paraphrase the first Secretary General of NATO, Hastings Ismay: bringing Montenegro into the Alliance will help 'keep the incumbents in and keep the Russians out'.

In terms of keeping the Russians out, the most powerful members of the