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Finland and Sweden’s Road to NATO

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When Finland and Sweden decided to apply for membership in NATO in May 2022, it was a big shift in both countries’ foreign and security policies, but a logical consequence of steps taken in the post–Cold War era. Both Sweden and Finland maintained neutrality during the Cold War, but then joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace in 1994 and the European Union in 1995. By becoming EU member states, they abandoned their earlier policies of neutrality, participating fully in European defense cooperation. Yet they remained militarily nonaligned, at least nominally, by not joining NATO.

They did form a close partnership with NATO, however: they shared the same threat perceptions, politically backed the goals of the alliance, participated substantially in its crisis management operations, and made their militaries interoperable according to NATO standards. Security elites—government officials and experts in both countries—were largely in favor of NATO membership. Many analysts regarded it only as a matter of time until the two countries would become full members. But it was uncertain how much time it would take or what would be the key reason for the final decision.

It turned out to be Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 that triggered Finland and Sweden to apply for NATO membership. In hindsight, this does not seem so surprising—but very few people had expected such a swift change. The most common prediction was that Sweden and Finland would become full members of NATO as a result of some kind of fusion between the alliance and the defense dimension of the EU. The expectation was that it would be a technical, bureaucratic decision that removed the anomaly of their military nonalignment, rather than a political decision in a crisis.

States’ foreign policies are normally based on continuity despite domestic power transfers. Changing the fundamentals of foreign policy often requires an external shock. Yet there is never any straightforward causal relationship between external events and decision-making.

PUBLIC OPINION AS DRIVING FORCE

The most conspicuous element in the process leading to Finland and Sweden’s applications for NATO membership was that the policy change was initiated by a dramatic shift in public opinion in Finland. During the week when the full-scale war in Ukraine started, a majority of Finns suddenly came to support NATO membership.

Finnish public opinion had been rather stable on the NATO question from the 1990s, when the first polls on the issue were conducted, until January 2022: the share of supporters normally varied between 20 and 30 percent, and the share of opponents between 50 and 70 percent. Overall, external events rather than the domestic debate affected the popularity of NATO in Finland. Public support for membership reached its low points during or right after the NATO or US-led military operations in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. When Russia used military force, support rose, as with the war in Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Nonetheless, the changes were moderate, and opinion always returned closer to the average after these external events.

In January 2022, only 28 percent of Finns supported membership in NATO. The share of those opposed had decreased somewhat compared with earlier polls, and that of the undecided had increased, but otherwise there were no signs of a major upheaval. This changed during the week in late February when Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine. A poll commissioned by national broadcasting company YLE showed that public support for joining NATO had risen to of 53 percent. Backing for NATO membership continued to
grow during the spring, rising to 62 percent in March. When the decision to apply for membership was officially announced in May, the level of public support had already risen to 76 percent, while opposition had sunk to less than 15 percent.

The shift in public opinion was not as drastic in Sweden as it was in Finland. A plurality of Swedes had supported the idea of joining NATO in many opinion polls carried out in the 2010s, but there was never a clear majority for it. Support for membership had only slightly increased by April 2022, when 45 percent of Swedes were in favor of joining NATO, while 33 percent opposed it. However, when asked if they would support membership if Finland also joined, more than 60 percent were for doing so; only 20 percent were against it. When the Swedish government made the decision to apply for membership at the same time as Finland did in May, more than 50 percent of Swedes backed the move.

This shows that the change in public opinion in Finland paved the way for acceptance of the NATO membership bid in Sweden. By contrast, in Finland, few respondents thought Sweden’s willingness to join NATO was a precondition for Finnish membership.

Several factors explain the drastic shift in public opinion on the NATO membership issue in Finland. First, the resistance of the Finns to membership had been wide but not deep. Less than a third of the population consistently supported joining, but only a third opposed closer cooperation with NATO. More Finns thought that NATO had made a positive contribution to Finland’s security than were in favor of Finnish membership in the alliance.

Underlying anti-American sentiment in Finland, which manifested itself particularly during the Iraq War, had not entirely disappeared, but negative perceptions of the United States were more palpable under the Bush and Trump presidencies. It should be noted, however, that military cooperation between Finland, Sweden, and NATO, as well as with the United States bilaterally, grew steadily under those two administrations. But having the current US president, Joe Biden, seen as being committed to NATO and multilateralism certainly made it much easier for many Finns as well as Swedes to change their opinion about NATO membership. The fact that NATO’s secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg, was a highly respected Norwegian social democrat also made the decision to join NATO smoother.

**SOVEREIGNTY AT STAKE**

But why did Finnish public opinion change in 2022, not in 2014 when Russia started to use force in Ukraine and annexed Crimea? Only a few Finnish public figures changed their positions on NATO membership because of the Ukrainian crisis of 2014. It was seen as a post-Soviet conflict that was not likely to spread to the Baltic Sea region. Russia was recognized as a strategic challenge, but there was no general feeling of an increased security deficit.

Russia’s military interventions in the area of the former Soviet Union were not viewed as undermining the fundamentals of Finland’s security policy. Finland, after all, had not neglected territorial defense after the end of the Cold War, but rather had retained military conscription and a large, trained reserve force. It had also bolstered its military preparedness with large-scale procurements, including the purchase of a fleet of 64 modern fighter jets from the United States in 1992, and their replacements in 2021.

Some pundits warned that NATO membership could lead to lessened motivation for taking care of national defense. Moreover, the prevailing logic was that joining NATO would likely be perceived by Russia as a provocation, and the greater levels of deterrence and protection conferred by membership would be devalued by the increased Russian threat. The question of NATO membership therefore seemed to have more to do with identity: the strategic facts were interpreted so as to fit with existing beliefs sustaining the continuity of military nonalignment.

Russia’s war in 2022 was more shocking than its actions in 2014 not just because it was the third time in little more than a decade that Moscow had resorted to military force against its smaller neighbors. In the run-up to the invasion, Russia had demanded that NATO abandon its open-door policy not only with regard to Ukraine, but also for Finland and Sweden. Finns and Swedes could no longer pretend that this crisis was restricted to the post-Soviet area. It concerned the European security order as a whole, and both countries’ sovereign right to decide for themselves whether...
to join NATO. For many people, applying for NATO membership was therefore a demonstrative statement against Russian President Vladimir Putin's attempt to define new spheres of influence in Europe.

A cognitive shift often requires an emotional push. The full-scale war that Russia launched caused moral outrage. Russia's wars in 2008 and 2014 had brought about only a slight change in public opinion because both were easier to explain away as tragic events of a kind to be expected in international relations. Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022 was different because it was unprovoked and on a larger scale. In Finland, the analogy of the 1939 Winter War against the Soviet Union was immanent and became much more strongly felt than in 2008 or 2014. People followed news of the war intensively, with emotional involvement.

In a comparative survey, Finland and Sweden were the European countries where the largest share of citizens believed that Russia, rather than Ukraine or NATO, was culpable for the war. They likewise had the highest proportions of citizens in Europe who supported imposing economic sanctions on Russia or supplying military equipment to Ukraine.

**MOVING IN TANDEM**

It is not self-evident that a change in public opinion should lead to a major policy change. The realist dictum that foreign policy officials can and should pursue the national interest irrespective of public opinion—since the masses do not have the necessary information to make correct inferences and are too emotional—had a long tradition in Finland. Given the shared land border extending more than 1,300 kilometers, the national interest had long been seen in terms of avoiding a major conflict by retaining good working relations with the Kremlin.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, public opinion started to matter much more in Finland, as evidenced by the decision to join the EU on the basis of a referendum. Leaders cited negative public opinion as one of the main reasons that Finland should not join NATO. When polls in the spring of 2022 showed that a majority now supported Finland's membership in NATO, politicians could no longer cite public opinion as a hindrance. But some questioned whether applying for membership in NATO in a time of crisis was wise. In his first interview after public opinion had turned positive on NATO membership, President Sauli Niinistö underlined that there was a difference between the thinking of those who are responsible for national security and those who are not. He said he understood the deep concern of the people, but argued for remaining cool-headed.

In February 2022, Niinistö did not seem to believe that any quick decisions with regard to Finland's NATO membership were in sight. Probably the biggest reason in Finland and Sweden for not joining NATO had been the fear that doing so would destabilize the security situation in Northern Europe. Although it was accepted that Finnish and Swedish membership would bring clarity to their position in any major military crisis in the region, the problem was the geostrategic change in itself. Russia's potential countermeasures had to be reckoned with, particularly during the period when the intent to join the alliance had been announced but the countries were not yet full members.

During the first weeks of the Ukraine war, there was also concern—including in Washington—that Finland and Sweden's NATO membership bids might escalate the conflict between Russia and the West, and possibly hamper the chances for an early cease-fire in Ukraine. But this reasoning was abandoned when it became clear that the war was not going to be over soon.

Because of the war, the idea that Finnish membership in NATO would contradict the old tradition of having good neighborly relations lost its appeal. Friendly relations with the Kremlin could no longer be retained when Russia was waging full-scale aggressive war against its neighbor—and had labeled Finland as an unfriendly nation due to its participation in Western sanctions. It was also difficult to see how it would be possible to return to good relations even after the war in Ukraine was over without a regime change in Moscow. Neither did there seem to be any reasonable mediating role on offer for Finland on the basis of its status as a nonaligned country, as had been the case in the Kosovo War in 1999. Moreover, the fear of countermeasures had diminished since Russia's actual capability to target Finland with hybrid, let alone military, operations was reduced due to its large deployments and losses in the war in Ukraine.

Although Finland's stated policy of preserving the option of applying for membership in NATO should the security situation change was partly a domestic political compromise, it was also considered a strategic signal to Russia. The message was simple: “We prefer stability and good
neighborly relations with you, but if you do not respect the principle that it is our sovereign choice to join NATO, or if you start seriously destabilizing the European security order, then we will seek membership in NATO.” Since Russia crossed both lines in the winter of 2021–22, the policy of using the NATO option as a strategic deterrent had failed. At the press conference announcing the government’s decision to apply for membership, Niinistö addressed this comment to Russia: “You caused this—look in the mirror.”

The shift in public opinion not only put pressure on the Finnish leadership but also gave it a broad mandate to pursue NATO membership. At the beginning of March, Niinistö launched a process that consisted of a series of political and diplomatic discussions with Washington and other key NATO actors to prepare for the formal decision to apply for membership. At this stage, it was important for Finland that Sweden move in parallel.

Already in February, both countries had intensified their cooperation with NATO by increasing the exchange of intelligence information and coordination of political and military activities. Now bilateral cooperation with the United States and Britain, as well as with the largest EU member states, was further strengthened in military exercises, armaments, and security of supply lines, as well as in the form of political declarations.

These measures could have been taken even if there had not been any firm intention to join the alliance. But they served to alleviate the concerns about vulnerability to Russian retaliation during the gray period between an application to join NATO and full membership, or in case the application process had to be halted.

Despite public opinion being clearly in favor of NATO membership in Finland, some time had to be reserved for domestic decision-making. For the sake of political legitimacy, there had to be a democratic process in which political parties held internal debates on the matter before the parliament gave its consent. The government prepared a report on the changes in Finland’s security environment, which was delivered to the parliament in April. This report did not recommend that Finland should apply for NATO membership, but it formed the basis for a concise subsequent report that did so.

Without going into the details of how and why even those politicians who had been known to be skeptical about the blessings of NATO membership came to support it, the whole episode of Finland’s membership application demonstrated a clear behavioral tendency to show unity in questions of national security. The idea of unity and the need for consensus in a crisis was deeply ingrained in Finnish collective memory during both World War II and the Cold War. Although the post–Cold War era seemed to render these historical lessons obsolete, they had clearly not vanished from collective memory when sovereignty and national security were seen as being at stake.

The NATO membership question was not seen as an issue that divided the government and the opposition or the leaders and the people. The opposition, which had already supported Finland’s membership in NATO earlier, did not mock the government or the former skeptics for their sluggish reversal. Though the process was driven by public opinion, trust in leaders remained at a high level. Without this unity, it is impossible to explain the May 2022 parliamentary vote of 188–8 in favor of the NATO membership application.

In Sweden, the reasons for military nonalignment were more clearly tied to tradition and identity than in Finland. Swedish policy had rested on nonalignment for more than 200 years and was seen as the basis for a long period of peace. There was no urgency to change that status when the full-scale war in Ukraine started.

Social Democratic Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson still argued in March that Sweden’s bid for NATO membership would destabilize the situation in the Baltic Sea area. But later that month she said the possibility of joining NATO was not out of the question. Meeting in mid-April with Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin, a fellow social democrat, Andersson indicated that Sweden might apply for membership if Finland also did so. The Swedish government thereafter prepared its report for the parliament on the worsened security situation.

The internal debate within the Social Democratic Party was the key to Sweden’s decision-making process. Despite the fact that the party’s old guard traditionally had strongly favored the policy of military nonalignment, the country’s
close connection to Finland had also been more important for the Social Democrats than for the other parties. The conservative party Moderaterna had already supported Sweden’s membership in NATO before Russia invaded Ukraine; the populist Sweden Democrats, whose earlier position had been ambivalent, also decided to back the membership bid. Only two relatively small parties, the Greens and the Left Party, remained opposed.

**Seeking Stability**

The formal decisions to apply for membership in NATO were made in Finland and Sweden simultaneously in May 2022. The stated motivation for the move was that it would strengthen the countries’ security and overall stability in a changed strategic environment. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine had increased the risk of a future military confrontation in Northern Europe in which both Finland and Sweden could be embroiled. Though neither state believed that it suffered from a substantial security deficit, membership in NATO was expected to bring added stability, particularly as a deterrent.

Finland might have been well prepared for the type of attack that Russia had launched in Ukraine, but NATO membership would raise its readiness for military operations even higher. Sweden had faced a provocative Russian violation of the airspace near Gotland Island in the Baltic Sea on Easter in 2016, and subsequently had bolstered its readiness, reintroducing military conscription. But more robust deterrence was needed, since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine was based on a grave strategic miscalcation. Russia’s loose nuclear talk also might have increased the feeling of insecurity, but the need for NATO’s nuclear umbrella had long been a controversial question in both countries and remained marginal to the discussion.

Both governments’ reports on the issue emphasized that NATO membership for Sweden and Finland would contribute to the overall stability of Northern Europe. It would strengthen the alliance and create strategic depth for the defense of the Baltic states as well as for Norway. Moreover, the decision to apply for membership was a symbolic act, demonstrating the unity of the West to the Kremlin.

Although it could be argued that Finland and Sweden’s earlier policies were based on wishful thinking about the potential strategic benefits of nonalignment both vis-à-vis Russia and in world politics in general, the option of joining NATO was never just empty words. Both countries had been systematically engaging in close partnership with NATO, developing military interoperability and participating in NATO’s crisis management operations and exercises. Finland and Sweden had deployed troops with NATO missions in the Balkans and Afghanistan, and Sweden also took part in NATO’s operation in Libya. The possibility of receiving or giving military assistance in a conflict was not excluded, though taking part in Article 5 exercises for mutual defense was avoided on the basis of military nonalignment.

Since both Finland and Sweden were established Western democracies and EU member states, meeting the political criteria for entering NATO was never in doubt. When they sent their application documents to Brussels in May, negotiations on the accession treaty proceeded on a fast track, leading to the formal invitation at NATO’s Madrid summit in June 2022.

But neither Finland nor Sweden fully expected the problems that would be caused by Turkey in the accession process. On the eve of the Madrid summit, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said he did not believe Finland, and especially Sweden, were doing enough to fight terrorism. He specifically accused them of harboring members of Kurdish political movements that Turkey regarded as terrorists and demanded their extradition. Both countries had also restricted their arms exports to Turkey in response to its use of military force against the Kurds in Syria.

Only after painfully complex negotiations did Turkey agree to lift its veto on Sweden and Finland’s accession treaty with NATO in a trilateral memorandum of understanding. The memorandum contained a number of creatively worded clauses, as well as ambiguous promises by Sweden and Finland to take Turkish security concerns seriously. But it also included a mechanism for Turkey to monitor the implementation of the agreement.

By contrast, Russia’s reaction turned out to be milder than feared. Pro-NATO advocates had always argued that Russia would protest loudly but eventually accept Swedish and Finnish membership without any significant military countermeasures, as it had done in response to the previous rounds of NATO enlargement. After all, NATO membership for the Baltic states must have been much harder for Moscow to swallow. Georgia and Ukraine were different cases, since Russia had both higher motivation and more effective means to prevent them from joining NATO.
In Russia’s strategic calculus, Finland and Sweden were already part of the West, though the extension of NATO enlargement even to these countries was a political blow for the Kremlin. At first, Russian policy on the matter appeared to shift to warning about severe consequences should NATO place military infrastructure closer to its borders, rather than regarding membership in itself as a major problem. In late September, explosions damaged the Nord Stream natural gas pipelines near Swedish territorial waters, raising public speculation as to whether Russia was behind it—and whether it was intended as a lesson for Sweden. Russia denied involvement in the incident. In December, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that new bases and groupings would be created in northwest Russia in response to NATO’s enlargement to Finland and Sweden, but it remains to be seen where these plans will be executed.

**NO PRECONDITIONS?**

The domestic discussions about Sweden and Finland’s future role in NATO only started on the very eve of the decisions to apply for membership. The two countries had already proved their willingness to contribute to NATO’s crisis management operations, but now they would be expected to also take part in common defense, particularly in the Baltic Sea area. The starting point in much of these discussions has been that there is no desire to place new NATO bases, let alone nuclear weapons, in Sweden or Finland. There is a widespread view that they will follow the Norwegian model in limiting NATO’s presence during peacetime, but Helsinki and Stockholm do not want to set any preconditions for membership.

The governments of Sweden and Finland believe that their membership will intensify the already existing Nordic defense cooperation and create a strong Nordic dimension in NATO. Such regional cooperation would not constitute a separate bloc, but would take place within the overall NATO framework and involve other members, particularly the Baltics, Germany, Britain, and the United States. Membership for Finland and Sweden might also have some implications for NATO’s command structure, which is currently being reformed.

As of this writing, Finland and Sweden are not yet full members of NATO. They are still waiting for the ratification of the accession treaty by Turkey and Hungary, hoping that this will be done at least before NATO’s next summit, scheduled to be held in Vilnius, Lithuania, in the summer of 2023. Finnish and Swedish political leaders have remained fully committed to membership—even more so in Sweden after September 2022 elections resulted in a change of government, bringing in a conservative-led coalition. Public support has also remained high.

The strongest political criticism related to NATO membership in Sweden and Finland since the launching of their membership bids has come from those who allege that joining the alliance implies abolishing dearly held principles of human rights and humanitarian concerns in foreign policy. These critics argue that the two countries are already succumbing to pressure from the Turkish authoritarian government to bend to its demands on the Kurdish issue in order to secure its approval for their membership in NATO.

Finland and Sweden do not want to treat the dispute with Turkey as a bilateral matter. They see it instead as a question of NATO’s credibility as a military alliance and a community of values. Although both countries justified their membership bids primarily with strategic motivations in response to Russia’s aggressive behavior against its neighbors, it is unlikely that Sweden and Finland would have turned to NATO had they not regarded Russia’s war in Ukraine as a conflict of values between democracy and authoritarianism.