

Discussion Article

Rethinking Finnish–Swedish relations, Nordic cooperation, and NATO

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Abstract

Two of the long-lasting consequences of the dramatic year 2022 are Finland and Sweden’s decisions to apply for NATO membership, taken on 15 and 16 May respectively. The decisions resulted from the Russian large-scale aggression against Ukraine at the end of February. With and around these decisions, we can see a myriad of adjustments, policy changes, shifts of public opinion, and turnarounds in discourse on security and defence. This article takes up some of these issues and reflects on where they might be leading, not only for Finland and Sweden, but also for Nordic cooperation and NATO in the near future.

Keywords

Finland, Sweden, NATO membership, bilateral defence cooperation, Nordic defence cooperation

Introduction

There are three questions that deserve a closer look and some problematisation. The first question is the bilateral security and defence cooperation between Finland and Sweden. It has deepened in the recent years to a degree that made it imperative for the two to advance together on the NATO membership issue. What is its meaning and role once the two countries are in NATO? The second question is the importance and meaning of Nordic cooperation. How will the overall security dynamics, but also the institutional balances, change once all five Nordic countries are in NATO? The third and final question is the question of emerging leadership. It seems something of a novelty to see Finland take the lead in a process of fundamental policy change, here leading Sweden to NATO. Will that be a start of a more lasting tendency, or will leadership be split and shifting in the North?

Alongside these questions, this article will reflect on the customary ways of speaking about our security and defence political conventions, on the quick changes in discourses, and on the need for finding a common one, a commonly accepted consensual description of what is happening and arguments for why the decisions that have been taken have been the good and right ones. Notably, we see quick changes in speaking about NATO. Are we about to find a new way of thinking about NATO, or rather discovering the plurality of views around its role?¹

New circumstances for bilateral defence cooperation

Starting with the bilateral security and defence cooperation between Finland and Sweden, we have observed a continuous development since 2014 towards something much more intense and deeper than the forms and levels of cooperation they have with other countries. The framework, the Memorandum of Understanding from 2018, extends cooperation beyond peacetime to cover times of crisis, conflicts, and war. The Finnish-

Swedish defence cooperation covers operational planning in all situations, and includes situational awareness, joint use of logistics and infrastructure, host nation support arrangements, surveillance and safeguarding of territorial integrity, and cooperation in the field of defence materiel and industry. As the Finnish Ministry of Defence puts it: “Finland’s objective is to create permanent conditions for military cooperation and joint operations between Finland and Sweden, which will apply all circumstances. No restrictions are set in advance for intensified bilateral cooperation” (Ministry of Defence).

The two now organize brigade-size common training exercises, developing concepts for joint deployments. They deploy a joint Amphibious Task Unit, and plan to fully operationalize a joint Naval Task Group by 2023. They also use each other’s naval and air bases and organize joint anti-submarine exercises. The two have not, however, formed a formal defence alliance or signed a treaty of mutual defence. Here, it is worthwhile to think for a moment about the background of this cooperation and about the conditions that have made it possible. While an important part of the reasons for the cooperation to grow can be practical and even economic in character, there are factors at play that facilitate this cooperation, notably trust and resemblance—two features that are interrelated.

What is a cause and what is a consequence is rarely obvious, and this applies to trust and resemblance in Finnish-Swedish relations, too. Are the two trustful because of the many similarities between the two countries? Similarity can be thought of as a good basis for cooperation to grow. But cooperation also leads to more similarity, through the spreading and adoption of good practices and solutions. At the same time, similarity may also decrease the attraction and value of cooperation: more of the same is not necessarily as good as something new that stands out as a clear improvement or benefit. Trust may be a decisive factor that enables specialisation and leaning on another country when

1. Among the recent writings on the subject, I would like to highlight Herolf, Gunilla (2022) ‘Svensk säkerhetspolitik i ett Natoperspektiv’ and Tiilikainen, Teija (2022) ‘Finlands väg till Nato’, both in ‘Proceedings and Journal’, The Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences, NR 3/2022. I would also like to thank Gunilla Herolf for her invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this commentary.

it comes to some special capabilities.

For being two rather small geographically neighbouring countries, Sweden and Finland have taken rather dissimilar decisions on their defence since the end of the Cold War. In the early 2000s, Sweden reoriented its security policy to emphasise crisis management. The change of focus implied sizing down its defence forces and reducing the number of conscript soldiers, and abolition of peacetime conscript service in 2010. Finland continued on the path of territorial defence and conscription. Russia's annexation of Crimea meant for Sweden a start of a return to emphasising territorial defence: to increasing military spending and partially reactivating mandatory military service, as well as seeking broader and deeper defence cooperation with other states (the so-called Hultqvist doctrine).

Further differences between the two countries can be found in the size of their defence industries, where Sweden is among the larger European actors, and Finland a small one, something that impacts their views of defence industrial cooperation in the EU. And clear differences can be seen in the ways the two have been speaking about neutrality, non-alignment, and about NATO. It is here that we can see signs of increasing similarity, too. In the past, neutrality may have had different connotations in Sweden and in Finland and one can discuss the extent to which neutrality has been a question of identity. Yet, the two countries came together in late 1990s to underline the instrumental character of non-alignment—for instance, as the foreign ministers of the two countries jointly did in 1997 as they were expressing their support for deepening relations with NATO in the new Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. On NATO, Finland used for a long time the notion of 'NATO option' to characterise its policy of staying outside but underlining the possibility to decide to apply for membership at any point in time. Sweden did not, but the notion of 'option' made its way even to Stockholm in 2021.

In practice, the deep bilateral cooperation meant that the two countries needed to move together on the NATO membership issue. It might not be possible to continue their close cooperation if one

of them is in NATO and the other is not: information exchange, planning and exercises, and perhaps even the overall focus could become complicated. At the same time, NATO membership would in all likelihood not be able to compensate for the loss of that bilateral relationship. It would still be more important for the two to work together. Even if NATO allies have fundamentally important new ways of supporting them, the closest help at hand and the shared security environment would count the most in a crisis.

The way the two were coordinating their steps and decisions in Spring 2022 was very swift. The change of public opinion in Finland was very quick, but so was the policy change in Sweden, given that the Swedish government was still saying that the country would stay out of NATO in February. Now, the two aim at entering the alliance together before long despite the intervention of Turkey in the enlargement process. Turkey seems to aim at maximising the concessions it can get before it ratifies the accession protocols. Signalling that it sees big differences between the two countries, it hints at possibly keeping Sweden out of NATO for a longer time than Finland.

What is particularly interesting in this tandem membership application is the way the two communicate about their intention to stay and move together, even when faced with such potential hindrances. This is not typical at all of NATO enlargements. NATO enlargements are processes where states enter one by one, following their own trajectories and Membership Action Plans. They are evaluated on their own merits, as are countries applying for any international organisation. Here, we can speak about a pair of countries that could join separately but that prefer to join together. We speak about a value added that comes from the two being able to continue to work together on defence without interruption.

Bilateral relations are important for other NATO countries, too, and particularly the USA cultivates bilateral relations even inside the Alliance. Both Finland and Sweden now negotiate on deepened cooperation with the USA, including on terms of hosting US troops (Finnish Government, 2022;

Reuters, 2023). Meanwhile, Finland and Sweden seem not to have been very vocal in spelling out how their bilateral cooperation could benefit NATO. It would seem, however, that they have a case in that their combined military strength is notable and they are on their way of being able to combine their forces, too. The Finnish-Swedish example of deepened cooperation and the understanding of how resemblance and trust play a role in it could be quite interesting and useful for NATO at large.

In any case, the two have tried their best to show their value as future NATO members. What comes to mind is the EU entrance of Sweden and Finland where the two needed to show particular loyalty to the new Common Foreign and Security Policy. They were met with suspicion because of the long tradition of neutrality, and they needed to, together with the third neutral applicant, Austria, sign a declaration about fully accepting the contents of this policy. And, once they were members, Sweden and Finland did profile themselves—acting together—as particularly active and constructive participants in the development of the EU's new policies, notably crisis management.

What is the weight of Nordic cooperation?

What the Finnish and Swedish policy of entering NATO together also recalls is the decision to enlarge the Schengen area to cover non-EU members Iceland and Norway at the time when Sweden and Finland entered the EU. This was a remarkable recognition of the fundamental importance, even priority, of Nordic cooperation vis-à-vis the EU. In fact, during the negotiation process, the importance of the Nordic passport union was highlighted, and Denmark, as the one Nordic country already in the EU, declared that it will not accept any EU norm implying an encroachment of the Nordic passport freedom. The entrance of Finland and Sweden into the EU would not be allowed to create a Schengen border between these countries and Norway. As Norway and Iceland became Schengen-associated, the Nordic order prevailed.

What will the contribution and significance of Nordic cooperation now be in NATO? It is a remarkable

change in the current order that all five Nordic countries will be members of NATO. The Nordic countries have cooperated in security policy for a longer time than what is often thought. Their institutional cooperation was, mainly to make it politically possible for Finland to take part, presented and understood as not being about foreign or security policy. Yet, these issues were never formally ruled out—as a matter of fact, they were explicitly allowed for. The Nordic ministers for foreign affairs started their regular meetings already in the 1930s, and the defence ministers' meetings started in a regular form in the 1960s, first concentrating on UN peacekeeping. At the same time, these meetings were also a platform to informally approach other defence-related issues.

In the 1990s, the defence ministers' agenda was broadened to cover, for instance, armament questions. Meanwhile in the EU, the first informal meeting of EU defence ministers was organised only in 1998. Nordic Defence Cooperation NORDEFECO started in 2009 based on these pre-existing forms of cooperation and it has been evolving since, now with the Vision 2025 on improving defence capability and cooperation, including in crisis and conflict, setting the goals of, among others, minimal restrictions on military mobility and more cooperation in military security of supply.

Because of this cooperation and considering that Nordic cooperation is even more advanced in other related policy fields, we might in practical terms be expecting a common Nordic voice concerning many issues in NATO—even more so as NATO looks more than previously at the civilian or societal side of security. Resilience has come up as one of the issues where the Nordics could work together in NATO. The Nordic Prime Ministers met in Oslo in August 2022, and they adopted a Joint statement on Nordic cooperation in security and defence that mentions the aim to contribute actively to the development and strengthening of NATO as a military and political alliance (Prime Minister's Office). Resilience, security of supply, and hybrid threats were taken up as issues where they can cooperate further and work for in NATO.

At the same time, the Nordics have been underlining

time and again that there will be no Nordic bloc in NATO. The question one might pose here is why there is such a need for denying such intentions, and why this would be bad for NATO. The enlargement to Sweden and Finland may lead to the observation that a remarkable share of the whole membership is geographically in the North, and that they might be able to influence the future of NATO in ways that would not be welcome for all just by bringing more Northern issues on NATO's agenda. Again, speaking about blocs is something that brings one back to the time of Finland and Sweden entering the EU. Then, the question that was worrying many old member states was the possibility that the new member states might build an influential group together with Germany, a potential counterweight to France or the UK. And again, it was repeatedly said that there would be no bloc.

And again, we need to note that the Nordics do not necessarily share similar points of view on all issues. When it comes to their own surroundings, the High North or Arctic issues, for instance, the five view the area from very different standpoints. It is also important to note that there is a larger shift going on when it comes to the institutions of cooperation in the Nordic-Baltic-Arctic broader area. The institutions that were set up in the 1990s with the specific intention to facilitate new forms of cooperation with Russia, the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, and the Council of the Baltic Sea States, are now frozen or in a phase of deep reconsideration. At the same time, the need for cooperation increases: this is noted above all when it comes to matters of climate change, environment, and energy. New constellations for cooperation might still emerge.

What is notable is how the ways of speaking change. One used to say that one of the strengths of Nordic cooperation was that the differences in their institutional affiliations did not matter: the Nordic countries were able to cooperate to such an extent even if they were not all members of NATO nor all members of the EU. Now, something different is being said: in fact, same institutional affiliations are helpful. It will become easier to cooperate—the Prime Ministers in Oslo even mentioned that their defence cooperation will become more binding

with the NATO accession of Finland and Sweden. Added to this, Denmark joining the EU's security and defence policy as a result of the referendum in 2022, which lifts Denmark's opt-out policy that has been in place since the Maastricht Treaty, will allow for a new take for the Nordics even in the EU.

New ways of speaking, new thinking?

Speaking in a new way about Nordic cooperation is only one of the many examples of the new ways of describing, framing, and arguing, and one of the new discourses that are now taking shape. One example is the need to find suitable ways of expressing the role of NATO in national defence in a way that is pointing at its clear usefulness but without being too abrupt a change, or without endangering too much of the traditional reliance on national defence, particularly in Finland. Speaking about NATO in a way that highlights its role in deterrence seems to become central. Similarly, ways of expressing the role of Sweden and Finland within NATO will be found.

Speaking and thinking about nuclear weapons changes, too. It seemed first as if the Norwegian and Danish models of national reservations on nuclear weapons (and NATO troops) being permanently based on their territories would become a model for Sweden and Finland as well. One might remember that these very issues were already long ago taken up as examples of small countries being able to influence NATO in questions that are important for them. First, thus, the five Nordics seemed to be in unison on the issue. The Swedish Prime Minister specifically underlined this intention, but in Finland, the government chose to emphasise that it was not making any reservations at all.

This 'Nordic model' was not adopted, and in the end, Sweden seemed to follow Finland—at least somewhat, the new minister for foreign affairs having said again that Sweden makes that reservation (Expressen, 2022). The reasons for avoiding reservations beforehand might have to do primarily with the process of accession and the need to ensure that there are no sticking points or positions that might lead to doubts among the old

member states. Already the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons of 2017 showed the attention paid to what NATO partners, notably the USA, had to say on the matter; Finland and Sweden never signed that treaty.

What also constitutes a change to prevailing thinking is that Finland now joins NATO at a time of unprecedented crisis and war—what used to be said was quite the contrary, namely that it would be best for Finland to join at a moment when the overall security situation was calm and that it would be too late to try to join once a crisis had hit. The policymakers apparently needed to find a coherent reasoning and storyline. Now, some earlier ways of speaking are being liberated from what was a political need to mask them. In 2014, Finnish participation in an exercise around Iceland could not be about air surveillance, only about training in cooperation with unarmed fighters; now, air surveillance is approached as one of the tasks that NATO membership can entail.

Some elements of the storyline seem to stay. In Finland, a central, and cherished, notion has been the freedom of manoeuvre or freedom of movement. We used to think that the ‘NATO option’ signalled this freedom. The Russian views and wishes expressed in late 2021 about agreeing on not enlarging NATO were seen in Finland as a direct threat to this freedom. No wonder NATO accession and membership have then been described as a way of guaranteeing that freedom of movement again. It is in the interest of policymakers to underline their independence and power to make their own choices, be it about neutrality, non-alignment, or alignment and alliance. We certainly see a new, confident, and upbeat discourse around NATO geared to dispel any doubts and to quickly build the necessary consensus on the accession, not only in the applying states but also in the old NATO member states. It seems to be one where Finnish and Swedish NATO membership strengthens nearly everything in the end: the security of these countries, the security of NATO, and Nordic cooperation.

Where will we go from here? Once everyone is strengthened, what will happen? The big question in the background is what direction NATO will take.

In NATO, the year of war in Ukraine has brought consensus and resolve. Before it, there were many question marks, not least about the role of the United States or whether NATO should be concentrating more on China. One could reasonably expect a variety of voices to rise again when it comes to NATO’s tasks and role in the future as the questions that were on the table before the Russian war on Ukraine come back.

One such issue is the relationship between the EU and NATO. It is fundamentally a question about two very different ways of organising defence cooperation in Europe, ways that could be complementary and which are both needed. It is also a divisive issue in the sense that the membership of the two organisations is not and cannot be fully identical, and the fears of the EU somehow weakening NATO are widely shared. At the same time, the growing competences of the EU are for many a source of concern. Yet, one might argue that a real deepening of NATO defence cooperation needs the help of the EU, notably in legislation on issues such as military mobility, on defence procurement and defence industry, and on public spending when it comes to, for instance, infrastructure.

What might Finland and Sweden have to say on this issue? And how will the relationship between Finland and Sweden be shaped in the future? A common theme here is leadership: leadership within NATO, and leadership within this Nordic duo. In the bilateral relationship, we have seen in an interesting way how Finland has taken a leading role. Here, a final comparison to the EU enlargement times could be made. It was a disappointment for many in Finland that at the time, the tandem did not seem to work and the Nordic agreements and joint understandings were not followed as Sweden communicated its decision to apply for EC membership rather abruptly and left Finland little chance but to speed up and change course as well as discourse. Perhaps Finland was simply not alert enough to hear and see what was happening, while Sweden was fast to react to the changes in Europe.

Now, the Finnish relative slowness has paid off: not having changed that much in its defence political and strategic thinking, it finds itself very well

positioned in the current circumstances. It can also use its instrumental thinking about security policy, shifting quicker than Sweden, which is more identity-based. Short term, thus, Finland leads: it has the right mindset, the right position, and the readiness to move. Long term, the situation may be different again. Who will be leading once the countries are in NATO? This might be a question of knowledge and skills and being able to take an active role early in the preparation of policies.

The two countries have not always been on the same page in their EU policies. In NATO, they could in the end have somewhat differing profiles again, Sweden being more transatlantic and Finland perhaps more Euro-Atlantic. But NATO is a totally new platform for their relations and may have a galvanising impact on their roles, particularly in hybrid threats and societal security. What about leadership in normative questions, in issues about NATO's future tasks? It could well be that Sweden takes that role again, testing both the Finnish capacity to follow and the degree of Nordic unity.

In the end, we might be seeing a quick change in how the pieces of the puzzle connect and a new unexpected picture emerging. Perhaps we still need to identify some missing pieces along the way. We might also need more critical voices and a more varied debate on the big issues that NATO faces, as well as on the roles and policies of Finland and Sweden. What the discussion on NATO membership has done already is that it has increased the interest of outsiders towards Finnish and Swedish policy choices. This interest may be just what is needed for an improved self-understanding.

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