



Enlargement to the North? Sweden, Finland and NATO

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Key Points

- Sweden and Finland are moving closer and closer to NATO, though without seeking full membership to date. Nor will this change before the parliamentary elections in 2018 and 2019.
- For NATO, the admission of the Nordic Europeans would be uncomplicated and would carry many advantages, above all for Nordic-Baltic security, but also regarding topics such as NATO-EU cooperation and the Open Door Policy.
- Despite certain risks (above all Russia's foreseeable reaction), Germany could gain two critical and reliable partners in NATO.

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Since the crisis in the Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia, Sweden and Finland have been moving closer and closer to NATO. Yet the rapprochement of the Nordic Europeans to the transatlantic defense alliance is nothing new. Since 1994, the two countries have worked together with NATO within the framework of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) Program. In addition to practical defense cooperation, this has also signified participation in the Planning and Review Process (PARP), further developing military capabilities and strengthening interoperability. Not to be forgotten are the military contributions to the NATO operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan as well as Sweden's deployment in Libya in 2011. Another milestone was the status as Enhanced Opportunities Partners. Sweden and Finland have enjoyed this status since 2014 and have used it to intensify their partnership with NATO, particularly in the Baltic Sea region.

Nevertheless, accession to NATO currently does not come into question for Sweden and Finland or to the extent it does, then only in tandem, as a report of a group of experts on behalf of the Finnish government recently underscored. The two countries share a strategic interest in security and stability in the Nordic-Baltic region. That they are stronger together was shown 20 years ago when they joined the European Union. However, they remain reticent with respect to NATO membership. This is due on the one hand to their political and strategic culture of neutrality and non-alignment, to which they still adhere, if only symbolically. On the other, political circumstances in the two countries do not favor the accession question. Though the Finnish government leaves open the option of joining at a later date, the Swedish rule out the possibility entirely. However, in Sweden a change of government from the coalition of Social Democrats and Greens to a conservative alliance could cast a new light on the accession issue. Despite the current public debate, it is therefore unlikely that a decision will be taken before the parliamentary elections in Sweden in 2018 and in Finland in 2019.

Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to take a look at the potential consequences of an accession for NATO, precisely for Germany. With the admission of Sweden and Finland, the Federal Republic would acquire two key partners in NATO who would defend a common line on some topics, such as cooperation with the EU. With a view to the many question marks raised by the Brexit in Europe, Germany would be able to count on two allies with similar interests and positions in NATO. Should Russian saber-rattling persist in the Nordic-Baltic region, the accession of the two Nordic European democracies could become a reality in the not too distant future, particularly since the Brexit should make for additional security policy activity in the region.

Uncomplicated admission

The admission of the two new applicants would be associated with little effort and manageable (political) costs for NATO. Firstly, policy dialogue between NATO and Sweden and Finland is more intensive and vibrant than ever before. The "28+2" format has become established within the Alliance as an automatic mechanism for core topics. Swedish and Finnish representatives, for example, sat at the table for an assessment of the political and military security situation in the Baltic Sea region. In 2016, Swedish and Finnish representatives took part for the first time in the meetings of foreign affairs ministers (May) and defense ministers (June). Apart from Russia's activities in the Baltic Sea region and the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, where Sweden and Finland are partner nations, frequent cooperation between NATO and the EU is on the agenda. Yet even if policy dialogue at the work-

Two new key partners for Germany?

Close political dialogue at the working and ministerial level

ing and ministerial level forms a solid foundation for the relationship of NATO to the two states, it remains circumscribed by the precept of confidentiality. This means that non-members do not have free access to NATO planning structures and are not integrated into all decision-making processes. Naturally, these restrictions have an adverse impact on the preparation of joint maneuvers and the flow of information from and to NATO.

Even from a military perspective, there are no obstacles whatsoever to the accession of the two states. To the contrary, their membership would even be desirable. Though their armed forces are small, they are highly developed. They would contribute a combat-capable air force and the state-of-the-art Swedish submarine fleet. The two countries would render important contributions to transatlantic striking power. Moreover, military cooperation has constantly been expanded. On 25 May 2016, the Swedish parliament ratified the Host Nation Support Agreement, permitting NATO to use territory, airspace and sovereign waters of Sweden in the event of a crisis or attack. A similar treaty has existed with Finland since 2014. Cooperation has also been strengthened in the defense industry, in military training and in the exchange of information. Finland, for example, supports the NATO Centres of Excellence for Cyber Security and Strategic Communication in Tallinn and Riga. Sweden recently decided to join both centres.

Two militarily relevant nations

A further critical factor is the notable interoperability of the Swedish and Finnish armed forces with NATO forces. Since the end of the Cold War, both countries have approximated NATO standards in military routines, terminology and procurement, thanks in part to their commitment to NATO-led operations in the Balkans and in Afghanistan. Both countries have moreover taken part as partner nations in maneuvers such as BALTOPS in June 2015 and the Crisis Management Exercise (CMX) in March 2016. At CMX16, Sweden and Finland were able to participate in a collective defense scenario for the first time. Though these joint exercises increase the interoperability of the armed forces, they also expose weaknesses in the exchange of information and coordination in serious incidents.

High degree of interoperability, participation in joint exercises

Security and stability in the Nordic-Baltic region

For NATO, the accession of Sweden and Finland could greatly improve the security situation in the Nordic-Baltic region. The set-up of "anti-access/area denial" (A2/AD) systems (i.e. air defense systems and anti-ship missiles) in Kaliningrad restricts NATO's access to the strategically important Baltic Sea region, impeding the defense of the three Baltic states in the event of an attack. Should Sweden become a NATO member, Swedish airspace could be used automatically, i.e. without any prior approval of the government, to reinforce the Baltic allies. A further interesting option is to create an air force base on the Swedish island of Gotland, off the southern coast of Sweden. NATO could thus strengthen its position throughout the Baltic Sea region. Finland could also provide critical information about Russian activities in the region. However, more planning, coordination and preparation is required for the two countries to be able to fulfill their critical role for the security of northeastern Europe. Only full membership can satisfy these requirements.

Critical contribution to Nordic-Baltic security

Perspective for stronger cooperation within the framework of NORDEFECO

Moreover, with NATO membership, one of the largest hurdles to closer cooperation between the Nordic and Baltic states within the framework of the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO) would be eliminated. The goal of NORDEFECO is to promote defense policy cooperation among the five members: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Since 2014, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have also been able

to collaborate in joint projects. Nevertheless, close cooperation has been difficult, because the three Baltic states view their collaboration with the non-NATO members Sweden and Finland as jeopardizing their connection to the transatlantic Alliance. When Finland assumes the presidency of NORDEFCO in 2017, the opportunity would arise to expand the cooperative structures. The accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO would thus also contribute indirectly to stabilization and integration in the region. This would also be good for Germany, not least with respect to energy security.

The military and strategic advantages for the Alliance in the Nordic-Baltic region of full membership for Sweden and Finland are obvious. Their accession would moreover send a political signal to Moscow by filling the security vacuum on the northeastern flank of the Alliance and establishing clear relationships in the region.

The risk exists, however, that NATO membership of Sweden and Finland will be construed as a provocation in Moscow. With the Warsaw resolutions for an increased military presence in eastern Europe, the signs already point towards confrontation. Accession would pour oil on the fire. In April 2016, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov already threatened consequences should Sweden join NATO. A potential accession process would draw additional attention to the Nordic states. Russia can be expected to exert influence on the media, and could react to an accession with economic sanctions and political and military threats. Such an aggravation of the situation would be inconsistent with Germany's approach favoring deterrence and dialogue.

Heightening of the
conflict with Russia?

NATO's capacity to act

The Alliance would not only be able to absorb the new applicants without any problem but their admission would even strengthen NATO's capacity to act. Their accession would give NATO-EU cooperation new impetus. With the accession of Sweden and Finland, the number of "double" members in NATO would increase. The Alliance would thus extend from the Atlantic coast to the Baltic Sea and from the Mediterranean to the Arctic. Though this would entail new obligations for the Alliance, it would also reinforce the aspiration to absorb the entire European Continent into the transatlantic community. Both Sweden and Finland have prescribed to the defense policy project of the EU and are convinced advocates of closer cooperation between the EU and NATO. This is in keeping with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who has given priority to the topic. In the joint declaration signed by the Secretary General, EU Council President Donald Tusk and the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker in Warsaw, it is stated that NATO and the EU have to give new impetus and new substance to their strategic partnership in order to confront common threats from the East and South.

New impetus for
NATO-EU cooperation

The strengths of the two countries in cyber security, strategic communication and defense against hybrid warfare relate to areas where NATO and the EU already cooperate. Allies could learn from the new members and develop new capabilities together. NATO could thus show that beyond the new emphasis on deterrence, the Alliance is working on fields that could take on greater importance for the defense of the Alliance partners in the future.

Dismissive public
opinion

However, Sweden and Finland could turn out to be complicated and difficult Alliance partners. In both countries, the governments face public opinion that tends to reject NATO. Though Russia's aggressive conduct and the resulting military threat have allowed public approval to increase slightly, there is no majority for accession

in either of the two countries. A survey on behalf of the daily newspaper Svenska Dagbladet in September 2015 showed that 41% of Swedes were for and 39% against NATO membership for their country. In Finland, less than one quarter of the population is for NATO accession and more than half against, according to the public broadcasting station Yle. A lack of support at home makes the decision-making of the Allies more difficult, because decisions must be unanimous. Diplomats must be sensitive to public opinion and thus are reticent about unpopular decisions. Sweden and Finland are moreover hesitant regarding the delicate topic of NATO nuclear strategy. Finland categorically rules out the stationing of nuclear weapons on its territory. While the two states would in no way be alone within NATO with their skepticism, their accession would present further difficulties to a coherent and credible NATO nuclear strategy. The question is thus whether NATO should accept two somewhat reluctant aspirants.

Political calculus in the member and accession states

The membership of Sweden and Finland would have political consequences both inside and outside the Alliance. Firstly, NATO could benefit from Swedish and Finnish “soft power” in order to improve its own image. Both countries enjoy a solid reputation on the international stage as progressive nations that are committed worldwide to development and human rights, demonstrating humanitarian engagement and supporting U.N. peace missions. Since the end of the Cold War, they have also exported security outside their immediate neighborhood. Recently appearing divided and strained, the Alliance could well use a breath of fresh air from two strong and cooperative democracies. The planned missions along the southern flank would profit from the additional legitimacy. Europe as a whole could also bathe in this positive light, for NATO contributes as a guarantor of European security to the perception of Europe as a united and resolute continent.

Swedish and Finnish
“soft power”

Moreover, accession would send an important message to other aspirants, above all Georgia, Macedonia and Bosnia, that the doors remain open to new NATO members. The Open Door Policy has proven to be a critical instrument in binding countries to the transatlantic alliance, motivating reforms and promoting democracy and stability particularly in central eastern Europe. With only Montenegro acceding since its inception, the Enlargement Process launched in 2009 could be reanimated. Clearly, Sweden and Finland have to be considered as easier candidates than other aspirants, as no major reform efforts have to be demanded from them. Germany is constantly putting the brakes on the Eastern enlargement. So for Germany, Nordic enlargement is a good opportunity to respect the basic Open Door Policy without having to bear the costs of admitting candidates in need of reform.

The door to NATO
remains open

The admission of Sweden and Finland could also lead to shifts within different factions in the Alliance, particularly with respect to conduct toward Russia. Some members, including Germany, might voice concerns regarding the escalation effect of accession. Sweden traditionally pursues a hard line against Russia. The tone between Stockholm and Moscow has sharpened based on the repeated incursions of Russian aircraft in Swedish airspace and the spectacular hunt for a Russian submarine in Swedish sovereign waters last year. Finland, in contrast, always takes a very conciliatory approach based on dialogue and detente. Yet, these two influences would balance each other out in the design of NATO’s Russia strategy rather than block each other. Firstly, both countries have already proven their pragmatism in hard negotiations regarding Russia’s activities in the Baltic Sea. Secondly, Finland will strengthen the current momentum of the faction of states that advocates dia-

Opportunity for a bal-
anced NATO strategy
towards Russia?

logue. In the long term, Finland's influence can help the Alliance to find the right mixture of pressure and dialogue.

In the long term, admission would lead to a shift in priorities in favor of the eastern flank, possibly bringing additional discord within the Alliance. From a German perspective, this is problematic because the Federal Republic has a clear interest in NATO involvement both in the East and in the Mediterranean. At the Warsaw summit, NATO better defined its role in the South, thus taking a key step towards safeguarding the balance between East and South. This balance remains fragile, however. Divergent perceptions of threats among Alliance partners make it difficult to adopt specific measures to combat dangers such as terrorism and illegal migration. Some southern member states thus might feel abandoned to their concerns. In the North, the Alliance is facing new danger scenarios. The tense situation in the Arctic, for example, might involuntarily become worse. To date, the neighboring countries have treated the territorial issues in the region as national issues. However, it is unclear whether this will remain the case in the event of a conceivable escalation between Russia and other states or whether the Arctic will continue to develop into a further conflict zone in addition to the Baltic Sea, Ukraine and the Black Sea.

More attention for
the East, less for the
South?

After Warsaw

In Warsaw, Sweden and Finland sat together at the table in many key meetings. For them to be able to exhaust their potential within the Alliance, however, they need to become full members. Even if NATO should take certain risks into account (Russia's foreseeable reaction and potential dissonance within the Alliance), it can profit in many respects from the accession of the Nordic Europeans. Firstly, the Alliance would gain two militarily relevant and highly respected members who would make a valuable contribution to Nordic-Baltic security and to NATO-EU cooperation. Nevertheless, the road to accession is long and bumpy. Two scenarios are conceivable. Either a shocking event will force accession or membership will be achieved in incremental steps. Both scenarios currently appear either undesirable or unlikely. The final hurdle in all cases will remain public opinion in the two countries. Against this backdrop, one alternative is to strengthen the connection to the United States and to expand bilateral relations.

The accession of
Sweden and Finland –
a win for NATO

An application for NATO membership remains the sovereign decision of Sweden and Finland. Nevertheless, Germany should promote their accession, because the two countries could become critical partners in NATO, as they share many perspectives with Germany. In Sweden and Finland, German political foundations could participate in public debates by putting experts in contact with each other and providing forums for discussion. Within the Alliance, Germany should advocate for the further strengthening of policy dialogue. For instance, the two countries should be integrated as far as possible into the process of implementing the Warsaw resolutions and involved more closely in preparing for CMX17. But it must be understood that certain advantages only come with full membership: There can be no voice and no assurance without assuming an obligation to contribute. Germany and NATO should communicate this to the Finns and Swedes, also with a view to the other potential accession candidates.

What should Germany
do?

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