A geopolitical game-changer

Finland and Sweden's NATO accession will fill an existing gap – a 'blind spot' – in the organisation's defence planning for its eastern territory

60 hours – that's how long it would take for Russia to gain control of the capital cities of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the event of a conventional attack, according to a 2016 study by the US think tank RAND Corporation. The forces of these three EU and NATO members would be overwhelmed. Subsequently, Western military HQs were haunted by the fear that Vladimir Putin might launch a rapid assault in the region to test the Alliance's resolve and undermine the credibility of collective defence, as laid down in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

Even though the Russian army's disastrous performance since its invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has called this into question, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania undoubtedly represent the Transatlantic Alliance's strategic Achilles Heel. The three Baltic states lie wedged between Belarus in the southeast and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad in the west. They are linked to the rest of the Alliance only by the narrow Suwałki Corridor at the Polish-Lithuanian border. In the case of a conflict, this corridor could be seized by enemy troops and the Baltic states would be cut off from other NATO allies. NATO would then face a dilemma: either accept the Russian *fait accompli* and thus lose all credibility or attempt to regain lost ground and thus risk a large-scale war with Russia, in which the danger of nuclear escalation could not be entirely ruled out.

Changing the balance of power

Finland's recent NATO accession and Sweden's forthcoming one, however, fundamentally alters this military calculation. The northern extension of the Alliance is a real *geopolitical game-changer*, which greatly simplifies the defence of the Baltics. Understandably, the news that the two Nordic states had applied to join the Alliance in May 2022 was greeted joyfully in Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius. Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas commented on Twitter last year (15 May): 'cannot overstate

the importance of these steps for our NATO family and Nordic-Baltic security. Look forward to the day we can say #WeAreNATO together with Finland and Sweden.' Only a day after the announcement, Kallas, together with her colleagues Arturs Krišjānis Kariņš in Latvia and Ingrida Šimonytė in Lithuania, issued a joint statement, warmly welcoming Finland and Sweden's decision.

And more significantly, the three Baltic republics were among the first member states to officially ratify the accessions. For Lithuania, in particular, the successful completion of the dual accession by July 2023 now represents an important foreign policy goal as it will host the next summit of the NATO heads of state and government.

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NATO accession constitutes a 'Copernican revolution' in foreign and defence policy for both Finland and Sweden. The two states have thus renounced their long-standing tradition of military non-alignment. Even before that, however, no one in Helsinki or Stockholm was under any illusion that operational forces were no longer needed for a credible military deterrent against Russia. And in the face of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, for the governments of both countries, joining NATO is primarily a matter of securing additional safeguards beyond their national capabilities.

For NATO, Finland and Sweden represent valuable political and military assets. Both states possess modern, well-equipped armed forces and stable democratic institutions. This is not a trivial consideration for the Alliance, after years of taking on board what can reasonably be described as military lightweights. Sweden currently spends around 1.3 per cent (about $ 8.4 bn) of its GDP on defence. Although this puts the country well below the 2 per cent target, the government has announced that it intends to reach this target by 2028. Stockholm is particularly well-positioned in terms of naval forces and air defence. NATO's Standing Maritime Group 1 will benefit, for example, from the Swedish navy's five submarines, which among other things are responsible for Baltic Sea defence.

Finland's defence budget already stands at 2 per cent of GDP (around $ 6 bn). However, the Finance Ministry is planning a further increase of $ 2.2 bn for the period of 2023 to 2026. In February 2022, an agreement was signed with the United States to purchase 64 state-of-the-art F-35

combat aircraft, which are to replace the Finnish air force's older F/A-18s by the early 2030s. With a value of around € 8.4 bn, this is Finland's biggest-ever military procurement. Based on the continuation of compulsory military service and its own particular reserve system, in the event of war, the Finnish army could be boosted to a force of 800,000 to 900,000 women and men with minimal delay. This is an enormous number by European standards.

Great improvements for NATO's defence capabilities

A quick glance at the map is enough to show how far-reaching the changes brought about by the Finnish and Swedish NATO accession will be for military strategic tectonics in north-eastern Europe. The Baltic will, de facto, become the Alliance's own inland sea. It will also simplify the defence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania enormously, as Finland and Sweden will henceforth bear the main responsibility for the Baltic (co-)defence. In the future, the Estonian air space can be monitored and defended from Finland. The capitals Tallinn and Helsinki are only around 80 kilometres apart, which presents no difficulty for modern artillery and air defence systems. Furthermore, the northern expansion creates the strategic depth required for taking back occupied territory. The two Nordic states fill an existing gap – a 'blind spot' – in NATO defence planning for its eastern territory. This also substantially increases NATO's available options for rapid force projection in north-eastern Europe. Supply lines can now be safeguarded much more quickly and reliably over air and maritime routes via Sweden. The Swedish island of Gotland also facilitates control over airspace and maritime activities in the Baltic Sea.

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Ideally, this circumstance alone will be sufficient to deter Russia from provocations in the region. But overall, Moscow has also been put into a defensive stance given the developments in the Baltic region. First of all, Sweden's NATO accession has robbed Russia of the possibility of a surprise Baltic land grab via a quick coup d'état and the (temporary) occupation of Gotland from the seaward side. Second, the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad will henceforth give Russia much more of a headache. And third, Finland's NATO accession will bring St Petersburg to the forefront of military planning. Although there is no conceivable conflict scenario in which NATO would move against

the city directly, at least a blockade of the Gulf of Finland is imaginable to monitor incoming ships.

All in all, Vladimir Putin's aggressive expansion policy has brought about precisely the opposite of what he originally intended. Finnish accession has added around 1,300 kilometres to Russia's border with the transatlantic defensive alliance, more than double the existing border. The dramatically deteriorating security situation has put even countries with decades of non-alignment traditions in the frame for possible NATO membership. Military neutrality has lost all value as a guarantee of stable relations with Moscow. It no longer provides strategic life insurance. As a result, the military balance of power in the Baltic region has shifted (even more) in favour of NATO. Overall, the defence of the area has been simplified, with the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania emerging as the biggest winners.

Denmark is opening up

All this shows that north-eastern Europe now finds itself in its very own '*Zeitenwende*', while the German government remains entangled in a bureaucratic jungle in its attempts at ushering in its own new era. The Scandinavian version of the *Zeitenwende*, besides NATO northward enlargement, also encompasses Denmark's opening up to cooperation within the framework of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). In Copenhagen, Stockholm and especially Helsinki, the first contours of a new European security order are taking shape – precisely where, in 1975, the signing of the CSCE (Helsinki) Final Act constituted a milestone on the way to a cooperative and indivisible peace and security architecture for the continent.

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In a tragic historical twist, for the foreseeable future, security in Europe has to be organised once more against an aggressive, revisionist and neo-imperial Russia. As a result of the war in Ukraine, Europe again faces a split into two blocks. On one hand, there are Finland and Sweden, as well as Moldova and Georgia, with their desire for closer involvement in Western (Alliance) structures. On the other hand, stands Belarus, which, since the outbreak of the war and at the latest with the recent announcement that Russian tactical nuclear weapons will be stationed on its territory, has abased itself to become a Russian vassal state.

Formerly neutral spaces in Europe are dwindling and with it the possibility of negotiations and mediation. The trend towards (re-)polarisation is very worrying in terms of the continent's stability, at least from a historical perspective. Finland and Sweden's NATO accession is likely to prove a win on points for the liberal model in the Western democracies' struggle with their authoritarian opponents to lay the cornerstones of the future international order. But a complete end to the path of neutrality in Europe would represent a truly disconcerting warning signal call for the old continent.



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