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Joining the West

Having fallen victim to the panic caused by the war in Ukraine, Finland and Sweden have decided to join NATO. A critical perspective

A famous quote from Desmond Tutu – 'if you are neutral in situations of injustice then you are choosing the side of the oppressor' – has been widely used and abused since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In numerous fora, it has been deployed to harangue countries into abandoning their neutrality and lining up behind NATO. Never mind that the oppressor to which Tutu referred was apartheid South Africa, a regime actively supported by the Atlantic military alliance. In both Russia and the West, the current moment is characterized by a constantly replenished amnesia.

Last month, Finland and Sweden opted to repeal their longstanding neutrality policies. Both countries submitted applications to join NATO, in a move that was rightly described as historic. Finland has been neutral since it was defeated by the Soviet Union during World War II – signing a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the Soviets in 1948. Sweden, meanwhile, fought numerous wars with Russia between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries but managed to stay out of any further conflict after 1814. Joining NATO discards a centuries-old tradition that has come to define the country's national identity.

Press coverage of the push for NATO membership has been euphoric. While Sweden has witnessed a limited but still lively debate, in Finland there has been little space for public dissent. Earlier last month, the cover of Finland's most-read newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, featured an illustration of two blue-and-white figures (the colours of the Finnish flag) rowing a Viking longship towards an illuminated horizon where the four-pointed NATO star is seen rising like the sun. The wooden ship is depicted leaving behind a dark, hulking structure decorated with a red star. The symbolism couldn't be clearer. Or perhaps it could. Several weeks ago, the online version of Sweden's *Dagens Nyheter* featured pop-up animation of the NATO emblem morphing into a peace sign.

Questioning a unanimous support for NATO membership

In this media environment, it is perhaps unsurprising that support for NATO membership is high: about 60 per cent in Sweden and 75 per cent in Finland. But a closer look at the demographics reveals some cracks in the pro-NATO narrative. For the Atlanticist press, 'the NATO question' represents a generational shift, with young people supposedly eager to join against the wishes of their parents, who, we are told, are hopelessly wedded to an outmoded position of Cold War non-alignment. 'Having been firmly opposed to any NATO move only weeks ago', wrote former Swedish Prime Minister turned liberal thinktank groupie Carl Bildt, the political class 'will now face a contest between an older generation and younger ones looking at the world with fresh eyes.'

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In reality, though, the opposite is true: the demographic most opposed to NATO membership in Sweden is young men, aged 18-29. And little wonder. They are the segment of the population that would be called upon to join any future military excursion. Contrary to the assumption that Russian aggression has shocked Swedes into unanimous support for the alliance, opposition appears to be on the rise. On 23 March, 44 per cent of young people surveyed were for NATO and 21 per cent against. In the middle of May, 43 per cent of them were for NATO and 32 per cent against: a double-digit leap. Support for membership rises with each age bracket, with the elderly most staunchly in favour. The latest polls from Finland tell a similar story. Polling by *Helsingin Sanomat* describes the typical NATO supporter as educated, middle-aged or older, male, working in a management-level position, earning at least €85,000 a year and politically on the right, while the typical NATO-sceptic is under the age of 30, a worker or a student, earning less than €20,000 a year and politically on the left.

Valuing business leader over the

general public

Some of the most ardent supporters of NATO membership can be found among Sweden and Finland's business leaders. In April, Finnish President Sauli Niinistö hosted a 'secret NATO meeting' in Helsinki. Among those in attendance were Swedish Minister of Finance Mikael Damberg, top-ranking military officials and powerful figures in the Swedish and Finnish business communities. Chief among them was the billionaire Swedish industrialist Jacob Wallenberg, whose family holdings add up to one third of the Stockholm Stock Exchange. Wallenberg has been NATO's most enthusiastic cheerleader among Swedish executives. He is a regular participant in the Bilderberg Meeting, an elite group dedicated to spreading the gospel of Atlanticism and free markets. In the weeks leading up to Sweden's decision to apply for NATO membership, the *Financial Times* predicted that the Wallenberg dynasty's stance on Swedish accession would 'weigh heavily' on the ruling Social Democrats, over whom he is thought to hold considerable sway.

At the Helsinki summit, Swedish government officials were warned that their country would become less attractive for foreign capital if it remained 'the only state in Northern Europe outside of NATO'. This, along with significant cajoling from Finland, was one of the decisive factors that led Minister of Defence Peter Hultqvist to change tack and swing behind the alliance. Sweden's *Expressen* reported that the meeting suggested the business community holds far greater power over foreign policy decisions than previously thought. It's not hard to see why business are so invested. Swedish defence industry giant Saab is expecting major profits from NATO membership. The company, whose majority shareholder is the Wallenberg family, has seen its share price nearly double since the Russian invasion. Chief Executive Micael Johansson has said that Sweden's NATO membership will open new possibilities for Saab in the areas of missile defence and surveillance. The company is expecting dramatic gains as European countries raise their defence spending, and first quarter reports reveal that operating profits have already risen 10 per cent over last year, to $32 million.

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The considerable influence of business leaders on the NATO question contrasts with that of the general public. Though Sweden has held referenda on every major decision in recent history – EU membership, the adoption of the euro – it will not consult its citizens on NATO. The most prominent politician to call for a vote is Left Party leader Nooshi Dadgostar, but her requests have been flatly rejected. The

government, fearing that NATO membership could be voted down once wartime hysteria wears off, has instead taken a 'shock doctrine' approach, ramming the policy through while Ukraine is still in the headlines and the public is afraid. They have also said that a referendum would require extensive organization and could not be held for some months. This means the issue of NATO membership would feature in the September election campaign: a scenario the Social Democrats are determined to avoid.

In Finland, however, there is little mainstream opposition to NATO. The issue has been tinged by nationalist sentiment, and opponents of membership are accused of not caring about their country's security. Parliament voted overwhelmingly in favour of membership last month, with 188 for and only eight against. Of those eight, one was from the right-populist Finns Party, another was a former member of the same outfit, and the remaining six were from the Left Alliance. The other ten Left Alliance MPs, though, voted in favour. One of the party's representatives went so far as to propose new legislation that would criminalize attempts to influence public opinion on behalf of a foreign power: a precedent that could in theory leave NATO-critics exposed to prosecution.

Kurdish activists or NATO membership?

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has slowed some of this break-neck momentum. Calling Finland and Sweden 'incubators' for Kurdish terror, the Turkish president has vowed to block the two Nordic countries' accession to NATO until they meet his demands. (The alliance requires unanimous approval from all member states for a new country to join). Erdoğan has blasted Finland and Sweden over their refusal to extradite 33 members of the PKK and Gülenist movement, blaming the latter for a bloody coup attempt in 2016. He has also demanded that Sweden lift an arms embargo that it imposed in response to Turkey's incursions in Syria in 2019.

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Kurdish issues have recently had an outsize presence in Swedish politics. When the Social Democrats lost their parliamentary majority last year, Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson was forced to negotiate directly with a Kurdish MP and ex-peshmerga fighter named Amineh Kakabaveh, whose vote would decide the

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fortunes of the government. In exchange for keeping it afloat, Kakabaveh demanded that Sweden lend its support to the YPG in Syria, and the Social Democrats acceded. Now, as of last month, Kakabaveh has chided Andersson for 'giving in' to Erdoğan and threatened to withdraw her support for the government. The Social Democrats may have avoided making the autumn elections an unofficial referendum on NATO membership, but their government remains extremely weak, and will face intense scrutiny in the months ahead. Many fear that it will strike a private deal with Erdoğan to sacrifice Kurdish activists and Turkish dissidents if he agrees to wave through its NATO bid. Meanwhile, Croatia's increasingly audacious president, Zoran Milanović, has erected another, smaller obstacle: promising to block Sweden and Finland's membership unless Bosnia and Herzegovina's election law is changed so that Bosnian Croats are better represented.

Abolishing socialist institutions for a US-led power bloc

The media, both foreign and domestic, have frequently described Finland and Sweden's accession as 'joining the West' – picking a side in the Huntington-esque civilizational struggle. This rhetoric is nothing new. Shortly before Montenegro joined the alliance in 2017, the country's long-reigning premier Milo Đukanović said that the division was not 'for NATO or against NATO', it was 'civilizational and cultural'. Yet it is especially odd, and revealing, to encounter this same auto-orientalism in Scandinavia. One right-wing commentator recently wrote that by joining NATO, Sweden was at last becoming a 'normal Western country'. He then paused to consider whether the government would soon abolish the Systembolaget, or state liquor monopoly. Here we get a sense of what 'joining the West' really means: binding oneself to a US-led power bloc and simultaneously doing away with any nominally socialist institutions – a process that has already been underway for decades.

The abandonment of principled neutrality as a moral option follows the changing meaning of internationalism, especially for the left in the Nordic countries. During the Cold War, the Swedish Social Democrats expressed the principle of international solidarity through their support

for national liberation movements in the so-called Global South. No figure better embodied this spirit than Olof Palme, who posed for photos smoking cigars with Fidel Castro and famously excoriated the US aerial bombardment of Hanoi and Haiphong, comparing it to 'Guernica, Oradour, Babi Yar, Katyn, Lidice, Sharpeville [and] Treblinka'. During the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, however, such 'active internationalism' was reconceptualized as 'responsibility to protect' certain non-Western victims of aggression. By the same logic, states are now expected to band together in an 'alliance of democracies' to confront tyranny and terrorism – through regime change where necessary.

Amid such confected panic, genuine threats to the Nordic way of life have gone ignored: the withering away of the welfare state, the privatization and marketization of education, rising inequality and the weakening of the universal healthcare system.

But the decision to join NATO does not just rely on a hollowed-out discourse of solidarity; it is also presented as a vital act of self-interest – a defensive response to the 'Russian threat'. In Sweden's case, we are asked to believe that the country is currently facing greater security risks than during both World Wars, and that the only way to address them is to enter a beefed-up military alliance. Although Russia is supposedly struggling to make headway against a much weaker opponent in Ukraine – unable to hold the capital, hemorrhaging troops and supplies – we are told that it poses an imminent threat to Stockholm and Helsinki. Amid such confected panic, genuine threats to the Nordic way of life have gone ignored: the withering away of the welfare state, the privatization and marketization of education, rising inequality and the weakening of the universal healthcare system. While rushing to align with 'the West', the Swedish and Finnish governments have shown considerably less urgency in tackling these social crises.

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