

## NATO'S EXPANSION IN RESPONSE TO RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE: STRENGTHENING THE TRANSATLANTIC ALLIANCE WITH FINLAND AND SWEDEN

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**Abstract:** In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Finland and Sweden jointly applied for membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on May 18 of that year. This decision marked a significant departure from the longstanding tradition of military non-alignment in both

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countries, signaling a radical shift in their foreign and security policies. The simultaneous submission of membership bids underscored the careful coordination between Helsinki and Stockholm, reflecting a strategic effort to minimize the risk of Russian reprisals or attempts to isolate either country. Additionally, the move dealt a blow to Vladimir Putin, occurring shortly after Russia's failure to capture Kyiv and avert the protracted and costly war that ensued. While Finland's accession process proceeded smoothly, Sweden faced initial obstacles, with Turkey and Hungary initially impeding the ratification of its NATO membership. Ultimately, Finland joined NATO in 2023, followed by Sweden in 2024, making them the alliance's 31st and 32nd members, respectively. The public discourse in both countries since early 2022 has been dominated by discussions of the benefits that NATO membership will bring, reflecting a profound shift in government policy and public sentiment. However, less attention has been paid to the advantages that Finland and Sweden will offer to the alliance. Despite this, their inclusion represents a significant political and symbolic response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, further solidifying NATO's position in the region. This article argues that the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO not only enhances the Alliance's military capabilities and strategic depth but also underscores the enduring commitment of its member states to collective defence and the preservation of peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region.

**Key words:** NATO, Finland, Sweden, war in Ukraine, transatlantic alliance.

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## INTRODUCTION

Finland officially became a member of NATO on April 4, 2023, swiftly completing the accession process. In contrast, Sweden encountered initial resistance from Turkey and Hungary. After more than a year of blocking Sweden's bid, Turkey finally agreed to support the application at the NATO Summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, on July 11, 2023. This decision followed Sweden's efforts to address Turkey's security concerns. However, the Turkish parliament did not ratify Swedish accession until January 2024, coinciding with a deal for the United States to sell F-16 fighter aircraft to Ankara.

In February 2024, during a visit by the Swedish Prime Minister to Hungary, announcements were made regarding Swedish plans to provide additional JAS-39 Gripen fighter aircraft to Budapest. Furthermore, Saab, the manufacturer of these jets, committed to investing in an artificial intelligence research center in Hungary. Subsequently, the Hungarian parliament voted to approve Sweden's NATO membership bid.

These recent developments mark a significant departure from the fundamental principle of Finnish and Swedish foreign and security policy since 1945, which prioritized non-alignment with any military alliance. Instead, both countries historically pursued conflict avoidance through skillful diplomacy and robust national defense strategies. Their defense doctrines aimed at fostering broad societal involvement and bolstering emergency readiness and societal resilience, acknowledging the inherent constraints of their small size and finite resources.

Sweden's history of armed neutrality is notable. It stood apart from direct involvement in the Second World War, establishing itself during the Cold War as a significant defense industry player and a key diplomatic voice in global peace efforts. Sweden's approach emphasized a strong military production base and national conscription to maintain credible deterrence, given its status as a small, non-aligned nation situated between NATO and the Warsaw Pact (Mendershausen, 1973). For Finland, the policy of military non-alignment was also a pragmatic response to geopolitical realities. Despite its modest population, limited natural resources, and minimal heavy industry or domestic arms production, Finland faced off against the Soviet Union twice in the

1940s during the Winter War (1939–40) and the Continuation War (1941–44). Additionally, it engaged in the brief Lapland War (late 1944) against the German Wehrmacht, its former co-belligerent against the Soviets.

Through sheer determination and 'sisu' (fighting spirit), Finland managed to preserve its sovereignty and the bulk of its territory, even as much of Europe fell under Allied or Soviet control. However, this independence came at a high cost, with widespread famine, suffering, and devastation during the war. Post-war, Finland's Soviet neighbors expected it to remain militarily non-aligned, unlike Denmark and Norway, which pursued NATO membership (Zarembaite, 2023). Anchored by a 1948 accord of amity, cooperation, and mutual assistance with the Soviet Union, Finland found itself militarily estranged from Western Europe during the Cold War. In navigating this delicate geopolitical landscape, Helsinki prioritized maintaining positive relations with its formidable neighbor to the east while also fortifying its military capabilities to counter any potential incursion by the Red Army. Meanwhile, Sweden adopted a role as an international mediator and pursued a Cold War policy of political neutrality and multilateral dialogue, actively advocating for nuclear disarmament. Throughout this era, both nations upheld robust national defense postures, though Sweden notably downscaled its military following the end of the Cold War in pursuit of a "peace dividend" (UK Ministry of Defence, 2023).

Given Finland's position as a buffer state, Swedish defense strategists perceived a reduced risk of immediate land invasion by the Soviets (or later, the Russians). Nonetheless, they remained vigilant against sub-threshold or "grey zone" activities, Soviet/Russian military presence and influence in the Baltic Sea region, and the potential occupation of Gotland, which could serve as a launching pad for attacks on the Swedish mainland or NATO countries in the event of a European conflict. Throughout the Cold War and up to 2014, both Finland and Sweden adopted policies aimed at avoiding antagonizing Moscow while also preparing for territorial defense. They quietly expanded military cooperation with other Nordic and NATO countries as a deterrent against potential threats. Many planners within the Western Alliance hoped that, while officially non-aligned, Sweden and Finland could contribute to defending themselves against Russian aggression, thereby bolstering NATO's security posture along Norway's eastern flank.

Moreover, Alliance officials anticipated at least tacit support from Stockholm and Helsinki for their fellow democracies in the West. This support might include allowing NATO aircraft to fly over their airspace en route to strike targets in Russian territory or the Baltic Sea. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact presented new opportunities for deepening ties with the West. Unlike most NATO members, including Sweden, which significantly downsized their military and defense industries in the 1990s and 2000s, Finland maintained a steadfast focus on national defense (Michel, 2018; Schmies, 2021).

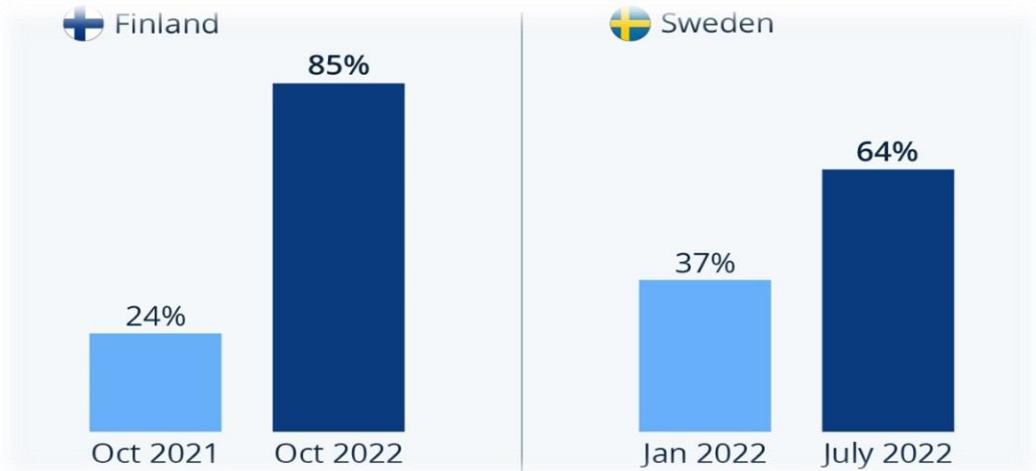
Both Finland and Sweden acceded to the European Union in 1995, aligning themselves politically, if not militarily, with the bloc. However, while Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union theoretically obligated them to come to the defense of other EU member states in times of crisis, their commitment to collective defense remained nuanced, reflecting their longstanding tradition of military non-alignment.

## **SCANDINAVIAN SHIFT: FINLAND AND SWEDEN' STRATEGIC EVOLUTION POST-UKRAINE**

Finland and Sweden cautiously approached NATO in the 1990s and 2000s, but refrained from pursuing full membership due to the prevailing political taboos at home. However, Russia's aggressive actions, starting with the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and culminating in the assaults on Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, led to a significant shift in this longstanding stance. After Russia's initial invasion of eastern Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014, Finland and Sweden, having been Partners for Peace since 1994, elevated their status to NATO Enhanced Opportunity Partners (EOP). This upgrade reflected their recognition of the escalating threat environment. In response to

the deteriorating security situation, both nations contributed to the NATO Response Force (NRF) and established Host Nation Support agreements (Binnendijk, 2020; Cottey, 2018).

They actively participated in joint exercises, high-level discussions on Nordic-Baltic security with NATO members, and various NATO-led missions, deploying small contingents to Afghanistan and Kosovo.



**Figure 1.** How the war in Ukraine pushed Finland and Sweden to join NATO<sup>1</sup>  
 (Source: <https://www.statista.com/chart/27422/public-support-joining-nato-finland-sweden/>)

Unlike many NATO members, Finland maintained a military focused on large-scale conventional warfare and territorial defense, rather than reconfiguring for expeditionary and counterinsurgency operations. This strategic choice positioned the Finnish Armed Forces well to confront the resurgent Russian threat. In addition to their cooperation with NATO, Finland and Sweden are members of the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) framework, and other multinational groupings like the Northern Group, the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). They have also forged bilateral and trilateral agreements with the United States, aimed at aligning security policies and enhancing cooperation (Binnendijk, 2020; Forsberg, 2018).

This extensive network of partnerships, coupled with efforts to ensure interoperability with NATO forces, has prepared Finland and Sweden for seamless integration into NATO structures should they choose to pursue membership. However, the decisive factor prompting their reassessment of military non-alignment was Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its broader destabilizing activities. In light of these developments, both Finland and Sweden found themselves compelled to reconsider their longstanding policies of neutrality. The geopolitical realities necessitated a reevaluation of their security posture, leading to closer cooperation with NATO and a shift towards policies aimed at bolstering their defense capabilities and resilience in the face of evolving threats. Amid escalating tensions, Finland and Sweden faced a series of security challenges, including Russian nuclear posturing, heightened military activity near NATO and Nordic territories, weaponized migration along the Finnish border, GPS disruptions in the Arctic, anti-satellite missile tests, and cyber-attacks on European communication networks. This

<sup>1</sup>This infographic based on polling conducted before and after Russia's invasion, the war in Ukraine has shifted public opinion drastically in both Nordic nations. Shortly before the conflict erupted, only 24 percent of Finns and 37 percent of Swedes supported their countries seeking NATO membership. In July/October 2022 though, a majority of the population now supports joining. A dramatic increase has been observed in Finland especially, where 85 percent said that they view their country's membership application positively.

deteriorating security landscape, compounded by Russia's entanglement in the Ukrainian conflict, left Helsinki and Stockholm with limited recourse for self-defense. Recognizing the need for a robust security framework, both nations concluded that only the collective defense provision of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty could ensure their protection in the post-February 2022 geopolitical landscape.



**Figure 2.** The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO reinforces the Alliance's northern flank<sup>2</sup>  
(Source: <https://nordregio.org/new-nato-map-to-mark-swedens-full-membership/>)

### SECURITY SHIFT: FINLAND AND SWEDEN'S EVOLUTION WITHIN NATO

The upcoming sections will explore the military strengths and additional contributions that Finland and Sweden offer as NATO's newest members. Furthermore, we will assess the overarching strategic advantages resulting from the expansion of the Alliance to include all Nordic-Baltic states except Russia. Finland, a Nordic country with a population of 5.6 million spread over a vast territory of 338,145 square kilometers, shares a 1,300-kilometer border with Russia. The nation heavily relies on Baltic Sea sea-lines of communication (SLOCs) for crucial supplies, making its geostrategic position historically delicate (Mendershausen, 1973).

<sup>2</sup>Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO marked a historic shift for these traditionally militarily nonaligned countries that for decades sought to balance political, economic, and cultural ties to the West and relations with Russia. After the Cold War, Finland and Sweden joined the European Union (EU) and established close partnerships with NATO. Both Finland and Sweden have participated in numerous NATO operations over the years, and the two countries have advanced militaries that are interoperable with NATO.

Finland's defense strategy is largely shaped by the existential threat posed by its eastern neighbor, leading to a disproportionately robust national defense capability. Its military forces and equipment are primarily geared towards defending its territory against potential Russian aggression. This emphasis underscores Finland's commitment to safeguarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of geopolitical challenges. In contrast to many European nations that transitioned to smaller professional militaries and focused on expeditionary operations post-Cold War, Finland maintained a pragmatic stance, prioritizing its limited resources to prepare for the potential resurgence of large-scale conflict in Europe. With direct historical experience of conflicts with Russia, Finland has placed civil preparedness, societal resilience, and a strong national will to defend itself at the forefront of its national identity. Even with Finland's accession to NATO, with the security benefits of Article 5, its core strategy of self-sufficiency, resilience, and mobilization of society during crises remains unchanged. This approach, known as 'comprehensive security' in Finland, parallels Norway and Sweden's 'Total Defence' concepts (Michel, 2018).

To ensure national preparedness and resilience, Finland relies on extensive cross-sectoral cooperation, where private entities collaborate with the public sector to guarantee critical supply chains and maintain societal functioning during emergencies (CCDCOE, 2021).

The country has developed robust supporting infrastructure, including underground civil defense shelters and stockpiles of essential supplies like food, fuel, medicines, and ammunition. Moreover, Finland recently secured EUR 242 million in European Commission funding to establish the EU's largest strategic reserve for protective equipment and medical supplies, aimed at responding to chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) emergencies.

In addition to physical infrastructure, Finland invests in public awareness campaigns, educational programs, and sectoral exercises to enhance readiness. The government also wields broad emergency powers, enabling it to reorganize industry and requisition resources in times of crisis. Furthermore, Finland is recognized as a leader in addressing hybrid threats, particularly those originating from Russia and its proxies. Since 2017, the country has hosted the Hybrid Centre of Excellence (Hybrid CoE), an international organization offering research, advice, and training under the joint auspices of the EU and NATO.

Moreover, Finland actively promotes resilience in critical infrastructure and combats online disinformation, particularly Russian-backed propaganda on social media platforms. Through these initiatives, Finland demonstrates its commitment to safeguarding its sovereignty and security in an increasingly complex and dynamic security environment.

In recent years, Finland has intensified its efforts to counter potential hybrid threats posed by China, such as intellectual property theft and attempts by Chinese entities to acquire strategic land parcels in sensitive Finnish regions, particularly in the Arctic. An incident in October 2023, where Finland's undersea Baltic connector gas pipeline with Estonia was damaged concurrently with the severing of a subsea data cable to Sweden, raised suspicions of Russian or Chinese sabotage, leading to multinational investigations.

Finland's national defense strategy continues to draw on the comprehensive resources of society, including conscription, a robust reserve force, and a population with a strong determination to defend the country, as evidenced by regular polling. This culture of self-sufficiency in defense positions Finland as an immediate net contributor to NATO's collective security upon its accession, offering valuable expertise in defending the Alliance's longest land border with Russia (Marlow, 2024).

The cornerstone of Finland's defense policy remains its military strength, characterized by a conscript-based higher-readiness force supported by a sizable reserve component. Conscription is compulsory for men over 18 years old and voluntary for women, with individuals serving either in the military or civil service, such as the paramilitary Finnish Border Guard. This system ensures a wartime troop strength of approximately 280,000, augmented by an additional 870,000–900,000 trained reservists, making Finland one of NATO's largest military forces.

While the Finnish Navy and Air Force rely less on conscripts or reservists due to their platform-centric nature, they boast significant capabilities, including icebreakers, mine warfare vessels, and soon-to-be-acquired F-35 stealth fighters. Finland's military assets span all domains, with a particularly formidable artillery force, which is crucial for countering the massed indirect fires backed by ground forces and armor characteristic of the Russian military. Finland's proactive approach to hybrid threats and its robust defense posture, underpinned by a strong national will and well-trained armed forces, position it as a key contributor to NATO's security architecture, particularly in the face of challenges emanating from Russia and China.

Sweden, a social democracy and advanced Nordic nation, boasts a vast territory of 450,295 square kilometers, making it the third-largest country in the EU in terms of land area. Despite its expansive landmass, Sweden's population of 10.4 million is concentrated primarily in its coastal cities, leaving much of the interior sparsely populated. The country's southern coast, stretching 2,700 kilometers along the Baltic Sea, and its western border, marked by the Scandinavian mountain range, define its strategic geography (Ministry of Defence of Finland, 2022).

During the Cold War, Sweden occupied a pivotal position on the front lines, leading to the establishment of robust coastal and aerial defenses. As one of the most formidable military powers in Europe at the time, Sweden embraced a policy of Total Defence, encompassing military, civil, economic, and psychological aspects to safeguard its sovereignty and ensure security of supply.

However, with the conclusion of the Cold War and the perceived reduction of the Russian threat, Sweden underwent a significant demilitarization process. Unlike Finland, which maintained a strong focus on territorial defense, Sweden downsized its armed forces considerably, pivoting towards civil defense, crisis management, and participation in peacekeeping missions abroad, such as those in Kosovo and Korea (NATO Allied Air Command, 2023).

In recent years, with the resurgence of Russia as a major security concern, Sweden has shifted its defense and security priorities once again. Recognizing the renewed threat posed by Russia, Sweden has embarked on efforts to bolster its military capabilities, reaffirm the importance of Total Defence, and revitalize its defense industry. This shift in threat perception was underscored in 2018 when the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) distributed guidance pamphlets titled 'If crisis or war comes' to every household—a significant departure from the practice discontinued since 1991. The move aimed to raise awareness among the populace about the need for preparedness in the face of potential crises or conflicts, reflecting Sweden's renewed focus on national defense and security.

Overall, Sweden's defense and security posture have evolved in response to changing geopolitical dynamics, from its role as a frontline state during the Cold War to its demilitarization and subsequent rearmament efforts in the face of renewed threats from Russia. Through initiatives like Total Defence and efforts to strengthen its military capabilities, Sweden continues to adapt to ensure the security and resilience of its nation.

The deteriorating security environment has prompted Sweden to reinstate the Total Defence model as the cornerstone of its defense policy, emphasizing a comprehensive approach to national security that encompasses both military and civil defense aspects. In response to escalating concerns over Russian cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns, Sweden has also revitalized its psychological defense capabilities.

While Sweden's military defense strategy is expected to maintain its focus on territorial defense, there is also a concerted effort to bolster societal resilience and crisis management capabilities. Conscripts, temporarily abolished in 2010, were reintroduced at the beginning of 2018, although the number of individuals obligated to serve remains relatively small compared to the eligible pool of conscripts. Efforts are underway to expand the capacity of the military training system, with plans to increase the annual number of conscripts from 6,000 to 8,000 by 2025.

Additionally, in the event of a national emergency, the Swedish government has the legal authority to mobilize all citizens aged 16 to 70 (UK Ministry of Defence, 2023).

Despite Sweden's larger population compared to Finland, its military capacity is smaller. However, since 2014, Sweden has been modernizing and expanding its armed forces capabilities. Sweden's combat air, littoral, and undersea warfare capabilities would significantly enhance NATO's deterrent and defense capabilities. The country's defense industry, despite its small size relative to other NATO allies, has proven to be remarkably sophisticated and capable. Domestic design and production of military equipment, such as the JAS-39 Gripen combat aircraft, Archer artillery systems, CV-90 infantry fighting vehicles, and conventional attack submarines, are notable achievements considering Sweden's limited defense budget and overall economic size.

To foster innovation in its defense technology and industrial sector, Sweden has adopted a 'Triple Helix' model, promoting close collaboration between the government, industry, and academic institutions. Moreover, Sweden actively exports defense platforms and equipment to NATO countries, generating revenue and economies of scale for local firms like Saab, while also strengthening ties and interoperability with foreign forces. As a result, Sweden plays a significant role in European collective security through its defense industrial contributions, despite its relatively smaller economic stature on the global stage (Zarembaite, 2023).

### **ENHANCING NATO'S CAPABILITIES: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF FINLAND AND SWEDEN**

Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO presents a myriad of opportunities and benefits for the Alliance. Drawing from their historical experience and expertise in assessing Russian capabilities and intentions, both countries offer valuable intelligence, insights, and specialization on the Russian military threat. Despite ongoing discussions regarding the integration of Finland and Sweden into NATO command structures and regional plans, the Alliance gains a strategic foothold in Northern Europe. With Finland's inclusion, NATO effectively doubles its land border with Russia and gains the potential to hold key Russian bases and forces in the Kola Peninsula at risk, thereby enhancing its conventional defense and deterrence posture (Selden, 2022).

Sweden's membership would provide NATO with additional strategic and operational depth in Scandinavia, aiding in the defense of Finland and facilitating the reception and integration of NATO reinforcements in times of crisis. Moreover, Sweden's strategic position would enable power projection into the Baltic Sea region, potentially involving the positioning of radar, air defense, and anti-ship systems on the island of Gotland. This would enhance NATO's ability to reinforce the Baltic States and contribute to a more integrated defense and deterrence approach in Northern Europe and the North Atlantic.

Additionally, Sweden's extensive network of ground lines of communication (GLOCs) would alleviate pressure on the limited north-south GLOCs in Norway, facilitating the rapid reinforcement of both the northernmost Norwegian counties and Finnish Lapland. The integration of Finland and Sweden into NATO would also lead to greater NATO presence in the European Arctic and Baltic-Nordic regions, improved information sharing and situational awareness in maritime and air domains, and enhanced coordination on air missions in the North Calotte region.

Overall, the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO would contribute to a more cohesive and robust defense and deterrence posture in Northern Europe, strengthening NATO's position vis-à-vis Russia and enhancing security and stability in the region (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland & Ministry of Transport and Communications of Finland, 2025).

Finland and Sweden offer valuable expertise in societal resilience and comprehensive security models, which align closely with NATO's strategic priorities outlined in the 2022 Strategic Concept. As leaders in Total Defence strategies, they possess unique insights into countering hybrid threats and mobilizing various sectors of society during crises. This expertise is



particularly relevant to NATO's ongoing efforts, including those led by Allied Command Transformation and the Defense Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2024).

The inclusion of Finland and Sweden in NATO promises long-term benefits for the Alliance. Their robust democracies and comprehensive security approaches complement NATO's values and objectives, enhancing the organization's resilience and cross-government coordination (Defense.Info, 2018).

Furthermore, both countries have actively participated in EU defense initiatives, fostering potential avenues for stronger NATO-EU collaboration on various issues. Helsinki's hosting of the Hybrid CoE exemplifies its leadership role in bridging EU-NATO cooperation (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2023). Sweden's endorsement of a feminist foreign policy and Finland's expertise in Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) initiatives offer valuable perspectives to NATO's work on human security and climate security agendas. These contributions underscore the importance of integrating diverse viewpoints and approaches into NATO's strategic framework (Le Gargasson & Black, 2023). On the military front, Finland boasts one of Europe's strongest artillery forces and maintains a sizable conscript and reserve force capable of rapid mobilization (Ministry of Defence of Finland, 2022). This readiness to deploy 280,000 troops within 30 days significantly bolsters NATO's land defense capabilities and enhances the Alliance's overall deterrence posture in the region. Additionally, Sweden's advanced defense industry and commitment to innovation ensure that NATO benefits from cutting-edge technologies and capabilities. The inclusion of Finland and Sweden into NATO not only bolsters the Alliance's military prowess but also enhances its strategic resilience by leveraging the expertise of these two Nordic nations. As NATO confronts evolving security challenges, the contributions of Finland and Sweden will be instrumental in shaping the Alliance's future capabilities and priorities.

Sweden possesses advanced military capabilities, boasting substantial armoured, mechanized, artillery, and air defense systems, including Patriot units. With a significant focus on artillery and associated sensors, Finland maintains disproportionate capabilities to engage in deep battles, leveraging its heavily forested and marshy terrain to effectively channel and engage enemy forces with long-range fires. Together, the military forces of both nations serve as a substantial conventional deterrent, safeguarding NATO's extended Finnish land border with Russia and possessing the capability to threaten key Russian assets such as the Kola Peninsula and St. Petersburg using long-range precision fires if necessary in a conflict scenario (European Parliament, "Mutual defence clause: Article 42").

Beyond their immediate vicinity, the armies of Finland and Sweden can provide high-readiness and follow-on forces to Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), aligning with NATO's New Force Model and Concept for the Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA). While both nations have experience in out-of-area operations, Finland remains steadfast in prioritizing territorial defense capabilities, addressing existing deficits across the Alliance (Deni, 2022).

Moreover, Finland and Sweden have signed Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCAs) with the United States and are actively deepening ties with the US Army, National Guard, and special operations forces through joint exercises. Their expertise, particularly in cold weather operations, is highly valuable and can be shared with partner nations. In the realm of air defense, both countries possess robust ground-based systems and fleets of fourth- and fifth-generation combat aircraft, tailored to their small population sizes (Chivvis, 2017).

They have also placed significant emphasis on enabling dispersed air operations to enhance survivability in the face of potential air and missile strikes, particularly from Russia. Sweden's design decisions for the JAS-39 Gripen aircraft, optimized for operations in austere and icy locations, further contribute to the resilience and flexibility of NATO air forces, offering valuable insights to other Allies adjusting to dispersed operations after years of operating from centralized airbases in uncontested airspace.

Such an approach is in line with initiatives such as the US Air Force's Agile Combat Employment (ACE) concept, presenting an opportunity for the Nordic air forces to exert significant influence in exploring the optimal integration of the distinct strengths and weaknesses of fourth- and fifth-generation aircraft. In 2023, the Finnish, Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian air forces jointly declared their intent to enhance air cooperation, particularly in the North Calotte region, and took steps toward a more cohesive joint force structure (Bronk, 2023).

In maritime domains, both Finland and Sweden boast small yet modern navies equipped with a variety of sensors, weapons systems, and mines, specialized for operations in the shallow and congested Baltic Sea and its littoral areas. For instance, Sweden's conventional submarine fleet can address vulnerabilities in maintaining navigability in the Baltic's waters during conflicts, as the shallow sea's average depth of 60 meters renders it unsuitable for the nuclear-powered submarines that constitute the majority of the US or Royal Navy's attack submarine fleets, as well as Russia's submarine force.

Despite their maritime focus, both nations have acknowledged the increasing military significance of secure access to and utilization of space, along with the threat posed by Russian anti-satellite (ASAT) missile and other capabilities. In response, Finland and Sweden introduced new national space strategies in 2018 and 2019, respectively (BBC News, 2017).

They also host crucial infrastructure, owing to their proximity to polar orbits; for instance, the Esrange Space Centre near Kiruna in northern Sweden accommodates one of the world's largest civilian satellite ground stations and serves as a pivotal node in the satellite network (CCDCOE, 2021).

Even prior to their NATO accession, both countries collaborated with the NATO Collaborative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (NATO CCDCOE) in Tallinn, Estonia, as non-NATO contributing nations. Sweden excelled in the competitive cyber defense exercise Locked Shields in 2021, while Finland claimed the top spot in 2022. Additionally, both nations maintain close partnerships with other European governments and Computer Emergency Response Teams (CERTs), participating in EU and Nordic Council initiatives focused on information sharing, training, education, and capacity building in cybersecurity.

Both Finland and Sweden boast world-leading science and technology ecosystems that punch above their weight on the global stage, driven by their highly educated populations and close collaboration among government, industry, and academia in research and development (R&D). Through industrial cooperation arrangements, both countries facilitate the integration of innovative solutions into defense systems, ensuring the military security of supply and enhancing the availability of critical technologies and materiel for their defense forces. Moreover, their robust commercial technology sectors offer ample opportunities for the adaptation of existing products and services into dual-use capabilities for NATO.

Sweden's advanced industrial base has fostered niche strengths in electronic warfare applications (e.g., Saab and Ericsson), conventional submarine technology (e.g., Saab and Kockums), unmanned systems (e.g., Saab and CybAero), and cybersecurity (e.g., Saab and Sectra). Conversely, Finland's strong digital and communications foundation has led to the development of command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems (e.g., Nokia and Bittium), cybersecurity solutions (e.g., F-Secure and Nixu), unmanned systems (e.g., Patria and Robonic), and Arctic-specific technologies such as vehicles, communication systems, and navigation equipment (e.g., Patria) (CCDCOE, 2021, 2022).

## CONCLUSIONS

The individual contributions of these nations will be significantly amplified upon Sweden's accession to NATO, particularly given the complementary roles that Finland and Sweden will assume within the Alliance. Finland's position as a vigilant frontline nation and Sweden's role as a logistics and transit hub will enable more effective power projection across the wider region. Swedish membership will also integrate the entire Nordic-Baltic region and all

Arctic States from the Arctic Council (with the exception of Russia) into NATO, paving the way for enhanced defense planning, joint exercises, and operations on the Alliance's northern flank.

The Kremlin's aggression, exemplified by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the resilient response of the Ukrainian people have refocused the transatlantic community on the critical importance of collective defense and investing in the resilience of military forces, industrial capacity, and societal determination to resist aggression. Paradoxically, Russia's attempts to undermine NATO's cohesion and credibility through its actions in Ukraine have inadvertently strengthened the Alliance's capabilities and presence in the Nordic-Baltic region and the High North. Thus, by compelling Finland and Sweden to join NATO, the Kremlin's aggressive maneuvers have yielded unintended consequences, bolstering NATO's resolve and solidarity in the face of external threats.

In conclusion, the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO not only enhances the Alliance's military capabilities and strategic depth but also underscores the enduring commitment of its member states to collective defense and the preservation of peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region.

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