Opinion – Finland and NATO Membership

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During the 2022 Madrid Summit, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) took a historic step to invite Sweden and Finland as members into the alliance. So far, 28 of 30 NATO member states have completed their national ratification. Türkiye and Hungary are pending. The latter has signaled that it will complete its ratification process by December. Ankara has been an opponent of the admission of Finland and Sweden and its approval schedule remains an open question. The Finnish decision to join NATO might at first glance seem like a major shift in Finland's formal security and defence policy. As Finland becomes a full member of NATO, it will indeed integrate its defence as part of the alliance's northeastern flank and strengthen especially the army and air force domain of NATO in both the Baltic Sea and the Arctic regions. In this sense, Finland is abandoning its previous position of being militarily non-aligned. Yet, the waters of Finland's western military integration since the end of the Cold War run deep.

In the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Finland's defence policy represented an anomaly in the general security climate. While most European countries downsized their militaries and cut defence spending, Helsinki never dropped the ball on territorial defence in the face of a potential Russian threat. In the 1990s, for example, Finland made material procurements: 64 F18 Hornets from the United States as well as used artillery, tanks and ammunition from Germany.

While Finland has been dubbed as 'neutral' due to the fact that it didn't join NATO at the end of the Cold War, in reality this has not been the case for decades. During the Cold War, Finland's formal policy certainly was to seek neutrality, but this was for sovereignty purposes. Having fought two wars against the Soviet Union and lost, an imposed neutrality was seen as the best policy to keep further Soviet influence at bay and to avoid becoming a Kremlin satellite.

When Moscow's grip over Finland loosened after the Soviet Union's collapse, Finland quickly sought to become a member of the European Union in 1995 and a NATO partner country in 1994. Neutrality was formally abandoned in Finland's first ever white paper on defence policy in 1995, where it was stated that after the end of the division between East and West, the policy of neutrality was no longer viable.

In the first decade of the 2000s Finland focused on further defence material procurement from the West, integration into NATO standards, and participation in NATO's crisis management operations overseas, including the Resolute Support Operation in Afghanistan, KFOR in Kosovo, and NATO training operation in Iraq. The experience and lessons learned throughout these years enabled Finland to deepen its ties with the alliance – making Finland perhaps more NATO interoperable than most member states.

Yet it was the events of 2014 which made the final push of Finland becoming not only militarily, but also politically, NATO interoperable. After Russia's first invasion of Ukraine and deteriorating security environment, Finland sought to develop a closer political-military relationship with both NATO and its individual member states through deeper defence cooperation. The development included a shift from crisis management operations to territorial defence exercises and high-level security policy dialogues. From 2014 onwards Finland signed bilateral Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with several partners, namely the United States, Sweden, Germany, France, and the UK. Finland also signed a trilateral document on defence cooperation with the United States and Sweden and gained an Enhanced Opportunities Partnership (EOP) status in NATO.

In the national debate the trend in Finland's security policy after 2014 was interpreted as a break with the past and Finland bid its final farewell to non-alignment. While Finland's formal policy was not to pursue NATO membership, its defence white paper in 2021 emphasized how defence cooperation and joint exercises strengthen national security. In other words, Finland pursued to form defence ties that could materialize into joint efforts in crisis times if deemed necessary. This was also laid out clearly by the President of Finland Mr Sauli Niinistö in a speech in 2016:

Finland will develop its military preparedness and interoperability not only to form a deterrent and threshold for intruders but also to be an attractive partner should the worst happen. This will also serve the development of Finland's own defence.

In February 2022, as Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the conclusion in Helsinki was that previous close defence cooperation was not enough since it did not provide an ironclad security guarantee by partners. The threat from Moscow increased overnight and Finland's deterrence tools needed to be recast. However, to claim that the decision to join NATO was purely based on national security conclusions by the political leadership is only half of the truth. In fact, three factors came into play.

Firstly, the current Russian regime was seen more prone to dangerous gambles and willing to limit Finland's sovereignty through demands that NATO should no longer enlarge. While the threat would not necessarily have been a direct one and an all-out military confrontation with Russia was unlikely, a more realistic problem was the significant weakening of Finland's geopolitical position. For example, it was possible to imagine a limited Russian military or hybrid threat scenario against Finland in order to distance Finland from NATO and absorb Helsinki into Moscow's orbit. In such a scenario where Finland would not be a member of NATO, Russia could have demanded Finland's capitulation, using the threat of nuclear or military options. Without NATO's article five, there would have been no guarantees of assistance, leaving Finland vulnerable.

Secondly, Finland's NATO bid was made possible by the fierce resistance of the Ukrainians. If Russia had succeeded in marching into Kyiv in days, Finland's current position would have been very uncomfortable: a confident Vladimir Putin at the height of his power would have been a formidable threat to Finland. In other words, Ukraine opened Finland's NATO window, and its resistance continued to keep it open.

Thirdly, without the sharp change in public opinion, and with it the shift of most parliamentary parties in favour of NATO membership, the room for the Finnish political leadership to take the decisive step towards membership would have been narrow. The dramatic shift in favour of NATO membership among Finns from approximately 23-25% to 50% in just a matter of weeks (now closer to 80%) was essential and encouraged the political decision-makers to go forward.

Finland's road to NATO membership was in this sense a perfect storm enabled by decades long preparedness, deep NATO interoperability, a changed security assessment among the people and politicians alike and, at the end of the day, luck. While joining the alliance ends Finland's long farewell to the last Cold War remnants of its security policy, it is not the end of history.

Through NATO, Finland will enter a new era of formal alliance-based security and defence policy. This is taking place at a time when the relations of Russia and the West are also stepping into an era of uncertainty and high risks. The position is unforeseen for Finland, who has since the Second World War sought a predictable and stable relationship with its eastern neighbour – including a frequent dialogue with the Kremlin. As President Niinistö put it in his speech in August 2022.

Under the prevailing circumstances, there is not much left of our earlier relationship with Russia. The trust is gone, and there are [*sic]* nothing in sight on which to base a new beginning. This is not the right time to build connections. On the contrary: we must very carefully reconsider any dependencies that could be used against us. Nothing must be left loose.

Finland will find itself in a world where Vladimir Putin is waging war in Europe, arming the Arctic and trying to place

his boot on the Baltic states' windpipe by absorbing Belarus. These moves by Russia are reshaping the foundations of European security – strengthening NATO's deterrence and collective security for years to come.

The inclusion of Finland and Sweden into NATO will not only improve their security but also partly relieve the Russian challenge. With hundreds of miles of new coastline in the Baltic Sea, NATO will possess a variety of options to support its easternmost members. Not forgetting that Finland has consistently spent 2% of its gross domestic product on defence. Similarly, in the high north, Sweden and Finland are two of eight Arctic powers — seven of which will be members of NATO once enlargement is complete. This is crucial because the Arctic is becoming an arena of intense competition, especially as ice melt reconfigures the region. Both countries' cold-weather capabilities and expertise will loom large.

In the end, NATO has no reason to expect major conflicts as a result of Finland's membership as the strategic interests of both coincide. However, the principal lesson for Finland is to learn to talk about defence policy in a way that takes into account both its national interests and, more broadly, NATO's interests. This is related to the way Finland communicates, for example deterrence, nuclear weapons, exercise activities and, in general, the goals of the entire alliance. As a member state, Helsinki can no longer execute security and defence policy with purely Finland in the front. It needs to learn to communicate in a way that emphasizes alliance unity – and especially its strength and force, if necessary.

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