

NATO'S NORTHERN EDGE

Finland debates its nonaligned status in the face of Russian aggression

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Understanding the reasons behind Finland and Sweden not joining NATO, despite being members of the European Union, requires more knowledge of psychology and history than strategy and politics. Both countries have had lively debates about their relationship with NATO since the end of the Cold

War, and the discussions have intensified with the ongoing crisis in Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea. Finland and Sweden have been keen on developing partnerships with NATO. At the NATO summit in Wales in September 2014, they conducted discussions on enhanced partnership and signed a host nation support agreement with NATO. Although it remains unlikely there will be a swift decision to apply for full NATO membership, it cannot be ruled out either.

Finland's and Sweden's historical traditions of neutrality, which continue under the label of military nonalignment, are the primary reasons they have not joined the Alliance. Sweden's more than 200-year-old neutrality has kept it out of military conflicts. Finland's tradition is shorter and the experience is mixed. Nevertheless, Finns believe that their neutrality policy was the key to its success during the Cold War. Unlike other Eastern European states, Finland did not become a Soviet bloc country but benefited from having good relations with both East and West. The saying "one should not fix what is not broken" applies.

THE WEIGHT OF EXPERIENCE

History, in itself, does not determine policies; rather, the perception of historical experiences does. The experiences of NATO members Norway and Denmark were different compared to those of Sweden, and the Baltic states' experiences were different from Finland's.

Perceptions are also important when assessing normative elements of military alignment versus nonalignment. For Finns and Swedes, neutrality has many positive connotations. In Sweden and Finland, there is a strong psychological commitment to the belief that being outside of military alliances is ethically grounded. Militarily nonaligned countries are believed to be able to serve as bridges or mediators in international conflicts. Some also link a lower level of military

expenditures to military nonalignment, although empirically the truth might be the opposite. Nevertheless, some see no incompatibility between nationalism and a cosmopolitan outlook, or between a strong national defense and pacifism.

Furthermore, psychological factors are important to national identity. For Finland, in particular, the core successful identity aspiration during the Cold War was to become a Nordic country rather than the fourth Baltic state (as it was designated in the Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty of 1939). In these circumstances, it was difficult to abandon this achievement and join NATO with the Baltic states and the other Central and Eastern European countries that once were part of the Soviet bloc. Although Denmark, Norway and Iceland have been members of NATO from the beginning, Finland has always identified more strongly with Sweden.

Identity matters also when NATO is equated with American hegemony in the world. There is an identifiable anti-American current in Finland and Sweden that shapes public discourse and sometimes, though less often, political decision-making. It is telling that Finnish and Swedish public opinion regarding NATO membership has been weakened because of American policies, particularly the Iraq war, than it has been strengthened by Russia's behavior and growing military potential.

Psychology shapes strategic thinking and how Russia is perceived as a potential threat. It is possible to construct a strategic rationale behind the policy of military nonalignment combined with a strong partnership with NATO, membership in the EU and deepening Nordic defense cooperation. This strategic equation is based on the idea that full membership in NATO would provoke Russia more than it would enhance security.

The Ukrainian crisis and Russian behavior have not changed this calculus so far because the amount of provocation to Russia caused by NATO enlargement in times of crisis is thought to grow concurrently with the increased level of deterrence and protection that would be achieved through membership. It is believed that Russia harbors no malevolent plans against Finland or Sweden unless they themselves give reasons for such — and NATO membership is regarded as such a reason.

AN ELUSIVE CONSENSUS

Socially constructed elements of strategic, political and identity philosophies have thus supported military nonalignment



Finnish infantry troops conduct winter training. FINNISH DEFENCE FORCES

in Finland and Sweden. Yet, there isn't a national consensus over NATO membership. From the critic's perspective, the strategic logic of the present nonalignment policy is not well thought out. While Finland prefers to stay militarily nonaligned, it also seeks to preserve the option of joining NATO, but it is not clear when it would use it. A crucial dilemma exists. In times of crisis, when there is a need to join a military alliance, it is questionable that the Alliance would accept new members; whereas, in times of peace, when it is possible to change policy, there is no perceived need.

Maintaining an option to join NATO despite not wanting to apply for membership can be defended on the grounds that it symbolizes the sovereignty of the state in line with Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) principles. Having the option to apply for and eventually join NATO is important, regardless of whether Finland would ever opt for a full membership. That explains why many are willing to support the right to join NATO, in some hypothetical circumstances, although they do not spell out what those circumstances might be.

The NATO option can also be seen as a deterrent. According to this logic, Russia would not put any significant military pressure on Finland or Sweden because it would push them to apply to NATO. With that knowledge, Russia left Finland and Sweden in peace during the Cold War. The Soviet Union did not want to upset the military balance in Northern Europe, it is argued, because it feared that Sweden would join NATO. However, if NATO membership is a deterrent to Russia, it is not clear what Russian actions would indicate that the deterrent has failed and be the triggering factor for joining NATO. Apparently, Russia invading a neighboring country and annexing a piece of its territory is not. Nor are provocative violations of Finnish and Swedish airspace. Clearly, Ukraine is not Finland; but when and if Finland's sovereignty is at stake, it would certainly be too late to join an alliance.

These psychological factors and belief systems help explain why the Ukrainian crisis and Russia's behavior in it have only slightly increased support for NATO membership. Less than one-third of Finland's and Sweden's populations support it. Only a few public figures have changed their opinion on NATO membership because of the Ukrainian crisis, but interestingly enough, they are mostly from the former communists and the Greens.

Although there is no visible quantitative trend supporting NATO membership, there is perhaps a qualitative change. Those in favor of NATO membership are convinced more than ever that they have been right. For those who supported NATO membership in the past, the Russian threat had not been the key issue, but rather Finland's willingness to belong to the relevant organizations that can better influence its security environment and allow it to participate in decision-making. After the Ukraine crisis, supporters of NATO membership have advocated their position more intensively and openly. Those supporting military non-alignment need to defend their views more effectively than before. Although a majority of politicians and public opinion oppose joining NATO, the foreign

policy elite consisting of officials, journalists and researchers largely supports such membership.

RUSSIAN RELATIONS

The strategy based on the idea that provoking Russia is dangerous and should be avoided is challenged by various arguments. One is that Russia already perceives Finland and Sweden as strategic adversaries and NATO membership would sharpen this image only slightly. Russia's assertive and sometimes arrogant behavior is seen as proof that it has strategic interests in Finland and Sweden independent of their membership in NATO. Some raise criticisms that Finland and Sweden already bear the political, military and economic costs of NATO membership, but fail to reap the benefits. "We share the risks," Jaakko Iloniemi, a former diplomat and *éminence grise* of Finnish diplomacy, argued at a June 2014 seminar hosted by Finland's president. "But we do not get the security guarantees."

Moreover, it is not clear what provokes Russia because almost any form of military or political cooperation can be deemed provocative. Limiting defense policy options based on what Russia deems acceptable would mean Finland and Sweden would not be able to deepen Nordic defense cooperation, participate in NATO exercises or have national military bases or maneuvers close to Russia's borders.

It is clear that Russia would not like Finland and Sweden to join NATO, but politicians and security experts disagree over what Russia's countermeasures would be. Those more inclined toward NATO membership believe that the measures would be restricted and temporary, and that it would be possible to continue good relations with Russia in the same manner as Norway or Germany. Those in favor of NATO membership think that Russia would, in fact, benefit from having more friendly nations in NATO.

Yet, uncertainty about Russia's reaction should Finland attempt to join NATO plays a role in the debate. Finns do not want to create an image of betrayal that could be held against them. Conversely, Finland does not earn as much visible good will from Russia as it used to. For example, the Russian Foreign Ministry has criticized Finland for human rights violations in a disproportionate manner. President Vladimir Putin's personal envoy, Sergei Markov, said in an interview with Finnish newspaper *Hufvudstadsbladet* in June 2014 that "Finland is one of the most *Russophobic* countries in Europe, together with Sweden and the Baltic states." Moreover, should Russia close Siberian airspace to European airlines, Finnair would be hit hardest. The official Russian position, expressed by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov when he visited Finland in June 2014, is one based on friendly relations. He stated that "our relationship with Finland is important and based on good-neighborliness," and "we don't want political issues to affect such good relations." In his view, the problems stem from Finland's EU membership.

Finally, joining NATO is also a domestic political issue. In Finland, the biggest political party, the Conservatives, or *Kokoomus*, has adopted a pro-NATO stance. Conservative Prime Minister Alexander Stubb and predecessor Jyrki

Katainen have openly favored NATO membership. Yet, in a multiparty system, the government is bound to consist of a coalition of at least two major parties and no other major party — aside from the small Swedish People's Party — supports NATO membership. Moreover, as political security decisions are traditionally based on a broad consensus, in practice, at least three of the four major parties need to back the membership bid. The Centre Party, the Social Democrats and the populist Finns (formerly known as “True Finns”) all prefer nonalignment, which ties the hands of the government, at least for the moment. The coalition agreement six parties made after the last election included a clause precluding the government from preparing an application for NATO membership.

Although President Sauli Niinistö is a conservative, he has not been willing to push NATO membership openly. Indeed, he has been rather cryptic on his views regarding NATO and Finnish membership. “Sitting on the fence” is one of his metaphors. In August 2013, he argued:

“Dissatisfaction with our current NATO policy — consisting of close cooperation with NATO and the potential of applying for membership at some point — often appears in two different ways. Viewing this as sitting on a fence, one way is to think we should be quick about jumping

over the fence, while the other is to think we should not have climbed it in the first place — or at least there was no point to it. I happen to think that being on top of the fence is quite a good place to be. Our present position serves our interests well at this point in time, taken overall. We have freedom to take action, we have choices available, and we have room to observe and to operate. We are not pulled one way or the other.”

Traditionally, the role of the Finnish president has been seen as a guarantor of good relations between Finland and Russia, and Niinistö clearly has adopted this role.

THE WAY FORWARD

On the other hand, none of the major parties is categorically against NATO membership and they support the idea of retaining the membership option. In fact, the defense policy

expert of the Finns Party and head of the Parliament's defense committee, Jussi Niinistö (not related to the president), argued in July 2014 that a new defense review of the pros and cons of NATO membership is needed. The president seconded it but wants a broader review of all defense options. It is unclear whether this is an indication of a policy change. When would the other major parties change their opinion about NATO membership? In particular, if Russian behavior is not what drives NATO policy in Finland and Sweden, what is?

One factor is public opinion. As long as the majority of the public is against NATO membership, politicians tend to stick to the existing policy line. Nevertheless, the relationship between public opinion and party positions is a chicken-and-egg question. There is ample evidence that if the government supported NATO membership, public opinion would change. Only one-third of the population supports membership, but only one-third opposes it consistently. The opinion of the remaining one-third is volatile and would change in circumstances where the leadership argued for membership. Leading politicians and parties have circumvented the public opinion issue by stating in speeches that they have “promised” to hold a referendum asking if Finland should join NATO.

Sweden is the other factor that determines whether Finland will apply. Sweden's bid for EU membership was the quintessential catalyst for Finland's own EU application

in 1992. Nevertheless, Finland joined the eurozone without Sweden, which indicates there is no reason Finland could not join NATO even if Sweden remained nonaligned. If, however, Sweden decided to apply for membership, it would be hard for Finland not to follow suit. Finnish and Swedish leaders have constantly stressed that they would prefer to synchronize their policies with regard to their relationship with NATO and try to avoid sudden moves that would surprise the other.

Will the Ukrainian crisis lead to a Finnish or Swedish application for NATO membership and to a northern enlargement of the Alliance? Such a scenario is not impossible, but it is too soon to tell with any certainty. The odds for and against are quite even. But if one should bet, it might be safer to bet on continuity. The security environment in Europe has changed, but psychology remains more entrenched. □



Sweden's Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, left, meets with Finland's new Prime Minister Alexander Stubb in Stockholm in July 2014 to discuss defense cooperation.