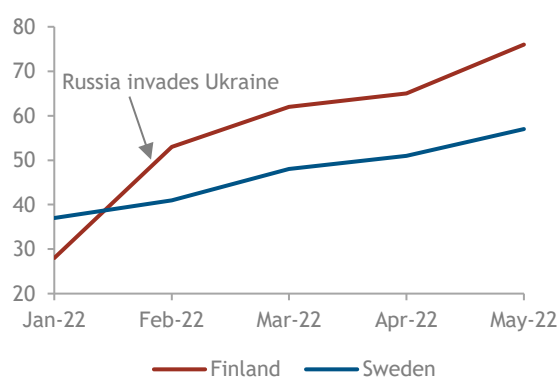


NATO's Nordic expansion: A recipe for enhanced security or geopolitical jeopardy?

Blog post by Associate Ed King, 20 May 2022

On Wednesday, Finland and Sweden submitted official applications to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). For decades, these countries have favoured military non-alignment. So why have they abandoned this stance, and what does it mean for NATO security and wider geopolitical relations?

Fig 1: Public opinion polls: Percentage of population supporting NATO membership



Source: Taloustutkimus, Novus

Both countries have maintained their neutrality for 75 years, all throughout the Cold War and beyond. But President Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine has dramatically shifted public opinion on NATO membership - 76% of the Finnish population now support joining the alliance compared with 28% before the invasion. One Finnish brewery has even gone as far as launching a NATO-branded beer to show its support.

The reasoning behind this shift is quite clear. Until Russia invaded Ukraine, most Swedes and Finns felt that joining NATO would be unnecessarily provocative towards Russia. Now, they believe they are vulnerable to attack, whether part of the military alliance or not, so they may as well have some protection.

While ratification usually takes up to a year, the NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg has promised a "smooth and swift" accession process. NATO membership would provide Finland and Sweden with protection in the face of a Russian attack, including security guarantees from nuclear states for the first time, but it would not be a one-sided partnership. Far from it.

NATO's security forces will be bolstered significantly by the addition of the two Nordic countries, who represent the missing pieces of the puzzle in the Baltic Sea. With the entire Baltic Sea region

becoming a NATO area, aside from the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, it makes Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania less vulnerable to attacks. The three Baltic states have hailed Sweden and Finland’s decision as dramatically improving their own security and ability to repel any attack from Russia. Furthermore, Finland’s 1,300 km border would more than double the length of the frontier between NATO and Russia. Both countries boast sophisticated land, sea, and air forces and bring experience from operations working alongside NATO, both participating in military exercises and exchanging intelligence. Neither country will be a financial strain on NATO, as Finland already exceeds NATO’s defence spending target of 2% of GDP and Sweden is on course to do so.

Fig. 2: Finland’s border more than doubles NATO’s frontier with Russia



In other words, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine looks set to bring about the very expansion of the Western military alliance that President Vladimir Putin aimed to prevent. So, how will the Kremlin react to this shift in NATO’s power?

Although Moscow initially called the announcement a direct threat to Russia, and threatened retaliation, Putin has since signalled a more tolerant stance. But he has warned the Kremlin would respond if the alliance installed military bases or equipment in either country. This seems unlikely as Sweden has stated it wants neither NATO military bases nor nuclear missiles on its soil and, while Finland is refusing to set conditions before its membership, the same is expected. With

Russia's military forces tied into and retreating from Ukraine, there is no spare capacity to suddenly invade Finland. Instead, the retaliations may take the form of violations of Nordic air space, cyber attacks, and disinformation campaigns which have already started with the Kremlin referring to the Finnish and Swedish leaderships as Nazis. Should NATO pursue a more substantial presence on its new border further down the line, then Putin may become less tolerant.

With Russian retaliation likely to be limited, the short-term geopolitical tensions may come from within NATO itself. Accession to the alliance requires approval from all 30 NATO countries, and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has threatened to not support Sweden and Finland's applications, accusing both countries of supporting terrorists. Erdoğan is seemingly trying to leverage Turkey's vote in order to gain concessions from the Nordic nations, including extraditing suspected Kurdish nationalists and lifting an arms embargo, which was imposed in 2019 because of Turkish operations in Syria. But it is not expected that Turkey would hold up membership of Finland and Sweden, as Erdoğan would be under significant pressure to yield from other members.

For now, the addition of Finland and Sweden to the NATO alliance seems to be a win-win situation for enhanced regional security, bolstering the Baltic Sea and providing greater stability in the face of eastern Europe's unpredictable neighbour. Despite Turkey's antics highlighting ongoing frictions between western allies, the move is unlikely to leave the region in geopolitical jeopardy.