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“WE’LL JOIN IF IT GETS SERIOUS”

by Toomas Ilves, published 26th of January 2018

From a traditional defense point of view, guaranteeing the security of the Baltic Sea region, more specifically the Nordic-Baltic States, Swedish and Finnish NATO membership should be a no-brainer. As with the European Union, when with the accession of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia the Baltic Sea became for all intents and purposes, an “EU lake”, a single strategic area with a large body of water in its middle.

It would stretch from Germany to the Arctic, from Vilnius to Oslo. Nordic-Baltic membership in NATO in other words would provide all the “defense depth” needed to safeguard the region. Right now on the other hand and for the foreseeable future, the Northern European and Baltic Sea region is bracketed by a NATO sliver in the West with Norway and Denmark, and only a slightly more broad area in the East with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Were they members of the Alliance, the entire region would be one area, and Sweden and Finland would enjoy the umbrella of Article 5. There would be no debate about what to do about Gotland, mock bombing attacks on any day, let alone on “Good Friday”, would be stopped long before Swedish airspace.

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This, eminently sensible regional security architecture, however, will not come about. Neither Sweden nor Finland has the desire or the political will to join NATO, at least in the foreseeable future. The reasons for this are different but the effect remains the same. Sweden claims its long, two-centuries old tradition of neutrality. In Finland, the issue of neutrality is somewhat more muddled but public opinion in both countries is dead-set against NATO membership. Neutrality, in other words the policies that have served Finland and Sweden from 1945 to the present is seen as the best way to continue.

And of course, every country (unless it's Georgia or Ukraine) enjoys the right to determine its own security arrangements.

All of this, however, contains “buts”. In the case of Sweden, it is not clear how neutral it was in WWII when it allowed Germany to ship supplies across its territory to Germany's Finnish ally. More recently, and under Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, Sweden co-operated closely – but secretly – with NATO and enjoyed – also secretly – a U.S. security guarantee, which is indeed an odd notion of neutrality.

In the case of Finland, a number of members of its political elite have averred that after joining the EU, Finland could no longer be considered “neutral”. It had, by this reasoning, “joined the West”. Ireland and Austria, two other neutral members of the EU, on the other hand do not consider their neutrality in any way compromised by EU membership. Neutrality thus is in the eyes of the beholder.

A little NATO history.

To better understand where we are in 2018, we need to go back almost 30 years, to the end of the Cold War to understand that Finland and Sweden have followed rather different paths to the same end of non-membership.

The Cold War that ended somewhere between 1989 and 1991, now coming up to a generation and half ago, fortunately never quite heated up. Instead, it merely ended with a whimper. What was called the Soviet bloc and its erstwhile members chose their own path toward democracy or, more often than not, unfortunately, toward something else. While the bloc concept in the East collapsed together with the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, 13 countries, most of which formerly counted as belonging to the Pact, have opted to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, where collective security has remained a core concept, underpinned by Article Five, the mutual defense clause of the North Atlantic Treaty, stipulating an attack on one ally is an attack on all. These countries joined, whether they admitted it or not, because they were not as convinced as older members that their Eastern Neighbor would remain as benign as it seemed in the early 1990s. After all, these countries knew their history.

Nonetheless, in the 1990s and at least up to 2008, NATO was decidedly not concerned with Russia, despite the concerns of a number of formerly communist countries joining the organization beginning in 1999. Indeed, these concerns were largely brushed aside. Instead, following U.S. Senator Richard Lugar's famous 1993 call that NATO must go out of area or

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out of business, the organization remained intact, no longer for defense against possible Soviet (or now Russian) aggression, but as a general collective security body to deal with rising threats to NATO Allies outside its original room and raison d'être. With Al Qaeda's 9/11 attack on the Pentagon and the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center, and the US's invocation of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, Lugar's notion appeared quite prescient.

At the time it seemed a success and a way forward out of a rigid NATO members-only framework. A number of non-members of NATO, including five current allies then in the NATO waiting room, i.e. participating in the Membership Action Plan for aspiring countries – the Baltic States, Romania and Bulgaria – as well as Partnership for Peace members Finland, Sweden and Georgia, contributed troops to the NATO-led (but non-Article 5 operation) International Security Assistance Force or ISAF, in Afghanistan.

In the Baltic Sea area, Poland joined NATO in 1999, with the strong backing of Germany, led by Helmut Kohl (who also led Germany's strong opposition to Baltic membership in NATO, and indeed in the EU as well). The Clinton and later the Bush administrations supported the aspirations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, creating for the accession process the Membership Action Plan or MAP. To be honest, the MAP was seen by all sides as a way to put a brake on the accession-eager Baltic countries' aspirations as well as to reassure, as it were, the recalcitrant Germans, French, UK and others afraid to offend Russian sensibilities that it would take time. That perhaps Russia would democratize further and obviate the need to take these countries into the fold. The requirement to go through the MAP process would differ from all prior expansions by setting out a roadmap of criteria countries would have to meet in order to join. No country prior to the 2004 expansion first had to go through the MAP process prior to accession. All accession-countries since then – Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia and Montenegro – all have had to followed this regular review of how a country has progressed to become NATO-fähig.

Notably, having moved the goalposts for membership, the MAP also became the new goal of aspirant countries. Denied to Georgia and Ukraine on the insistence of Germany and other "Old NATO members" in the 2008 Bucharest Summit (when, echoing a Finnish Prime Minister on Estonia, Vladimir Putin told George Bush Ukraine "isn't even a country"), NATO's inability to offer even a stepping stone to accession undoubtedly influenced Russia, which took it, rightly or wrongly, as NATO washing its hands of the fate of these countries. This would continue to reverberate for almost a decade up to the present time but especially in Ukraine in 2014.

Within NATO itself, until the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008, older NATO members did not take Russia's antagonistic behavior toward Eastern European allies seriously, if even then. One could argue they did not do so until the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Georgia, Nicolas Sarkozy, who headed the French EU presidency at the time and the architect of the EU "peace plan", set the removal of Russian troops from occupied Georgian territory as a precondition for resumption of the wide-ranging EU-Russian Partnership and Co-operation Agreement (PCA). A month later, the same President Sarkozy also forced through restoration of the PCA with Russia, proclaiming

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“Thank God commonsense prevailed” when all sanctions were removed despite Russian troops remaining in place, violating Sarkozy’s own brokered agreement. In a not uncommon pattern, Sarkozy to this day maintains a sycophantic relationship to Russian President Putin, echoing in this former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, former Italian Prime minister Silvio Berlusconi as well a host of other, somewhat dimmer luminaries, including Czech President Milos Zeman, and a former Finnish Prime Minister, today a lobbyist for Gazprom’s Nordstream 2 pipeline.

Moreover, the Baltic States at this late date, 2009 and unlike other NATO allies, enjoyed no NATO contingency plans, the detailed plans of what NATO forces would do should a country come under attack. Germany and other allies had blocked their creation since Baltic membership almost 5 years earlier and continued to do so, even after the massive Russian DDOS attacks against Estonia a year earlier in April-May 2007. Clearly, for some countries, there were different levels of NATO membership. While Russia already had demonstrated its willingness to invade its neighbors, NATO chose to follow the EU’s course and act as if the Russo-Georgian War had changed nothing. Through much pestering and remonstrances, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania did manage, though, finally to secure contingency plans in 2011. Grudgingly, and in response to the cyber attack on Estonia in 2007, NATO also accepted the establishment of the Cyber Defense Center of Excellence or CCDCOE.

Sweden and Finland by and large remained untouched by these Post-Cold War developments but their approaches have differed. While most discussions of Swedish and Finnish attitudes toward possible NATO accession rightly focus on popular opinion and the statements of politicians on their own potential accession, it is quite illuminating to look at their responses to the Baltic States’ efforts in the past 20 years.

The Swedish take is fairly straightforward: Sweden does not at this point wish to join but had nothing against the Baltic States’ joining the alliance. Most importantly, the independence of the Baltic countries and later NATO expansion only served to assuage Sweden’s security concerns. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and more importantly the (almost exclusively U.S. and Swedish-driven) departure of Russian troops from the Baltic States, Sweden gained a dramatic defense advantage. About 35 minutes of advantage. With Soviet airbases in Latvia and the Estonian island of Saaremaa (Ösel), warning time for any possible Soviet air attack on Sweden was no more than 10 minutes. With Post-Soviet military air power now relocated some 300 kilometers Eastward, Sweden needed only to worry about a sudden air attack from Kaliningrad. Indeed, the only jets to scramble against the Russian mock bombing attack on Sweden on Good Friday 2013 came from the NATO air-policing contingent based in Siaulai, Lithuania. Sweden’s air force was off duty. Meanwhile, a number of verbal threats from a number of Russian leaders, diplomats and military figures have tended to backfire, moving the public toward a more positive stance toward NATO, yet not enough to be in the majority.

Finland, on the other hand, has taken at best a hands-off approach though at times also has interfered directly to thwart the aspirations of the Baltic countries. It assiduously avoided any role pushing for Russian troop withdrawals from the Baltic States, despite the major security gains derived from departure of Russian airbases a mere 80 kilometers to the South.

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From there on in, a number of Finnish diplomats instead worked, within their means, to stymie Baltic membership in NATO. Prime Minister Alex Stubb and later President Sauli Niinistö, have been exceptions, as have been former president Martti Ahtisaari and Finland's foreign policy's grand old man, the late Max Jakobson who both favored NATO membership for the Baltic States as well as for Finland, but neither was in power by that time.

Instead, the NATO aspirations of the Baltic countries were seen as a threat, enough so that one senior Finnish diplomat boasted to me (I was foreign minister at the time) how he alone had seen to it that no military equipment was off-loaded and no (purely symbolic) F-16 over-flight took place, at a Partnership for Peace exercise in Paldiski, Estonia in 1997. When I raised this with the Finnish ambassador at the time, his patronizing response was, "And he was very wise to do so". All the more curious after this direct meddling is for this writer to observe the extreme sensitivity some two decades later regarding Balts expressing any opinion about Finnish NATO membership.

Leaving these differences aside, the public argument against Swedish or Finnish membership is public opinion.

Most recently in a poll in Fall 2017, only 22 percent of Finns would support NATO membership for their country. Interestingly, a Verkkouutiset poll in 2014 found roughly an equally low percentage of supporters for joining NATO but also found that were political leaders to take a stance in favor, popular support would rise to 53 per cent, with 34 per cent against. This in turn was significantly changed from 2009 when only 32 per cent would have favored NATO membership even if the Prime Minister and President were in favor and 61 per cent against.

In Sweden, poll results are mixed with one from early 2017 showing 41% in favor of joining, 39% against, while a recent poll by Dagens Nyheter reporting 44% against. Either way, neither the pro nor anti position enjoys a majority in Sweden today. Even if we believe the most recent poll, a small plurality against membership could rapidly change with more ham-fisted badgering or actual provocations of the Good Friday attack variety.

To sum up, NATO is not going to expand to Sweden or Finland in any time in the near future. In Finland, popular opinion is against membership; in Sweden it is up to now positive but insufficient. Sweden has begun negotiations with the U.S. to buy Patriot missiles for 1.2 billion dollars, but this is far from NATO membership or an Article 5 guarantee. Finland will most likely continue on its own, hoping apparently for a close relationship with the U.S. Thinking of the future, however, it wouldn't be a bad idea to think of the NATO issue other than in terms of bashing the Baltic countries. Better relations with the U.S. are certainly helpful but as already then NATO Secretary General Anders Fogt Rasmussen said to Sweden about closer NATO co-operation: Article five still only extends to members of the Alliance. A message just repeated by Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the beginning of 2018: There is no guarantee NATO will come help Sweden. Article 5 applies only to allies, those who have acceded to the Alliance.

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EU application Redux

A continuing fear among some in Finland is a repetition of Sweden's 1993 application to join the EU. Finland and Sweden had previously agreed to inform each other of an application, yet Sweden failed to abide by the agreement. What if Sweden unilaterally applies and Finland does not? This is not completely unlikely with Swedish general elections in 2018, where parties favoring membership enjoy a not unreasonable chance of coming to power. The consensus among political leaders in Finland today appears to be that a Swedish application would alter neither Finnish public opinion nor their own position.

All of this is pure speculation of course. At the current time there appears to be no change in positions in either country.

But We Have 42.7 and We'll Join If It Gets Serious

Finally we need address two issues: rapid NATO entry and the EU solidarity clause. There is a view among those opposed to Swedish/Finnish membership in NATO at the current time, that we will join "if things get serious". To whit: the current security environment does not yet call for joining NATO but if that environment changes, of course, we will join. (This is something I have heard mainly from Swedes, less so from Finns)

If only it were that simple. First, as mentioned above, all new members since the 1999 expansion have had to go through the MAP process. While I have heard some from Finland and Sweden say "we are so good we don't need to do the MAP", that is a decision made by the North Atlantic Council, including the thirteen countries to have gone through the MAP. I wouldn't count on acquiescence from those who have gone through the process, as it would mean admitting they were somehow inferior to Sweden and Finland. While there are those in the two Nordic countries who would probably agree, NATO is a consensus organization so I would not count on a waiver. More importantly, going through MAP or the Membership Action Plan takes time and will have to be approved by the North Atlantic Council.

Secondly, as new Alliance members know all too well from their own experiences, proposals to expand NATO inevitably lead one Alliance member or another to question whether "this is the right time to expand". All the more so in the hopeful scenario "we will join if things get serious". In other words, in a period of higher tensions and security concerns in Europe, i.e., when things do get serious, one can count on some allies to be opposed to any expansion lest it cause a further escalation. Future opposition to accelerated membership is no reason to join the Alliance now, but there also should be no place for serious discussions of security that rely on this last and possibly ephemeral hope.

Finally, NATO membership must still be ratified by all ally parliaments. This too takes time. Even if sped up because the "situation is now finally serious", it smacks of "I'll buy fire insurance because forest fires blaze around me".

Finally, politicians from both Sweden and Finland also have appealed to the Article 42(7) of

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the Lisbon treaty, the so-called solidarity clause, obligatory for all EU member states, as a substitute for NATO membership. This clause provides that if an EU country is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other EU countries have an obligation to aid and assist it by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.

Unfortunately, it is far from clear what this obligation to assist entails: sending troops and air power or sending olive oil? “Within their power” is too nebulous. The North Atlantic Treaty’s (NAT) Article 5 has similar wording, but anyone who has studied security policy knows that the treaty became NATO only when the O was added and an organization was created to ensure the treaty functioned. At this point – though this may always change – there is no organization within the EU that could actually make article 42(7) functional and operational. All the more curious are occasional discussions among Finnish politicians as to whether Finland should or would indeed come, say, to Estonia’s assistance, were the latter to be attacked.

To sum up, this collection presents a number of genuine security policy experts’ views on Swedish and Finnish NATO membership. As is probably clear, this writer believes it would be in the interest of the security of the entire region were these countries to join. Yet, political reality seems to preclude that. While that makes defense of the entire region more problematic, these are the current security and political realities. Instead, we NATO allies need to plan for the continuation of the status quo. As must the countries that choose to continue to remain outside of NATO.