JAMES BLACK, CHARLOTTE KLEBERG, ERIK SILFVERSTEN

NATO enlargement amidst Russia’s war in Ukraine

How Finland and Sweden bolster the transatlantic alliance
Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Finland and Sweden applied together to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on 18 May of that year.¹ Breaking as it did with both countries’ longstanding traditions of military non-alignment, this move to join the Alliance marked a radical change in both Finnish and Swedish foreign and security policies.² The decision to submit membership bids concurrently also reflected careful choreography and close political coordination between Helsinki and Stockholm, as well as the interlinkages between each country’s defence planning – with the Finns and Swedes hoping that simultaneous applications would reduce the risk of Russian reprisals or attempts to isolate whichever of the two countries was slowest to act. The move was also another setback for Vladimir Putin, coming shortly after Russia’s failure to seize Kyiv and force a swift Ukrainian collapse that would have prevented the so-called ‘special military operation’ from turning into the full-scale, protracted and costly war it has since become.³

Finland’s accession process ultimately proved much smoother than that of its Swedish neighbour, with Turkey and Hungary initially blocking ratification of Sweden’s entry to the Alliance. Finland joined NATO in 2023, while Sweden followed in 2024, making them the 31st and 32nd members respectively.⁴ There has been much discussion of the benefits that NATO membership will bring to the two nations, not least as part of the public engagements and debates that have unfolded in both countries since early 2022 amidst a radical shift in government policy and popular attitudes.⁵ Less coverage has been given to the benefits that Finland and Sweden will bring to the Alliance, notwithstanding the obvious political and symbolic value of further NATO enlargement as a direct riposte to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine. To this end, this RAND Europe Perspective serves as a primer on the path that the two Nordic countries have taken to NATO membership, and on the outsized strategic and military benefits that these small nations together offer as ‘net contributors’ to Alliance security.

**The path to NATO membership**

Having quickly completed the accession process, Finland officially joined NATO on 4 April 2023. Sweden, by contrast, faced initial opposition from both Turkey and Hungary.⁶ Following more than a year of blocking Sweden’s bid, Turkey agreed to support the application at the NATO Summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, on 11 July 2023,
following numerous actions by Sweden to address Turkey’s stated security concerns. Despite this commitment, the Turkish parliament did not actually ratify Swedish accession until January 2024, alongside a long-awaited deal for the United States to sell F-16 fighter aircraft to Ankara. A visit by the Swedish Prime Minister to Hungary in February 2024 brought announcements of Swedish plans to provide Budapest with additional JAS-39 Gripen fighter aircraft and for the jets’ manufacturer Saab to invest in an artificial intelligence research centre in Hungary. The Hungarian parliament subsequently voted to approve the Swedish bid to join NATO, paving the way for Sweden to complete accession into the Alliance two years after applying for membership.

These developments represent a fundamental reversal of the central tenet of both Finnish and Swedish foreign and security policy since at least 1945: namely, that neither nation would align itself with any military alliance. Instead, both countries have sought to avoid conflict through a mix of careful diplomacy and strong national defence. The latter has been rooted in promoting whole-of-society participation and high levels of emergency preparedness and societal resilience to offset the limitations of being small countries with only limited people and resources.

Sweden has a long history of armed neutrality. It was one of the few European countries to avoid direct participation in the Second World War. Then, through the Cold War, it carved a niche for itself as, on the one hand, an outsized defence industrial player (believing a strong military production base and national conscription to be guarantors of credible deterrence as a small, non-aligned player caught between NATO and the Warsaw Pact), and on the other a major diplomatic voice in international peacebuilding.

For Finland, the policy of military non-alignment was also a practical concession to geopolitical realities. Despite having a population of only a few million, scant natural resources besides timber, and limited heavy industry or domestic arms production, Finland fought against the military might of the Soviet Union twice in the 1940s through the Winter (1939–40) and Continuation Wars (1941–44). It also took on the German Wehrmacht, its former co-belligerents against the Soviets, in the brief Lapland War (late 1944). Against all odds, its famed ‘sisu’ (or fighting spirit) enabled Finland to retain its sovereignty and most of its territory, even as much of the rest of Europe came under Allied or Soviet occupation. However, this independence came at the cost of widespread famine, suffering and devastation during the war, and a post-war...
Both countries have sought to avoid conflict through a mix of careful diplomacy and strong national defence.

expectation from the Finns’ Soviet neighbours that they would remain militarily non-aligned rather than pursuing NATO membership as the Danes and Norwegians did.\textsuperscript{14}

Tied to a 1948 agreement of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance with the Soviet Union that isolated Finland militarily from Western Europe during the Cold War, Helsinki sought to maintain good relations with its superpower neighbour, while preparing itself militarily for the possibility of yet another invasion by the Red Army. Sweden pursued a role as a mediator internationally and chose a Cold War policy of political neutrality and multilateral dialogue, actively promoting nuclear disarmament. Both countries maintained strong national defences during this period, but Sweden significantly downsized its military when the Cold War ended, in pursuit of a ‘peace dividend’.\textsuperscript{15} With Finland effectively acting as a buffer, Swedish defence strategists were less acutely concerned of the risk of imminent land invasion by the Soviets (or, after the 1990s, the Russians). Nonetheless, they noted the threats posed by sub-threshold or grey zone activities, Soviet/Russian military presence and influence in the Baltic Sea, and the potential for hostile forces to seize the island of Gotland as a launchpad for attacks on either the Swedish mainland or NATO countries in the event of European conflict.\textsuperscript{16}

As such, through the Cold War – and up to 2014 – both countries pursued policies designed to avoid provoking Moscow while also preparing themselves for territorial defence and quietly and carefully expanding their military relations with other Nordic and NATO countries as a deterrent. Many planners from the Western Alliance hoped that Sweden and Finland, while remaining officially non-aligned, could be relied upon to defend themselves against the Russians in the event of any major European conflict, in turn helping to secure NATO ally Norway’s long eastern flank for a time. Similarly, Alliance officials hoped that the governments in Stockholm and Helsinki would offer at least tacit support to their fellow democracies in the West by, for example, making no real effort to stop overflight of their airspace by NATO aircraft en route to strike targets in Russian territory or the Baltic Sea.\textsuperscript{17}

The collapse of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact brought renewed opportunities for deepening ties with the West. Unlike almost all NATO countries, and indeed Sweden, who extensively cut back their militaries and defence industrial bases in the 1990s and 2000s, Finland did not embrace the opportunity for a ‘peace dividend’, instead retaining a strong focus on national defence. The two countries joined the European Union (EU) in 1995, officially becoming politically if not militarily aligned – though Article 42(7) of the Treaty of European Union did in theory bind them to mutual defence of other EU member states in the event of a crisis.\textsuperscript{18}
The turning point: Ukraine

Finland and Sweden took tentative steps towards NATO in the 1990s and 2000s, but stopped well short of accession to the Alliance, with the idea of membership remaining largely taboo within domestic politics. Though Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 offered early warning signs of the mounting threat, the Kremlin’s decision to attack Ukraine, first in 2014 and then in 2022, was the decisive factor in changing this longstanding policy position. Having become Partners for Peace in 1994, Finland and Sweden became NATO Enhanced Opportunity Partners (EOP) following Russia’s first invasion of eastern Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.19

In recognition of the deteriorating threat environment from 2014, Finland and Sweden contributed to the NATO Response Force (NRF) in a supplementary role and through Host Nation Support agreements. Besides playing an active part in joint exercises and training, as well as attending high-level discussions on Nordic-Baltic security in a 30+2 format with NATO members, both countries have also taken part in several NATO-led missions, sending small forces to Afghanistan and Kosovo. Unlike most NATO members, however – or Sweden to some extent – Finland did not reconfigure its military for expeditionary operations and counterinsurgency missions in Afghanistan, Iraq or sub-Saharan Africa. Instead, the Finnish Armed Forces retained a strong focus on large-scale warfighting and capabilities relevant to territorial defence, positioning them well to counter the resurgent Russian threat.20

Besides this close Swedish-Finnish cooperation and the deepening of ties with NATO, both countries are also part of the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF),21 the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) framework,22 and other groupings that involve various combinations of NATO nations. Examples include the Northern Group, the European Intervention Initiative (EI2) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).23 Helsinki and Stockholm have also pursued bi- and trilateral arrangements with the United States, signing a three-way Statement of Intent (SOI) in 2018 to help align security policy and cooperation initiatives,24 and then concluding more ambitious Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCAs) in 2022 (Finland)25 and 2023 (Sweden).26 This web of inter-linkages – as well as longstanding efforts to ensure that national forces and equipment are interoperable and

Having become Partners for Peace in 1994, Finland and Sweden became NATO Enhanced Opportunity Partners following Russia’s first invasion of eastern Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.
Figure 2. Finnish and Swedish participation in selected defence cooperation frameworks in Europe

SOURCE: RAND Europe analysis.
1994: Finland and Sweden join the Partnership for Peace, a partnership intended to build trust between NATO and non-member states.27

1995: Finland and Sweden join the European Union.

1997: Finland and Sweden join the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), a multilateral forum for dialogue.

2009: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden establish NORDEFCO.

2014: Russia invades eastern Ukraine and annexes Crimea. Finland and Sweden become NATO Enhanced Opportunity Partners and begin to make significant contributions to NATO-led operations and initiatives.

2016: Sweden signs a Host Country Agreement with NATO.

2017: Finland and Sweden join the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force.

2018: Finland and Sweden sign a trilateral Statement of Intent with the United States on deepening their defence cooperation.

2022: Russia invades Ukraine. Finland and Sweden apply for NATO membership.28 Finland signs a Defense Cooperation Agreement with the United States.

2023: Finland becomes the 31st member of NATO. Sweden signs a Defense Cooperation Agreement with the United States.

2024: After two years of delays, the Turkish and Hungarian parliaments ratify Sweden’s NATO membership bid. Sweden becomes the 32nd member of NATO.

2023: Finland becomes the 31st member of NATO. Sweden signs a Defense Cooperation Agreement with the United States.
meet NATO standards – put both Finland and Sweden in a position to integrate quickly into Alliance structures and plans if they were ever to apply for membership.  

After February 2022, despite having maintained a careful policy of military non-alignment for most of the previous century, Finland and Sweden found themselves faced with Russian aggression against Ukraine and mounting provocations on other fronts. These included Russian nuclear sabre-rattling, concerning military activity around NATO or Nordic airspace and waters, weaponised migration at the land border with Finland, GPS jamming in the Arctic, dangerous anti-satellite missile tests in outer space and cyber-attacks on European communications infrastructure. Given this acute deterioration of the security environment – and recognising that Russia’s military was, against its intention, now pinned down in Ukraine for the foreseeable future, thus limiting the Kremlin’s immediate options to retaliate against the smaller Nordic states – both countries judged that only the collective security guarantee provided by Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty would be sufficient to guarantee their security in a world changed by February 2022.

**New allies: the Finnish and Swedish contribution to NATO**

The following sections examine the military capabilities and other assets that Finland and Sweden bring to NATO as its newest members, before moving on to consider the overall strategic benefits arising from the Alliance’s enlargement to incorporate all Nordic-Baltic states besides Russia.

**Finland**

Finland is a Nordic state with a population of 5.6 million people and a large territory that spans 338,145 sq. km. Sharing a 1,300-km border with Russia and dependent on Baltic Sea sea-lines of communication (SLOCs) for most of its critical supply, Finland’s geostrategic situation has historically been precarious, as reflected in its painful experience of war in the 1940s. Because of the existential threat posed by its eastern neighbour, Finland maintains a disproportionately strong national defence capability with its forces and equipment tailored heavily towards territorial defence against a possible Russian invasion. Contrary to many European nations that shifted their focus to small professional militaries and expeditionary operations following the end of the Cold War, Finland maintained a pragmatic approach to prioritising its finite resources as a small nation on preparing for the worst-case scenario of a future return to large-scale warfighting in Europe. Direct experience of having fought Russia in the past has brought civil preparedness, societal resilience, and cultivation of a strong national will to fight (building on the mythology around ‘sisu’) to the forefront of what it means to be Finnish.

Finland joining NATO, with all the added security that comes with Article 5, does not change the longstanding Finnish focus on self-sufficiency, resilience and the mobilisation of the entirety of Finnish society to protect the country in a crisis. Known in Finland as ‘comprehensive security’, this is akin to Norway or Sweden’s ‘Total Defence’ concepts. To ensure national preparedness and resilience, Finland depends on extensive cross-sectoral cooperation, with private companies and organisations...
Finland maintains an extensive supporting infrastructure, such as underground civil defence shelters, and stockpiles of food, animal feed, fuel, medicines, medical equipment, ammunition and other supplies. Engaging with the public sector in various frameworks during the planning process to ensure critical supply and the functioning of society during crises. This cooperation is backed by a mix of public awareness and outreach campaigns, educational initiatives (including regular courses for local and business leaders on how to support defence in a crisis), national and sectoral exercises, and strong legislation that gives the state sweeping emergency powers in a crisis (e.g. to reorganise industry and critical functions or to requisition buildings, vehicles and supplies). In addition, Finland maintains an extensive supporting infrastructure, such as underground civil defence shelters, and stockpiles of food, animal feed, fuel, medicines, medical equipment, ammunition and other supplies. It also recently received EUR242 million in European Commission funding to establish the EU’s largest strategic reserve for protective equipment and medical supplies used in responding to chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) emergencies, with stockpiling beginning in 2024.

Like Sweden, Finland has become recognised as an expert in so-called hybrid or ‘grey zone’ threats below the threshold of outright war, especially where these emanate from Russia and its proxies. To this end, Helsinki has since 2017 been home to the Hybrid Centre of Excellence (Hybrid CoE), an international agency providing research, advice, training and exercises under the joint auspices of the EU and NATO. Finland is also actively involved in promoting resilience for critical infrastructure and seeking to counter disinformation campaigns online, especially Russian-backed propaganda on social media. It has also taken increasing steps in recent years to address potential hybrid threats from China, including IP theft and attempted Chinese purchases of strategic parcels of land in the Finnish Arctic or other sensitive locations. Notably, in October 2023, Finland’s undersea Balticconnector gas pipeline with Estonia was damaged, apparently at a similar time to the severing of a subsea data cable to Sweden, prompting multinational investigations into possible Russian or Chinese sabotage.

Drawing on the full range of society’s resources, as well as conscription, a well-trained reserve and the population’s strength of will to defend the country (as reflected in regular polling), all thus remain at the foundation of Finland’s national defence. Its culture of heavily armed
self-sufficiency means that Finland joins NATO as an immediate net contributor to the Alliance’s collective security, and one with a highly influential role to play in defending NATO’s longest land border with Russia. Military defence remains the core of Finnish defence and security policy and is largely based on a small conscript-based higher-readiness force backed by a large reserve component, allowing for disproportionate mass and a credible defence despite a small population. Mandatory for men over the age of 18 and voluntary for women, conscription takes place either in the military (defence forces) or civil service (e.g. the paramilitary Finnish Border Guard). The system makes for a wartime troop strength of approximately 280,000, with an additional 870,000–900,000 of the 5.6 million population also trained as reservists – representing one of the largest military forces in NATO. Because of their platform-centric nature, the Finnish Navy and Air Force are less reliant on conscripts or reservists, and though small, they are equipped with noteworthy capabilities, such as icebreakers, mine warfare vessels, and soon the latest F-35 stealth fighters. Finland thus brings significant military assets across all domains, notably including one of the strongest artillery forces in Europe. The latter is an especially valuable asset when facing off against a Russian army built around massed indirect fires backed by armour and manoeuvre ground forces.

Table 1. Overview of Finnish defence capabilities

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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
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<tr>
<td>Defence spending</td>
<td>Finland plans to spend EUR6.19 billion (USD6.58 billion), equivalent to 2.3 per cent of GDP, on defence in 2024. This compares to 1.53 per cent of GDP in 2020.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Military personnel</td>
<td>Active military personnel in the defence forces: 19,250 (Army 13,400, Navy 3,150, Air 2,700); gendarmerie and paramilitary Border Guard: 2,700. In reserve: 238,000 (Army 185,000, Navy 24,000, Air 29,000), plus 12,000 gendarmerie and paramilitary.</td>
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| Major capabilities | **Land:** The ground force operates the Leopard 2A6 main battle tank, K9 self-propelled howitzers, multiple launch rocket systems and various armoured and support vehicles, and is backed by the paramilitary Border Guard.  
**Air:** Equipment includes various aircraft: F/A-18C (55) and F/A-18D (7) fighters, which will be replaced by the F-35A, C295M (1) for electronic intelligence; a mix of C295M (2), Learjet 35A (3) and PC-12NG (6) as transports; and G-115EA (28), Hawk Mk50/51A (29) and Hawk Mk66 (16) as trainers.  
**Maritime:** Under the Squadron 2020 project, the Navy will replace its patrol boats and minelayers with corvette-sized vessels. Naval equipment includes patrol and coastal combatants (20), amphibious landing craft (52), mine warfare (8), mine countermeasures (3), minelayers (5) and support (7). |

SOURCE: adapted from IISS (2023b).
Sweden

Sweden is a social democracy and highly developed Nordic state. With an area of 450,295 sq. km, it is the third largest country in the EU by territory, but like Finland it is sparsely populated beyond its coastal cities, with a total population of only 10.4 million. Its 2,700-km long southern coast borders the Baltic Sea, and the Scandinavian mountain range spans its western border with Norway. Strategically located on the frontline of the Cold War, Sweden maintained strong coastal and aerial defences and was one of the strongest militaries in Europe at the time. It also actively pursued a policy of Total Defence that encompasses all of society in the national defence effort, and includes military, civil, economic and psychological elements of defence. Sweden’s Cold War national defence was characterised by heavily armed neutrality and a robust defence industry as twin means of safeguarding its sovereignty and security of supply.

Following the end of the Cold War, the absence of a serious Russian threat caused a dramatic reduction of defences, and in contrast to Finland, Sweden significantly downsized its armed forces and shifted towards civil defence, crisis management and peacekeeping operations (e.g. in Kosovo or Korea). With Russia’s return as a major security threat over the past decade, countering Russia has once again become the focal point for Sweden’s defence and security efforts, and it has looked to ensure stronger military forces, reiterate the importance of Total Defence, and re-invigorate defence production. Signalling this shift in threat perceptions, in 2018 the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) sent out guidance pamphlets to all Swedish households for the first time since 1991, with the title ‘If crisis or war comes’.

The deteriorating security environment has brought back the Total Defence model as the foundation of Sweden’s defence policy, and with it a reiteration of the whole-of-nation effort. The 2015 Defence Bill outlined this ‘total’ approach to national security, covering both military and civil defence. Psychological defence has also been reinvigorated due to heightened concerns over Russian cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns. Sweden’s military defence is likely to remain focused on territorial defence, while also looking to enhance societal resilience and crisis management. Temporarily abolished in 2010, conscription was reintroduced at the start of 2018. However, the number of people obliged to serve amounts to only a small fraction of the eligible pool of conscripts, not least because the military training system’s capacity to absorb new entrants is more limited than in the Cold War. Amidst efforts to boost capacity, the annual number of conscripts is expected to rise from 6,000 to 8,000 by 2025. The Swedish government can, however, also legally mobilise all Swedish citizens aged 16–70 in a national emergency.
Sweden’s military capacity is smaller than that of Finland, despite having a population almost double the size of its neighbour. Nonetheless, since 2014 Sweden has made efforts to modernise and expand the capabilities of its armed forces. Sweden’s combat air, littoral and undersea warfare capabilities would bring significant additions to NATO’s deterrent and defence toolbox.69 Sweden employs a range of military equipment, much of which is of domestic design – with the record of local design and production being an especially impressive feat given the small size of the national defence budget and of the Swedish economy in general compared to NATO Allies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France or Germany.70

The country’s disproportionately large and sophisticated defence industry is capable of addressing many of the Swedish armed forces’ equipment needs, including the manufacture of advanced combat aircraft (JAS-39 Gripen), artillery systems (Archer), infantry fighting vehicles (CV-90) and conventional attack submarines.71 To drive innovation despite the small size of its defence technology and industrial base relative to other European or North American competitors, Sweden has prioritised a ‘Triple Helix’ model that creates virtuous cycles from close cooperation between government, industry and academic institutions.72 Sweden also actively exports defence platforms and other equipment, including to countries in NATO, as a means both of ensuring revenue and economies of scale in production for local firms such as Saab, and of deepening ties and interoperability with foreign forces.73 As such, Sweden provides a defence industrial contribution to European collective security that punches well above its wider economic weight.74

Table 2. Overview of Swedish defence capabilities

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<tr>
<td>Defence spending</td>
<td>Sweden plans to spend SEK126 billion (USD11.83 billion), equivalent to 2.1 per cent of GDP, on defence in 2024. This is almost double its defence spending in 2020.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military personnel</td>
<td>Active military personnel in the defence forces: 14,600 (Army 6,850, Navy 2,350, Air 2,700, Other 2,950); voluntary auxiliary organisations: 21,200. In reserve: 10,000. Apart from the three service branches, the Home Guard and National Security Forces are also part of the Armed Forces.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Major capabilities | **Land:** The ground force operates the Leopard 2A5/Strv 122 main battle tank, CV-90/strf 90 infantry fighting vehicles, Patria armoured personnel carriers and the Archer wheeled self-propelled howitzer, as well as various self-propelled mortars, towed mortars, and transport or support vehicles. Ground-based air defence has been boosted in recent years with the US Patriot missile system.  

**Air:** Equipment includes various aircraft: the JAS-39C/D Gripen (96) and JAS-39E Gripen (in test), as fighters; the Gulfstream IV SRA-4 (S-102B) (2) for electronic intelligence; the S-100B Argus (1) and S-100D Argus (2), for airborne early warning and control; the KC-130H Hercules as a tanker/transport; a mix of C-130H Hercules (5) Saab 340 (OS-100A/Tp-100C) (2) and Gulfstream S50 (1) as transports; and the Sk-60W (67) for training.  

**Maritime:** Naval equipment includes: diesel-electric attack submarines (Gotland and Sodermanland-class) (5), corvettes (5) and various patrol and coastal craft (150), along with mine warfare or countermeasures vessels (7), amphibious landing craft (11) and support craft (15). |

SOURCE: adapted from IISS (2023b).
What will Finland and Sweden bring to NATO?

Finland’s accession – and with Sweden soon to follow – brings both opportunities and benefits to the Alliance. Historical experience and expertise on assessing Russian capabilities and intentions bring to NATO valuable intelligence, insights and specialism on the Russian military threat. Notwithstanding ongoing debates over how best to integrate Finland and Sweden in NATO command structures and regional plans (e.g. with Finland initially coming under Joint Forces Command [JFC] Brunssum rather than JFC Norfolk as is the case for Norway and was reportedly Helsinki’s preference), the Alliance also gains a strategic foothold in Northern Europe.

With the addition of Finland, NATO effectively doubles its land border with Russia, while also offering Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) the potential to hold key Russian bases and forces in the Kola Peninsula (part of Russia’s so-called ‘bastion’) at risk, using long-range precision fires as a means of bolstering conventional defence and deterrence posture. With Sweden’s membership, meanwhile, the entire Baltic coastline would become ‘NATO territory’, save the Russian coast and the exclave of Kaliningrad. The addition of Sweden would also bring new strategic and operational depth to NATO’s position in Scandinavia, aiding with the defence in depth of Finland if needed and, through provision of host nation support, with the reception, staging, onward movement and integration of NATO reinforcements arriving in a crisis (e.g. from the UK, in a JEF guise, or US and Canadian forces from across the Atlantic). Nor would Finland be the only beneficiary: the ability to use the more developed east–west ground lines of communication (GLOCs) that run through Swedish territory, including both road and rail links, would also help reduce pressure on the limited north–south GLOCs that currently connect southern and northern Norway. This would aid in the speedy reinforcement of both the northern-most Norwegian counties (e.g. Finnmark) and Finnish Lapland. Similarly, Sweden’s strategic position would aid power projection into the Baltic Sea region, including via the possible positioning of radar, air defence and anti-ship systems on the island of Gotland, or the transit of aircraft and other NATO forces to reinforce the Baltic States.

Northern Europe and the North Atlantic thereby become a more integrated defence and deterrence space through, inter alia: a greater presence of NATO forces in both the European Arctic and the Baltic-Nordic regions; improved information sharing and situational awareness in the maritime and air domains; opportunities for a more coherent approach to air missions in the North Calotte region where Norway, Sweden and Finland intersect; and an increased focus on the High North as a zone of competition with Russia. This integration also offers an opportunity to establish a more explicit division of labour reflective of different nations’ geostrategic position, assets and dependencies; for example, emphasising the unique role of Finland as a key NATO frontline state, and the benefits that Sweden brings as a logistical hub and staging post for operations in northeastern Europe and as a key contributor to maritime domain awareness in the Baltic Sea.

With all NORDEFCO and JEF nations now part of NATO, this also brings opportunities for those mini-lateral subgroupings to move ahead with more ambitious
Figure 4. Map of Russia’s ‘bastion’ in relation to NATO’s northern flank

The two new NATO Allies will need to navigate what role they each wish to play in the Alliance’s nuclear deterrence.

cooperation – distinct from but complementing and reinforcing the work of the wider NATO Alliance. Indeed, in November 2023 the JEF nations announced that they had activated a JEF Response Option for the first time in response to damage to subsea cables and pipelines connecting Estonia, Finland and Sweden. This has prompted joint naval and air patrols by JEF members to secure critical infrastructure in the Nordic-Baltic region and North Sea.

The two new NATO Allies will also need to navigate what role they each wish to play in the Alliance’s nuclear deterrence. Both Finland and Sweden have domestic legislation and strong political lobbies that emphasise nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation as important planks of their foreign policy. For its part, the Swedish government has emphasised that it sees no current reason for nuclear weapons to be based on its territory in peacetime once it joins NATO, and that its membership of a nuclear alliance would not undermine its wider commitments to disarmament or the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Finland has issued similar reassurances, and may clarify its stance further in the wake of the February 2024 presidential election victory by Alexander Stubb. Though wider public attitudes on NATO membership shifted markedly in 2022, enduring sensitivities around the nuclear issue could impact policy questions such as whether to permit the transit of Allied nuclear weapons through Finland and Sweden. There are a range of new deterrence policy options available to leaders in Helsinki and Stockholm as new NATO Allies, with live debates over what role to play, how to balance deterrence and escalation management, and how to build domestic support for any change in approach. Looking further into the future, the upper end of that spectrum of possible options would include following countries such as Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey in participating in NATO nuclear sharing through use of dual-capable aircraft (DCA) to deploy US nuclear weapons (with Poland currently exploring options to join them). However, neither Finland or Sweden has indicated any intentions towards such a move as of yet.

As highly developed market economies and vibrant democracies with capable defence industries, as well as niche technical capabilities, Finland and Sweden are also likely to exercise a constructive influence in the shaping of NATO policy – though in the short term the need to staff so many new NATO billets and get up to speed with Alliance bureaucracy will place considerable pressure on both countries’ staff officer corps and pool of civil servants. Relatedly, there are wider and longer-term benefits that can be gained from Finland and Sweden’s insights and input as leaders in societal resilience and comprehensive security or Total Defence models, including how to counter hybrid threats and mobilise businesses, the media and the general population in a crisis. Such areas of expertise align closely with many of the priority areas
identified in NATO’s Strategic Concept 2022, as well as the ongoing work of Allied Command Transformation, the new Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA) and other NATO agencies or bodies.

The key contributions that Finland and Sweden bring to the Alliance are summarised below:

As robust democracies leading the way when it comes to societal resilience, cross-government coordination and an overall comprehensive approach to security, NATO will benefit long-term from including Finland and Sweden in its ranks. Having both long been active members of EU defence initiatives (as non-NATO members) and other EU efforts, their inclusion could also lead to the promotion of stronger NATO-EU collaboration on a range of issues. Helsinki’s role hosting the Hybrid CoE, supporting both the EU and NATO, reflects this sort of thought leadership and bridging role. Sweden was also the first country in the world to officially endorse a feminist foreign policy (though it later revoked it in 2022 following a change in government), and both countries will bring useful insights to ongoing NATO work on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), as well as the human security and climate security agendas.

On land, Finland has one of the strongest artillery forces in Europe and maintains a large conscript and reserve force, capable of mustering 280,000 troops within 30 days. Sweden has advanced capabilities that include sizeable numbers of armoured, mechanized, artillery and air defence systems, including Patriot units. Given a heavy emphasis on artillery and associated sensors, as well as the tactical opportunities afforded by their heavily forested and marshy terrain to canalise and pin enemy forces with long-range fires, Finland has retained disproportionate capabilities to contest the deep battle for a nation of its size. Collectively, the two nations’ forces provide a sizeable conventional deterrent to help secure NATO’s extended Finnish land border with Russia, including the ability to hold at risk the Kola Peninsula and other hubs such as the city of St Petersburg using long-range precision fires, if needed in the event of war.

Outside of their immediate neighbourhood, Finland and Sweden’s armies can also contribute high-readiness and follow-on forces to SACEUR, as per the NATO New Force Model announced at the 2022 Madrid and 2023 Vilnius Summits. This aims to transition the NRF to a larger multidomain Allied Reaction Force, giving NATO the forces needed to enact a credible response to any threat as envisaged through the new overarching Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA). Both nations have prior experience in out-of-area operations, including in Afghanistan and Kosovo, but Finland in particular has retained a strong focus on those territorial defence capabilities in greatest deficit across the
Both nations have given significant priority to ensuring that equipment, training and infrastructure all enable dispersed air operations as a means of maximising survivability for air forces in the face of air and missile strikes from Russia in the event of any conflict.\(^{103}\) The two nations have also signed DCAs with the United States and are taking steps to deepen ties with the US Army and National Guard, as well as special operations forces, including through joint exercises; they can share especially valuable expertise with partner nations in niches such as cold weather operations.\(^{104}\)

In the air domain, Finland and Sweden have substantial ground-based air defences, and fleets of fourth- (F/A-18 and JAS-39) and soon fifth-generation (F-35A) combat aircraft that are impressive relative to their small population sizes. Furthermore, both nations have given significant priority to ensuring that equipment, training and infrastructure all enable dispersed air operations as a means of maximising survivability for air forces in the face of air and missile strikes from Russia in the event of any conflict. This consideration has especially been important to Sweden and has driven many of the design decisions for the JAS-39 Gripen, which is optimised for operations, refuelling, rearming and maintenance from austere and icy locations – including makeshift runways on Swedish highways.\(^{105}\) This adds to the resilience, survivability and flexibility of NATO air forces, and provides opportunities for knowledge sharing with other Allies re-learning the lost art of dispersed operations after three decades of operating in uncontested airspace and from centralised airbases.\(^{106}\) Such an approach aligns with initiatives such as the US Air Force’s Agile Combat Employment (ACE) concept, while there is also an opportunity for the Nordic air forces to play an influential role in exploring how best to integrate the differing strengths and weaknesses of fourth- and fifth-generation aircrafts.\(^{107}\) Indeed, in 2023 the Finnish, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian air forces signed a joint declaration of intent to strengthen air cooperation, including in the North Calotte region, and moved towards a more integrated joint force.\(^{108}\)

At sea, Finland and Sweden both have small but modern navies that carry a mix of sensors, shooters and mines and are specialised in operations in the shallow and congested Baltic Sea and its littoral. For example, Sweden’s conventional submarine fleet can help to redress
vulnerabilities in keeping the Baltic’s waters navigable in the event of a conflict. The shallow sea’s average depth of 60 metres makes it too shallow for the nuclear-powered submarines that comprise all the US or Royal Navy’s attack submarine fleets and the bulk of Russia’s own force. Both nations also bring important niche capabilities such as minelayers – a sizeable gap for NATO and the United States – and minesweepers, as well as icebreakers, and offer small but capable forces of marine infantry. Given substantial experience in littoral operations, there is an opportunity for Finland and Sweden to work with NATO Allies on developing concepts for littoral warfare, as with the US Marine Corps’ evolving model of Expeditionary Advance Base Operations (EABO) or the UK’s ‘littoral strike’.

In space, neither Finland nor Sweden are major military players, with small civil space sectors and a corresponding focus on contributions to the European Space Agency (ESA) and EU initiatives such as the Copernicus Earth Observation (EO) programme or the Galileo Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) (which offers a secure service to government and military customers, as with the US GPS). Nonetheless, both nations have recognised the growing military salience of secure access to and use of space, as well as the threat posed by Russian anti-satellite (ASAT) missile and other capabilities; Finland and Sweden unveiled new national space strategies in 2018 and 2019 respectively. They also host some important infrastructure, given their proximity to polar orbits: the Esrange Space Centre near Kiruna in northern Sweden accommodates one of the world’s largest civilian satellite ground stations and serves as a hub in the satellite network. There are thus opportunities to work closely with other Nordic and NATO Allies to explore joint development and operation of satellites for polar orbits, especially given the vital role that satellite communication, EO data and GNSS services play in remote Arctic regions.

In the cyber domain, both Finland and Sweden have been investing heavily to bolster cybersecurity and cyber defence in line with their comprehensive approaches to national security and societal resilience. Finland’s experience of Russian cyberattacks prompted the Finnish Cyber Security Strategy of 2019, which sets out priorities for international cooperation, better coordination of cybersecurity management, planning and preparedness and developing cyber security competence. For its part, Sweden released a National Cyber Security Strategy in 2016 and established the National Cyber Security Centre in 2021, operated by a coalition of state security organisations to strengthen Sweden’s ability to deliver a new layer of security in a digital age. Even before joining the Alliance, both nations engaged with the NATO Collaborative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (NATO CCDCOE) in Tallinn, Estonia, as non-NATO contributing nations, with Sweden ranking highest at the competitive cyber defence exercise Locked Shields in 2021 and Finland taking the top spot in 2022. Both nations also work closely with
other European governments and Computer Emergency Response Teams (CERTs), including through participation in EU and Nordic Council information sharing, training, education and capacity building initiatives.\textsuperscript{121}

Both Finland and Sweden maintain world-leading science and technology ecosystems with an outsized impact beyond their small size, driven by high levels of education and close cooperation between the government, industry and academia in R\&D. Industrial cooperation arrangements help to integrate new solutions into defence systems, safeguard the military security of supply, and bolster the availability of critical technologies and materiel to the defence forces.\textsuperscript{122} The two countries’ strong commercial tech sectors also provide opportunities for the adaptation of pre-existing products and services to become dual-use capabilities for NATO. Sweden’s advanced industrial base has made for niche strengths in electronic warfare applications (Saab and Ericsson), conventional submarine technology (Saab and Kockums),\textsuperscript{123} unmanned systems (Saab and CybAero) and cybersecurity (Saab and Sectra). In Finland, a strong digital and communications base has led to a focus on developing C4ISR systems (Nokia and Bittium), cybersecurity (F-Secure and Nixu), unmanned systems (Patria and Robonic), and Arctic-specific technologies including vehicles, communication and navigation systems (Patria).\textsuperscript{124} Sweden and Finland are thus likely to bring valuable niche expertise from the public sector, industry and academia to benefit the NATO S&T community, including contributions through the NATO Science and Technology Organisation, the NATO Innovation Fund, and the new Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA).\textsuperscript{125} Together, therefore, Finland and Sweden bring outsized military assets to the table across land, air and sea, as well as niche strengths in emerging domains and technology areas, and a wider record of thought leadership in the fields of hybrid threats, societal resilience and Total Defence.\textsuperscript{126} These individual national contributions will only be further magnified when Sweden joins the Alliance, especially given the complementary roles that the two newest Allies would play (Finland as vigilant frontline nation, Sweden
as a logistics and transit hub enabling power projection across the wider region). Swedish accession will integrate the entire Nordic-Baltic region and all Arctic States from the Arctic Council (save Russia) into NATO. This will open new opportunities for integrated defence and deterrence planning, exercises and operations on the Alliance’s northern flank.\textsuperscript{127}

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the Ukrainians’ determined defence have served to refocus the transatlantic community on the importance of collective defence and of investing in the underlying resilience of military forces,\textsuperscript{128} industrial capacity,\textsuperscript{129} non-military levers\textsuperscript{130} and societal will to fight.\textsuperscript{131} By pushing Finland and Sweden to join NATO, the Kremlin’s plans for its ‘special military operation’ have ultimately backfired – as they have too on the battlefields of Ukraine. Where Russia had hoped to undermine NATO’s cohesion and credibility, and to further fragment Europe, instead it has achieved the opposite: directly bolstering the Alliance’s capabilities and presence in the Nordic-Baltic region and the High North.\textsuperscript{132}

Notes

2. Germanovich (2022a); Germanovich (2022b).
4. NATO (2023d); NATO (2023e).
5. Armstrong (2023); Chatterjee (2023).
8. Marlow (2024); Dee (2024).
10. France24 (2024).
11. Caves et al. (2021); Nicholson et al. (2021).
14. This led to the emergence of the term ‘Finlandisation’ in international relations circles, typically referring to the phenomenon by which a smaller nation is forced into implicit or explicit limitations on its domestic, foreign and security policy and a stance of neutrality to placate a larger neighbour. See The Economist (2022).
19. NATO (2023d); NATO (2023e).
22. NORDEFCO was established in 2009 via a Memorandum of Understanding that merged three pre-existing cooperation initiatives, namely the Nordic Coordinated Arrangement for Military Peace Support (NORDCAP), Nordic Armaments Cooperation (NORDAC) and Nordic Supportive Defence Structures (NORSDUP). NORDEFCO (2024).
Russia signed up to the PfP a month later, reflecting hopes in the West that Russia would liberalise and embark on a path of democratisation and peaceful relations with NATO and the EU after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Though reservists do still have important roles to play, for example in technical or maintenance roles for a protracted conflict.
Though not a member of the EU, Norway has been invited with Canada and the United States to participate in the PESCO project on military mobility to further aid the smooth and rapid movement of military forces across Europe, including in a crisis. Cf. Council of the EU (2021).
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About the Authors

James Black is assistant director of the Defence and Security research group at RAND Europe, where he leads the Defence Strategy, Policy, and Capability research portfolio. He also serves as European lead for the RAND Space Enterprise Initiative, a global hub for RAND’s space-related research, and advises the Centre for Defence Economics and Acquisition. He was recently a non-resident NATO 2030 fellow.

Charlotte Kleberg is a research assistant in the Defence and Security team at RAND Europe. Her research interests include maritime strategy and naval warfare, military strategic studies, defence analysis and applied history. Charlotte has completed two war studies degrees, a M.Sc. in politics, security and war at the Swedish Defence University and a M.A in history of war at King’s College London from where she also holds a B.A in history.

Erik Silfversten is assistant director of the Defence and Security team at RAND Europe and co-director of the Centre for Futures and Foresight Studies (CFFS). He works at the intersection of technology, policy and the future and his primary research interests are complex, strategic policy challenges in relation to cybersecurity and emerging technologies. Erik has extensive experience in futures and foresight research including horizon scanning, trends analysis, scenario development and analysis, technology impact analysis and systems analysis. In his role at CFFS, he is responsible for the operations and development of the Centre.
About this Perspective
This Perspective examines the contributions that Finland and Sweden can make to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) as the newest NATO Allies, having joined in response to Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. It examines the path each nation took towards NATO membership, after a long history of armed neutrality and military non-alignment. It also explores the capabilities and expertise that Finland and Sweden bring to the Alliance in terms not only of their armed forces but also their approaches to innovation, security, resilience, and emergency preparedness. This builds on prior RAND research on opportunities to deepen cooperation in the Nordic-Baltic region and ways to enhance defence and deterrence on NATO’s northern flank more broadly, including in the Arctic.