

The NATO Accession of Finland and Sweden: A Strategic Advantage for the Alliance and the U.S.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The two new NATO members, Sweden and Finland, are key players in enhancing NATO's defense fabric and confronting security threats, especially those posed by Russia.

Both countries are investing in their own already substantial military capabilities and are providing significant amounts of aid to Ukraine.

These two memberships should be a relief to the U.S., as it must focus its resources on the Indo-Pacific to counter China's growing threats and capabilities.

In an era characterized by escalating global security threats, the recent accession of Finland and Sweden to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) represents a pivotal and transformative development with a net positive impact on both American and European security. Despite being the newest members of the Alliance, Sweden and Finland have swiftly emerged as key players in enhancing NATO's defense fabric, augmenting the Alliance's capabilities and readiness to confront security threats, especially those posed by Russia. The effort of both countries to provide for their own, and NATO's, security stand in marked contrast to some legacy members of NATO who have failed to meet defense spending goals and have failed to contribute substantially to the military aid of Ukraine.

The United States should be grateful to have two new members of NATO who both pull their own

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weight and enhance the security of the Alliance overall, especially because the United States will have to focus its resources on the Indo–Pacific region to counter China’s growing threats and capabilities.

From Neutral to NATO

Finland and Sweden both have a history of declared neutrality, with ever-increasing cooperation with NATO since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

After resisting an invasion by the Soviets during World War II, Finland was forced to cede large territories, pay reparations, and legalize the Communist Party in an arrangement that became known as Finlandization. In this arrangement, Finland retained its sovereignty and remained neutral during the Cold War, joining neither the NATO Alliance nor signing the Warsaw Pact.¹

Sweden, on the other hand, retained a position of neutrality and non-alignment based on historical precedent and geographical position. For nearly two centuries, Sweden embraced neutrality, not having fought a war since the age of Napoleon.²

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Finland and Sweden began to increase their cooperation with NATO through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. Through PfP, both countries maintained a policy of military non-alignment but actively contributed to and supported NATO activities, operations, and missions regionally and in Iraq and Afghanistan.³ The integration with NATO through this partnership reached the point where Russia considered Finland and Sweden to be “virtual” NATO allies.⁴ This policy changed after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

In May 2022, Finland and Sweden applied for NATO membership. Both Nordic countries confirmed their willingness and ability to meet the political, legal, and military obligations and commitments required of membership. Finland’s Accession Protocol was first ratified, joining the Alliance on April 4, 2023, and Sweden followed shortly after on March 7, 2024.⁵

Since joining NATO, Finland and Sweden have both been eager to demonstrate their commitment to the Alliance and have already become meaningful contributors to the overall security of the Alliance, both by investing in their own already substantial military capabilities and by providing significant amounts of aid to Ukraine. Both countries are model members of the Alliance and stand in marked contrast to some other members who have not been pulling their own weight in either military spending or in Ukraine contributions.

Finland

Finland demonstrates a steadfast commitment to enhancing its defense capabilities by substantially increasing its defense budget. Finland's fiscal year (FY) 2024 defense budget increased by \$6.6 billion, constituting 2.3 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP).⁶ This exceeds NATO's 2 percent of GDP investment guideline, an indicator of political resolve to contribute to NATO's common defense.⁷

In terms of specific capabilities, Finland yields strength from:

Manpower. Despite having a relatively small population at 5.5 million, Finland has one of the largest fully mobilized armies in NATO with 280,000 troops.⁸

Army. The Finnish army is equipped with 650 tanks (200 of which are 2A6 and 2A4 Leopards) and other weapons, including 700 Howitzers and cannon, 700 mortars, and 700 heavy and light rocket launchers. Additionally, the Finnish Ground Force is equipped with sophisticated sensors and anti-aircraft weapons, including Israeli-made ELTA counter-battery radar systems, which provide it with the ability to track incoming rockets, artillery shells, and mortar fire, the National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System (NASAMS) 2, and tanks.

Finnish soldiers are trained and equipped for cold-weather fighting, with significant quantities of night-fighting equipment and cold-weather gear.⁹

Naval Force. The Finnish navy has four command vessels, five mine-layers, eight missile craft, three mine counter-measure vessels, 13 mine sweepers, and a smaller landing craft. It is also acquiring more corvettes for surface combat (which are in construction and will enter service in 2029).¹⁰

Air Force. The Finnish air force has a fleet of 61 McDonnell Douglas F/A-18 Hornet jets, which are being replaced with 64 Lockheed Martin F-35A Lightning II jets (delivery will begin in 2026). The air force also has dozens of training aircraft and long-range surveillance radars.¹¹

Finland has been instrumental in:

Providing Aid to Ukraine. Finland assumes a proactive role in delivering military assistance to Ukraine, underscoring its commitment to European security. According to the Kiel Institute, Finland currently ranks as the ninth-largest contributor to Ukrainian military aid relative to its GDP, having allocated \$2.21 billion in military support from January 2022 to April 2024.¹² As part of this aid, according to the chief of arms for the Finnish Defense Forces, Finland provided Ukraine not only with old weapons, but also with the latest models of its weapons, air defense systems, and ammunition.¹³

Participating in NATO Exercises. Finland, alongside Norway and Sweden, hosted the 2024 Nordic Response exercise as part of Steadfast Defender, the largest NATO exercise in decades. With a focus on the Nordic region, Finland contributed more than 4,000 soldiers.¹⁴ Finland also participated in Baltic Operations 2024 (BALTOPS-24, the largest recurring NATO naval exercise).¹⁵

Sweden

Like Finland, Sweden demonstrates a steadfast commitment to enhancing its defense capabilities by substantially increasing its defense budget. Sweden's FY 2024 defense budget increased by \$2.44 billion, constituting 2.1 percent of its GDP. This budget is double that of its FY 2020 defense budget.¹⁶ This exceeds NATO's 2 percent GDP investment guideline, an indicator of political resolve to contribute to NATO's common defense.¹⁷

In terms of specific capabilities, Sweden yields strength from:

An Extensive Domestic Defense Industry. Sweden's defense industry amounted to \$3 billion in 2022 and the country's defense companies produce exceptional weapons systems, such as Saab's Jas 39 Gripen and BAE System AB's Combat Vehicle 90. The defense sector is built with an extensive public-private partnership component.¹⁸

Naval Force. Sweden has an advanced submarine fleet: three advanced *Gotland*-class submarines and one older model that is scheduled to retire when the new designs are delivered in 2027 and 2028. These submarines can operate in the Baltic Sea, filling a critical gap in NATO capabilities.¹⁹

Air Force. Sweden's air force is the largest in Scandinavia and one of the largest in Europe. Sweden has exceptional air capabilities, maintaining a fleet of at least 100 fighter jets (with more to be delivered in the coming years).²⁰

Sweden has been instrumental in:

Providing Aid to Ukraine. Like Finland, Sweden assumes a proactive role in delivering military assistance to Ukraine, underscoring its commitment to European security. According to the Kiel Institute, Sweden ranks as the sixth-largest contributor to Ukrainian military aid relative to its GDP, having allocated \$2.79 billion in military support from January 2022 to April 2024. As part of this aid, Sweden committed tanks, Howitzers, and infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs).²¹

Hosting and Participating in NATO Exercises. Prior to NATO membership, Sweden had already hosted BALTOPS 22 on the island of Gotland, a joint NATO exercise that included amphibious operations, gunnery,

anti-submarine, air defense, mine clearance operations, explosive ordnance disposal, unmanned underwater vehicles, and medical response.²² Sweden also co-hosted the 2024 Nordic Response exercise with Norway and Finland and contributed more than 4,500 soldiers.²³ Additionally, and alongside Finland, Sweden just participating in BALTOPS for the first time as a NATO member. U.S. Vice Admiral Thomas Ishee, the commander of the 6th Fleet and STRIKEFORNATO, called this a “clear deterrence message” to Russia.²⁴

Strategic Advantages

The accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO presents numerous advantages for NATO, as it presents substantial security problems for Russian military planners and therefore enhances the security of NATO overall, including:

1. Gotland island’s ability to dominate the Baltic and contribute to the defense of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania; and
2. The challenge to Russia posed by the massive border it now shares with Finland and Finland’s large reserves of military personnel.

The accession of Sweden and Finland has necessitated new NATO military planning in the Baltic Sea. Sweden’s supreme commander of the armed forces, Micael Byden, has expressed concerns over Vladimir Putin’s potential control over the Baltic Sea through Gotland.²⁵ Gotland is the largest island in the Baltic Sea and sits between mainland Sweden and the Baltic states. Gotland is primarily an asset to NATO military planners, not a liability. Enhanced military capabilities hosted by the Swedish on the island would make it difficult for the Russian navy to project power in the Baltic Sea and potentially hamper Russian planning for an attack on any of the three Baltic states.²⁶ Sweden demilitarized the island in 2005, but reintroduced permanent troops on the island in 2016, following the Russian annexation of Crimea. Sweden has since gradually increased the military presence on the island, and in 2021 reactivated air defense systems on Gotland.²⁷

Finland’s border with Russia extends 830 miles north to the Arctic Ocean. Just across this border from Finland sits the Kola Peninsula, one of the most critical regions in Russia for Russian national security interests. The Kola Peninsula is home to Russia’s Northern Fleet, which includes ballistic missile submarines (a component of Russia’s nuclear triad), attack submarines, and various surface ships.²⁸ Russian military planners must now consider

the possibility that NATO members will station assets in Finland capable of threatening Russian forces in the Kola Peninsula. This exposure in a region that Russia had previously considered relatively secure complicates Russian military planning to a significant degree. Russia will likely have to introduce more conventional military assets in the region, troops that it otherwise would have preferred to keep further south opposite the Baltic states or Ukraine.²⁹ The inclusion of Finland in NATO thus introduces another layer of deterrence against any temptation for Russia to consider military operations against a NATO member.

Conclusion

Since joining NATO, Finland and Sweden have demonstrated significant capacity and will as NATO members by investing in their military capabilities and by providing substantial amounts of aid to Ukraine. Finland and Sweden's NATO membership enhances the Alliance, especially through certain critical assets, such as Finland's substantial reserve forces and Sweden's robust defense industry. Both countries have boosted their defense budgets beyond NATO's 2 percent of GDP guideline, actively support Ukraine, and engage in NATO military exercises. Both stand as model NATO members, and the Alliance would be markedly improved if every member state were to emulate them.

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