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‘The Special Position of Sweden and Finland

In the Field of Security

An analysis of states’ military relationship with the EU
and NATO



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Abstract

Sweden and Finland are two states which have adopted, for numerous decades, a completely neutral stance on international developments, particularly in the field of security and defense. With their accession to the European Union, their policy shifted from neutral to militarily non-aligned and it was primarily expressed through the decision of non-participation in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. However, the European integration and cooperation in the field of defense, as well as the current military threats they face, make cooperating with NATO increasingly attractive. Given the numerous developments over the last decade, this essay will highlight the special position of these two states and their cooperation with the two aforementioned organizations, to gain a more thorough understanding of the situation and to reasonably predict upcoming developments.



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‘The Special Position of Sweden and Finland

In the Field of Security

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1. Introduction

The security policy of Sweden and Finland in their modern history attracted wide research interest as they, having adopted a neutral stance during the Cold War, sought – and ultimately found – their place inside the European Union. Indeed, their commitment to the Union’s Common Foreign and Security Policy simultaneously marked the end of their neutrality policy (Forsberg and Vaahtoranta 2001, 69). However, the policy of non-alignment towards the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) remains to this day, despite their enhanced cooperation in numerous areas of interest. At the same time, increased cooperation between the Member States of the European Union is observed in the field of security and defense and is often expressed by adopting common defense policies, developing the defense industry, or seeking military action.

It is therefore worth considering how the position of non-participation in NATO by Sweden and Finland is consistent with their simultaneous involvement – to some extent – in the defense initiatives and activities of the European Union. This paper will address this concern, analyze their current special situation in the field of security and systematically assess future developments, based on their present and upcoming security risks.

After presenting the historical context that puts into perspective and explains the current situation, this essay will examine, through a bibliographic review, the strategic position and participation of the two Nordic countries within the European Union in the field of security and defense, the military threats they are called upon to address, and their cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

2. Historical Background

To thoroughly understand the special status of Sweden and Finland, it is incredibly significant to present the historical events that led to the current political and strategic landscape.

Until the 1800s, Sweden of the time included the territory of present-day Finland and maintained it under its sovereignty. The King of Sweden during the above period was Gustav IV, who, influenced by France's revolutionary tendencies, turned against it and came into conflict with its allies, i.e. the Russian Empire and the Danish-Norwegian Kingdom in 1808 (Norman et al. 2021). Politically isolated and with enemies in all directions, Sweden failed to defend the region of Finland and was forced to surrender it, along with Åland Islands, to Russia. A few years later, Charles XIV comes to power in Sweden and reverses the strategy that the Kingdom would follow in the forthcoming years. Being aware of the Napoleonic Empire's weakness, he sought cooperation with its enemies, namely Russia, with which he capitulated in 1809. This treaty ceded Finland to Russian sovereignty, allowed the accession of Norway to Denmark, and led to a long-term peace from 1814 and onward (Norman et al. 2021).

The upcoming conflicts in the region back then concerned the Swedish Kingdom, but Swedish troops were never actively involved in them. These were the First and Second Schleswig Wars and the Crimean War, during which Sweden drifted apart from Russia when they allowed English and French warships to enter Swedish ports and signed a treaty afterward with the Western Powers in 1855 (Norman et al. 2021). Swedish neutrality was also observed during the conflicts between Prussia and Austria in 1866 as well as between France and Germany in 1870-71.

During World War I, two developments are notable. Initially, Sweden retained her neutrality, as she was familiarized with this strategy, but its intention to maintain their trade relations with Germany led to a decline of trades with the Allies and famine in its interior (Norman et al. 2021). Secondly, the February Revolution and the October Revolution in Russia at the end of World War I paved the way for Finland's independence, which was officially recognized in December of 1917 (Sundblad et al. 2021).

Since Finland's independence, the distribution of power in the region had shifted. Geographically, Finland became the buffer state between Sweden and Russia, which delivers a significant impact on the security rationale of the two states (Forsberg and Vaahtoranta 2001, 70). This was confirmed in practice during World War II, when Finland fought twice against Russia, unlike the geographically protected Sweden, which did not take part in any hostilities. In addition, it is worth mentioning the intention of the two states to form – before World War II – their own defense alliance/union, which, however, was later abandoned due to Russia's objection (Norman et al. 2021).

The outcome of the war steered the two countries to different, yet near, paths. Sweden continued its neutral doctrine and abstained from any political activities or commitments that would put it at risk, like the participation in NATO and the Brussels Treaty (Eliasson 2003, 10). Finland, on the other hand, came to an agreement with the Soviet Union, signing the Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance Agreement in 1948, which included a mutual defense assistance clause and deprived Finland's right to participate in any organizations that were hostile to the USSR (Sundblad et al. 2021). This agreement between Finland and the USSR forced the former to maintain a neutral stance on global issues, to avoid conflict with the latter.

Therefore, during the Cold War, it can be stated that Sweden was neutral by choice, in contrast to Finland, which was neutral due to necessity. This claim may also be confirmed by their stance during the international crises of the Cold War; the former "actively condemned both the United States and the Soviet Union" while the second "avoided criticism of any of the major powers" (Forsberg and Vaahtoranta 2001, 70).

3. From Neutrality to the European Union

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union made the neutrality of the two countries unnecessary, especially in the case of Finland, where the dissolution of the USSR led to the repeal of the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance (Forsberg and Vaahtoranta 2001, 70). In this manner, Sweden and Finland concluded their accession negotiations with the European Union and became its members in 1995.

Sweden and Finland's intentions to join the Union differed; The former's motives were essentially political and economic, while the latter's were unquestionably related to its safety (Forsberg and Vaahtoranta 2001, 71). Regardless of their aspirations, their accession to the European Union entailed their commitment to its Common Foreign and Security Policy.

Thus, a change of strategy is observed by the two Nordic countries, from a completely neutral stance to a non-aligned one, which also tends to be more and more questioned in practice with the passage of time, as military cooperation and initiatives have been constantly undertaken and develop (Bildt 2018).

This essay will not analyze the history and the course of the two states within the European Union, but it will focus on the current security concerns that they have to address, as well as on their relevant activities within the Union.

3.1. Current Security Concerns

Just like any Member State located on the borders of the European Union, Sweden and Finland's predominant concern is the defense of land, maritime, and aerial territories under their sovereignty or authority. Although the nature of their concerns may differ when compared, their cause is in most cases common: the Russian threat.

As aforementioned, concerning their geographical position to Russia, Finland comprises the (directly) threatened state, while Sweden remains the protected one, having the former as a buffer state (Forsberg and Vaahtoranta 2001, 70).

This understanding was realistic only until recently. However, it has changed when an array of factors led Russia to adopt revisionist aspirations in the Baltic Sea Region, steering increased military presence and mobility in Sweden and Finland's proximity (Finland's Prime Minister's Office 2016, 11). Defense insecurity in the region was intensified, according to the Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy (2016), with the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the more and more frequent military activity in the Arctic.

Specifically, the Baltic Sea is the setting of a multidimensional security matter and involves numerous actors. Based on the map below, this matter will be further analyzed.



Map 1: The Baltic Sea (Einstein 2006)

The leading actors are: Russia and Belarus on the one hand, which have strong political, social, economic, and military ties, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia on the other hand, members of the European Union and NATO, and the third party with a distinct position are Sweden and Finland, members of the European Union but not members of NATO (non-aligned states). As easily understood by the map, the states directly threatened due to their territorial proximity with Russia and Belarus are all of those mentioned above, except Sweden. The Swedish island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea retains a significant strategic value for the country and the defense of the region, as it may provide the ideal defensive position for transitioning forces – in the Baltic

Sea – and can be used to project power in the region (Chang 2017). Ensuring military deterrence capabilities and defending it is deemed critical, notably due to its proximity to the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, which holds an equally important strategic value for the Russians (Johnson 2020). Therefore, military readiness must be strengthened and maintained accordingly, based on relative developments.

Russian interest is not limited merely to the Baltic Sea but equally extends to the Arctic. Climate change directly affects the region, where the melting of ice forms alternative maritime routes and enables the exploitation of energy resources (European Parliament 2021, 2). Sweden and Finland are involved directly, as they will carry out a leading role in future developments due to their sovereign rights in the area, which stem from international law. The Arctic has progressively been understood as a new front, which Russia swiftly pursued to control, mainly by carrying out unauthorized overflights in the states' national airspaces and conducting military exercises in the region (Hurt 2021).

Both states establish their security policy on effectively preventing and combating hybrid threats. The term “hybrid war” cannot be solely attributed to a unique definition. “Hybrid threats” in this essay refer to the use of diplomatic means, information, intelligence, cyber and psychological operations, use of economic pressure, terrorism, and extremism (Wither 2016, 76). The number and intensity of hostile intelligence activities within Sweden and Finland (primarily originating from Russia) have increased since 2014 (Korpela 2016), while cases of espionage and extremism, usually associated with Iran and other Islamic Republic countries (Afghanistan, Mauritania, Pakistan, Islamic State), have been constantly multiplying (Khoshnood 2021, 1).

3.2. Mobilization through the Union: Action for Security

This section will present the involvement of Sweden and Finland mainly in the field of the European Union's Common Security and Defense Policy. It will examine the European institutions and capabilities which permit these two states to address their security concerns.

A capability of utmost importance offered to all Member States of the European Union, through its primary law and within the framework of the Common Security and Defense Policy, is the Mutual Defense Clause [Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union]. Although this clause takes into consideration the particular defense policies of its Member States and their position within or outside NATO, Finland will frequently emphasize the issue of mutual assistance within the Union, as reasserted in a relevant government report (Finland’s Prime Minister’s Office 2016, 12, 20). Sweden, on the other hand, can use this clause according to its interests and the political will of the government in place. Swedish military assistance under the Mutual Defense Clause is not an unambiguous binding obligation but may be interpreted according to the country’s intents (Österdahl 2021, 159–60).

Sweden and Finland participate actively in the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), but the related intensity is differentiated respectively. The table below illustrates the countries' participation in the PESCO programs, which aim to improve or form new defense capabilities for the States concerned.

Sweden	Finland
Military Mobility	
Airborne Electronic Attack	Timely Warning and Interception with Space-based Theater Surveillance
European Medical Command	
European Union Collaborative Warfare Capabilities	
Maritime Unmanned Anti-Submarine System	Integrated Unmanned Ground System
European Union Training Mission Competence Centre	
European Union Test and Evaluation Centres (Coordinator)	

Closely linked to the Permanent Structured Cooperation is the European Defense Fund, which strengthens the Union’s strategic autonomy in the defense sector through financing. This Fund is viewed positively by the countries discussed,

particularly Finland, as it provides it the opportunity to strengthen its small-sized defense industry (Fägersten 2020, 33).

Finally, the following table summarizes the Swedish and Finnish military participation in European institutions, formations, and military missions, both of the past as well as the present.

Sweden	Finland
Initiatives	
European Intervention Initiative (EI2)	
Movement Coordination Centre Europe (MCCE)	
European Army Interoperability Centre – Finabel	
Nordic Battlegroup	
European Air Group	Battlegroup 107
	European Corps
Military Missions and Operations	
European Union Force Chad/CAR	
European Union Naval Force Somalia – Operation Atalanta	
European Union Training Mission in Mali	
European Union Training Mission in the Central African Republic	European Union Force in the Central African Republic
Operation Artemis	
Takuba Task Force	

4. Cooperation and Relations with NATO

As it has already been mentioned several times, Sweden and Finland remained neutral until the end of the Cold War, while in the post-Cold War period, and with their accession to the European Union, neutrality transformed into non-alignment, primarily relating to NATO.

The two parties (Sweden-Finland/NATO) maintain significant relations and cooperation, which were established when they joined the NATO Partnership for Peace program (PfP) in 1994 and were further strengthened by their participation in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council in 1997 (NATO 2021).

This chapter will briefly focus on their NATO membership prospect and the relevant political developments during the previous years, as well as on the increasing operational cooperation between the two parties.

4.1. Membership Status and Political Developments

Sufficient information has been provided until this point which explain the rationale on why Sweden and Finland have been in this special position today. Their history, geographical location, and political choices in the last century have contributed to the present position of non-participation in NATO.

There is a long-standing and reasonable public opinion division in both countries regarding NATO membership and it stems from the aforementioned factors (Ydén, Berndtsson, and Petersson 2019). Simultaneously, however, a consensus is observed, both at a social and political level, on the simultaneous accession of both states, in case they ever decide to do so (Järvenpää 2019, sec. Finnish Public Opinion and NATO).

Recent years' developments, principally relating to the situation in Ukraine and the increased military activity in the Baltic Sea, have reopened discussions on the prospect of joining the Alliance. We may indeed experience the developments that will lead to the policy-turning point for NATO membership. This hypothesis is reinforced to some extent by the recent historic majority achieved in the Swedish Parliament on the prospect of adopting a 'NATO option' (Ringstrom 2020). A NATO

option indicates readiness for a membership application to the Alliance, which Finland has already expressed since 1995. Although this decision does not necessarily entail membership discussions with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, it is a critical development and a posture change that undoubtedly conveys a strategic message in all directions.

4.2. Operational Cooperation

Although any form of cooperation between Sweden, Finland, and NATO deserves to be taken into consideration and evaluated, this section will briefly point out their operational cooperation, in regard to their security concerns and threats.

To begin with, Sweden and Finland are partners in the Partnership Interoperability Initiative (PII), as well as Enhanced Opportunity Partners under the aforementioned program (NATO 2020). This cooperation allows the strengthening of interoperability among military forces for optimized cooperation during crisis management. In addition, through this cooperation, they may assist, following a national decision, the NATO Rapid Reaction Force (NRF) (NATO 2021).

Of instrumental importance is the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the two countries and NATO on 'Host Nation Support'. As Host Nations (subject to national decision), they provide political or military assistance to Allied forces located on, or in transit through, their territory during exercises or in a crisis (NATO 1997, chap. 12: Host Nation Support).

Lastly, the joint military operations and training between a) the national armed forces of Sweden and Finland and b) NATO military formations and armies could not be disregarded. These include the annual military exercise 'BALTOPS', which has been held since 1972 and is related to operational activities in the Baltic Sea, (STRIKFORNATO 2020), as well as the series of 'Ramstein Alloy' exercises, which involve air surveillance in the Baltic Sea, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, countries which do not possess any fighter aircraft (Charpentreau 2021).

Sweden	Finland
Partnership Interoperability Initiative	
Enhanced Opportunity Partners	
Host Nation Support	
NATO Response Force (NRF)	
PfP Planning and Review Process (PARP)	
NATO Operational Capabilities Concept (OCC)	
Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC)	
Strategic Airlift International Solution (SALIS)	
Multinational Corps Northeast	
Sweden's Individual Partnership Cooperation Programme	
Exercises	
BALTOPS	
RAMSTEIN ALLOY	
COLD RESPONSE	
FLAMING SWORD	

AURORA	PASSEX of Standing NATO Maritime Group One (SNMG1)
SUMMER SHIELD	

5. Evaluation & Conclusions

The current strategic environment and interdependence between states differ significantly compared to the 19th and 20th centuries. Swedish and Finnish neutrality has been a strategy that has been, over the years, abandoned on the altar of economic and defense enhancement, only at the precise time that the conditions allowed the minimum consequences due to that change of direction.

The globe presently moves at astonishing speeds, mainly due to the broad interstate connection and interdependence, technological and economic development, as well as climate change. Developments with a negative impact in the defense sector may occur at any given time, a phenomenon that augments the uncertainty of states, especially those that are military non-aligned.

Uncertainty was, therefore, the driving force behind the mobilization of the European Union's Member States in the field of security and defense, to which Sweden and Finland contributed significantly and willingly. Uncertainty has even prompted them to reevaluate their relationship with NATO and pursue wider cooperation to ensure fundamental capabilities, such as that of interoperability.

Even though the worsening situation in the Baltic Sea at the moment may be interpreted as a temporary situation, hybrid threats and the issue of the Arctic have a long-term horizon, i.e. they will concern the two countries in the future.

In our view, Sweden and Finland are expected to abandon their militarily non-aligned policy at the precise time that a widespread military crisis will occur on their borders, provided that this change of policy; 1) will emerge by both countries at the same time and 2) will reverse the crisis towards their benefit, both in the short and long term.

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