

Finland's and Sweden's NATO Accession Is in the National Interest and Should Receive Senate Support

Luke Coffey and Daniel Kochis

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Finnish and Swedish NATO membership is in the U.S. national interest.

With robust military capabilities and decades of experience working with the U.S. and NATO, Finland and Sweden will be net security contributors to the Alliance.

Their accession will better secure the Arctic, Baltic Sea, and Nordic regions—making future conflict there less likely by removing any lingering ambiguity.

In light of Russia's most recent invasion on Ukraine, Finland and Sweden have formally applied to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Finland and Sweden possess robust military capabilities and decades of experience working with the U.S. and NATO. Far from being like other “free riders” who have contributed little to the Alliance in recent years, their entry into NATO would provide a net contribution to regional security. The U.S. should support their membership in the Alliance, ensure steps are taken to help bolster their defense during the period of their application process, lead efforts inside the Alliance to update and modernize NATO's contingency plans in the Baltic region, and get NATO focused on Arctic security.

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U.S. National Interest

U.S. foreign policy decisions should first be evaluated by whether they protect and advance American interests. The Trump Administration oversaw the entry of two new members of NATO (Montenegro and North Macedonia), which greatly contributed to the stability of the Balkans. It is right for the Biden Administration to support Finland's and Sweden's membership in the Alliance to help secure the Baltic region. There are six reasons why Swedish and Finnish NATO membership is good for the U.S. and the Alliance:

1. Finland and Sweden Possess Robust Military Capabilities. Both nations would bring significant capabilities to the Alliance. Finland, a country of just 5.5 million people, has a formidable military including an active force of approximately 20,000. Finland also has 238,000 trained reservists and a recently announced the purchase of 64 F-35 fighter aircraft. Finland will spend 2.2 percent of gross domestic product on defense next year, meeting the NATO benchmark right from the start. In March, Sweden committed to meeting the 2 percent mark soon.¹ As things stand, in 2025, Sweden's defense budget will be 34 percent higher than 2021 levels and almost double the 2015 total in nominal terms.² Sweden has announced that it is re-garrisoning Gotland island—perhaps one of the most important pieces of territory in the Baltic Sea. This will greatly help NATO defend the countries in the region. Both nations have purchased U.S.-built capabilities. (Finland has F-18s, F-35s, and Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles (JASSM); Sweden has the Patriot missile system.)

2. NATO Focus on the Arctic Would Be More Likely. Finland's and Sweden's NATO membership would mean that seven of the world's eight Arctic countries are now in the Alliance. Entry into NATO would focus the Alliance on the emerging challenges of the Arctic—and help to deter malign Russian and Chinese activities there. To date, NATO has failed to develop an Arctic strategy. From a practical point of view, the Alliance would have no choice but to develop and implement an Arctic policy when both Finland and Sweden become members.

3. The U.S. Has a Long Historical Relationship with Both Finland and Sweden. The U.S. shares history, a strong trading relationship, and a mutual interest in peace and security in Europe with Finland and Sweden. Finland and Sweden both have a historical partnership with the U.S. and NATO, have signed defense cooperation agreements with the U.S., and exercise consistently with NATO allies with which they are highly interoperable.

4. Regional Security Would Improve in the Baltic Sea Region. Finland's and Sweden's entry into NATO would allow the Alliance to defend the Baltic states more easily and deter Russian aggression more effectively in the region. Russia has proven to be keenly aware of which nations are and are not NATO members. The Alliance's Article 5 statement that an attack against one member is an attack against all has proven effective in deterring Russia. Currently, the three Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—are geographically isolated from the rest of the Alliance. Finland's and Sweden's NATO accession will ease operational planning and increase regional security. Finland and Sweden both are critical for NATO's ability to defend and, if necessary, retake the Baltic states from potential future Russian aggression. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO decreases the risk of war in the Baltic region by removing any lingering ambiguity that Russia may have perceived with Finland and Sweden outside NATO.

5. Both Nations Have the Political Will to Deploy Forces. Considering that Finland and Sweden have had a tradition of being militarily neutral or non-aligned, both have contributed to overseas military operations. Both Finland and Sweden took part in NATO's missions in Afghanistan. In total, Sweden deployed more than 7,000 troops to Afghanistan and led the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Mazar-i-Sharif, which oversaw reconstruction efforts in four provinces across northern Afghanistan.³ Finland deployed a total of 2,500 troops, including special forces, to Afghanistan.⁴ Sweden contributed fighter jets to enforce a no-fly zone in support of NATO's Operation Unified Protector (OUP) in Libya. In recent years, both countries have deployed hundreds of troops to NATO-, EU-, and U.S.-led missions in Iraq (training Iraqi Forces), the Balkans, and sub-Saharan Africa.

6. Finland and Sweden Will Stand Up to the Threat from China. Finland and Sweden are clear-minded about the threat posed by China. Last March, Finnish authorities announced that the cyber group APT31, which is linked to the Chinese government, was likely behind cyberattacks aimed at the Finnish parliament.⁵ Sweden has been a particular target after it banned Chinese telecommunications companies Huawei and ZTE from its 5G networks in 2020.⁶ In announcing the ban, Sweden's Post and Telecom Authority stated, "The influence of the Chinese state over the country's private sector provides strong incentives for companies to act in accordance with the goals of the Chinese Communist Party's national strategies."⁷

Two of the chief competitors to Chinese telecoms companies for 5G rollouts are Nokia (Finnish) and Ericsson (Swedish). Their importance for

secure next-generation networks was not lost on former Attorney General William Barr who, in 2020, stated the U.S. should consider taking a “controlling stake,” in one of the firms.⁸ In addition to next-generation networks, Finland and Sweden must help the U.S. check Chinese designs on expanding its reach into the Arctic, and they are similarly wary of Chinese investments in Europe. For instance, in 2018, on security grounds, Finnish authorities blocked an attempted acquisition or lease of a small airport in the town of Kemijärvi, north of the Arctic Circle, by the Chinese state-funded Polar Research Institute of China.⁹

Background

Although Finland and Sweden have for historic and political reasons been militarily non-aligned, their partnership with NATO is currently the closest of any non-member states, and close relations go back decades. Even during the Cold War, Sweden secretly cooperated with NATO and was unofficially referred to at NATO headquarters as its “17th member.”¹⁰ The end of the Cold War saw an end to Finnish and Swedish efforts to keep partnerships with NATO allies under wraps.

Both nations joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace program in May 1994. Since that time, official ties and cooperation have increasingly intertwined Finland and Sweden with NATO.¹¹ Swedish troops continue today to take part in NATO’s Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission, and Swedish forces contributed to OUP in Libya and NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Resolute Support Missions in Afghanistan. Likewise, Finland contributes troops to KFOR and was an active member of both ISAF and Resolute Support.

Both nations take part in several NATO Centres of Excellence and have solidified their partnership with Alliance members through joint exercises and planning, as well as through key defense acquisitions with important partner nations, including procurement of many U.S. systems and platforms. Following the 2014 Wales Summit, NATO introduced a category of “Enhanced Opportunity” partners within the pre-existing Partnership Interoperability Initiative for deepening cooperation with non-NATO partner countries. Finland and Sweden were two of the five Enhanced Opportunity Partners. Both have signed host-nation support agreements with NATO. In May 2018, during the Trump Administration, the defense ministers of Finland, Sweden, and the U.S. signed a Trilateral Statement of Intent to strengthen defense cooperation.

Both nations have been strong supporters of Ukraine. Finland was one of the first Western countries to send weapons to Ukraine in February¹² and has continued military aid—as well as contributing an additional €15 million (\$16.1 million) in development cooperation funds and humanitarian assistance since the start of 2022.¹³ Similarly, Sweden has provided both humanitarian and military assistance to Ukraine and recently co-hosted a humanitarian donors conference with Poland, raising \$6.5 billion in additional aid for Ukraine.¹⁴

The Open Door

NATO's open-door policy for qualified countries has contributed greatly to transatlantic security since the first round of enlargement in 1952, helping to ensure the Alliance's central place as the prime guarantor of security in Europe. The North Atlantic Treaty's Article 10 states that any European state that is "in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area"¹⁵ can be invited to join the alliance.

While Russia has described any further NATO enlargement as a "provocation,"¹⁶ no third party should have a veto over the decisions of the sovereign member states of NATO. It is for the democratic countries that make up the Alliance to decide whether to admit new members—and which ones. All decisions made by the Alliance require unanimity, including those regarding enlargement.

While Russia has made blustery statements threatening Finland and Sweden should they join NATO, Russia has recently toned down its rhetoric. For instance, President Vladimir Putin recently stated, "As far as expansion goes, including new members Finland and Sweden, Russia has no problems with these states—none. And so in this sense, there is no immediate threat to Russia from an expansion to include these countries."¹⁷

The Way Ahead

NATO has done more than any other organization, including the European Union, to secure U.S. national interests,¹⁸ promote stability, and ensure security in the Euro-Atlantic region. NATO accomplished this by enticing countries to become a part of the Alliance. It is in America's interest that NATO's door remain open to deserving European countries, like Finland and Sweden, who commit to their defense and strengthen the Alliance rather than relying on the United States to pick up the tab. It is in America's interest to:

- **Ratify the accessions protocol for Finland and Sweden after thorough consideration and open debate.** To demonstrate U.S. leadership and send a strong message to the transatlantic community, the U.S. Senate should speedily allocate time to debate, and then pass, the required accessions protocol for Sweden and Finland to join NATO.
- **Support steps to help bolster Finland’s and Sweden’s defenses during their application process.** The time period between applying to become a member and receiving the security guarantee of NATO membership could be a dangerous one if handled improperly. On this issue, the Europeans are stepping up to the plate. To date, Denmark, France, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, and the U.K. have extended security guarantees to Finland and Sweden while they await NATO membership. These are important European-led guarantees. However, as Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin stated, “The key issue is to keep the ratification process as short as possible.... That would be the best security guarantee.”¹⁹ The U.S. should support its European allies in this endeavor and should participate in combined exercises with Finland and Sweden during this period.
- **Lead efforts inside the Alliance to update and modernize NATO’s contingency plans in the Baltic region.** The last time the Alliance did this was in the aftermath of the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine. With Sweden and Finland in NATO, and with the security dynamic changing in the region due to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, NATO should update its plans for the Baltic region. It is in America’s interest to lead this process.
- **Encourage the Alliance to welcome Finnish and Swedish participation in the development of NATO’s forthcoming Strategic Concept.** NATO is in the process of drafting a new Strategic Concept that will be released at this summer’s summit in Madrid. The last Strategic Concept was published in 2010 when the geopolitical situation in the North Atlantic region was much different. It is in the interest of the U.S. and the Alliance for Finland and Sweden to play a role in the development of the new Strategic Concept—even before they become NATO members.
- **Work with allies to develop a NATO Arctic strategy.** With two more Arctic states in the Alliance, and considering Russia’s and

China's increasing role in the Arctic region, NATO should finally agree to developing a comprehensive Arctic policy to address security challenges in the region.

- **Keep NATO's door open.** Finnish and Swedish membership will also serve as proof to other aspirant countries that NATO's door is truly open for new members. NATO should ensure that its open-door policy is explicitly clear for those countries that meet the criteria set out in Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty when in it is America's interest. Russia should never be seen as having a veto over a country's membership in NATO. Just because a country was once occupied by the Soviet Union or under the domination of the Russian Empire does not mean that it is blocked from joining the Alliance in perpetuity.

Conclusion

The NATO accession of Finland and Sweden is an important decision that will bolster transatlantic security by adding two members to NATO who have the political will to contribute and the capabilities to back up their commitments. Their accession will better secure the Arctic, Baltic Sea, and Nordic regions—and make future conflict there less likely. There are myriad reasons why Finnish and Swedish NATO membership will advance U.S. national interests. Their bids deserve U.S. support.

Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy at The Heritage Foundation. **Daniel Kochis** is Senior Policy Analyst for European Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom at The Heritage Foundation.

Endnotes

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