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Executive Summary

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has brought several noteworthy consequences, including for NATO's Northern and Eastern Flank's regional security architecture. Following decades of peaceful coexistence in the region, some Nordic states (Finland and Sweden) have found themselves on a verge of a strategic choice. The direct result of the Russia-instigated war in Ukraine were the decisions made by Finland and Sweden to seek membership in NATO. Within a span of one year, both Finland (April 2023) and Sweden (March 2024) became members of NATO. This paper builds up on the explanatory power of the "frontline states" concept, as presented in the previous report, yet it focuses on the examination of the impact of Finland's and Sweden's in NATO membership on the defence posture of the Alliance. As both of these states are becoming vital for the strengthening of other NATO's frontline states, I will assess the role of these newcomers in the Alliance's defence and deterrence strategy. Additionally, the paper will highlight key implications of Finland's and Sweden's NATO accession for the Baltic Sea new security architecture in the light of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian War.

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Introduction

In terms of the concept of a “frontline state”, Finland seems not only to align with the overall description but also politically demonstrates acceptance of such a role.¹ Geopolitical realities, including the longest border with Russia of any NATO state, a history of strained relations with Russia (and the Soviet Union), combined with robust military assistance to Ukraine and societal understanding of the threat from Russia both to Finnish and European security, all make Finland a frontline state *par excellence*.² Even though Sweden would hardly be perceived as a classic frontline state – as it lacks a land border with Russia - due to its extensive Baltic coastline and the presence of islands in the Baltic Sea, along with its strong opposition to Russia’s imperial policies in Europe, Stockholm currently presents a relatively united stance with Finland and other NATO frontline states.³ In an interview in March 2024, Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom stated that NATO and EU states “must prepare for a long-term conflict with Russia”, reminding also that Sweden's membership in NATO is a direct result of Russia's “illegal, unprovoked and indefensible war of aggression”, and that Russia’s confrontational approach to the EU and NATO “needs to be addressed”.⁴ Predictably, for frontlines states in Central and Eastern Europe such as Poland⁵, Finland’s and Sweden’s accession to NATO might represent a useful opportunity to build a common platform of allies that advocate for both a stronger defence in Europe and more decisive support for Ukraine.

Finnish and Swedish cooperation should not be taken for granted or expected to be flawless as these states bring their own unique political, economic and cultural backgrounds to the NATO community. This is precisely why the newly enlarged NATO, as Matti Pesu aptly observed, should base its posture and strategy in Northern Europe on “a more explicit division of labour” as the regional allies and stakeholders “can be divided into four categories in terms of their role in regional security: frontline nations, hubs, security providers and the ultimate security guarantor”.⁶ According to this proposed division of labour, the regional frontline nations include “the Baltic states,

¹ For example, during the 2024 presidential campaign in Finland, the candidates referred to Finland as a “frontline state”. “It’s a very critical time in Finnish and European history. One should not underestimate the challenges of leading foreign and security policy in the current environment. It’s a very tough environment for small states, especially small frontline states like Finland,” said Olli Rehn, a candidate for president. Alexander Stubb, a winner of the presidential campaign, told in the interview that when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, “Finland suddenly became a direct frontline state”. Richard Milne, *Finland to elect president for troubled times after Nato entry*, “Financial Times”, 27 January 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/ae26e6fe-59ea-4ee4-b531-a5e05b357261>

² In 2007, in a speech in Washington DC, Finland’s defence minister Jyri Häkämies argued that, due to its geographical location, Finland’s three primary security challenges were ‘Russia, Russia and Russia.’ Quoted in: Matti Pesu, Tuomas Iso-Markku, *Insufficiency of informal alignment: why did Finland choose formal NATO membership?*, “International Affairs”, Vol. 100, Iss. 2, March 2024, p. 575.

³ Zach Sheely, “National Guard poised for security cooperation partnership with Sweden”, 22 October 2023, https://www.army.mil/article/270998/national_guard_poised_for_security_cooperation_partnership_with_sweden

⁴ See an interview: Swedish FM: 'Prolonged period of conflict with Russia' ahead, “Deutsche Welle”, 21 March, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/swedish-fm-nato-eu-in-a-prolonged-period-of-conflict-with-russia/video-68638410>; Also: Foreign Minister: Russian confrontation needs to be addressed, Sveriges Radio, 20 March, 2024, <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/foreign-minister-russian-confrontation-needs-to-be-addressed>

⁵ See: Wojciech Michnik, “Poland as a new frontline state”, *New Eastern Europe*, no 3(LI) 2022, April-May 2022, p. 130.

⁶ Matti Pesu, *NATO in the North: The emerging division of labour in Northern European security*, “FIIA Briefing Paper”, September 2023, p. 5, https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/bp370_nato-in-the-north.pdf

Finland and Poland, which can also play a role as hubs and even security providers along with the United Kingdom and Germany. Denmark, Sweden and Norway are first and foremost hubs. The United States remains the ultimate security guarantor of the area".⁷

This paper expands upon the explanatory capacity of the “frontline states” concept as presented in the previous report.⁸ Following 2014, the debate about so-called NATO’s Eastern Flank intensified. In this perspective, the term “frontline states” has been employed to refer to the security concerns and defence responsibilities of Nordic, Central and Eastern European member nations of NATO, specifically: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland⁹, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway¹⁰, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.¹¹ Yet my report here focuses on the impact of Finland’s and Sweden’s membership in NATO for Alliance defence posture. As both of these states are becoming vital factor in strengthening other NATO’s frontline states (and NATO as a whole), I assess the role of these newcomers in the Alliance’s defence and deterrence strategy.¹² Finally, the paper will highlight key consequences of Finland’s and Sweden’s NATO accession for the Baltic Sea new security architecture in the context of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian War, exploring how Finland’s and Sweden’s accession to NATO affects defence and deterrence of the Alliance, with a specific focus on the security of the Baltic Sea region in terms of deterring Russia.

⁷ Ibidem

⁸ Agata Mazurkiewicz, Wojciech Michnik, “Towards the Frontline States Concept: Understanding the Responses to Russia’s War against Ukraine.” PeaceRep, 2023. <https://peacerep.org/publication/towards-the-frontline-states-concept/>

⁹ Finland joined NATO on 4 April 2023.

¹⁰ This paper does not deal with Norway as a potential frontline state. One report indicates that both Finland and Norway are frontline states vis-à-vis Russia, each employing a similar strategy for deterrence and defence. Finland’s frontline status is primarily characterized by its extensive land border with Russia, whereas Norway predominantly serves as a maritime frontline state. For more see: Per Erik Solli, Øystein Solvang, *Deterrence and (Re)assurance in the High North – Finland and Norway Compared*, “Policy Brief”, no.4, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.nupi.no/en/publications/cristin-pub/deterrence-and-re-assurance-in-the-high-north-finland-and-norway-compared>

¹¹ See: The concept of “frontline states” – developed in the previous report – serves both as a certain description of state security perception and more importantly as a potentially potent tool to study the current security environment in selected Nordic and Central and Eastern European states. Agata Mazurkiewicz, Wojciech Michnik, “Towards the Frontline States Concept: Understanding the Responses to Russia’s War against Ukraine.” PeaceRep, 2023. <https://peacerep.org/publication/towards-the-frontline-states-concept/> See also: “Frontline Allies: War and Change in Central Europe”, U.S.-Central Europe Strategic Assessment Group Report, November 2015, Center for European Policy Analysis, https://cepa.ecms.pl/files/?id_plik=2102

¹² Please note that this report concentrates more on the benefits of Finland and Sweden membership in NATO for the Alliance, other frontline states and the Baltic Sea region, rather than on benefits that the membership brings to Helsinki and Stockholm.

From NATO's 30 to 32

As a direct consequence of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, both Finland and Sweden concurrently submitted their formal applications to join NATO. Finland officially became the 31st NATO member on April 4, 2023, followed by Sweden as the 32nd member on March 7, 2024. The ground-breaking decision of Helsinki and Stockholm was a product of both: political elites' transition towards NATO membership and the changing societal attitudes in Sweden and Finland. The change in public opinion perspectives on NATO membership was more than substantial. The proportion of Finnish and Swedish public in favour of NATO membership experienced a significant surge. In Finland, from 24 percent in October 2021 to 85 percent in October 2022. In Sweden, from 37 percent in January 2022 to 64 percent in July 2022.¹³ Even though prior to 2022 both Finland and Sweden had cooperated closely with NATO, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine proved to be a watershed moment that sealed Finnish and Swedish decisions to join NATO. The inclusion of Finland and Sweden, both steadfast democracies committed to upholding the rules-based international order, into the Alliance will strengthen the core of the transatlantic community. Their accession to NATO presents fresh avenues for enhancing regional deterrence and defence in Northern Europe, promoting greater burden-sharing across the Atlantic, and ensuring the overall security of the Alliance in ways that previously were unattainable.¹⁴

In 2022, Finland's defence budget was set at 5.1 billion euros, equivalent to 1.9 percent of the country's GDP, marking a substantial increase from 1.3 percent allocated in 2020. This rapid rise can be attributed to the procurement of more F-35 fighter aircraft. However, the conflict in Ukraine has spurred calls for further budgetary increases. Consequently, the Finnish military received an additional funding of 700 million euros in 2022 and 788 million euros in 2023, leading to a budget allocation equivalent to 2.2 percent of GDP.¹⁵ Although the number of active military personnel in the Finnish Defence Forces is relatively modest, approximately 19,000 (in addition to roughly 3,000 Border Guard personnel), the conscription system guarantees the presence a substantial reserve force. The fully mobilized army is estimated at 280,000. For comparison, Sweden, which has double the population of Finland, maintains approximately 24,000 active personnel and a reserve of 31,800 soldiers.¹⁶ In relation to the defence budget, Sweden plans to allocate USD11.83 billion towards defence expenditures in 2024, equivalent to 2.1 per cent of GDP. This represents almost twofold increase of its defence spending compared to 2020. As the report of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs clearly indicates, from the Alliance perspective, the most immediate benefits of Finland's accession are: its extensive national defence system that relies on a significant

¹³ Numbers quoted in: James Black, Charlotte Kleberg, and Erik Silfversten, *NATO Enlargement Amidst Russia's War in Ukraine: How Finland and Sweden Bolster the Transatlantic Alliance*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2024. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA3236-1.html>.

¹⁴ Anna Wieslander, Eric Adamson, Jesper Lehto, "How allied Sweden and Finland can secure Northern Europe", Atlantic Council, 6 January, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/how-allied-sweden-finland-can-secure-northern-europe/>

¹⁵ Data quoted in: Heljä Ossa, Tommi Koivula. "What would Finland bring to the table for NATO?" *War on the Rocks*, May. 9, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/what-would-finland-bring-to-the-table-for-nato/>

¹⁶ Ibidem.

reserve established through mandatory general conscription and the doctrine of territorial defence; it has become a part of the NATO-centred European deterrence and defence system, thereby contributing to NATO's diverse array of deterrence and defence responsibilities, including initiatives such as Enhanced Forward Presence and air defence, and deepening Finland's integration into both the civilian and military structures of NATO.¹⁷

From NATO's viewpoint, Sweden's integration into the alliance's structures undoubtedly enhances the security of not only Sweden itself but also the entire Nordic region and the Baltic States.¹⁸ Not only has Sweden proficient armed forces and a defence industry, but it also possesses a significant fleet of combat aircraft, an extensive radar and anti-missile defence systems and significant navy (the third-largest in the Baltic Sea after Germany's and Russia's), which includes submarines.¹⁹ With the enlargement of NATO's north-eastern flank, and with the primary threat originating from the Russian Federation towards the Nordic region, the task of patrolling the shared airspace becomes less daunting. Sweden's inclusion in NATO facilitates closer cooperation with other member states in terms of intelligence sharing, joint exercises, and coordinated responses to potential threats.²⁰ Additionally, Sweden's NATO membership binds the entire Nordic region together, offering Europe an opportunity to assume greater responsibility for its own security and supporting the collective defence efforts of Northern Allies, including Denmark, Finland, Norway, the Baltic States, Poland, the United States, and Canada. Sweden's presence is also likely to bolster NATO's influence in the Arctic region. In summary, with both new members, Finland and Sweden, the Alliance's security posture in the Nordic, Baltic, and Arctic regions is significantly reinforced.

Akin to the frontline states in Central and Eastern Europe, Finland and Sweden both rank high in terms of humanitarian and military assistance provided to Ukraine. Based on estimates of the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, Finland's overall support for Ukraine totals 1.9bn € (Rank: 13) and amounts to 0.7 % of its GDP (Rank: 6), the majority of it, i.e. 1.6bn € (or 0.6 of the GDP) being allocated towards military support: (ranked 7 overall). Sweden's overall support for Ukraine is 2.9bn € (Rank: 10) and amounts to over 0.5% of its GDP (Rank: 13) -- similarly, the majority of it goes for

¹⁷ Tuomas Iso-Markku Matti Pesu, Charly Saloniemi-Pasternak, Iro Särkkä, Minna Ålander, *Finland's NATO accession: What will change?* "FIIA Comment" 3, March 2023, https://www.fia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/comment3_finlands-nato-accession.pdf

¹⁸ For an assessment on what Sweden brings to NATO in terms of military capabilities see: John R. Deni, *Sweden would strengthen NATO with fresh thinking and an able force*, "New Atlanticist", 18 May, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/sweden-would-strengthen-nato-with-fresh-thinking-and-an-able-force/>

¹⁹ In terms of maritime power, Sweden and Finland "possess capabilities other NATO Baltic Sea nations do not: fast-moving combat boats, hovercraft and coastal hunters that are trained to defend against enemy naval infantry, but are also able to attack. Beyond the Baltic region, only the U.S. and the UK among NATO members maintain strong amphibious forces". Quoted in: Eva Björling, "What Sweden will bring to NATO", Geopolitical Intelligence Services, 8 March 2024, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/sweden-nato-accession/>

²⁰ Both Finland and Sweden have enjoyed close ties with other Nordic states and participate in Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF), a regional defence initiative that promotes collaboration between Nordic armed forces." Relations with Sweden", NATO 8 March 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52535.htm

military support for Ukraine: over 2bn € (Rank: 9), which constitutes 0.35% of the GDP (Rank: 12)²¹ In February 2024, just days before its formal accession to NATO, Stockholm unveiled its largest military aid package for Ukraine, worth \$685 million.²² Meanwhile, Finland, along Denmark, is at the forefront of committing military support to Ukraine.

²¹ Christian Trebesch et al., “The Ukraine Support Tracker”, Kiel Institute for the World Economy 2023, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/?cookieLevel=not-set>

²² Joshua Posaner, “Sweden makes fresh Ukraine military aid pledge as NATO membership nears”, *Politico*, 20 February, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/sweden-makes-fresh-ukraine-military-aid-pledge-as-nato-membership-nears/>

NATO and the Baltic Sea Region's Security

The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO carries significant implications for the security architecture of the Baltic Sea region. As nations possessing considerable military capabilities, their NATO membership will alter the power equilibrium and bolster collaborative defence initiatives within NATO. Furthermore, their strategic geographical locations will provide NATO with additional strategic outposts in the region, reinforcing the Alliance's deterrent capabilities particularly against potential threats originating from Russia.

The new Nordic members in the Alliance will considerably impact NATO's frontline states in its maritime dimension. The feasibility and potential depth of security cooperation among six states, namely Finland, Sweden, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, are expected to increase. Additionally, their full membership will help mitigate threats posed by the Russian naval forces in the Baltic Sea. The Russian Baltic Fleet, headquartered in the Kaliningrad Oblast between Poland and Lithuania, has gained notoriety for its naval and aircraft force provocations, notably targeting the Baltic States.²³ Furthermore, the new members will enhance NATO's presence in the High North, where the Alliance faces challenges from the Russian Northern Fleet, including its nuclear-powered submarines located on the Kola Peninsula. With Finland's and Sweden's accessions to NATO, one of the worst scenarios for Russia in the Baltic Sea comes to a realization, as NATO will be in gaining the upper hand in both maritime and aerial domains within the Baltic Sea.²⁴ While referring to the Baltic Sea a "NATO lake"²⁵ or "NATO sea" seems to be an exaggeration²⁶, it is undeniable that the only non-NATO state on the Baltic coasts is the Russian Federation. NATO has progressively expanded its influence over the Baltic Sea, a pivotal maritime corridor for the Russian fleet, which maintains bases near St. Petersburg and in the heavily fortified Kaliningrad exclave. In the Cold War era, only Denmark and Germany, situated at the westernmost edge of the Baltic, were part of the Alliance. However, Poland's accession to NATO in 1999, followed by the inclusion of the three Baltic States in 2004, brought most of the southern shoreline of the sea under the Alliance's control.²⁷ With Finland and Sweden joining NATO, the grip on the sea tightens from the north, shifting the naval and aerial balance in the Baltic Sea in favour of the Alliance.

²³ Robert Czulda, Sweden and Finland In NATO: A Major Boost To Central-Eastern Europe, "Pulaski Commentary", 16.02.2023, <https://pulaski.pl/en/pulaski-commentary-sweden-and-finland-in-nato-a-major-boost-to-central-eastern-europe-robert-czulda-2/>

²⁴ These concerns clearly indicated here: Рябініна Ю., Политолог Батурич: НАТО хочет взять Балтийское море под контроль, <https://rg.ru/2024/03/11/reg-ufo/ekspert-baturin-nato-hochet-vziat-pod-kontrol-baltijskoe-more.html>.

²⁵ Following the inclusion of Finland and Sweden in NATO, the majority of the Baltic Sea states will be members of the alliance, prompting some to dub the Baltic Sea a "NATO lake." However, this label presents certain issues as it implies that NATO holds exclusive control over the region's security, suggesting that littoral states can depend solely on the alliance's protection without any reservations. This oversimplification fails to acknowledge the intricate security dynamics in the region and ongoing challenges that persist despite NATO's presence. See: John R. Deni, "Is the Baltic Sea a NATO Lake?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18 December 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/12/18/is-baltic-sea-nato-lake-pub-91263>

²⁶ Laura Kayali, "Sorry Russia, the Baltic Sea is NATO's lake now", *Politico*, 13 July 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-lake-what-sweden-and-finland-will-change-in-the-baltics-russia-ukraine-war/>

²⁷ Ibidem, <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-lake-what-sweden-and-finland-will-change-in-the-baltics-russia-ukraine-war/>

From 2014 to 2015, NATO underwent a gradual strategic shift towards highlighting the importance of Baltic security. This shift was driven by several key factors, including Russia's military threat in the Baltic Sea region, highlighted by repeated Russian incursions into Nordic and Baltic airspace, and an extensive submarine hunt in Stockholm's archipelago in October 2014; NATO came to recognize the Baltic Sea as a singular military strategic area.²⁸ Additionally, there were growing concerns voiced by frontline states in the region, namely by the Baltic States and Poland, following Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea; these profound developments prompting NATO to closely examine other potential scenarios of aggressive behaviour by the Russian Federation in the Baltic region.

According to NATO's Strategic Concept, the Alliance will prioritize its defensive efforts toward a deterrence-by-denial posture in order to "deny any potential adversary any possible opportunities for aggression".²⁹ For three small, former Soviet-occupied states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the accession of Finland and Sweden brings new opportunities to boost their defences and overall security. As the Baltic States view Russia as an existential threat, a perspective they share with other EU and NATO members in the region, these states understand that their defence relies not only on their own preparedness but also on the Alliance's deterrence and collective defence guarantees. The war in Ukraine validated the Baltic states' enduring anxious assessment of Russian expansionism. This war also underscored that these states' initiatives to enhance security and defence, including the implementation of total defence strategies, modernization of armed forces, and strengthening of intra-NATO cooperation, were steps in the right direction.³⁰

Defending the Baltic States is another significant matter in the context of Finland's and Sweden's accession. Given their size, geography and geopolitical location, it seems rather evident that the Baltic States encounter serious challenges in defending themselves in the case of a conventional invasion, unless they receive substantial assistance from their other allies. Zdzislaw Sliwa summarized this point bluntly: "in the event of open war with Russia, they [the Baltic states] would not be able to survive alone even with Enhanced Forward Presence support. They have deterrence-by-denial capabilities but notably lack deterrence-by-punishment competencies. They also have significant shortcomings related to air defence. This is a rather well-known issue and must be complemented by other NATO allies, as airpower would play a crucial role during the initial phase of any conflict with Russia".³¹ When it comes to securing the Baltic Sea region, particularly in terms of defending the Baltic states, Sweden's role appears to be particularly prominent. Since 2014, Sweden's strategic community has widely held the belief that the risk of war has escalated, and that Sweden would

²⁸ Anna Wieslander, *A new normal for NATO and Baltic Sea security*, "UI Brief", no. 2, 2015, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/butiken/ui-brief/2015/a-new-normal-for-nato-and-baltic-sea-security.pdf>

²⁹NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, p. 6: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf

³⁰ Since 2014, Estonia and Latvia have also invested in a comprehensive approach to national defence, strengthening the involvement of the society in safeguarding national security. For more see: Eugeniusz Cieślak, *Putting Comprehensive Defence to Work: What Can Poland Learn from the Baltic States?* "Politeja" vol. 19 no 4(79), 2022, pp. 81-84.

³¹ Zdzislaw Sliwa, "NATO and Baltic Security", [in:] Olevs Nikers, Otto Tabuns eds., *Baltic Sea Security Regional and Sectoral Perspectives*, Jamestown Foundation, May 2021, Washington DC p.23, <https://www.baltdefcol.org/files/files/publications/Baltic-Sea-Security-Regional-and-Sectoral-Perspectives-web.pdf>

inevitably find itself entangled in any conflict between Russia and the West in the Baltic region. Two primary reasons underpinning this assessment: 1) the access to Swedish airspace or air bases would be crucial for NATO's defence of the Baltic States; 2) the scenario referred to as the 'Gotland grab,' wherein Russia would seize the Swedish island of Gotland to block NATO from providing reinforcements to the Baltic States.³²

³² Robert Dalsjo, "Sweden and its deterrence deficit: quick to react, yet slow to act", [in:] *Deterring Russia in Europe*, p. 97-98

Deterring Russia?

The above analysis of Baltic Sea security prompts the question: how has this NATO enlargement (with Finland and Sweden) impacted Russia's European strategy? I contend that three crucial aspects come into play to temper Russian planning and possible action: increased NATO military capabilities, NATO's pre-eminence in the Baltic Sea region, and the physical widening of the north-eastern flank with Finland's accession. Looking solely at geostrategic considerations, Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO creates challenges for Russia regarding its access to and use of the Baltic Sea. Finland's NATO membership further limits Russian access to the Kaliningrad Oblast. The immediate consequence of Finland joining NATO is the doubling of Russian border territory adjacent to NATO territory, with Finland's 1,340 km border becoming part of this equation. This situation also complicates sea lane approaches to Baltic fleet ports in Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg. Particularly concerning St. Petersburg, the inclusion of Finland to in NATO narrows the geographically constrained Gulf of Finland, spanning a maximum width of 120km and a distance of only 52km from Finland to the Estonian shores.³³ Additionally, Sweden's island of Gotland, located in the Baltic roughly midway between Sweden and Latvia, offers a strategic vantage point for monitoring both maritime and aerial activities in the region. These recent developments introduce limitations for Moscow in two significant western locations: St. Petersburg and the Kaliningrad Oblast. St. Petersburg, traditionally Russia's gateway to the west, is situated at the eastern end of the narrow Gulf of Finland, which is currently under NATO's oversight at its entrance. Kaliningrad, Russia's westernmost territory, faces increased vulnerability to NATO as its already fragile connections to mainland Russia are now potentially jeopardized even further.³⁴ Therefore, the importance of Finnish and Swedish accession into NATO in impacting Russia's Baltic strategic capabilities cannot be overstated.

The accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO has had substantial ramifications for Russia's European strategy.³⁵ In the face of the Alliance's notable military reinforcement, particularly with the inclusion of Sweden's formidable naval capabilities and Finland's well-equipped air force and large land forces, Russia has reinforced military units near Finland, notwithstanding the significant forces already engaged in Ukraine.³⁶ According to recent (February 2024) Estonia's foreign intelligence evaluations, Russia plans to augment its troop presence along its borders with the Baltic states and Finland, aiming to potentially double the current numbers in preparation for a potential military

³³ "Gulf of Finland", European Straits Initiative, <https://www.europeanstraits.eu/Partners/Gulf-of-Finland>

³⁴ For an overview of the strategic significance of the Baltic Sea see: Felix Chang, *Crowded Pond: NATO and Russian Maritime Power in the Baltic Sea*, "Baltic Bulletin", Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 14, 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/12/crowded-pond-nato-and-russian-maritime-power-in-the-baltic-sea/>

³⁵ It will also affect Russia's military posture in the Arctic. For more on Russia's military role in the Arctic see: Jonas Kjellén, *The Russian Northern Fleet and the (Re)militarisation of the Arctic*, "Arctic Review on Law and Politics", Vol. 13, 2022, <https://arcticreview.no/index.php/arctic/article/view/3338/6318>

³⁶ Katherine Kjellström Elgin, Alexander Lanoszka *Sweden, Finland, and the Meaning of Alliance Membership*, "Texas National Security Review", Vol 6, Issue 2, Spring 2023, <https://tnsr.org/2023/05/sweden-finland-and-the-meaning-of-alliance-membership/>

confrontation with NATO within the coming decade.³⁷ In July 2022, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev reiterated the Kremlin's standard warning that "Finland and Sweden's choice to join NATO is a significant mistake, to which Russia will respond symmetrically."³⁸ Russia decided to reorganize its military structure to include newly created administrative units (i.e. established two new military districts and the dissolution of the Western Military District) with these arrangements understood – among other things – to bolster Russia's posture and strategic potential. According to the Kremlin's plans, the newly (re)established "Leningrad Military District is supposed to secure Russia against potential NATO actions".³⁹ Some of these Russian actions and threats suggest that the latest NATO enlargement – caused mostly by Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine – has delivered a serious blow to the Kremlin strategic calculus for Europe.⁴⁰ Enhanced Alliance information sharing and joint exercises continue to bolster NATO's defensive capabilities. Overall, Russia's access to the area is now strategically restricted, primarily to the Gulf of Finland. Russian leaders' contentions that the "accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO undermines European security", requiring a Russian response of some kind⁴¹, do not alter the reality of an enhanced and more robust expression of NATO resolve and capability in the Baltics (and Europe more generally).

³⁷ Richard Milne, Max Seddon, "Russia to double military presence along NATO border, Estonia warns", *Financial Times*, 13 February 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/1ec23623-31b3-446d-aa8b-b60684f44cc9>

³⁸ Rene Nyberg, "Russian collateral damage: Finland and Sweden joining NATO", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 6.10.2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88096>

³⁹ Anna Maria Dyrer, "Russia's Armed Forces Two Years After the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine", Polish Institute of International Affairs, 28.02.2024, <https://pism.pl/publications/russias-armed-forces-two-years-after-the-full-scale-invasion-of-ukraine>

⁴⁰ See also: Nicholas Lokker and Heli Hautala, Russia Won't Sit Idly By After Finland and Sweden Join NATO, *War on the Rocks*, March 30, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/03/russia-wont-sit-idly-by-after-finland-and-sweden-join-nato/>.

⁴¹ TVN24: Putin o rozszerzeniu NATO: nie mieliśmy wojsk na granicy z Finlandią, a teraz będziemy mieli, 13 March 2024, <https://tvn24.pl/swiat/putin-o-rozszerzeniu-nato-nie-mielismy-wojsk-na-granicy-z-finlandia-a-teraz-bedziemy-mieli-st7818311>

Conclusions and Recommendations

As a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Baltic Sea has emerged as a key area for European and NATO defence. The Baltic Sea region, comprising nine states categorized into the eastern flank (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), the northern flank (Finland, Sweden, and Norway), and the southern flank (Poland, Germany, and Denmark), has experienced a profound evolution. This transformation extends beyond mere changes in arms material and strategy to encompass shifts in psychology and, in some instances, identity. The events of 2022 served as a catalyst for Sweden and Finland to apply for NATO membership, marking a significant departure from their historical non-alignment stance.⁴² Consequently, a majority of the states in the region have been in the process of rebuilding their armed forces and military capabilities and reinventing their defences.⁴³

One of the immediate consequences of Finland and Sweden joining NATO is the consolidation of a shift in European security focus towards the northeast. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Nordic and frontline states have become pivotal actors in the cohesive Western response, effectively reshaping Europe's geopolitical dynamics. The traditional core of European NATO, previously cantered around Paris and Berlin, appears to be shifting towards the east, extending from Helsinki to the Black Sea. Eastern and Nordic countries, such as Poland, Romania, Finland, and the Baltic States, demonstrate more heightened awareness than their Western counterparts with regards to the danger posed by Russia and the urgent need for collective determination in response of Moscow's aggressive policies.⁴⁴ The inclusion of Sweden and Finland in NATO could cement this redirection for the foreseeable future, particularly if the confrontation with Russia remains the primary concern demanding the alliance's attention and allocation of resources.⁴⁵ This shift in-the-making does not imply that all these states will always act in unison. As these frontline states represent military power disparities, diverging political interests and different defence cultures, it would be hard not to expect some debates – and even rows – among them. Yet, with the accession of Finland (and recently) Sweden, these Baltic and Northern European states all find renewed reasons to enhance their cooperation to build defensive capabilities as they are guided to deter any potential interference from Russia.

In many respects, the military capabilities of Finland and Sweden complement each other, collectively constituting a significant asset for NATO. Together, they enhance NATO's overall strategic position in the Arctic and represent a definitive game-changer in the Baltic Sea region. Additionally, given these countries' involvement in regional defence initiatives (in the Nordic Defence Cooperation – NORDEFECO) and their participation in various NATO-led programs (i.e. *Partnership for Peace*; *Enhanced Opportunity Partner*) and military exercises (such as annual naval exercise *Baltic Operations*; or *Trident Juncture*), the full integration of

⁴² Robert Egnell, Michael T. Plehn, "If You Want Peace...", PRISM Vol. 10, No. 2, 2023, p. 4.

⁴³ Total Defence and Comprehensive Defence is a "strategic approach that recognizes the multidimensional threat posed by autocratic countries and the existential threat to the liberal rules-based world order". It stresses the notion that effective deterrence depends on both resistance and resilience as vital elements of the respective security and defence strategies. Ibidem, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Mike Rogers, *NATO's Got a New Backbone*, "Foreign Policy", 12 May 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/12/ukraine-russia-nato-united-states-poland-war-military-spending-alliance/>

⁴⁵ Nicholas Lokker, Jim Townsend, Heli Hautala and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, *How Finnish and Swedish NATO Accession Could Shape the Future Russian Threat*, Center for a New American Century, 24 January, 2024, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/how-finnish-and-swedish-nato-accession-could-shape-the-future-russian-threat#:~:text=Indeed%2C%20Finnish%20and%20Swedish%20NATO,%2Dà%2Dvis%20the%20Kremlin.>

Helsinki and Stockholm with NATO is expected to proceed expeditiously and smoothly. Consequently, Finland's and Sweden's contribution to enhancing transatlantic security and defence should be promptly evident.

The clear political and symbolic significance of NATO enlargement to include Finland and Sweden is evident in the Alliance's direct response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine. European security is strengthened while a profound signal is sent that even once non-aligned states which were not particularly inclined to join the Alliance (before February 2022) may find NATO membership valuable. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO presents both opportunities and advantages for the Alliance. These states' historical experience and expertise in assessing Russian capabilities and intentions provide NATO with valuable intelligence, insights, and specialized knowledge regarding the Russian military threat⁴⁶. Furthermore, the Alliance acquires a strategic foothold in Northern Europe through their membership. Yet, it is also noteworthy to remember that with every NATO enlargement, there are inherent challenges that both the newcomers and the Alliance will confront. Among these are the increased territorial defence obligations that this new enlargement will entail for NATO. Additionally, it is imperative to consider the respective roles that Finland and Sweden will assume within NATO and how their membership will influence the strategic equilibrium of the interconnected and vital regions of the Baltic, the northwest European flank, and the High North.⁴⁷

I conclude that the diversity of the frontline states and the nuances of their security cultures and approaches to different aspects of the war in Ukraine - resulting from, for example, the varying internal contexts, sizes, populations, and capabilities of these countries - adds complexity to our contemporary understanding of Alliance security. One of the most significant developments in the concept of the "frontline states" pertains to the positions of the Nordic countries, in particular Finland and Sweden, in the context of their recent accession to NATO and their role in the Baltic Sea security. Examining of these states' actions and responses to the war, along with a better understanding of these states' consequent security calculations, can enhance the conceptualization of "frontline states" and their role in the continuing evolution of the NATO Alliance and European security.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Black, James, Charlotte Kleberg, and Erik Silfversten, "NATO Enlargement Amidst Russia's War in Ukraine: How Finland and Sweden Bolster the Transatlantic Alliance", Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2024. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA3236-1.html>.

⁴⁷ James Hackett, "Finland, Sweden and NATO: the capability dimension", Military Balance blog, 20 May, 2022, International Institute for Strategic Studies, <https://www.iiss.org/en/online-analysis/military-balance/2022/05/finland-sweden-and-nato-the-capability-dimension/>

⁴⁸ Even though, the "frontline states" concept with its explanatory strength seems to be quite potent and more precise than alternative terms applied to describe current geopolitical challenges for this part of Europe, (i.e. NATO's Eastern Flank or Northeastern Flank) this is still imperfect analytical tool with further potential for conceptual and theoretical development.

About PeaceRep

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at The University of Edinburgh. Our research is re-thinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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Cover Image: Danish troops hold Denmark's and NATO flags as they wait for Latvia's Prime Minister Krisjanis Karins and Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen to visit NATO's enhanced Forward Presence battle group troops in Adazi, Latvia March 31, 2022.

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