



NATO'S "OPEN DOOR" FACES NORTH
By Leo Michel¹
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Since 1999, 12 nations from the Baltics to the Balkans have graduated from the Partnership for Peace (PFP) to NATO membership. NATO's new Strategic Concept, when unveiled at the Lisbon Summit on November 19-20, will reaffirm the "open door" policy that made this possible. However, enlargement toward problematic eastern aspirants (Georgia, Macedonia, and Montenegro) has stalled, and Ukraine has shelved its application. NATO's best candidates for enlargement lay in a different direction: north.

As PFP members since 1994, Finland and Sweden have developed such close ties with NATO that many regard them as "virtual" Allies. Their participation in NATO operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan, as well as in many PFP programs, has helped to transform their militaries from outdated, unsustainable Cold War structures to smaller, more capable and deployable forces. This benefits their regional defense cooperation (alongside Nordic Allies Norway, Denmark, and Iceland), contributions to the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy, and bilateral defense links with the United States.

Finnish and/or Swedish accession would bring new capabilities and expertise into Alliance structures. The new Strategic Concept will advocate: expanding NATO's dialogue and cooperation with Russia; intensifying its "comprehensive" civil-military approach to crisis response; building closer relations with the EU; and enhancing cooperation on "cyber defense" and maritime security in the Baltic and Arctic regions. Finland and Sweden share many common approaches with the Allies. But as Partners, their ability to shape and implement NATO policies is constrained. Allies will not extend unfettered access to their inner councils to nations who are not bound to NATO's treaty's obligations, including collective defense.

Finnish and Swedish officials now acknowledge that neither country can pursue a "go it alone" security strategy. And few believe that the EU could replace NATO if they faced a serious threat. Hence, they have begun asking the right questions.

First, since NATO will profoundly affect their security environment for the indefinite future, are their nations better served by having a seat at the table where Alliance policies are decided? Second, given the trend toward increased NATO-EU cooperation, are they at a disadvantage in shaping that cooperation compared to the 21 EU members that belong to NATO?

¹ Distinguished Research Fellow, Institute for National Strategic Studies, Washington.

France asked similar questions before deciding, in 2009, to return to full participation in NATO's military structures after a 43 year absence. Ultimately, the French concluded that their "one foot in, one foot out" approach was not working in NATO or helping their EU interests. However, the common assumption that the Finnish and Swedish governments will eventually join hands to seek membership together underestimates differences in their strategic cultures.

Despite nuanced declarations—in April 2010, Defense Minister Hakamies dismissed "any actual military threat" against his country— many Finnish strategists worry about Russia. This is understandable, especially given the legacy of two wars with the USSR and its heavy handed Cold War policies. Yet, while Moscow detests NATO enlargement, its response to a Finnish application would depend on the international context at the time. Russia could not easily shrink its trade (including energy) and other links with Finland without hurting its own relations with the EU.

Finland's debate over NATO membership has had a positive effect. Since 2004, reports by government ministries, parliamentary commissions, and leading think-tanks have methodically weighed membership's potential costs and benefits. With the public increasingly well-informed, it's more difficult for NATO critics to argue their case based on myths—for example, that Allies could force Finland to abandon military conscription or participate in operations against its will.

Finnish analysts tell me that if their political leaders were to reach a consensus to join NATO, public opinion would rally behind the decision. If that were to happen, Finland would communicate its request to the NATO Secretary General. Assuming the Allies quickly reach consensus, which is likely, Finland would receive a formal invitation to join at a future NATO summit.

In Sweden, Russia figures less prominently in security policy discussions, although the Georgian intervention alarmed Stockholm. And while America's image has improved since President Obama's election, Sweden's moralistic brand of neutralism and anti-nuclear sentiments occasionally resurface. In a 2009 poll, Swedes ranked the United States close behind Russia and China as "a problem for peace and security globally."

Swedish views are evolving. Since 2007, the governing center-right coalition, breaking with the traditional view of "military non-alignment," formally adopted, with bipartisan parliamentary backing, a "solidarity declaration" stating: "Sweden will not remain passive if a disaster or an attack would strike another EU member state or Nordic country... (Accordingly), Sweden will have the ability both to receive and provide military support." Meanwhile, polls show support for NATO membership jumped from 17 to 35 percent during 2005-2009, while opposition fell from 67 to 38 percent.

But Swedish politicians are less prepared than Finnish counterparts to debate NATO membership. The center-right parties, now a minority government, are divided, and even "pro-membership" figures believe that a "Finnish style" study should not be launched without tacit agreement from the opposition Social Democrats. Leading Social Democrats dismiss the study idea, however, so the impasse could last until the next election in 2015.

NATO should be patient. Enlargement is not an end in itself. If the Alliance gets its Strategic Concept right, reforms its military and civilian structures, and shows solidarity regarding 21st century challenges, it will remain the pillar of Euro-Atlantic stability and security that has attracted Finland and Sweden to draw closer. If those countries opt to remain Partners, NATO must provide opportunities for closer consultations and ensure that their contributions and sacrifices are valued. And if one or both eventually seek membership, their citizens must accept their responsibilities in an alliance that will be committed to protect them.