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Between Military Non-Alignment and Integration

Finland and Sweden in Search of a New Security Strategy

Tobias Etzold and Christian Opitz

Alarmed by the Ukraine crisis and Russia's military activity in the Baltic Sea region, Finland and Sweden are currently engaged in an intensive debate about their national security. Faced with a changing threat scenario, there is growing doubt in both countries about their current defence capabilities. Questions are also being asked about the security policy course pursued since the end of the Cold War, with calls for higher military spending and NATO accession being the reflex response. However, corresponding initiatives would need to be embedded in a comprehensive and coherent security and defence strategy. Various options for cooperation exist at bilateral, regional and European level and could comprise key elements of this strategy.

The principle of military non-alignment is firmly embedded in Sweden's and Finland's security culture. Nonetheless, since the end of the Cold War, the two countries' security policy has been strongly oriented towards participation in international crisis missions under EU and NATO command. As both countries are also increasingly integrated in NATO's cooperation structures and support the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), this supposed military non-alignment is looking increasingly doubtful. At the same time, the two countries' national defence capabilities have been substantially reduced, resulting in major deficits in some areas. In view of the growing tensions with Russia, the governments

are prepared to make additional resources available for national defence, but their adherence to formal military non-alignment currently remains unbroken. In both countries, however, the debate about possible accession to NATO has recently gathered momentum.

In Sweden, the future security policy course formed part of the cross-party agreement which ended the government crisis in December 2014. Security policy is also likely to play a role in the context of the Finnish parliamentary elections on 19 April 2015. However, the parties' positions on NATO vary widely in both countries, and in Sweden, the public is clearly divided on this issue as well.

The debate in Finland

The wars against the Soviet Union in the 20th century have left their mark on Finland's security policy. In particular, the fact that Finland's allies changed several times during the Second World War has nurtured a deep-seated belief that the country ultimately has no option but to take sole responsibility for its own security. This perception is still relevant today. This is partly due to Finland's specific geostrategic position close to the Kola Peninsula, used by Russia as a key military base.

Finland has fairly large defence capacities. A key element is general conscription, which still enjoys considerable public support. Nonetheless, the military has undergone painful restructuring in recent years: for example, the number of active reserve troops has been cut from 350,000 in 2012 to 230,000 today, and although Finland still ranks among the top one-third in Europe with its defence budget, amounting to around 1.3 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), spending on military equipment has halved since 1990. A cross-party parliamentary report recently warned that without additional resources, the military will only be able to carry out its tasks "for a few more years".

While there is a cross-party consensus in favour of increasing defence spending, the government is divided on the issue of NATO. Prime Minister Alexander Stubb (from the conservative National Coalition Party) and Defence Minister Carl Haglund (from the liberal Swedish People's Party) openly support NATO membership as the logical extension of pro-Western integration. By contrast, Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja, a Social Democrat, is keen to avoid putting any extra strain on the country's close relations with Russia. The liberal Centre Party, currently in opposition and in the lead in the pre-election opinion polls, takes a similar view.

President Sauli Niinistö, the commander-in-chief of the Finnish armed forces, is also cautious. He has already announced that accession to NATO would only be possible after

a referendum. The Finnish people are still clearly opposed to membership: in the latest surveys in January 2015, only 25 per cent of Finns voiced support for such a move.

The debate in Sweden

In Sweden, Russia's recent conduct has awakened unpleasant memories of the Cold War. Russian combat aircraft have repeatedly entered Swedish airspace, and there is a suspicion that in October 2014, a Russian submarine entered Swedish waters. According to Foreign Minister Margot Wallström, the Swedish people are genuinely fearful of Russia once more.

Against this background, Swedish security policy is likely to prioritise national defence in future, and there is a desire to reduce Sweden's involvement in military operations overseas. All the political parties see a need to increase investment in the military in order to improve its operational capability. The defence budget is expected to increase by 3 per cent in 2015. Current spending amounts to around 1.2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). In operational terms, troop numbers on the Baltic island of Gotland – which was already strategically significant during the Cold War – have been increased. The reintroduction of general conscription, which was only abolished in 2010, is also being considered.

However, NATO accession is rejected by the Social Democratic/Green minority coalition government, in office since October 2014. By contrast, the four centre-right opposition parties are in favour of at least looking at precisely what the criteria for membership might be. In order to avert the risk of snap elections, both camps signed the "December Agreement" and pledged to cooperate in various policy areas, including defence. However, political differences over the NATO issue are obstructing this co-operation.

Meanwhile, popular support for accession is growing. A survey conducted in October 2014 revealed, for the first time, a relative majority – 37 per cent – in favour

of membership; by January 2015, this had already climbed to 47 per cent. The findings are inconsistent, however: another survey conducted at the same time produced a figure of just 33 per cent in support of membership.

Options for cooperation

Current developments are changing Finland's and Sweden's threat analyses and security policy interests. There is a growing recognition that in a crisis, their national defence capabilities would not be sufficient on their own. If the two countries maintain their adherence to military non-alignment, at least for the time being, this will inevitably raise the question of alternative options for security cooperation.

In recent years, both countries have progressively moved closer to NATO, and the expansion of this cooperation is now gaining new topicality. Sweden and Finland are already regarded as close allies and very active non-members. A strong message was sent by the signing of Host Nation Support Agreements, after long preparations, during the NATO Summit in Wales on 5 September 2014. These agreements enable the two countries to benefit from NATO's support in crisis situations. The Summit also established the Partnership Interoperability Initiative. Sweden and Finland are among the small number of candidates for the third and final stage of this Initiative, known as the Enhanced Opportunities Program (EOP), which aims to increase interoperability in partners' contributions to NATO operations and exercises, thereby further intensifying military cooperation and political dialogue.

While NATO itself is interested in more intensive cooperation with Sweden and Finland, some members – especially the Baltic states – fear that the principle of collective self-defence under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty will be weakened and ultimately undermined if the Alliance increasingly involves non-members. Sweden and Finland should therefore not overtax the partnership, which is based on the good

will of the NATO members, but also build up their national defence capacities on their own initiative and intensify other forms of cooperation.

A further option for Finland and Sweden lies in the expansion of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Both countries support the current CSDP, not only with disproportionately large personnel contributions. They are actively committed to deepened military integration in the long term too, for example through their participation in the EU's Nordic Battle Group, a seven country-strong regional contribution to the EU's crisis management capability. The Battle Group has been placed under Swedish command – for the third time – for the first six months of 2015.

The EU's main significance for Finland and Sweden lies in its status as a security community in the making. Both countries are calling for the mutual assistance clause of the Treaty of Lisbon to be implemented and progressively developed. At present, however, this does not include a guarantee of collective security, as the majority of EU members give clear priority to NATO. EU military integration is currently stagnating and is therefore only likely to increase Finnish and Swedish defence capabilities to a minimal extent for the time being.

Meanwhile, Sweden and Finland are moving closer in their bilateral military relations. In May 2014, they signed an Action Plan for Deepened Defence Cooperation, and in line with its provisions, the two countries' armed forces delivered a joint final report at the end of February 2015, identifying feasible cooperation areas and proposing specific measures for their implementation. The initiative is motivated by a drive towards more efficiency, arising from budgetary constraints in both countries. But there is also a political logic behind the cooperation between these two countries, as the only non-NATO members in Northern Europe.

At present, bilateral cooperation is based on ad hoc pragmatism and is geared solely towards peace time. Existing cooperative

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activities, such as joint naval exercises, are being scaled up, but a unifying vision is still lacking. This approach is easy to “sell” at the domestic level and can certainly generate intermittent synergy effects. In practice, however, it does little to enhance the two countries’ defence capabilities. A bilateral defence alliance would have a far greater impact. Both sides would benefit from close integration of their national defence policies, even if this meant having to commit to a high level of interdependency. The armed forces themselves are calling indirectly for the cooperation to be expanded to conflict and crisis scenarios. The two Defence Ministers have not publicly ruled out this form of alliance, although it is likely to remain unrealistic in the medium term due to ongoing scepticism on the part of most politicians in both countries.

In 2009, the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) was established as a framework for the continuation and expansion of security cooperation. Its members are Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The aim of this particular format is to identify efficient joint solutions to security-related problems and create synergies between the five countries. NORDEF’s areas of cooperation include strategic development; human resources and education; training and exercises; and joint operations. The cooperation is not guided by grand visions and high expectations, but by pragmatic needs at a basic functional level. The Baltic countries have also been involved in NORDEF projects since 2011. Nordic-Baltic security cooperation was deepened and widened in autumn 2014.

Overall, military cooperation at the Nordic/Nordic-Baltic level is still a work in progress and has largely symbolic value at present. The regional approach is a good example of the “pooling and sharing” of military capabilities at the EU and NATO level. Due to the lack of military integration, however, it is too weak to facilitate stand-alone solutions to security challenges in the short to medium term.

Durable security in Northern Europe

NATO membership for Finland and Sweden is an unlikely scenario at present. In both countries, such a step would require a political consensus, a formal review of its implications, and a referendum, all of which would involve lengthy lead-in times. Each of the alternatives – cooperation with NATO or the CSDP, or bilateral or regional cooperation – seems inadequate in its own. Their beneficial elements, however, have the potential to be mutually reinforcing, provided that overlaps are avoided at the same time. NORDEF, for example, can contribute to defence integration in Europe, as the two processes are interdependent and evolve through interaction. Nordic-Baltic cooperation, for its part, is a good example of close interaction between members and non-members in the NATO context. The same applies to deepened bilateral military cooperation between Sweden and Denmark, agreed in March 2015. In that sense, existing cooperation arrangements should be intensified, with “joined-up” thinking across the various options and integration of their various elements into a coherent overarching security and defence strategy. Such a strategy has the potential to enhance durable security in Northern Europe – and that will benefit Germany as well.