

## CHAPTER IV: FINLAND, SWEDEN AND NATO: A VIEW FROM WASHINGTON

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### NATO ENLARGEMENT AND FINNISH-SWEDISH ABSENCE

IN THE AFTERMATH of the tectonic changes in Eastern Europe of 1989 after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, only a few had the historic foresight to see the possibility of a resurgent Russia or the potential backsliding in the newer democracies. Euphoria was dominating the political elites. Only a few cautioned about the 'end of history' as we knew it. The idea that the West's liberal-democratic ways would now spread like wildfire was part of the peace dividend. Only a few of the champions of this new reality were grounded in realpolitik and with a deep historic knowledge and understanding that things could go off the rails. At the time, this minority was ridiculed. The difficulties of transition from dictatorship to democracy were thought negligible, and the vulnerabilities of Western democracies were underestimated.

Central-Eastern European countries like Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic pushed hard for the enlargement of NATO, understanding that their best hope of stabilising their countries, which were going through a very difficult phase of transition, was to join the Transatlantic institutions. There was also, however, an element of fear of a resurgent Russia wanting to reverse the process of change from dictatorship to democracy by military means. The sophistication of Russian foreign policy and its use of soft power was not yet visible. Therefore, the majority of the populations of these countries were in favour of joining

NATO. Hungary took the risk of a referendum, which resulted in a victory for the ‘yes’ camp.

In Western Europe such fears were never really understood. The warnings by the Central and Eastern Europeans about a possibly disruptive Russia were discarded as old-school, anti-communist rhetoric, driven by anger rather than rationality. The debate in Finland at that time focused on joining the EU. The referendum yielded strong support for joining the EU, 57–43%. The possibility of NATO membership was never put on the front burner. Those in the Finnish diplomatic corps who were close observers of the NATO enlargement process were working hard to convince the then leading political forces to take the big leap and join in the first wave, with Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. Swedish voices were a lot quieter. In the corridors of Brussels, the chatter between Finnish diplomats and prospective members was about a window of opportunity, which could soon close.

The same conversations took place about Swedish membership. Moreover, Sweden which had boasted of a formidable defence force during the Cold War decided in the following decades to cut back its capabilities, its military manpower and spending. In 2010, Sweden even decided to ‘mothball’ military conscription.

## MEMBERSHIP VS. PARTNERSHIP

THE PARTNERSHIP FOR Peace programme invented in Washington in 1994 was originally intended to put the enlargement idea on the back burner, to sidetrack the process. The idea was reluctantly taken on board by the prospective members as a ‘preparatory half-way house’. However, an unintended consequence was the further tempering of Finnish and Swedish membership

debates, as both countries saw this as a framework that would result in 'just enough' of a close relationship to NATO.

The point that the driver of NATO membership is Article 5, which concerns the strategic relationship with the U.S. and the full participation in the political decision-making process, was overlooked, but not by its opponents. The efforts to thwart membership of Finland and Sweden had an undeniably strong anti-American streak.

In conversations, there was yet another important element, which reverberated to a point, but failed to change the direction of the discourse. This was the clarity about the difference in the level of political influence on NATO for members and non-members. NATO has and always will be first and foremost a military defence alliance, with Article 5 at the core, but having a place around the Council table gives any country a very special political status in the international community. It is also a distinction critical in the relationship to the U.S. An ally is an ally; a partner, however close, is a partner. Article 5 extends only to full members. This is a very important part of the considerations for membership for all those countries that have become members since 1999 and continues to be one for those that have the declared goal to become one.

The Finnish and Swedish decision was not without merits and must be respected. The two countries, by many wrongly considered as twins in the NATO membership debate, have done well as influential power-brokers in their non-aligned and neutral statuses. However, their background and strategic situations are very different. It makes no sense to look at the two as locked together. Sweden has had a political culture of over-reliance on the UN. This is changing but is still very dominant within big parts of the political and cultural elites and the rest of the population. The Russian arguments to stop enlargement were

accommodated. No doubt there was always a sense of complacency present in their decision not to join the Alliance. “We will join when we want to and when we are ready,” was the argument. The counter-argument was “Join now, while you can, as it might not be that easy in the future.”

The Finnish case, seen from the U.S., is different. It is rooted in the harsh realities of its history with Russia. The two cannot be compared.

Finnish and Swedish neutrality are therefore judged differently. Finland’s position is more understandable and pragmatically justified. It has a far more complicated history with Russia [the Soviet Union], and its neutrality is considered a stance forced upon it by past and recent history. Swedish neutrality is born out of historical development, but is a choice of convenience. It is today considered to be more a result of ideology. Neutrality served both countries well during the Cold War, but lost its original meaning after the fall of the Soviet Union. Neutrality is increasingly seen as obsolete when non-military tools of strategic disruption are inseparable from conventional military ones.

Those of us who strongly supported, and still support, Finnish and Swedish membership have put forward a case, which has both a military and non-military component. The military arguments are well-known, but the non-military aspects are often overlooked. In the past two decades, NATO has welcomed and embraced countries that were and still are in an unfinished process of transition from dictatorship to democracy, from a command economy to a fully-fledged market economy. Some of these countries have not been able to stabilise their democratic institutions and solidify a society based on transparency and the rule of law. In more cases than not, there is a democratic backslide leaning towards authoritarian rule, prone to Russian influence. Despite their membership of NATO, and for most in the EU,

the process is far from complete. It would have benefited NATO and its newest members to have had two solid, well established democracies joining the Alliance.

Of the Nordic countries, today only Denmark, Iceland and Norway are members of NATO. Given the growing importance of the Nordic countries in stabilising Europe and indeed the community of Western democracies, it would be desirable to align their membership in NATO.

### PROSPECTS OF JOINING TODAY

IN MANY WAYS, Russia can be pleased. The circumstances of joining NATO now are not favourable. The appetite for enlargement is just not there. While NATO has made clear that Russia has no veto over the enlargement process, the conditions for membership have changed and Russia has made it very clear that it would do everything it can to block Finnish and Swedish membership. Moreover, the political forces inside NATO, which see appeasement of Russia as a viable option and as a preferred road to defusing the Russian threat, have become stronger within the Alliance. This is due to many factors, among them Russian efforts to influence the public and the attendant corruption of politicians, which is not to be underestimated.

Americans, regardless of their political party, view neutrality as an outdated concept. Neutrality today, rightly or wrongly, is seen as a stance to keep equal distance from the U.S. and Russia, which of course is nonsense. Finland and Sweden are part of the West, and most Americans, if asked, would name the two countries as members of NATO. But that does not grant them status as allies in Washington.

The enhanced cooperation of the two countries with the U.S. should not just be welcome, but it is also important to the

stability of the two countries and the Nordic-Baltic region as a whole. The relationship is deep and extends from business ties to military cooperation, but perhaps the broad cooperation also creates an illusion about the content of the relationship. They are important military partners, but they are not allies.

Finland is a great example of *realpolitik* and understanding of the importance of maintaining a credible military defence posture. It is well understood that the decision of Finland to join or not to join NATO is for Finland and Finland alone. No country will force any such decision upon the Finnish people. It is important that Washington understands that willingness to join NATO has to rest upon robust support; reluctant and half-hearted membership is not welcome. There is, however, a sense in Washington that both in Sweden and Finland, there is little understanding of the nature of their enhanced relationship with the U.S., that somehow this will amount to an Article 5-type intervention to defend these countries, should they be attacked. This is not the case. Only full NATO membership provides such guarantees.

The current balance of power in the Baltic Sea region favours Russia in many ways because the country patchwork of Article 5 guarantees makes the region less resistant to Russian attack and pressure. Sweden's role in defending the Baltic States is important. The recent reinforcement of the defence of Gotland is a strong sign, key to Baltic Sea security. However, the oft-repeated argument that NATO and particularly the U.S. needs Sweden is a misunderstanding. Being useful and being indispensable are two entirely different things.

The growing concerns for security in the Baltic region in both countries are noticeable. Finland has maintained a strong capability. Sweden has done much recently to reverse the process of further weakening its armed forces, such as reintroducing

conscription for both men and women. The desire for enhanced military cooperation with the U.S. is clear. The efforts made through institutionalised cooperation like Nordic Defence Cooperation or NORDEFECO are not being overlooked.

To boost their image and standing in Washington, our think tank has suggested that the two countries be bold and raise their military spending to a level which would put many actual members of NATO to shame. In doing this, Finland and Sweden would make a strong statement that they are not mere free riders of Western defence and security, and they are not countries that want to achieve full security at a lower level of military *and* political commitment and risk-taking. It would also prove that they *think and act* like allies.

It is in this context that the ambitious project of French-German-led independent European defence must be discussed. There is no doubt that Europeans need to be ready and able to carry out robust military operations on their own in the future, without U.S. involvement. The weaknesses of European capabilities are clearly understood. The political will to overcome these are welcome. It is also clear that these goals require Europe-wide political commitment. If this commitment also strengthens the European pillar of NATO, it is a most welcome development.

However, the strengthening of European defence should not come at the cost of a strong and cohesive Atlantic Alliance. The idea that Europe will be able to fend off strategic threats on its own is an illusion. No European defence will be able to replace NATO's Article 5 guarantees, so no European nation should be guided by the idea that Europe needs to develop its autonomous defence because the U.S. does not care about Europe. This is nonsense. America cares about Europe and, counter-intuitively, the more Europe cares about itself and common threats to our community, the more the U.S. will care about Europe. Europeans

need to understand that only with U.S. leadership will we be able to counter an increasingly aggressive and assertive Russia and China.

Sweden and Finland need to consider the above, and any future investment in their militaries must be seen through this dichotomy: a need to strengthen the Transatlantic relationship, while also making sure that Europeans take their own security more seriously. Their future debates and decisions about joining NATO should also be considered in this context.

## NATO UNDER PRESIDENT TRUMP

MONTHS BEFORE THE elections, experts in Washington urged Europeans to have a ‘plan B’ ready, in case Hillary Clinton lost the elections. We said that the Europeans don’t get to elect the American President, so they must be ready to work with the U.S. President whom the American people choose to elect. They might have sympathies, they might have preferences based on their own political or ideological convictions, but in the end they must find ways to work with the President in office. This is sometimes hard, but the visceral hate toward Trump has also blinded Europeans to the realities of America.

Yes, in the first months of the Trump administration there was a fear of America turning inwards and that it might abandon NATO as the institution of choice for the transatlantic relationship. And yes, the rhetoric by President Trump about NATO being obsolete was confusing. Some of his comments were and are unnecessary. But his declarations were also taken way too literally and some Europeans saw this as a battle cry for detachment from America, suggesting that “we can no longer count on America”.

The same forces failed to recognise the fact that, from the start, tried and experienced U.S. military leaders have played an



important role in the Trump administration. Arguably one of the most influential members of the Trump cabinet, former General James Mattis, was once Commander of the Allied Command Transformation. It was not long before it became very clear that NATO would remain at the core of the transatlantic relationship. The appointment of former Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison as U.S. Ambassador to NATO was also about sending a strong message: the U.S. wants one of its most seasoned politicians to sit around the NATO Council table.

Some Europeans were driven by honest worries that the U.S. will turn away from Europe, but others displayed open or latent anti-Americanism, which always looms in the background. It is sometimes not easy to be America's friend, especially when policies are messy and when there is no perceived sense of direction, but it is easy to be its enemy. Rather than facing issues head on, it is at times a lot easier to blame America for all the world's troubles. Seen from Washington, some of the suggestions in Europe that emerged in the wake of Trump's election were opportunistic: use this to boost European independence from the U.S. Finland and Sweden, however, would do well to keep in mind that while increased European defence is welcome, this should never come at the cost of the transatlantic relationship. Yes, the Europeans should take more responsibility for their security. They need to spend more on their defence and yes, the EU's foreign policy efforts will only be considered credible if it is backed up by hard and soft power alike. In the end, however, the U.S. is the ultimate guarantor of European security, and this will remain a fact for the foreseeable future.

## FINLAND AND SWEDEN: FREE RIDERS OR IMPORTANT MILITARY PARTNERS?

FINLAND AND SWEDEN are both very important players in international affairs and are important members of the EU. They are both of strategic importance for stability and security in the Baltic Sea region. This stability is of course primarily dependent on the continued and robust presence of the U.S. and NATO, but the two countries are de facto contributors to it. Finnish and Swedish contributions are more than welcome.

They are important military partners, because of the investments in their security forces and the cutting-edge technology that is frequently the standard for these forces. Finland's reserve military structure, the rapidity with which they can deploy, the broad societal perspective into the range and type of forces and the special skill that Finland can call upon during crisis situations make it an excellent military partner. Its long border with Russia and its intelligence capabilities make it an asset, not a free rider.

On the other hand, their cooperation with the U.S. and the Alliance is also beneficial to Finland and Sweden themselves, not just to the U.S. Gotland is of strategic importance, and can play a critical, albeit not decisive role, in case of crisis in the region. However, were it controlled by the enemy it would create an extremely dangerous situation. In any conflict or in exercising for any scenario, access, basing and overflight are critical components. You must depend on allies and partners for these essential components. In these domains, NATO can work with both Finland and Sweden.

There are capabilities the two countries possess, which are real assets. There is great potential for increased cooperation in fields that are of strategic importance, such as countering non-traditional threats like hybrid attacks, threats to critical infrastructure, countering disinformation, cyber security and intelligence.

## AMERICAN LEADERSHIP: THE ROLE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

U.S. LEADERSHIP in the Western world is as important as ever. As the saying goes “Europeans hate American leadership, but they hate the lack of it even more”.

The U.S. is the pillar upon which NATO rests. No country or group of countries can replace U.S. leadership within the Alliance. For years this leadership has been withdrawn or even absent, and this might have led to the conclusion that perhaps NATO is not as important as in the past. That was the wrong conclusion.

In the election campaign, there was little talk of NATO, if at all. However, the one recurring theme by both the Democrat and Republican candidates was the importance of the allies spending more on their defence, to make a larger contribution to burden-sharing. This should not have come as a surprise to European partners and allies. Earlier demands by the U.S. to spend more, the so-called 2% pledge, were never taken seriously by the Europeans, although they had all signed off on it at the Wales Summit in 2014.

Trump on the other hand is now very serious about it, for reasons beyond NATO. While the 2% shouldn't be the only component that shows commitment, demanding it is as much a political statement as a military one. Europe needs to take more responsibility for its defence and understand that the U.S. can easily be overstretched. More importantly, the U.S. public, rightly or wrongly, sees spending on allies as not spending on infrastructure, education, job creation or health care at home. Trump's call for more spending is not just the idea of an ignorant and uninformed president. He has plenty of information about the military capabilities of Europe. The strong element of pressure by the U.S. public, however, cannot be ignored.

If the requirements of military budget spending are taken more seriously, it will increase credibility and deterrence and provoke a new discussion in Europe about taking its own defence far more seriously.

The role of the President of the United States within NATO is of course not just symbolic, even if the institution of POTUS has strong symbolism. The President is the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Armed Forces, which is the decisive factor in maintaining NATO as a defence alliance. His decisions and executive orders are defining for the Alliance. The President epitomises U.S. leadership.

## THE FUTURE OF FINNISH AND SWEDISH MEMBERSHIP IN NATO

FINNISH AND SWEDISH membership is not on the front burner in debates in Washington these days. Both countries are doing extremely well as friends and partners of the U.S. The relationship between the U.S. on the one hand and Sweden and Finland on the other-hand is underscored by frequent high-level visits. Enhanced security cooperation is always on the agenda. Efforts to build a special relationship with the U.S. are welcome signs that there is still a very strong constituency in favour of a close security relationship between the U.S. and the two countries.

Both countries are also regarded as important members of not just the EU, but also the group known as the Nordic countries. It does not go unnoticed that they are among the world's leaders on many fronts: education, clean, sustainable and pleasant cities, technical innovation, the environment and social innovation. The Nordic countries have a great constituency and many friends in America. They can make a huge contribution to the debates in America about the future direction of the U.S., with great credibility.

## FRIENDS

THE QUESTION OF NATO membership is politely 'avoided' in most conversations these days. It is not a priority, for the moment. There is a good understanding that the supporters of membership in Finland and Sweden will not risk a referendum, which could have a negative outcome, throwing back the possibility of joining NATO for years if not for decades.

However, a serious debate about this critical issue would be helpful. It is the majority view in Washington that neither country should be held hostage by the other, that they should go through their own internal and painful political processes.

It may emerge that many of those opposing membership have strong arguments for staying out of the Alliance. As mentioned above, some are driven by fear, others manipulated by Russian propaganda, and others still have ulterior motives, but a serious and responsible debate would also bring to the surface strong arguments in favour of membership. It would also show that the U.S. (unlike some other powers) does not interfere in the debate, and that we take the position that this is a decision for the Finnish and the Swedish people, not for the outside world to take. It would however give those who would like to see Finland and Sweden in NATO an opportunity to explain why. It would also allow for a powerful platform to push back against dangerous anti-American sentiments, which are fuelled by forces both within and beyond Finland and Sweden.

If and when Finland and Sweden decide of their own accord to join the Alliance, have no doubt that their friends in America will have a good and credible case to make when asking the Congress of the U.S. to ratify their membership.