

THE ACCESSION OF FINLAND AND SWEDEN TO NATO: GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR RUSSIA'S POSITION IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION

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The article examines Sweden's and Finland's motives for ending their long-time non-aligned policies and joining NATO after Russia had launched a special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. The two countries' decision is shown to be in the interest of the United States, which has always sought to fill the geopolitical vacuum reigning after the collapse of the opposing Soviet bloc and the Soviet Union itself. Finland and Sweden were the missing links for Washington and NATO in the Baltic region and Northern Europe as a whole. The study analyses the major consequences of these geopolitical changes for Russia in the Baltic region. These include the increasing disparity in armed forces with NATO, the substantial expansion of the border with the Alliance, the acquisition of new territorial and infrastructural capabilities by NATO to deploy reinforcements and military equipment from member countries to the region, the potential stationing of nuclear weapons on the territories of new member countries, the risk of blockading the Kaliningrad region, as well as the Gulf of Finland, and the Danish straits for Russian vessels. It is stressed that in the current circumstances, Russia needs to consider multiple scenarios in the Baltic region. On the one hand, it must safeguard its interests with minimal damage. On the other hand, it is crucial to steer clear of uncontrolled escalation of tensions with NATO, as it entails the risk of a military clash.

Keywords:

Baltic region, Russia, Kaliningrad region, NATO, armed forces, naval activity, nuclear weapons, infrastructure, blockade

Introduction

The decisions of Sweden and Finland to join NATO were an eloquent manifestation of increased tensions between Russia and the West. The two Nordic countries for a long time (the former for more than two centuries, the latter for the entire period after World War II) adhered to the policy of military non-align-

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ment. In May 2022, they submitted applications for accession to NATO, and the Alliance summit in Madrid in June 2002 sent them official invitations to join NATO.

The situation emerging as a result of this development inevitably affects Russia's position both in the Baltic region and in Europe as a whole. The geopolitical and military imbalance between the Russian Federation and the collective West is becoming even more obvious. NATO's eastern flank is acquiring a logically complete shaping, which, in the context of a sharp aggravation of the Russian-Western confrontation, seriously disadvantages Russia.

Yet, the consequences of such an expansion of the North Atlantic Alliance, which, in the opinion (albeit not indisputable) of many observers, primarily in the West, means the transformation of the Baltic into a 'NATO lake', are not unambiguous. Russia still has many opportunities both to protect its own interests and avoid complete isolation in the region and to prevent a dangerous escalation of tensions, fraught with a direct military clash with NATO. The aim of this study is to analyze the immediate and potential challenges that Russia faces in the Baltic region, to forecast possible scenarios for the development of the situation, and to formulate some recommendations in terms of how Russia should act to minimize the damage, and in the long term, to find ways out.

To achieve this aim, elements of the retrospective method are used, necessary to understand the motives for the decisions taken by Finland and Sweden, as well as studying the role of the main external players (primarily the United States). Likewise, the key factors shaping the challenges and threats that Russia faces in light of these events are analyzed. Finally, possible scenarios for the development of the situation and Russia's reaction are built.

The study draws on a wide range of Russian and foreign authors who trace the evolution of military-political trends in the Baltic Sea region (including the question of how Helsinki and Stockholm decided to break with non-aligned politics), the ability of these two Nordic countries to contribute to the cumulative power of NATO, and the current confrontation between the West and Russia, and who try to forecast the ways Moscow may act in these circumstances.

How Helsinki and Stockholm came to NATO membership. Discussions in the political community of both Nordic countries regarding joining NATO, took place long before Russia began the special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, at least after the political and military crisis in that country started in 2014. Even in the earlier period, various formats of defence and security cooperation between the Nordic countries, regardless of their affiliation with military-political alliances (primarily the Northern Defence Cooperation Forum (NORDEFECO) established in 2009 comprising Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden), had been objectively aimed at bringing these states closer to NATO and building a security system in the region focused on the Atlantic vector [1]. The Russia — West confrontation, which escalated after the start of the Ukraine crisis, further accelerated the erosion of the non-aligned status of

Finland and Sweden. They were increasingly involved in joint military activities with NATO, including Aurora, BALTOPS, and Cold Response military exercises, although officially they did not set the goal of joining NATO. At the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, the two countries signed memoranda with the Alliance to join its Host Nation Support program, which opened the way to inviting NATO forces in crisis situations and for exercises [2, p. 16]. In May 2018, in Washington, the defence ministers of the United States, Finland and Sweden signed a trilateral declaration for expanding security cooperation. As a major field of such cooperation, it was planned to increase joint military exercises and develop interoperability.¹

In Finland, back in 2016, a report by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was released assessing the country's possible accession to NATO, which examined all the pros and cons of such accession, and prospective options for different scenarios (including either simultaneous or separate accession to the Alliance with Sweden). The authors of the report, including prominent experts and diplomats from Finland and other European countries such as Mats Bergqvist, René Nyberg, and François Heisbourg, expressed their concern about a serious crisis in relations with Russia in the event of such a break with the post-war tenets of Helsinki's security policy and urged not to take such important decisions in a hurry. However, the strategic course towards joining NATO was already outlined in that report [3].

Some Russian experts already recognized at that time that the likelihood of Sweden and Finland joining the North Atlantic Alliance had increased in recent years [4, p. 16], especially given the growing 'threat' emanating from Russia in the 'post-Crimean' period [5, p. 88]. Anyway, it was stated that their rapprochement with NATO was an irreversible process, the only question being how far it would go and how it would be taken in Moscow [6].

In principle, the departure of Helsinki and Stockholm from neutrality had been heralded by their accession to the European Union in 1995, since the EU's capability to build its own defence and security identity, despite the ambitions of some of its leaders, is severely limited, and this task is unattainable in isolation from NATO.

Nevertheless, the decision by the governments of these two Nordic countries (with nearly unanimous support from their political elites) to part with the non-aligned policy was determined by the start of the Russian military operation in Ukraine, which became inevitable for the Russian leadership after the United States and NATO had rejected the draft agreements on mutual security treaties handed over to them in late 2021. If the Russian campaign in Ukraine had not begun, domestic discussions in Stockholm and Helsinki regarding the necessity to join NATO would probably have continued indefinitely, and these countries

¹ Finland, Sweden and US sign trilateral agreement, with eye on increased exercises, *Defence News*, 09.05.2018, URL: <https://www.defencenews.com/training-sim/2018/05/09/finland-sweden-and-us-sign-trilateral-agreement-with-eye-on-increased-exercises/> (accessed 29.07.2023).

themselves would have continued to be drawn into joint military activity with the Alliance, especially by intensifying joint military exercises with it. Now that Russia has crossed a critical line in Ukraine, these reflections, as the larger part of these countries' elites see it, have become inappropriate [7, p. 11]. This radical break of the two states with their long-term geopolitical stance is supported by public opinion polls. In Finland, the survey conducted by the YLE media company almost immediately after Russia began its special operation in Ukraine, showed that the share of citizens in favour of joining NATO exceeded 50 per cent for the first time in that country's history.¹ In Sweden during the same period, the proportion of NATO supporters was slightly lower, with 41 per cent expressing support and 35 per cent opposing, indicating an increase in the share of supporters by approximately 4 per cent compared to the survey conducted in January of the same year.²

The events that began on February 24, 2022, became a triumph for that group of politicians in both Nordic countries who had always focused on maximum rapprochement with NATO. Among them, in particular, is the former Prime Minister of Sweden Carl Bildt, one of the principal architects of the EU Eastern Partnership program, aimed at dragging the European countries of the former USSR into the Western orbit. After the start of the Russian military operation in Ukraine, Bildt became a vociferous supporter of Sweden's and Finland's accession to NATO, arguing that in their new status, they could significantly change the European security architecture and strengthen NATO's European pillar [8–10]. In Finland, among the most prominent proponents of joining the North Atlantic Alliance from the very beginning of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, were ex-president Martti Ahtisaari and former foreign minister Alexander Stubb.³

For the first time since the end of the Cold War, NATO enlargement is not taking place by adding former socialist countries constituting the Warsaw Pact, or some former Soviet republics, but by accepting states that were part of the world capitalist system but maintained a non-aligned status. It is noteworthy that in terms of compliance of their armed forces with NATO requirements, as well as in terms of political criteria (belonging to “established democracies”), Helsinki and Stockholm could be admitted to the Alliance without the intermediate and preparatory stages that former members of the Warsaw Pact and the Baltics had gone through.

¹ Neutral Finns and Swedes reconsider idea of NATO membership, *NPR*, 03.03.2022, URL: <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/03/1084112625/neutral-finland-sweden-warm-to-idea-of-nato-membership> (accessed 22.07.2023).

² Possible NATO membership campaign gathers momentum, *Euractiv*, 28.02.2022, URL: https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/possible-nato-membership-campaign-gathers-momentum/ (accessed 22.07.2023).

³ Hakala, H. J. Finland Turned to NATO Membership with Lightning Speed, *International Centre for Defence and Security, Estonia*, 26.09.2022, URL: <https://icds.ee/en/finland-turned-to-nato-membership-with-lightning-speed/> (accessed 28.07.2023).

Helsinki and Stockholm are actively involved in providing military assistance to Kyiv through the supply of weapons (in particular, air defence systems), and training Ukrainian military personnel to master various types of Western military equipment. The 'Russian threat' after the start of Moscow's military operation in Ukraine outweighed the argument of that part of the expert community, the political and business elite of Finland and Sweden, who had feared that their joining NATO and corresponding war obligations was fraught with the risk of uncontrollable tension with Russia or involvement in hostilities in the interests of those members of the Alliance who are geographically remote from the Baltic region (in particular, Turkey).

Until the Nordic countries broke with their non-aligned stance in 2022, this argument provided some Russian experts and observers with reasons to believe that their departure from neutrality and joining NATO was unlikely in the foreseeable future. As a result, these analysts suggested that Russia should not view the Nordic region as an inevitable candidate drifting towards NATO [11; 12].

Justifying its intention to radically rethink its national and regional security strategy, the Finnish government, in its report issued in April 2022 placed full responsibility for the new situation on "Russia's aggressive and revanchist policy". According to the report, "Finland's foreign and security policy and active and proactive diplomacy strengthen security in Finland and our neighbouring areas both through national measures and international cooperation. As the war is ongoing in Ukraine, it is difficult to assess all its effects. In response to the changed security situation, Finland will in any case have to strengthen its security and defence capability and intensify long-term cooperation with key partners". The report asserts that Finland keeps its "sovereign decision-making" and "makes its foreign and security policy decisions independently" [13, p. 14].

In Sweden, submitting the application to join NATO was somewhat more controversial than in Finland (especially because possible NATO accession was traditionally an ideological issue and reflected the contradictions between, mainly, Social Democratic 'NATO skeptics' and right-wing supporters of rapprochement with the Alliance) [14, p. 27–28]. This is evidenced by discussions in the working group set up in March 2022 by the government including representatives of various political parties in the Swedish Riksdag. The final report of this group, as well as in the case of Finland described above, claims that the security environment for Sweden has deteriorated as a result of the "Russian aggression," and that the danger of Russian "aggressive actions" against Sweden has grown. Yet the Swedish report pays more attention to the costs the country would bear due to potential NATO membership, including those related to the possible involvement of Stockholm in international conflicts in remote regions. The document calls for the maximum preservation of those mechanisms of cooperation in the field of security and international influence of Sweden, which it managed to develop during the period of its non-aligned status [15].

It is not a mere coincidence that Sweden's and Finland's announcement of their joining NATO made shortly after Russia's launch of the military campaign in Ukraine, happened almost simultaneously with the referendum in Denmark on June 1, 2022 (not formally related to NATO) on abolishing the opt-out from the European Union concerning Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). More than two-thirds of those participating in the referendum voted for the abolition of that provision, which until that moment had been one of the foundations of Copenhagen's limited status in the European integration project. Actually, given the sharp aggravation of the security situation in Europe and the confrontation between Russia and the West, any attempts by the European Union to build its military and political identity, autonomous from NATO and the United States, become irrelevant. Therefore, any projects within the framework of CFSP strengthen the Atlantic rather than the Europe-oriented principle in the strategy for a united Europe. As one Russian scholar notes, the supporters of the abolition of the Danish CFSP opt-out who won that voting, "managed to make that referendum not merely a vote 'for' or 'against' the European Union, but a question of protecting the European values, solidarity with Ukraine and European partners who are taking unprecedented steps in the new environment" [16].

Yet, ratification of the protocols on the accession of the two states (especially Sweden) to the alliance met with certain obstacles, primarily given the conditions put forward by the Turkish government due to Stockholm's alleged reluctance to counter Kurdish groups (primarily the Kurdistan Workers' Party — PKK) which Ankara considers terrorist. As for Finland, Turkish ratification of the protocol on its accession to NATO was also delayed but was still carried out in March 2023. Hungary took a similar position on this issue. It was dissatisfied with the interference of Helsinki and Stockholm in the country's internal affairs under the pretext of 'anti-democratic' trends in the policies of the Viktor Orban government. With their opposition, Ankara and Budapest disrupted the original plan of Helsinki and Stockholm to join NATO simultaneously.

In this regard, some experts in Sweden express concern that this time gap between Finland and Sweden in joining the Alliance and probable new delays in Stockholm's accession will give Russia a chance to exploit the emerging effect of the 'grey zone' in the region and consider Sweden as a weak link in the Western bonds. According to Marco Nilsson from the University of Jönköping, in this situation, Moscow will intensify operations to influence public opinion in the countries of the region and even try to stimulate internal instability there [17].

However, judging by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's step-by-step abandoning his 'principled' position in 2022—2023, and concessions he made to the majority in NATO (and primarily to Washington) on the issue of Stockholm's membership in the Alliance, this issue is practically resolved. The incompleteness of Sweden's accession to NATO was yet reflected in the final communiqué of the

Vilnius summit in July 2023, which only says that NATO welcomes “Finland as the newest member of [the] Alliance” and that “NATO membership makes Finland safer, and NATO stronger”.¹

In late October 2023, Erdogan signed the protocol on Sweden’s accession to NATO and sent it to the Turkish parliament for ratification. Since Budapest’s position remains an obstacle in resolving the “Swedish issue,” it cannot be ruled out that the completion of Stockholm’s admission to NATO will take some time, but it is obvious that both Finland and Sweden will be integrated into the Alliance altogether. Accordingly, Russia’s geopolitics in the Baltic region, as well as its political, economic and military positions there, are undergoing negative change.

The importance of Sweden’s and Finland’s joining NATO for the collective West is evidenced by the fact, albeit symbolic, that the Ewald von Kleist Award was presented to these two Nordic countries for their “historic step in response to Russia’s war of aggression”. This event occurred during the Munich Security Conference in February 2023. This award, named after the founder of that international forum, was accepted by the former and the current Prime Ministers of Sweden Magdalena Andersson and Ulf Kristersson, the President of Finland Sauli Niinistö and the then Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin.²

U.S. interest in the Baltic region in a proxy war against Russia. After the end of the Cold War, when the United States and its allies in security alliances (primarily NATO) made the most of the emerging “unipolar moment,” the enlargement of the North Atlantic Alliance and its expansion beyond the sphere of responsibility limited by the Washington Treaty, became one of the foundations of American geo-strategy. This applied, among others, to the Baltic region, where Washington needed, despite inevitable negative reactions from Russia, to promote the entry of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania into NATO and the maximum involvement of the then non-aligned Finland and Sweden in NATO activity. The latter included participation in possible efforts to defend the Baltic countries given their semi-isolation from the mainland of the Alliance [18, p. 61].

However, the evolution of Washington’s priorities in the Baltic region and the entire eastern half of Europe was largely reactive and depended on many factors — both domestic and external. Among them is Russia with its readiness and capability to challenge the unipolar world order in its immediate environment. No less important is the increasing need (especially since the presidency of Donald Trump) to counter the growing influence of China and the Chinese expansion. In any case, when such a challenge from Moscow was barely noticeable, Washington (during the presidencies of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and in

¹ Vilnius Summit Communiqué. Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Vilnius 11 July 2023, *NATO*, 11.07.2023, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm (accessed 26.07.2023).

² Kleist Award 2023 to be presented to Sweden and Finland, *Munich Security Conference*, 13.02.2023. URL: <https://securityconference.org/en/news/full/kleist-award-2023/> (accessed 15.07.2023).

the early period of Barack Obama's office) focused not so much on the use of the Baltic region in its military and political strategy, but more on demonstrating the triumph of 'democratic values' in this region and the orientation of its post-communist countries to the West [19].

The situation began to change after the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis and Russia's actions in response to the coup in Kyiv in 2014, when 'detering' Moscow — the Baltic region being a major arena — started to return to the agenda of the United States and NATO. But even then, until February 2022, the emphasis was placed mainly on the military "mastering" of those countries (Poland and the Baltic trio) that had joined NATO after the end of the Cold War and always tried to be in the vanguard of the anti-Russian efforts of the West. As for Finland and Sweden, the task of their involvement in NATO and using their capabilities for military confrontation with Russia was rather theoretical and prognostic.

Washington, driven by its need to mobilize as many countries as possible to counter Russia in the wake of hostilities in Ukraine, sought to leverage their military, industrial, and intelligence potential. This involved creating challenges in regions most sensitive for Moscow unleashing a proxy war against Russia. From the beginning, the United States was among the most enthusiastic supporters of Sweden's and Finland's applications to join NATO. In early June 2022, then-Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, visited Helsinki and Stockholm. While meeting with senior officials of these countries, he noted their capability to make significant contributions to the war potential of the North Atlantic Alliance and assured them of Washington's intention to participate more actively in joint military exercises with these countries.¹

On August 3, 2022, the US Senate ratified the protocols on the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO. On August 9 of the same year, President Joseph Biden signed these protocols. Commenting on this event, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that "in the United States there is "strong... bipartisan support for the membership applications of Finland and Sweden", and that in Washington, they "look forward to quickly bringing them into the strongest defensive Alliance in history". Blinken emphasized that "allies are united in their shared mission to defend the Euro-Atlantic community, deter aggression, project stability, and uphold NATO's values of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law". "We also remain firmly committed to NATO's Open Door policy".²

American experts studying the changes in the security environment which accompany the recent wave of NATO expansion, focus on several aspects. Firstly,

¹ Pentagon weighs plans to expand exercises with Finland, Sweden amid NATO bid, *Defence News*, 03.06.2022, URL: <https://www.defencenews.com/pentagon/2022/06/03/pentagon-weighs-plans-to-expand-exercises-with-finland-sweden-amid-nato-bid/> (accessed 20.07.2023).

² Signing of U.S. Instruments of Ratification of Finland and Sweden's NATO Accession Protocols, U.S. *Department of State*, 09.08. 2022, URL: <https://www.state.gov/signing-of-u-s-instruments-of-ratification-of-finland-and-swedens-nato-accession-protocols/> (accessed 20.07.2023).

the contribution of Helsinki and Stockholm to the collective military potential of NATO; secondly, their ability alongside other countries in the region to destroy Moscow's strategic plans for the further use of the Baltic in its interests as a 'grey zone'; thirdly, the necessity to coordinate the strategies of all Western states in the region within the framework of NATO, the European Union, and other forums, to overcome certain gaps between different groups of states in the region (Baltic Trio, Scandinavian peninsula, South Baltic countries) in their military and political priorities [20].

Among the types of military equipment Sweden and Finland have to contribute to the total NATO war potential, experts close to the Pentagon mentioned (as of mid-2022) about 150 fighters, including 96 JAS-39 Gripen multirole fighters used by Sweden, and 62 F/A-18 Hornet multirole combat aircraft in Finland (the latter are planned to be decommissioned by 2025). By the end of this decade, Finland intends to purchase 64 F-35 fifth-generation fighters. The Swedish Air Force will acquire two GlobalEye airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) aircraft. A significant contribution by Sweden to NATO will be Stealth Visby corvettes and Gotland-class submarines. For its part, Finland, which is often called an 'artillery superpower', has a powerful (larger than France, Germany or the UK) resource of these types of weapons, primarily the M-270 Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS). As for tanks, Finland and Sweden have 220 Leopard main battle tanks, which is comparable to Germany's 245 similar vehicles. Both Nordic countries have developed air defence systems. Sweden has been operating the Patriot air defence systems since 2021; Finland uses NASAMS systems [21]. It is noteworthy that Finland has AGM-158 JASSM low-detection standoff air-launched cruise missiles developed by Lockheed Martin. Moreover, Helsinki plans to purchase an extended range version of this missile, the AGM-158B JASSM-ER for F-35 fighters with a range of up to 980 km, which is a matter of greater concern for Russia.

At the same time, certain American expert centres are warning that Russia will not put up with the deterioration of its geopolitical position (even despite the mixed effectiveness of the campaign in Ukraine), and increase its reliance on nuclear deterrence and other military instruments in the region, as well as on hybrid methods of influencing a potential enemy [22].

The value of the two Nordic countries for the United States and NATO in their addressing 'hybrid' threats — the main source of which being Russia, as the West alleges in recent years — is confirmed by the fact that the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) has been operating in Helsinki since 2017. The right to participate in it is granted to member countries of the European Union and NATO. After Finland and Sweden become NATO members, the role of the North Atlantic Alliance in the functioning of this formally European organization will increase. The competence of this centre includes countering threats that are non-military in nature but directly affecting the security of various countries. They include activities

in the information and psychological sphere, active use of cyber technologies, and supporting various opposition and extra-systemic movements to undermine state power.

New enlargement of NATO in the Baltic region and Russia's position.

After Finland and Sweden sent official applications to join NATO, the positive response to which was obvious, the thesis about turning the Baltic Sea into a 'NATO lake' became unanimous in the Western media, as well as among scholars studying security issues. Some observers in the Alliance member countries, however, warn against euphoria and unrealistic calculations about this geographical factor. They recall that Russia still has many opportunities to counter NATO in the Baltic region, that its armed forces are stationed in the Kaliningrad region, in the western part of the mainland of the Russian Federation and in Belarus, and that Russia retains the potential to limit NATO's freedom of manoeuvre in the Baltic, albeit not in its entire water area and only for a certain period [23].

Nevertheless, the fact that all the states in the Baltic Sea, except Russia, will be NATO members, cannot but affect this country's positions both in the Baltic region itself and its geopolitical and military-political interests in general. The principal challenges and threats — real and potential — boil down to the following groups:

- the complete disappearance of the geopolitical buffer between Russia and the Western side, which Finland used to be;
- an inevitable blow to Russia's foreign economic ties and supply chains of these ties in the region (primarily with Finland), which began after the EU countries joined anti-Russian sanctions in 2022 and cannot but worsen as a result of the new NATO expansion;
- the growth of NATO's overall power by adding new member countries, especially Sweden (primarily its submarine fleet);
- ever more unfavourable situation for Russia in the Baltic region, due to the fact, that the principal NATO and EU member countries, hostile to Russia (Poland and the Baltic states) are concentrated there, and due to potential joining of their efforts with new members of the Alliance for the sake of "containing" Moscow;
- the emergence of a springboard for the deployment of military contingents of NATO member countries to deter Russia;
- facilitating the delivery of NATO military reinforcements to the Baltic countries thanks to the geographical resources of the two Nordic countries and improving their infrastructure capabilities in this regard;
- the danger of deploying nuclear weapons on the territories of new member countries;
- the threat of a blockade of the Gulf of Finland and Kaliningrad, as well as blocking Russia's exit from the Baltic Sea to the Atlantic Ocean.

If we group these challenges and threats by their relevance, it is evident that at the top of them are those pertaining to the changes in the military balance with

NATO, unfavourable for Russia. This is especially noticeable due to the interference of the United States and its allies in the Ukrainian conflict which is fraught with a risk of a ‘hot’ war. This is aggravated by a significant extension — over 1,300 km — of the land border between Russia and NATO in Finland, and an even greater increase in the line of contact with the Alliance in the Baltic Sea from north to south. Moreover, there is a desire among Western military-political experts and in the media, with a direct interest in justifying the swift integration of the armed forces of new NATO members into the Alliance’s total military power for the sake of countering the ‘Russian aggression’, to intimidate Moscow and present the emerging situation in the Baltic Sea region as nearly disastrous for Russia. This information bravado is exemplified by the claims of certain experts interviewed by *Newsweek* magazine on the eve of the Vilnius NATO summit in July 2023. In particular, Frederik Mertens, an analyst at the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, argues that NATO in the Baltic already has an overwhelming advantage over Russia not only in the sea but also in air potential, and with Sweden joining NATO, Russian surface ships can only rely on ground-based air defence. There hardly is a spot of the Baltic left, Mertens argues, where a Russian surface ship cannot expect the imminent attack of an advanced sea-skimming missile. Besides, Sweden will be much more integrated into NATO in terms of information and intelligence sharing.¹

The second group of challenges and uncertainties facing Russia in the Baltic arises from its most vulnerable territories and maritime spaces. This is primarily the Kaliningrad region, due to its exclave and isolated position from the ‘mainland’. The most alarmist-minded observers in Russia (in particular, Alexander Nosovich, editor-in-chief of the Kaliningrad analytical portal *RuBaltic*) even argue that Finland’s and Sweden’s joining NATO creates a threat of Russia losing this region [24]; the more so that a step towards this has already been taken by Lithuania’s blocking in June 2022 of transit of goods subject to EU sanctions. This was an attempt to provoke a military-political crisis requiring NATO intervention, in which the new members, especially Sweden with its appreciable naval capabilities, having the island of Gotland as an ‘unsinkable aircraft carrier’, would play an important role.

Although the threat of ‘losing Kaliningrad’ is still highly exaggerated, it is clear that those in the West who are calling for a tougher line against Moscow to force it to capitulate in Ukraine, openly view pressurizing Kaliningrad and creating as many difficulties for Russia as possible in the region as a major tool against it. First of all, because Kaliningrad is an ice-free port, the home base of the Baltic Fleet, and Iskander-M missiles are deployed in the region. In any case,

¹ Sweden Joining NATO Is a Nightmare for Russia’s Baltic Sea Fleet, *Newsweek*, 12.07.2023, URL: <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-nato-sweden-baltic-sea-finland-1812526> (accessed 30.07.2023).

some Western experts, although they do not speak out loud about the blockade of the Russian exclave, openly argue that Kaliningrad will be at the centre of a new Russian-NATO confrontation [25].

Sweden's entry into NATO (albeit still incomplete) opens the way for the Alliance to actively use the strategically significant island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea, not least for keeping the Kaliningrad region under pressure. In late 2021 and early 2022 (when military tension around Ukraine began to grow), the transfer of American HIMARS missile systems to this island began — their range covering Kaliningrad. The Swedish government also started the deployment of armoured combat vehicles and military personnel there for patrolling. At the end of April 2022, the Swedish government announced the allocation of 1.6 billion Swedish crowns (\$163 million) to strengthen military infrastructure on this island (primarily for the construction of barracks), justifying this step by growing tensions with Russia. According to the country's Deputy Minister of Finance and Financial Markets Minister Max Elger, the aim of this measure "is to be able to house many more conscripts and to make operations more effective, and in that way contribute to greater capacity... on Gotland".¹

Another, albeit less likely, hot spot that faces a hypothetical blockade by some NATO countries, is the Russian part of the Gulf of Finland. The Baltic countries, primarily Estonia, who are seriously considering the possible 'locking' of the Russian fleet in the Gulf of Finland, express particular satisfaction in this regard. They can try to do this jointly with Finland (in particular, using the RBS-15 anti-ship missile systems that are in operation in Finland, and the Blue Spear anti-ship missiles purchased by Tallinn from Israel), since now the exit from this narrow bay to the main waters of the Baltic Sea will be controlled by NATO countries from both shores. In particular, Enno Mõts Chief of Staff of the Headquarters of Estonian Defence Forces, openly said in May 2022 that the expansion of NATO presence in the Baltic Sea is a strategic move that could potentially disrupt Russia's plans to conduct military operations from the Gulf of Finland. This expansion, akin to surrounding Kaliningrad by NATO on all sides, is seen as a countermeasure to mitigate potential security concerns.²

With the accession of Finland and especially Sweden to NATO — due to the Alliance gaining the entire Scandinavian Peninsula as a bridgehead, and correspondingly strategic depth — the problem of the "indefensibility" of the Baltic states is solved for NATO. Now the remote member countries of the Alliance have practically unlimited opportunities to transfer reinforcements there, primarily using the Swedish air and sea space. Daniel S. Hamilton senior fellow at

¹ Sweden to boost military on Gotland amid Russia fears, *Reuters*, 29.04.2022, URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/sweden-boost-military-gotland-amid-russia-fears-2022-04-29/> (accessed 25.07.2023).

² Finland Joining NATO Will Help Bloc Control Baltic Sea: Officials, *Newsweek*, 13.05.2022, URL: <https://www.newsweek.com/finland-joining-nato-help-bloc-control-baltic-sea-officials-russia-estonia-1706293> (accessed 23.07.2023).

the Brookings Institution argues that with the transformation of the Baltic into a “NATO lake,” there will be no need to rely on the Suwalki Gap between Poland and Lithuania to achieve the task of protecting the Baltic countries [25].

The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO is a chance to activate some infrastructure facilities which can now be used to transfer troops and weapons to territories located close to the Russian borders and Russian military bases on the Kola Peninsula. This, in particular, is a project to electrify the long-frozen railway link (Tornio — Haparanda) between these two countries in the polar region.¹

However, publications of a number of experts in the Nordic countries (in particular, from the Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences) express concern that the entry of Finland, and in the future Sweden into NATO will highlight the problem of splitting the Northern European flank of the Alliance between different Joint Force Commands (JFC). Finland, after its accession to NATO, was designated to JFC Brunssum (Netherlands), responsible for Central Europe and the Baltic region, while Norway is under JFC Norfolk (USA), whose task is to protect the sea routes between Europe and North America via the Greenland — Iceland — United Kingdom (GIUK) gap, as well as in the Arctic. It is not yet known which JFC Sweden will be assigned to after joining NATO. The authors of these publications expect that further reforms of NATO’s command structure will be guided by a strategic vision for the Nordic and Baltic regions as a joint operational area [26].

The ‘nuclear factor’ in the military-political equation that is emerging in the new conditions, will most likely have a delayed effect on Russia, although Finland and Sweden, including their heads of government, declared that they would not set preconditions for membership in the Alliance (i.e., they do not rule out deploying nuclear weapons on their territories in principle). However, nuclear planning issues, in terms of both the extension of guarantees to potential members and their participation in NATO’s operational activities, still remain highly important, because as part of collective defence and NATO nuclear guarantees, they correspondingly will be addressed by Russia in its war planning. On the other hand, their armed forces can and will be considered by NATO in the context of nuclear planning even without nuclear weapons on their territories [27, p. 21 — 22].

In the Arctic region, no less than in the Baltic, the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO affects the security of Russia. Given that after joining the Alliance they will significantly enhance their participation in various NATO-wide and regional military projects, the confrontation between Russia and the West in the Arctic, as Ilya Kramnik, research fellow at the Primakov National Research Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Acade-

¹ How Sweden and Finland could help NATO contain Russia, *Reuters*, 05.07.2023. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/natos-new-north-fresh-chances-contain-moscow-2023-07-03/> (accessed 17.07.2023).

my of Sciences (IMEMO) argues, “risks being larger than during the Cold War, especially considering that Sweden and Finland were neutral states at that time” [28]. A number of American experts reasonably forecast that the mere accession of these two countries to the North Atlantic Alliance will significantly increase the importance of the Arctic region in both NATO and Russian military priorities (the more so that over half of the coastline of the Arctic Ocean falls on Russia), Sweden and Finland making a significant contribution to monitoring Moscow’s military activity on the Kola Peninsula and at the same time contributing to increasing the risk of NATO — Russia escalation [29].

In the context of growing NATO’s total power in the Baltic region, Poland and the Baltic states — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — are designing new plans, not only military, but also geoeconomic, to deter Russia, and expect these designs to be included in the Alliance’s agenda. The Baltic countries will gain important strategic and defensive space in the event of a possible military conflict with Russia, as well as an opportunity to participate in probable alternatives to Russian energy supplies. In particular, complementary protection by NATO may be provided for the Polish-Danish Baltic Pipe gas pipeline under construction with a connection to the Norwegian gas transportation network, as well as the Swinoujscie gas hub of American oil and gas companies for Eastern and Central Europe, and the floating LNG terminal near Gdansk [30].

A new dimension of NATO’s activities, which has now almost the entire Baltic at its “disposal,” arises at the intersection of the security sphere and geo-economics, which was facilitated by the Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2 pipeline blasts in September 2022. They disabled these gas pipelines for an indefinite period, and a number of leading EU member countries (primarily Germany) were directly interested in their functioning. This attack itself, the likely NATO entry of Sweden — it is conducting its own investigation here as the explosion happened in its special economic zone — is a new pretext for NATO to take care of the security of infrastructure facilities in the Alliance’s area of operation, including in the Baltic Sea. In February 2023, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced the creation of a Critical Undersea Infrastructure Coordination Cell at NATO Headquarters.¹

New uncertainties and alternatives for Russia. The less favourable the international position of Russia becomes due to the Ukraine conflict, the more urgent it seems to search for variants of reducing mutual tension, — at least in certain areas or regions — even if the conflict in Ukraine itself cannot be resolved or frozen in the near future. The Baltic region, paradoxically, can provide such opportunities, even though it is here that the states most unfriendly towards Russia are located, and it is now becoming an almost monopoly sphere of influence for NATO.

¹ NATO stands up undersea infrastructure coordination cell, *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, 15.02.2023, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_211919.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed 24.07.2023).

The unfavourable scenario for the development of the situation in the region for the foreseeable period seems the most realistic, given the level of mutual tension. This is evidenced by the significant decline in relations with Finland (both economic and political), the severance of many humanitarian ties with that country. As a result, Russia loses one of the few ‘buffers’ in relations with the collective West. Monopolization of the security sphere in the Baltic by the North Atlantic Alliance goes hand in hand with other events testifying to the West’s desire to isolate Russia in the region both politically and economically. In March 2022, almost immediately after the start of the special military operation in Ukraine, the Russian Federation was suspended from the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS). Thereupon, Moscow announced in May of the same year that it was withdrawing from it. The seriousness of Moscow’s perception of challenges posed by the further expansion of NATO and its infrastructure — by adding the states whose non-aligned status has long been one of the foundations of the European balance of power — is evidenced by the complete withdrawal of the Russian Federation from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). The Russian Foreign Ministry announced the denunciation of this treaty at the beginning of June 2023. Its statement in particular notes that “a safe and stable balance of conventional arms in the north of Europe has been seriously undermined by the recent accession to NATO of Finland, a non-CFE country that borders Russian territory which is regulated by the CFE, and the prospects of deploying conventional arms of third countries in Finland, along with the ongoing accession of Sweden, also not a CFE member. These steps were the last straw that prompted the Russian Federation to finally exit the treaty”.¹

In the first months after Helsinki’s and Stockholm’s decisions to join NATO, a prevailing opinion in the Russian political and expert community was that such a turn in their policies, despite emerging problems for Russia, would not be fatal. For instance, professor of St. Petersburg State University Konstantin Khudoley expressed an opinion that the accession of these countries to the Alliance “does not create any existential threat for Russia,” and “when criticizing the decision of Sweden and Finland, it is advisable to refrain from threats, or sharp and rude attacks; they will not frighten the Finns and Swedes, but only increase their negative attitude towards Russia. If NATO military infrastructure appears on the territory of Sweden and Finland, Russia, of course, must take measures, but they must be strictly verified and be a response only to those threats that will specifically arise no less, but in no case more” [31].

However, the subsequent development of events, the protraction of hostilities in Ukraine, and the escalation of Western intervention in the Ukrainian conflict leave, at least for the foreseeable future, little chance for supporters of Russia’s restrained behaviour, including in the Baltic region. After Sweden and Finland

¹ Foreign Ministry statement on Russia sending notifications to states-parties to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 09.06.2023. URL: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1886348/?ysclid=lp703pgtk7952680477 (accessed 26.07.2023).

abandoned their long-standing tradition of non-aligned politics and got actively involved in political and war confrontation with Russia, unconditionally joining the general line of the West to deter the 'Russian aggression', the idea that maintaining some kind of cooperation between Russia and NATO states in the military and military-technical field in the Baltic region (in particular, the idea of Russia's return to participation in the BALTOPS exercises, as it did until 2014) will help curb the rise in tensions, is not relevant any more [32, p. 73].

The scenario of 'reducing the damage' caused by the transformation of the Baltic into "the NATO lake," although it seems unrealistic due to non-decreasing tensions between Russia and NATO, should not be completely ruled out, because neither Moscow nor the West have an interest in uncontrollable confrontation. Despite the obvious security challenge that the actual NATO monopoly in the Baltic poses for Russia, in the initial period after Stockholm and Helsinki announced their intention to join the Alliance, there was no desire within the top leadership of the Russian Federation and the expert community, to put this problem among the key threats for the security of Russia. President Vladimir Putin, during the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) summit on May 16, 2022, speaking about the enlargement of NATO, including Finland and Sweden, said that "Russia has no problems with these states ... In this sense, therefore, there is no direct threat to Russia in connection with NATO's expansion to these countries. But the expansion of its military infrastructure to these territories will certainly evoke a response on our part. We will see what it will be like based on the threats that are created for us ... So, we will respond to it in a fitting manner".¹ Thus, there was a clear desire of Moscow to somewhat push aside the challenges and threats emerging from NATO expansion, which at the moment are less than the threats that stem from the events around Ukraine and the danger of a clash with NATO on the Ukrainian front.

Some diplomats and political experts in the new NATO member countries, who oppose burning all bridges with Russia, were quick to respond to such somewhat conciliatory signals from Moscow. Among them, there exist different opinions regarding the extent to which this expansion of the North Atlantic Alliance really threatens Russia's military security, whether it is an immediate war threat or rather a political and psychological factor. In the political communities in Finland and Sweden, a prevailing desire is to downplay the danger that their accession to NATO poses for Russia, and to place all the blame for the respective geopolitical choices of Helsinki and Stockholm on Moscow itself. For instance, the well-known Finnish diplomat, former ambassador of Finland to the Russian Federation and Germany René Nyberg believes that in the context of miscalculations made by Moscow during its military campaign in Ukraine, "Finnish and Swedish NATO membership looks from a Russian perspective more like collateral damage... Sweden has enjoyed unofficial American guarantees since the 1950s

¹ CSTO summit, 16.05.2022. *President of Russia*, URL: en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68418 (accessed 27.07.2022).

and Finland is an enhanced partner of NATO. Both defence forces are NATO compatible... From a purely Russian military view, Finnish and Swedish NATO membership does not change much. Except that it provides additional depth for Norway's defence of Finnmark" [33].

Despite such attempts to downplay the negative consequences of the two Nordic countries joining NATO that Russia faces, the view expressed by the Finnish diplomat leaves hope that in Helsinki and Stockholm a desire to blindly follow the path of other post-communist Baltic states trying to be Washington's proxies, will not prevail. However, it is only after the root causes of the current acute confrontation between Russia and the West are addressed adequately, that one can expect avoiding unfavourable development in the Baltic region.

The need for Russia to take countermeasures to reduce the negative impact of the transformation of the Baltic Sea into the 'NATO lake', leaves enough room for flexibility and involves, on the one hand, purely military response, on the other hand, necessary adjustments of our country's political priorities in the region. First, reinforcing both the land and sea groups of the Russian Armed Forces on the north-western border becomes inevitable, corresponding to the dimension of threat emerging for our country. This will entail the deployment of ballistic missile systems, and air defence forces, as well as creating opportunities for launching strikes with high-precision weapons on the territories of new NATO members. Second, it is necessary, as long as the Russia — West tension continues on the current level, to rethink more thoroughly the political and economic priorities of the Russian Federation in relations with those states of this region that adhere to Russia-hostile attitudes (including a revision of established logistics schemes), linking these relations with a 'contribution' they make to the build-up of mutual tension. Actually, this process was started by the EU and the US by escalating sanctions pressure on Russia. Third, even with the current Russian-Western deadlock and brinksmanship, it is necessary to explore options for resuming cooperation and defending Russian interests in the region for the future, as sooner or later, the confronting parties come to awareness that new institutional mechanisms are required to replace the discredited post-bipolar Western-centric system of the European security architecture.

The actual consequences of the latest geopolitical changes in the Baltic region will largely depend on the outcome of the military operation in Ukraine, and at least a partial easing of the overall political and war tensions between Russia and the West.

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