

## Finland: back to the NATO debate

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In Finland, the debate on the country's potential NATO membership has been snowballing for several weeks. It stems from Russia's increasing military pressure on Ukraine and its demands for a revision of the European security architecture (published in mid-December). The New Year's speeches of President Sauli Niinistö and Prime Minister Sanna Marin were important components of the discussion. Both leaders emphasised that Finland has the right to apply for NATO membership. The Kremlin's appetite for guarantees that there will be no further NATO enlargement eastwards are of particular concern in Finland where this would mean the collapse of the country's long-standing security policy line, thus seriously constraining its international room for manoeuvre. Retaining the option of joining NATO is part of Finland's security policy aimed at deterring Russia. With it, Finland is signalling that aggressive actions by the Russian Federation could lead to the country's accession to NATO.

Finland remains outside NATO, but cooperates closely with it on political and military levels. This cooperation intensified after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Finland has participated in NATO's crisis management operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan, contributes to the NATO Response Force (NRF), and takes part in NATO exercises. It has also implemented an agreement on Air Situation Data Exchange and signed a Host Nation Support agreement, opening political and military-technological opportunities for NATO forces to use Finland's territory.

### Commentary

- So far, there have been no groundbreaking declarations by the government of Finland on NATO membership that would deviate from the existing security policy line. Nor has there been any change in the positions of the political parties. However, the intensity of the debate itself seems unprecedented, with more and more experts and politicians from different parties joining the discussion and the media becoming increasingly interested. There is much to indicate that this is only the beginning of a broader discussion which – should the military aggression against Ukraine escalate and Russia continue to blackmail NATO – will not fade away as it did after the annexation of Crimea. Supporters of membership stress the importance of Article 5 and allied deterrence. The opponents argue that joining NATO would weaken Finland's security, putting it on the frontline of the confrontation with Russia and leading to a deterioration of bilateral relations with Moscow. There are also voices marked by a Cold War mindset – calling for restraint in the debate (the lack of open debate on national security in the name of maintaining good relations with the USSR was one of the features of Finlandisation).

- Nevertheless, there is no hint that Finland will apply for NATO membership in the near future. Politicians and public opinion remain gridlocked. The former are mostly reluctant to speak out directly in favour of accession, fearing a negative reaction from the electorate. On the other hand, the majority of the society is against joining NATO because politicians do not raise the issue publicly. Given Finns' trust in government and public institutions, it could be assumed that an unequivocal 'yes' from the president and prime minister to NATO membership would result in a significant increase in the number of supporters of accession. However, one obstacle to this is that in Finland the president plays the role of the guardian of good relations and dialogue with Russia, while the current prime minister represents the Social Democrats, who are opposed to membership. In Finland's consensus-driven democracy, it is impossible to imagine joining NATO without the blessing of the largest centre-left parties, Social Democracy and Centre (40 and 31 out of 200 seats respectively). At present, the most heated exchange of arguments on this issue is taking place in the Greens (20 seats). The party is officially opposed to NATO accession, but proponents of a different approach are increasingly visible among its members. The centre-right National Coalition Party (in opposition, 38 seats) and the Swedish People's Party (in government, 10 seats), which represents the Swedish-speaking minority, call for Finland to seek NATO membership. It is hard to predict what the impact of a possible direct Russian assault on Ukraine would be on the opinion polls regarding NATO. Currently, only 24% of Finns support membership while 51% are against it and 24% remain undecided. In recent years, the share of those saying "no" to NATO has fallen, while the number of those with no opinion has risen. It is possible that, in the event of a Russian offensive in Ukraine, the groups for and against NATO would "entrench" themselves in their positions and there would be no noteworthy flow between them.
- A revision of the positions of the political parties and an increase in Finnish public support for NATO would likely follow a potential Swedish decision to pursue NATO membership. In this scenario Finland would fear isolation in the 'buffer' zone between NATO and Russia. However, Sweden is divided on the issue of accession. In Stockholm, as in Helsinki, a cross-party consensus is needed for joining NATO. The government of Sweden – made up of Social Democrats and Greens – is opposed to membership. It is therefore unlikely that Finland would decide to join NATO without Sweden. For Helsinki it is vital to coordinate Finland's positions with Sweden on this issue.
- From a military point of view, there are no impediments to Finland joining NATO. The Finnish Armed Forces are implementing allied standards. They are characterised by a high level of interoperability with NATO countries. In recent years, Finland has enhanced military cooperation with several NATO members, mainly the US, Norway, the UK and France. The requirement to allocate at least 2% of GDP on defence would not be an obstacle either. In connection with the purchase of 64 F-35 aircraft, the Finnish defence budget increased significantly last year from 1.34% of GDP (€3.2 bn) to 1.85% of GDP (€4.6 bn). The plan for 2022 envisages 1.96% of GDP (€5.1 bn). If internal and external circumstances were to change notably, and Finland were to apply for NATO membership, it might combine it with adopting self-imposed national restrictions regarding allied military presence (along the lines of Norway's Cold War arrangements). From NATO's perspective, the accession of Finland – located between the Arctic and the Baltic Sea –

would strengthen the security of the north-eastern flank, including the defence of the Baltic states and northern Norway, as well as the monitoring of Russian forces on the Kola Peninsula.