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FINNISH AND SWEDISH NATO MEMBERSHIP - A PATH TOWARDS MORE REGIONAL SECURITY OR INSTABILITY?

Resume

With the ascension of both Finland and Sweden to NATO, the Scandinavian and Baltic regions are facing the restructuring of the security architecture that can lead either toward more regional security or instability. This research aims to identify potential points of conflict between NATO and Russia that can develop after Finland and Sweden joined NATO, and to give an assessment of the possibility of military escalation between Russia and NATO. This is achieved by employing content analysis during the research of the reports, strategies, and doctrines, as well as with employment of the case-study method, which was used when analyzing specific examples of the interaction between the Nordic countries, NATO, and Russia in the Scandinavian and Baltic regions. With three potential regional conflict points between NATO and Russia identified, which are the Baltic Sea/Kaliningrad, the Russo-Finnish border, and the Arctic region, it can be concluded that Finnish and Swedish NATO membership applications, as well as their ascension to NATO, are a cause for the increase of the conflict potential in the region. which can lead towards NATO-Russia military escalation and probable employment of nuclear weapons.

Keywords: Finland, Sweden, NATO, Russia, NORDEFCO, Kaliningrad, Baltic Sea, Arctic, A2/AD

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INTRODUCTION

The escalation of the Ukrainian Crisis at the beginning of 2022 effectively became a proxy war between Washington and Moscow as of the first half of 2024, with NATO countries providing significant material and military support to Kiev. These developments also signalled the end of European security architecture as it existed in the first two decades of the XXI century. In Europe, there are only a few remaining military-neutral countries that are not yet part of NATO, such as for example Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldavia, Ireland, Austria, and Switzerland, among others, and until recently – Finland and Sweden. Both Finland and Sweden were considered long-time military-neutral countries, with Finland usually acting as a bridge between Moscow and the Western world. However, since the start of the Ukrainian Crisis in 2014, in the society and political elites of both countries, once again the question of NATO membership was raised, but no significant steps were made towards it until the beginning of 2022. With Finland becoming a NATO member in April 2023, and Sweden in March 2024, the whole of Scandinavia is now effectively under the Washington-led military alliance. While the political leadership of both Finland and Sweden is in favor of such development as they perceive that it increases the national security of their own respective countries, Moscow sees this as a move forced by Washington to utilize the resources of Nordic countries against Russia's security interests in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic region.

The aim of this research is to identify potential points of conflict between NATO and Russia that can develop after Finland and Sweden became both part of NATO members and to give an assessment of the possibility of military escalation between Russia and NATO. With the ascension of Finland and Sweden to NATO, the threshold for the military conflict between NATO and Russia has decreased, and it is important to understand the consequences of further militarization of Northern Europe from all involved parties, as they can lead toward the most dangerous scenario imaginable – nuclear escalation and employment of tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield. The methodology used in this research consists of content analysis, which was used in the research of documents such as reports, strategies, and military doctrines, and the case-study method, or the study of precedents and examples, which was used as a research method when analyzing specific examples

of the interaction between the Nordic countries, NATO, and Russia in the Scandinavian and Baltic Sea regions.

FINLAND AND SWEDEN – FROM NORDEFCO TO NATO MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Until the emergence of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, the possible ascension to NATO was present in the internal discourse in Finland and Sweden, although it was not ranked so high in the political and security agenda of both countries. However, during the last decades, both Helsinki and Stockholm worked towards closer cooperation and integration into NATO structures (Danilov 2022, 31). This was achieved mainly through their participation in the Nordic Defense Cooperation (NORDEFCO), along with Iceland, Denmark, and Norway. Established in 2009, NOR-DEFCO was the result of a merger of three parallel initiatives, which were the Nordic Armaments Cooperation (NORDAC), the Nordic Coordinated Arrangement for Military Peace Support (NORDCAPS), and the Nordic Auxiliary Defense Structures (NORDSUP) (Dahl 2014, 4-5). Until 2014, NORDEFCO was mainly based on the economic cooperation between the Nordic countries. However, after the beginning of the Ukrainian Crisis, the focus shifted toward security and closer cooperation with NATO, with NORDEFCO countries participating jointly in various NATO-led military exercises (Møller, 2019, 2). For example, the goals that NORDEFCO set for its "Vision for 2025" include strengthening operative cooperation, total defense, military security of supply, Nordic defense industry cooperation, and Nordic cooperation in the European Defence Fund, along with the highest possible integration within NATO's military and logistic structure (NORDEFCO 2022). This increased cooperation of neutral Finland and Sweden with NATO via Partnership for Peace programs and NORDEFCO corresponded with the emerging NATO Arctic policy, which aimed at containing the rising ambitions of Russia in the region (Danilov 2022, 31).

The period after the start of the Ukrainian Crisis was marked by increased defense cooperation both within the NORDEFCO and between Finland/Sweden and NATO. In 2015, during the Swedish chairmanship of NORDEFCO, steps were approved which aimed to ensure the highest possible levels of defense cooperation, in response to "Russia's aggressive actions" (Danilov 2022, 32). The rising levels of cooperation between Finland/Sweden and NATO were confirmed also in 2014 during

the NATO Summit in Wales, which saw both countries becoming Enhanced Opportunities Partners (EOP). The EOP status for Finland and Sweden meant that they were connected to the system of regular political consultations on security issues, including the participation of both countries in the NATO Foreign and Defense ministers' meetings, while also participating in military and operational planning activities of NATO, coupled with the in-depth and rapid intelligence exchange. In effect, both Finland and Sweden were actively integrating into NATO, while maintaining the *façade* of neutral countries and retaining sovereignty over the national militaries (Danilov 2022, 32).

During the last decade, the prevailing public sentiment in both Finland and Sweden was against NATO membership in both countries. For example, in Finland from 2014 to 2021, public opinion shifted from around 60% of those citizens who were against Finnish NATO membership, to around 50% in 2021 (Kanniainen 2022). In Sweden, 47% of the citizens were against NATO membership in 2014 (as opposed to 33% of those in favor), and by the end of 2021, 35% of the population was against Swedish NATO membership, with 37% supporting it (Statista 2023). These sentiments, however, shifted strongly in favor of NATO membership in both countries with the military escalation of the Ukrainian Crisis in early 2022, and by May 2022, 76% of the Finnish citizens were in favor of their country's NATO membership, and in case of Sweden, 58% of citizens supported country's NATO membership (Kanniainen 2022).

The high support for NATO among the Finnish and Swedish populations was used by the political elites of both countries to evade the referendum on this question, limiting it to the discussions in their respective parliaments instead. For example, in April 2022, Finnish President Sauli Niinisto stated there wouldn't be a need for a referendum on joining NATO if the vote on this question received supermajority support in the Eduskunta¹ (RT 2022). At the same time, then-Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson stated that "a referendum was a bad idea", and that she did not think that it was a question that was suitable for the referendum, thus limiting Sweden's NATO membership debate only to the Riksdag² (Reuters 2022).

Before the voting on the application for NATO membership in May 2022, both countries released a report that analyzed the changing

¹ National parliament of Finland.

National parliament of Sweden.

security environment in the region. Finland released a report in April 2022, titled "Government report on changes in the security environment", in which the analysis was given of the consequences of Finnish NATO membership. The report identified Russia as a main threat to Finland, while it warned that Russian "hybrid warfare" activities may be used against both Finland and Sweden during the period of their NATO membership application (FG 2022a, 28). Already in the following month, a new report was published by the Finnish government titled "Report on Finland's Accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization 15 May 2022" in which it stated that Finland will be part of NATO's collective defense with security guarantees under Article 5, while Finnish NATO membership would also strengthen stability and security in the Baltic Sea region and Northern Europe (FG 2022b, 3).

In Sweden, similar reports were commissioned by the government, and in May 2022, a report titled "Deterioration of the security environment – implications for Sweden" was published. In it, it was stated that Sweden needs to strengthen its defenses and that NATO membership would provide security guarantees under NATO's Article 5, which may prove as a deterrent for Russia, in case of any hostile intentions towards Sweden (MFAS 2022, 31). The report further states that if Sweden and Finland were both members of NATO, all Nordic and Baltic countries would be covered by security guarantees, and that in the hypothetical case of open war between NATO and Russia, Sweden would be either way involved in that conflict – whether if it's a full-fledged alliance member or not. This report, in a similar fashion to Finnish ones, warned about potential Russian hostile activities against both Sweden and Finland during the period of both countries' ascension to NATO, and it clearly defined Russia as a main foreign threat to Sweden (MFAS 2022, 35–36).

Both countries submitted their applications for NATO membership in May 2022, after overwhelming votes in favor of membership in both Eduskunta and Riksdag. Even some major political parties, such as for example Sweden Democrats or the Finns Party who were in their previous election campaigns either against NATO membership or in favor of the mandatory referendum, gave their support during the voting in their respective parliaments (Gotkowska 2022). While initially, the membership approval of both countries was blocked by Turkey, and later on Hungary, Finland became the 31st member of NATO in April 2023 (Reuters 2023). In January 2024, Turkey's parliament approved Sweden's NATO membership bid, with Hungary's parliament following suit in

February, thus making Sweden officially the 32^{nd} member of NATO in March 2024 (CNN 2024).

In the following chapters, three possible scenarios will be presented. These scenarios constitute the three potential conflict zones between NATO and Russia that were identified based on the recent developments in the region of Northern Europe, including the NATO membership applications of Finland and Sweden in May 2022, followed by their ascension to NATO in 2023 and 2024 respectively.

CONTESTED A2/AD ZONE OVER BALTIC SEA / KALININGRAD

One of the most sensitive issues in the Baltic region is the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad and Kaliningrad District (Калининградская область), and its lack of land communication with Russia proper. Moscow has access to Kaliningrad Oblast via the so-called Suwalki corridor (or Suwalki Gap), which separates the Kaliningrad Oblast from Belarus via a strip of land between Poland and Lithuania, and it is considered a strategic route that can allow or deny access to the Russian enclave (Deni 2022). The Russian military capabilities in the Kaliningrad Oblast significantly increased during the last decade, with the modernization and expansion of land, sea, and air forces that are garrisoned there. Some analysts believe that this Russian military expansion and reorganization will ensure that the forces located within Kaliningrad Oblast will be capable of conducting and maintaining offensive ground operations in the theatre and that they will also maintain pressure on NATO assets deployed in the region (Muzyka 2021, 8). However, from the Russian perspective, such military force expansion may be deemed necessary. as it can serve as a deterrent against any potential NATO military adventurism that can be directed against Kaliningrad Oblast, whether it takes the shape of a full-fledged invasion, or in a shape of land-and-sea blockade of Kaliningrad (Zverev 2021).

However, in order for any such hypothetical land-and-sea blockade of Kaliningrad to be introduced by NATO forces, the airspace above Kaliningrad Oblast and the Baltic Sea needs to be fully controlled by NATO. And in the hypothetical scenario in which Russia decides to establish the land corridor to Kaliningrad via the Baltic states (thus engaging directly with NATO forces in the area), Moscow also needs to establish control over the airspace of the Baltic region. Such hypothetical scenarios were

analyzed by RAND Corporation, which published a report in 2017 titled "What Role Can Land-Based, Multi-Domain Anti-Access/Area Denial Forces Play in Deterring or Defeating Aggression?". In it, the important component of each presented scenario is Anti-access/Area-denial Exclusion Zone (or A2/AD for short). The report stated that if Russia challenges NATO's A2/AD in the Baltic region, Russian forces are capable of defeating the NATO forces that are garrisoned in the region in 60 hours or less. Thus, Russia's A2/AD capabilities in the Baltic region allow Moscow's naval and air forces to conduct attacks and amphibious operations "in the rear areas of Estonia and Latvia, capture Gotland and other strategic islands, and block the sea communication from Stockholm to NATO forces in Riga and Tallinn" (Bonds et al. 2017, 92).

In such a hypothetical scenario that envisions the clash of Russia's and NATO forces in the Baltic region, one small island plays almost a crucial role – the Swedish island of Gotland. Given its strategic position which is almost a central one between Sweden and Latvia, and close to Poland, Kaliningrad, Lithuania, Estonia, and Finland, Gotland was re-militarized by Sweden in 2016, and it is considered an important part of Swedish A2/AD capabilities against Russia. It is also considered to be a point of pressure towards Kaliningrad, and the potential first target for a hypothetical Russian naval/airborne invasion against Swedish A2/AD capabilities – which will lead towards the enhancement of Russia's own A2/AD capabilities against NATO in the region once the island is under Russian military control (Bonds et al., 92). Since 2017, massive annual NATO exercises codenamed "Aurora" included the defense of Gotland Island as one of the hypothetical scenarios. This was also the case with the latest "Aurora 2023" exercise that lasted from April to May 2023, in which more than 26.000 NATO and Swedish personnel participated in scenarios revolving around the attack and defense of Gotland island, as well as other strategic positions on the Swedish territory (NATO 2023).

These kinds of hypothetical scenarios show two important things – Sweden was considered to be a NATO member in almost everything but in name, as the Swedish military is closely integrated with NATO military forces, and the defense and control of the Swedish territory (mainly Gotland island) are considered to be a crucial part of NATO's A2/AD capabilities in the Baltic region. Thus, Sweden's NATO membership is only finalizing the process that started years ago, while it is also enabling a legal mechanism for the potential establishment of NATO military bases on Gotland – including the presence of the navy, air,

and land forces of the United States. It can be also argued that with the Finnish and Swedish NATO membership, the Baltic Sea became almost fully *Mare Nostrum* for NATO (or "NATO lake"), barring the two areas around Kaliningrad and Saint Petersburg. Due to the fact that vital sea lines of communication run through the region, control of sea and air space would be a vital military priority for all sides in the potential confrontation (Swistek and Paul 2023). After the Swedish ascension to NATO, the alliance's presence in the area will be significantly enhanced, and it will provide an additional security dilemma for Russia, which will certainly feel more pressure deriving from the potential blockade or invasion of Kaliningrad Oblast. This will, in turn, provoke additional military build-up of Russian forces in the region, and increase the tensions which can lead towards the military escalation and employment of nuclear weapons from the side of Moscow, as per Article 27 of Russian Defense doctrine (SCR 2014).

Some Russian experts also believe that there is a likely potential for an armed confrontation between the Russian and NATO forces in the Baltics, but mostly as a part of the wider, global conflict. From the perspective of Moscow, the main concerns regarding the Baltic Sea region are related to the deployment of the missile defense platforms in Poland by the United States, as well as the potential ability of Washington to deploy short and medium-range missiles in the vicinity of the Russian border (Khudoley 2023, 13-14). However, Russian experts also believe that NATO is also highly concerned about Russian A2/AD capabilities in Kaliningrad Oblast. Thus, they are of the opinion that there is a possibility that NATO forces, in order to suppress Russian A2/AD in Kaliningrad, may use cruise missiles such as AGM-158 JASSM, anti-ship and land-attack missile NSM, multi-purpose fighters of the fifth generation F-35A Lightning II, as well as self-propelled multiple rocket launchers systems such as M270 MLRS, HIMARS along with the military special forces of the region's NATO members against the Russian weapon systems, anti-air/anti-ship missile batteries and command, communication, and logistic hubs (Zverev 2021). And while in recent years, there were several publications in the Western countries made by military and civilian experts who argued for a preventive strike against the perceived build-up of Russian "invasion forces" in Kaliningrad Oblast, there is hope among the Russian military and political elite that the NATO members are fully aware of Russia's nuclear weapon capabilities, which are seen as the best deterrent against any such military adventurism from the side of NATO (Zverev 2021).

That such kind of scenario is not only a hypothetical possibility but perhaps reality, can be seen in the example of the economic blockade of Kaliningrad in 2022. In April 2022, in light of the escalation of the military conflict in Ukraine, Kiev requested Poland and Baltic states to completely close the borders with Russia, effectively placing Kaliningrad under land blockade, which was seen by Moscow as a hostile move from the side of countries that were members of the NATO. According to Russian experts, Moscow was prepared to respond militarily to the potential blockade of Kaliningrad (Volkova 2022). The situation escalated in June 2022, when Lithuanian Railways stopped transit deliveries to the Kaliningrad Oblast, as well as the export from it of a large list of goods that fall under the EU sanctions that were introduced against Russia in February 2022, which prompted Moscow to issue warnings that the "practical force" will be used instead of "diplomatic force", if the transit is not resumed (RBC 2022). By the end of August of the same year, the situation partially deescalated, as some transit was allowed by Lithuania, but the tensions remained high in the region (TASS 2022a).

MILITARIZATION OF THE RUSSO-FINNISH BORDER

With the ascension of Finland to NATO, the Russo-Finnish border effectively became a NATO-Russian border, placing strategically important cities of Saint Petersburg and Murmansk close to the territory of the military alliance hostile towards Russia. Before 2014 and even sometime after it, Finland and Russia worked in close proximity on various cross-border cooperation (CBC) programs, which were aimed at the economic development of the border regions, as well as environmental cooperation, smoother cross-border traffic flows, and cooperation in education, culture, and research (MFAF 2023). Thus, the border between Finland and Russia was demilitarized and considered to be a zone of mutual economic cooperation and development (Sebentsov 2020).

Starting with the Finnish NATO membership application, and with the newly introduced EU sanctions against Russia, this kind of joint venture ended, and the State treaty on cross-border cooperation between Finland and Russia was suspended (MEAEF 2022). And while at the beginning of 2022, Moscow issued warnings to Helsinki that if Finland continues forward with the NATO membership bid there will be an adequate response from the Russian side, there weren't any significant developments in the border region, such as for example, rapid

accumulation of either Finnish or Russian military personnel or equipment (YLE 2022). Nevertheless, in September 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that "if (US) military bases are deployed on the territory of these countries...we will make a decision to strengthen our capabilities in the north-west of the Russian Federation. In any case, the line of contact with NATO will radically increase" (Izvestia 2022).

However, as of 2023, there were new developments in this area, which demonstrated the increasing tensions between Finland, now a fully-fledged NATO member, and Russia. As of April 2023, Finland has started to fortify its border with Russia with barbed wire, infrared cameras, sensors, and increased border patrols, with the whole process of fortification expected to be completed by 2026 (VOA 2023). However, the major escalation of Finno-Russian tensions occurred in the following month when the Finnish government entered into negotiations with the United States over the question of deployment of their military forces and construction of their military installations on Finnish grounds. This was presented to the public as a "mutual agreement on cooperation in defense" by the Finnish government, with conformation that this agreement would allow US troops to stay in Finland, station military equipment and materials, as well as invest in infrastructure from the funds the US Congress provides the Pentagon (BNN 2023). However, in June 2023, the Finnish government stated that there were no negotiations regarding the deployment of US nuclear weapons on the territory of Finland (Helsinki Times 2023).

Naturally, this caused an alarm in Moscow, with the Russian Defense Ministry stating that the appropriate measures will be taken, such as the creation of a new army corps that will be garrisoned along the border, along with the saturation of the border zone with air defense systems and strengthening of military infrastructure in the region (Bainazarov 2023). The creation of the new army corps that will be stationed in Karelia was already announced by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu at the beginning of 2023, and by preliminary data, it would include three motorized-rifle divisions and two airborne-assault divisions (Kommersant 2023). Moscow is also highly concerned with Helsinki's order of 64 F-35 Lightning II multirole combat aircraft from the United States, due to be fully delivered by 2030, and which are capable of carrying nuclear weapons (TASS 2022b).

One more issue led to the recent increase of tensions between Russia and Finland, which was the question of the potential Finnish remilitarization of Åland islands. Åland islands were demilitarized areas since 1856 (after the Crimean War), while the islands were granted autonomy by Finland in 1921. In April 2023, a debate in the Finnish public occurred regarding the militarization of the Åland islands, which means establishing a de facto NATO presence on the strategically positioned islands between Sweden, Finland proper, and Estonia, with Finnish politicians and military experts giving arguments both for and against such action (Vaalisto 2023). And while the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a restrained message regarding such unilateral moves from the side of Helsinki, some Russian experts believe that the islands will be militarized either way, especially after Sweden joins NATO too, with the Åland island being used as a sort of anti-aircraft/anti/ship bastion that will be able to control air and sea routes from Saint Petersburg to Kaliningrad (Karpov and Medvedeva 2023).

ARCTIC REGION

The last significant point of confrontation between Nordic NATO members and Russia can be identified as the Arctic region, which includes the High North, as well as the strategic Northern Sea Route (NSR). In its foreign policy, Norway distinguishes between the Extreme Arctic, which refers to the North Pole and uninhabited areas in the so-called High Arctic, and the much more habitable parts of Northern Norway and Svalbard, which are considered as the "High North" (Nordområdene). Norway gained sovereignty over the Svalbard archipelago in accordance with the Svalbard Treaty (signed in 1920 in Paris and entered into force in 1925), and in 1977 the country created a Fish Protection Zone (FPZ) for the conservation and management of marine living resources (Østhagen and Raspotnik 2017, 104-105).

The Northern Sea Route was opened to the international community in 1991, and it was expected that by 2024, more than 80 million tons of cargo would be shipped through it. It is also expected that climate changes will especially affect the Arctic Ocean in the future, which will create additional opportunities for Arctic trade routes and especially underline the importance of the NSR (Karamperidis and Nikolaos 2022). Geographically, NSR includes the Russian-controlled Eurasian Coastline, as well as the entire Norwegian shoreline, and it is considered a

strategic route between the ports in Northwest Europe and Asia (Karamperidis and Nikolaos 2022).

The Artic Institute, a Washington-based think-tank, published an analysis in January 2023, in which it argued for expanded NATO presence in the High North, mostly due to Russia's almost complete control of the NSR, which in their view would hand Moscow "an economic and diplomatic lever with which to extend their regional influence" (Karamperidis and Nikolaos 2022). The report acknowledges that besides the shipping and transportation routes, the most lucrative economic opportunity lies in the extraction of hydrocarbon and mineral resources from the Arctic, and that "critical for the geopolitical balance of the region", the majority of these resources are located in Russia's Siberian territory, while the total value of mineral resources in Russia's North "22.4 trillion US-Dollars" (Karamperidis and Nikolaos 2022).

The report further stated that NATO has directed increasing attention to the North Pole via military exercises and that the membership of both Finland and Sweden in NATO will "only bolster the resources NATO has to dedicate to the Arctic issue" (Karamperidis and Nikolaos 2022). Besides Russia, the report identified China as another regional competitor as Beijing strives to "advance its maritime power and economic influence through the founding of a Polar Silk Road", a move which can help in decoupling China's economic power from the US control of "important geopolitical chokepoints of global shipping like the Straits of Malacca and Gibraltar" (Karamperidis and Nikolaos 2022). Thus, the NSR under Russian control can help Beijing in asserting its maritime independence and accelerate China's rise as a "great maritime power", while the report underlines that the continuing Sino-Russian cooperation on economic and strategic factors "is a serious reason for NATO to redouble its efforts and attention" in the Arctic region (Mottola 2023).

That the Arctic region is becoming more of a focus for Washington is visible from the United States security strategy which was published in 2021, titled "Regaining Arctic dominance: the U.S. Army in the Arctic", In it, it is stated that "the United States is an Arctic nation. As such, the Arctic security environment contributes directly to homeland defense and is of vital importance to our national interests" (USA 2021, 1). In the report, it is further stated that "the Arctic has the potential to become a contested space where the United States' great power rivals, Russia and China, seek to use military and economic power to gain and maintain access to the region at the expense of US interests.

U.S. National Security Strategy highlights the Arctic as a corridor for expanded strategic great power competition between two regions – the Indo-Pacific and Europe" (USA 2021, 15). And in August 2022, NA-TO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that "NATO has a clear interest in preserving security, stability, and co-operation in the High North. The Arctic is the gateway to the North Atlantic, hosting vital trade, transport, and communication links between North America and Europe...Finland and Sweden's (NATO) membership will significantly enhance our posture in the High North and our ability to reinforce our Baltic Allies" (NATO 2022).

Some Russian experts see the membership of Finland and Sweden in NATO as a strengthening of Washington's own position within NATO, with the Arctic highly likely becoming one of the key areas of both military and economic confrontation between major powers in the near future (Narmaniya 2022). The reason for this is seen in the global problems with logistics, and the more accessible shipping routes in the Arctic which are occurring due to the rapid climate changes. Russian experts also note that with the growing importance of the NSR, non-Arctic Asian countries such as India and China are also interested in its development, while Russia at the same time sees this route as historically belonging to it, and with the West insisting on the withdrawal of NSR from national jurisdiction. Thus, with the growing mutual claims on the Arctic area and the resources attached to it, the chances of confrontation between the United States and Russia are growing – especially due to the ability of the United States to rely on the military and economic resources of its regional allies such as Canada and Nordic countries (Narmaniya 2022).

Moscow was concerned with what was understood as NATO pressure towards the non-aligned states of the region, i.e., Finland and Sweden, while the full membership of both countries in this US-led military alliance is seen by Moscow as a short-sighted policy that will destabilize the region (Vinokurov 2022). There is also a view among some of the Russian experts that the new NATO priority is the struggle for resources on a global scale, with the Arctic being an important source of them, and that it is the reason for increased NATO military presence in the region – to which Russia must naturally respond (Vinokurov 2022). This view is also shared by Russian military officials, with the addition that there is now an increased risk of military confrontation in the Arctic region between NATO and Russia since there is a possibility that the

United States will use Finnish and Swedish soil in order to base their own military assets in the region, including navy and aviation (Sokirko 2022). And that the tensions are continuing to increase in the region can be seen in Moscow's suspension of annual payments to the Arctic Council in February 2024, with the spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova, stating that Russia may completely withdraw from the Arctic Council if it evolves into "an unfriendly institution" (RIA 2024).

CONCLUSION

As of the first half of 2024, there are no signs of de-escalation of the Ukrainian Crisis, but rather there is a prospect of further escalation of it – which can lead to an open military confrontation between NATO and Russia. Firstly, the NATO membership applications of Finland and Sweden in May 2022, and later the ascension of Finland to NATO in April 2023 and Sweden later on in March 2024 marked the end of the old North European security architecture. The lines are now clearly drawn between the US-led military alliance on the one side, and Russia on the other. This research aimed to identify three potential points of conflict between NATO and Russia after both Finland and Sweden became part of NATO. Based on the cases that were analyzed in the previous chapters, we can conclude that there are three possible points with high chances of confrontation between NATO and Russia, divided into the short-term, medium-term, and long-term periods. We can divide them as follows:

1. The possible point of NATO-Russia military confrontation within the short-term time period – this refers to the Kaliningrad Oblast and Baltic Sea region. It can be said that out of the three analyzed points, this one has the highest chance for military confrontation in the near future based on several factors, such as: the influx of military hardware and personnel in the region from the side of Russia, NATO, and NATO's newest member – Sweden; the militarization of the Swedish Gotland island and conduction of massive yearly NATO military exercises in the region; lack of land communication between Kaliningrad and Russia proper and turning of the Baltic Sea effectively into the "NATO Sea" (thus increasing the potential for blockade); the already introduced economic blockade against Kaliningrad in 2022 which almost lead to a military response from the side of Moscow, and significant presence

of literature and reports that are advocating for the suppression of Russian A2/AD capabilities in the Baltic Region. All of this can lead us to the conclusion that with both Finnish and Swedish NATO membership, Moscow will seek to increase its own defensive and offensive military capabilities in the region which can lead to further degradation of mutual trust and communication, thus lowering the threshold for the application of military force from all parties involved. Here it should be noted that the main danger comes not so much from the conventional armed conflict between the NATO forces and Russia, but from the use of tactical nuclear weapons from the side of Moscow, if its territory is threatened by any kind of military adventurism from the side of NATO members, such as Poland, Baltic States, and Nordic countries.

- 2. The possible point of NATO-Russia military confrontation within the medium-term time period – this refers to the militarization of the Russo-Finnish border, with both sides increasing their defensive capacities in the once peaceful region. While Finland announced the fortification of its 1340 km-long border with Russia, Moscow at the same time announced the formation of new military formations in the border region, along with the increased presence of the anti-aircraft systems. However, in 2023, Helsinki announced that it is willing to allow US-military presence on its territory, while at the same time, it will purchase F-35 fighter jets that are capable of carrying nuclear missiles. This can only lead to an increase in regional tensions, as there will be a high-security risk for Moscow to have American military bases, troops, and hardware so close to the strategic cities of Murmansk and Saint Petersburg. With the increased presence of both now NATO troops on Finnish soil and the Russian military on the other side, there is always a chance for the development of a hybrid-warfare environment, including cross-border recon and raids in order to mark or neutralize new military installations of strategic value, which can only lead to increased chances of military escalation. However, compared to the Kaliningrad scenario in which already there was a real chance of military escalation, the militarization of the Russo-Finnish border is a process that only started recently, with American troops not yet permanently present on the Finnish soil as of the first half of 2024.
- 3. The possible point of NATO-Russia military confrontation within the long-term time period this refers to the Arctic and the gradual militarization of the region. In the coming decades, and mainly due to climate change, the accessibility and importance of the Northern Sea

Route will only grow, along with the accessibility to the vast resource deposits in this region. The Arctic is already a contested zone between major powers, such as the United States, Russia, and China, with Nordic countries playing a significant support role in advancing the ambitions of Washington in the area. At the same time, Moscow has its own economic and security interests, and it is willing to invest significant resources in achieving them. Finnish and Swedish NATO membership now means increased resources that NATO can deploy in the Arctic region in order to counter the Russian and emerging Chinese presence. This in turn will lead to increased military deployment on the Russian side. which is a move that always increases the chances for military clashes that can later on expand into open warfare. And although some experts believe that the Arctic is the battleground of the future between NATO and Russia, for now, there have been no significant cases of military confrontation between those two sides, but rather just gradual military build-up. That is why we can presume that compared to the cases of Kaliningrad, which is a possible point of NATO-Russia military confrontation within the short-term time period, and the Russo-Finnish border, which has the potential for escalation towards the military clashes in the medium-term time period, the Arctic can be considered sort of a "long game" of positioning, threats, warnings, and military build-up, which has potential for military escalation in the coming decades, rather than in the coming months or years.

By taking all three scenarios into account, it can be concluded that firstly, Finnish and Swedish NATO membership applications, and later on, Finnish and Swedish ascension to NATO, are a cause for the increase of the conflict potential in the region, rather than having a deterring effect for any kind of future military conflict between NATO and Russia. While both countries were officially neutral, they could still maintain normal relations with Moscow while at the same time integrating into the NATO structure. Now, after both Finland and Sweden became NATO members, it is expected from Moscow to adopt its stance towards Helsinki and Stockholm accordingly, as this US-led military alliance is de facto waging a proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. Thus, in case of any open military confrontation between NATO and Russia, there is a chance that weapons of mass destruction can be used against future NATO installations on Finnish and Swedish soil. And while perhaps the logic behind the application for NATO membership from the side of Helsinki and Stockholm was that in the short run, it solves their

national security issues by coming under the military and nuclear umbrella of the United States, in the long run, this will only create more mistrust, uncertainty, and conflict potential between Nordic countries and Russia, and therefore, by nature, significantly increase conflict potential between NATO and Russia which can lead towards the worst case scenario – employment of tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield.

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ФИНСКО И ШВЕДСКО ЧЛАНСТВО У НАТО-У – ПУТ КА ВЕЋОЈ РЕГИОНАЛНОЈ БЕЗБЕДНОСТИ ИЛИ НЕСТАБИЛНОСТИ?

Сажетак

Ескалација украјинске кризе почетком 2022. године изазвала је

значајну промену у европској безбедносној архитектури, а истовремено је означила и јасну поделу између такозваног "колективног Запада" и Русије. Оно што је постао "посреднички рат" између Вашингтона, као лидера НАТО војног савеза, и Москве на територији Украјине, имало је за последицу велике геополитичке промене и у северним регионима Европе, попут Скандинавије. Земље које су раније сматране за војно неутралне, попут Финске и Шведске, све више су почеле да усклађују своју спољну и безбедносну политику са интересима Вашингтона, што је довело до њиховог отвореног захтева за приступање НАТО-у у мају 2022. године. Међутим, било би погрешно претпоставити да то није био очекиван потез са њихове стране, с обзиром да су се и Финска и Шведска скоро у потпуности интегрисале у НАТО војну и логистичку структуру, почевши од њиховог чланства у "Нордефку" (NORDEFCO) па до учешћа у регионалним војним вежбама НАТО-а. То је све водило ка томе да и Финска и Шведска постану чланице НАТО-а релативно брзо после подношења заједничког захтева за чланство маја 2022. године – Финска је постала 31. чланица НАТО-а у априлу 2023. године, док је Шведска постала 32. чланица НАТО-а у марту 2024. године. Циљ овог истраживања је да се идентификују потенцијалне тачке сукоба између НАТО-а и Русије које се могу развити након што су Финска и Шведска примљене у НАТО, као и да изврши процену могућности војне ескалације између Русије и НАТО-а. Ово ће се постићи применом анализе садржаја током истраживања извештаја, стратегија и доктрина, као и применом студије случаја, која

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је коришћена приликом анализе конкретних примера интеракције нордијских земаља, НАТО-а и Русије у Скандинавском и Балтичком региону. Са уласком Финске и Шведске у НАТО, потенцијал за отворени војни сукоб између НАТО и Русије се повећао. Самим тим, потребно је разумети последице даље милитаризације Северне Европе, како од стране земаља чланица НАТО-а, тако и од стране Русије, јер такав развој догађаја може довести до остварења најопаснијег сценарија који се може замислити, а то је нуклеарна ескалација и употреба тактичког нуклеарног оружја на бојном пољу. Ово истраживање је идентификовало три тачке могуће будуће конфронтације између НАТО-а и Русије — чији се потенцијал увећава са чланством Финске и Шведске у НАТО-у. Идентификоване тачке су Калињинградска област и регион Балтичког мора, руско-финска граница и арктички регион.

Калињинградска област и регион Балтичког мора већ су доживеле пораст тензија између Русије и земаља чланица НАТО-а, попут Пољске и балтичких држава. То се посебно видело током економске блокаде Калињинграда 2022. године, која је скоро довела до руске војне интервенције пре него што је спор донекле мирно решен. Међутим, шведске војне активности у региону, почевши од милитаризације острва Готланд и њеног учешћа у масовним годишњим војним вежбама под вођством НАТО-а, као што је то на пример "Аурора", само воде ка већем неповерењу и порасту тензија између нордијских земаља и Москве.

Руско-финска граница, демилитаризована од краја Хладног рата, сада се активно утврђује од стране Хелсинкија, уз недавну најаву да ће Финска дозволити да трупе и базе Сједињених Држава буду стациониране у земљи. То је заузврат навело Москву да најави формирање нових корпуса војске који ће бити стациониран дуж границе, уз истовремено постављање значајног броја противваздушних система у региону.

У арктичком региону, већ дуже време постоји геостратешко ривалство између САД-а и њихових савезника попут нордијских земаља са једне стране, и Русије, али и Кине са друге стране. Вашингтон може да рачуна на јединствени безбедносни простор са Финском и Шведском као чланицама НАТО-а, као и на коришћење значајних војних и логистичких ресурса које ове земље поседују приликом ограничавања арктичких амбиција како Русије, тако и Кине. То све води ка повећању тензија у овом региону, и могућој будућој војној ескалацији

ради контроле над Северним морским путем и арктичким ресурсима који постају доступни захваљујући климатским променама. Узимајући све горе наведено у обзир, може се закључити да су пре свега захтеви Финске и Шведске за чланство у НАТО-у, а затим и приступање ове две земље војном савезу предвођеним Сједињеним Америчким Државама, узрок увећања конфликтног потенцијала у региону, што само по себи може довести до војне ескалације између НАТО-а и Русије, а тиме и до могуће употребе тактичког нуклеарног оружја.

Кључне речи: Финска, Шведска, НАТО, Русија, NORDEFCO, Калињинград, Балтичко море, Арктик, A2/AD

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