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How allied Sweden & Finland can secure Northern Europe

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Introduction

NATO is approaching its ninth round of enlargement. The accession of Sweden and Finland—two solid democracies and defenders of the international-rules based order—into the Alliance will strengthen the core of the transatlantic community. Their NATO membership opens up new opportunities to bolster regional deterrence and defense in Northern Europe, increase transatlantic burden sharing, and secure the Alliance as a whole in ways not previously possible.

This issue brief sets the stage by suggesting that the Alliance use the accession of Sweden and Finland to create an ambitious deterrence-by-denial “bubble” over Northern Europe. Such a strategy does not merely include military capabilities but must be underpinned by civil robustness and resilience that stretch across NATO territory. Operationally, allies in Northern Europe should prepare to assume greater responsibility as first responders in case of a severe security situation, below or at the level of Article 5. For this to succeed, political cooperation and agenda setting must intensify among Northern European allies.

In 2014, Northern Europe became a region of high tension at the forefront of global geopolitical competition, as a consequence of Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and its war in eastern Ukraine. In parallel, China started engaging in the region in search of both economic and political leverage, not least in the Arctic. In the June 2019 Atlantic Council issue brief *Securing Northern Europe: Toward a Comprehensive Approach*, we argued against the tendency to address the Baltic Sea, the North Atlantic, and the Arctic as separate regions, and instead proposed to view them as “one militarily and politically strategic area.”¹ This perspective has increasingly become mainstream, as illustrated in the military assessment that the Swedish Armed Forces submitted to the government in November 2022. The 2019 issue brief explored the reasons behind such a proposition and advocated that Northern European states should develop a comprehensive approach that would help them simultaneously counter a revisionist Russia and the risks associated with decreased US engagement in Europe. Northern Europe, in this approach, encompasses Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, and the United Kingdom (UK). With Sweden and Finland joining NATO, the prospects for successful political and military regional integration in line with this comprehensive approach have increased substantially.

This report first sets the broader scene by describing how NATO is adapting to a world marked by great-power competition. It assesses the shifting nature of US engagement toward European allies. It then proceeds to describe how the accession of Sweden and Finland into NATO can serve as an opportunity for the Alliance to strengthen security structures, building on the perspective of Northern Europe as one geostrategic area, politically and militarily. Finally, the

issue brief summarizes policy recommendations for actors who wish to promote peace and security in the region and beyond, using NATO as the main vehicle. Proposals are made along three dimensions.

- **Militarily, NATO should bolster its capabilities and aim to build an ambitious deterrence-by-denial bubble for Northern Europe, thereby securing and stabilizing an area at the forefront of global power competition. Such a bubble would also contribute to greater burden sharing in the Alliance, as it would primarily rely on regional resources.**
- **NATO allies must underpin the deterrence-by-denial bubble with individual and joint measures to strengthen robustness and resilience across allied territory, using a comprehensive approach. Further cooperation between NATO and the European union (EU) is key in this regard.**
- **Politically, more efforts must be made toward joint agenda setting and initiatives among Northern European allies, in order to succeed with the military ambitions and ensure the sustainability of NATO's 360-degree approach.**

What kind of NATO will Sweden and Finland join?

Sweden and Finland were invited to join NATO at the Madrid Summit on June 29, 2022. They will enter an Alliance in transition, from handling a world marked by cooperation to navigating a security environment characterized by confrontation. In response, NATO will significantly strengthen its deterrence and defense postures in Europe, especially along its Eastern flank. In addition, NATO will need to deal with China for the first time in its history. This, in turn, has implications for burden sharing and the long-term engagement of the United States, raising the bar for European allies to sustain US interest for a strong transatlantic community.

Despite military setbacks in Ukraine, Russia has proven both willingness and capacity to engage in a full-scale regional war. That is why it poses the “most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area” for the foreseeable future.² To reduce the risk of being drawn into the war, NATO is seeking to even the playing field by bolstering its military posture. Only from a position of strength can Europe’s security architecture be rebuilt.

In the short term, NATO has already boosted its deterrence in response to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. NATO’s eastern flank has received nearly a tenfold increase in troops; multinational battlegroups have doubled from four to eight and grown to brigade size; NATO aims to create a pool of eight hundred thousand troops, of which three hundred thousand would be high-readiness; and the United States will establish a permanent army headquarters in Poland.³

In the longer term, as described in the new strategic concept, NATO will strive toward a deterrence-by-denial posture in order to “deny any potential adversary any possible opportunities for aggression.”⁴ To this end, NATO has introduced a

new force model, which will resource the coming generation of military plans. The plans will be more regional in scope, connecting forces to designated countries and tasks. Exercises will be developed to prepare for high-intensity and multi-domain operations, and to ensure reinforcement accordingly. Division-level structures will be established for the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) on the eastern flank. The strategic concept calls for forward defense with an in-place, multidomain (air, sea, land, cyber, and space), combat-ready force with prepositioned equipment and enhanced command-and-control structures. Allies should be able to provide rapid reinforcement on short, or no, notice. For Northern Europe, with Sweden and Finland as new allies, this approach will open up unprecedented possibilities for defense and operational planning, which should be matched by ambitious defense and resilience investments.

Alongside Russia, China is emerging as a major challenge to the Alliance, but in a different manner. The first instance in which NATO officially addressed China was the 2019 London Declaration, which recognized China's influence and international presence as both an opportunity and a challenge.⁵ The June 2021 Summit in Brussels spoke in more stringent terms, calling China a “destabilizing force and systemic challenge, whose actions threaten the rules-based international order.”⁶ The 2022 strategic concept is specific in China's strategy to use “economic leverage to create strategic dependencies” and increase its influence to “subvert the rules-based international order.”⁷ Both NATO and the United States now frame China as a multidomain challenge, employing a broad range of political, economic, and military tools to undermine allies' interests, security, and values. Washington has been the primary driver for NATO to deal with the geopolitical challenges and confrontation between the West and China, and NATO's rhetoric on China has increasingly matched that of the United States. Thus, China's inclusion in the NATO Strategic Concept for the first time is a policy victory for the United States.

NATO avoids overstretch by limiting itself to addressing Chinese threats as they relate to Euro-Atlantic security. NATO defense planning does not include the Indo-Pacific, neither when it comes to capabilities nor to operations (at least not yet, some NATO officials would add). Indo-Pacific issues will instead be addressed by NATO through intensified dialogue and cooperation with partners in the region. For now, NATO's return to its core mission of European deterrence and defense is clear—a return to which the United States is fully committed, at least in the near term.

The shifting US engagement in Europe

A fundamental part of the 2022 US National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy (NDS) policy is to work closer with allies. Recognizing the decreasing US power relative to other rising global actors, Washington understands it can no longer determine the conditions of world politics alone. In the decade that will set the “terms of geopolitical competition between the major powers” and “contest for the future of our world” between democracies vs autocracies, the United States seeks to invest in its allies, while setting high expectations for them in competing against adversaries.⁸

The emphasis on working with allies brings NATO back to the core for the United States, but in a different way than before. European allies must engage alongside the United States in world affairs. The NSS states that the United States' agenda with European allies is transatlantic in its foundation, but global in ambition. This means engaging European allies on a broad spectrum of policy areas, from trade and investment to combatting corruption and climate change. This

engagement, which rests on shared democratic values, aims to take place across several multilateral formats. NATO is one of them.

The United States is, therefore, investing in the transatlantic link, while “count[ing] on our Allies to continue assuming greater responsibility.”⁹ From the US perspective, Russia poses an immediate threat to the international system, but only China has the means and intent to reshape the international order. The United States, thus, makes clear that it is “prioritizing the [China] challenge in the Indo-Pacific, then the Russia challenge in Europe,” as Russia is viewed as a waning power over the medium to long term.¹⁰

Implications for Northern Europe

Russia’s size, power, and geographic proximity to the Baltic and Nordic states mean that it can never be dismissed as a dominant, and potentially aggressive, actor in the region. To prevent conflict from spilling over into wider Europe, regional deterrence is necessary and serves to secure the whole transatlantic area.

The power asymmetry between Russia and Northern European states has created a dependency on the United States as the guarantor of regional security, based not only on its extended deterrence. The United States is expected to lead and respond quickly with conventional forces in a crisis. NATO commitments tie the United States to the region. Hence, it never completely leaves it, but it does not fully focus on it either, as the NSS and the NDS make clear. Its attention is dependent on the severity and urgency of any threat toward its allies. While the United States is focused on Russia in the short term, diminishing US engagement in Europe over the long term carries significant consequences for security in the region.

As emphasized in the 2019 issue brief, the US pivot to Asia has implications for Northern Europe, which heavily relies on the transatlantic link for its security. Smaller European states may find themselves in a situation where the United States is “either politically unwilling to come to its assistance, or militarily unable to do so due to strained capabilities.”¹¹ In the event of a crisis or war in the region, European allies would then need to be first responders on both a national and collective level. As the United States is focusing on the China challenge, the case for a robust deterrence-by-denial structure for Northern Europe becomes even stronger, serving to avoid a situation in which European allies would have to fight in a contested environment against a major nuclear adversary without the presence of the United States.

Create a deterrence-by-denial bubble over Northern Europe

For Northern Europe, a key issue is the Russian ability to implement anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) zones in Kaliningrad and the Arctic through a combination of air- and maritime-defense systems, attack aircraft, midrange mobile missile systems, anti-submarine warfare capabilities, new classes of submarines equipped with long-range land-attack missiles, and cyber- and electronic-warfare capabilities.¹² In 2015, NATO acknowledged the challenge, and the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) at the time, General Philip Breedlove, referred to the zones as “bubbles.” Sydney Freedberg, “Russians in Syria Building A2/AD ‘Bubble’ Over Region: Breedlove,”¹³ The Russian aim would be to limit freedom of movement in peacetime, reduce situational awareness and strategic anticipation in crisis, and prevent

deployment of NATO troops and hinder reinforcements in times of conflict. The A2/AD zone in Kaliningrad affects NATO operations in the Baltic Sea and reinforcements to the Baltic states.¹⁴ The A2/AD zone also affects Sweden and Finland. Russia would have an advantage in the early deployment of air-defense systems on the islands of Gotland or Åland, strengthening its capacity to deny NATO access to airspace over the Baltic Sea. In the Arctic, Russia has reestablished its multilayer “bastion of defense.”¹⁵ A crucial staging point for Russian operations in the North Atlantic is the Kola peninsula, which hosts a significant portion of Russian second-strike capability. In crisis or wartime, Russia would likely want to expand its strategic buffer zone around its military assets, such as its nuclear Northern Fleet, pushing into or hindering mobility on Swedish and Finnish territory on the Cap of the North.

Some analysts have questioned the Russian ability to create impenetrable bubbles.¹⁶ Regardless, NATO has been too passive, not taking sufficient advantage of its strengths to assure capacity to operate within its own territory. So far, NATO’s response has been to increase presence in peacetime in the air and the waters affected, and to invest in capabilities that could “break the bubble” in case shooting started. This needs to change, as the aim expressed in the strategic concept is to “deny any potential adversary any possible opportunities for aggression.”¹⁷ NATO should reflect on the fact that Russia uses its A2/AD strategy as part of its comprehensive approach to deterrence. If NATO could do the same, a new form of strategic balance could be established, which would serve to stabilize and prevent military conflict from breaking out.

With Sweden and Finland as allies, NATO can establish a robust deterrence-by-denial posture in a once contested and fragmented region, enhancing the security of all allies. The opportunities must effectively be capitalized upon. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the defeats its army has experienced have exposed its weakness. Russia’s preoccupation with the war should be used as an opportunity for NATO to build stronger and more efficient deterrence, stabilizing and paving the way for a more secure environment ahead. With a future position of strength, a new era of détente could be possible in a post-war context.

The current security situation provides opportunities to connect the dots and fill the gaps to shape a solid deterrence-by-denial bubble for Northern Europe. Key components for such a structure include

- air and missile defense;
- airspace dominance;
- subwater dominance;
- intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); and
- readiness through operations and exercises.

1. Air and missile defense

A crucial step for NATO is to build a solid air and missile structure for the whole region. For the Baltic states, their lack of air defense has long been a recognized major military shortfall. At the Madrid Summit, the defense ministers of Estonia

and Latvia signed a letter of intent for joint procurement of medium-range anti-aircraft systems. The Baltic states, Norway, Finland, the UK, and eight other allies have joined the 2022 German “European Sky Shield Initiative,” which aims to strengthen European short-, medium-, and long-range air-defense capabilities through coordinated and joint procurement.¹⁸ Possible components of the project are: German IRIS-T short-range defense, the US Patriot medium-range system, and the Israeli-US Arrow-3 long-range ballistic-missile-defense system. The aim is to be interoperable and, thus, strengthen NATO’s Integrated Air and Missile Defense.

As Finland joined the initiative, its representatives emphasized the NATO integration dimension, stating that “there will not be parallel systems.”¹⁹ For Sweden, joining the initiative should only be a matter of time, as Sweden already operates IRIS and the US Patriot system, alongside Germany. Poland is in the process of deploying the Patriot system as well, which creates opportunities for medium-range missile coverage across the Baltic Sea. The Swedish Armed Forces have recommended taking immediate steps to develop a common and integrated air- and missile-defense system (IAMD) with NATO allies. If it does so, air-defense coverage along NATO’s northeastern flank will be significantly enhanced.

2. Airspace dominance

The airspace over the Scandinavian peninsula is a strategic asset that brings essential advantages to the party that controls it in case of a conflict in the region. Both Sweden and Finland possess strong air forces of fourth- and fifth generation fighters—Sweden with its own produced JAS Gripen system and Finland soon introducing F-35s, as do Norway and Denmark. In all, with Sweden and Finland in NATO, the Nordic countries would have approximately two hundred and ten state-of-the-art combat aircraft, which are a powerful tool to prevent and respond to hostile actions—if the jet fighters are able to quickly operate together and across national territories. For the broader region, the UK, Poland, and Germany also operate F-35s, altogether shaping an agile, potent, and interoperable Northern European presence in the sky.

Sweden and Finland have already intensified cooperation with NATO allied nations in the air domain. Under the Cross Border Training framework, established by Norway, Sweden, and Finland in 2009, with Denmark joining in 2021, the Nordic Air Forces jointly fly training missions on a near-weekly basis.²⁰ Cross Border Training evolved to establish the Arctic Challenge Exercise in 2013, one of Europe’s largest live air-power exercises, held every two years.²¹ Participating nations in the exercises include Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, and the United States, with support from the NATO Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS).

Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland should shape a joint Nordic air force of combat aircraft that can operate seamlessly across national territories in the Nordics. Norway’s top air chief has proposed the establishment of a Nordic Air Operations Center when Sweden and Finland join the Alliance.²² Such an operations center would provide for using the force in a holistic, joint manner. However, it is important that such a force is not developed merely as a tool to protect the Nordics, but is an asset for the whole of Northern Europe as well as the Alliance in its 360-degree approach to security. In addition, such a center needs to be integrated into NATO’s command-and-control structure in a manner that does not

create a limited “NATO within NATO” in the North, but makes operations possible across the Baltic Sea, Arctic, and North Atlantic.

The deterrence value of a Nordic air force further increases if the aircraft carry long-range weaponry. While Norway and Finland can provide such capabilities, Sweden lacks credible long-range offensive capabilities.²³ Finland’s F-35s and approved use of US AGM-158 JASSM air-to-surface missiles, which form a core part of its long-range strike capabilities, will substantially contribute to the region’s deterrence posture.²⁴ Thus, Sweden should prioritize such acquisition for the JAS Gripen, in line with the Swedish Armed Forces’ latest set of recommendations.

3. Subwater dominance

With Sweden and Finland in the Alliance, the Baltic Sea will resemble a “NATO lake,” with Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg as exceptions. Sweden has the longest coastline in the Baltic Sea, and its widespread archipelago provides a special operational environment, as do the shallow brown waters of the Baltic Sea. Among the Northern European states, the UK, Norway, Poland, and Germany operate submarines, but mainly with a focus on blue-water operations in the North Atlantic.

As Russian submarine presence in the Baltic Sea has increased in recent years and become a hotspot for sabotage, NATO has doubled its maritime presence.²⁵ As modern submarines serve as movable ISR systems, Sweden’s accession to NATO opens up new possibilities to safeguard the Baltic Sea and allied territory. Sweden’s soon-to-be expanded submarine fleet with two modern Saab A26 can contribute.²⁶

Sweden, with tailormade capabilities for the Baltic Sea, should take a leading role in establishing a NATO Submarine and Seabed Monitoring Mission to safeguard the subwaters in the Baltics by monitoring Russian underwater activities. Sweden could be joined by submarines from Germany, Poland, and the UK in this endeavor. The territorial waters off the Baltic states’ coasts, where the maritime conditions provide a suitable environment for Russian covert underwater operations, should be a priority.

4. Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance

NATO’s joint intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (JISR) is critical for providing “decision-makers and action-takers with a better situational awareness of the conditions on the ground, in the air, at sea, in space and in the cyber domain.”²⁷ As the line between peace and war has become increasingly blurry through Russian malign activity—including propaganda, disinformation, cyberattacks, border disruption, energy subversion, and airspace violation—the ability to have the upper hand in ISR can make all the difference for successful deterrence and defense. This is further underlined in the region by Russia’s geographic proximity and demonstrated proficiency at snap exercises, which mean that NATO cannot afford a delay in response.

NATO’s owned and operated platforms are mainly the Alliance Ground Surveillance (AGS) and AWACS, which provide situational awareness for the air domain. These capabilities are significantly reinforced by national systems provided by allies. The newly procured P-8s operated by the UK and Norway to increase surveillance over the Northern parts of allied

territory are one important contribution. Sweden and Finland will bring extensive ISR capabilities both to the Baltic Sea and the vast area of the Arctic: in space, in the air, on the ground, and at sea. Sweden will also provide subwater ISR. This will substantially increase the Alliance situational awareness in Northern Europe. It is essential that these capabilities are interoperable with the JISR structure, in order to contribute to multiple surveillance and reconnaissance activities.

In some areas, Sweden and Finland have started to cooperate more closely on ISR, using NATO standards as the common baseline.²⁸ In the maritime domain, Swedish and Finnish navies have worked together closely within the Swedish-Finnish Naval Task Group (SFNTG), Sea Surveillance Cooperation Finland and Sweden (SUCFIS), and Swedish-Finnish Amphibious Task Unit (SFATU).²⁹ These joint units were established to improve maritime situational awareness and deepen cooperation between amphibious forces in the Baltic Sea. Such existing information structures can contribute to NATO's situational awareness in the region. There is also successful shared Nordic air surveillance during peacetime through Nordic Cooperation for Air Surveillance Information Exchange (NORECAS), which should be connected to the JISR system as well.

Identified capability gaps in the Baltic region include airborne ISR and unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs), which would augment the Alliance's anti-submarine warfare capabilities. Swedish and Finnish accession to NATO could provide an opportunity to work jointly to address these gaps, preferably through joint procurement.

In addition, Sweden and Finland will bring valid perspectives and expertise on the Russian threat, which is a constant intelligence focus for both countries. As with the Baltic states, Sweden and Finland possess unique insights and understanding of the threat, based on geographical closeness and frequent engagement with Russian malign activity. Intelligence analysts within the NATO structure are another identified gap that should be addressed as Sweden and Finland join the Alliance, as they can contribute with such competence.³⁰

5. Readiness through operations and exercises

NATO has several ongoing operations in the region: air policing, which is guarding the airspace over Iceland and the Baltic states; eFP in the Baltic states and Poland; and NATO's standing naval forces (SNF), which frequently patrol the waters in the North Atlantic and the Baltic Sea. The operations play a central part of deterrence, as the troop presence signals readiness to deter, commitment to defend, and solidarity within the Alliance as participating forces comes from all parts of NATO, not only from the region. They also serve as instrument to maintain and develop interoperability.

Sweden and Finland have both indicated their readiness to contribute to air policing, the standing maritime forces, and eFP. They should conduct air policing over both the Baltic states and Iceland, as well as in other parts of the Alliance, if required.

Since the regional context is growing in NATO, with its new force model connecting forces to designated countries and tasks, it is plausible that Sweden contributes troops to the Baltic states on a permanent rotational basis. These should be solid contributions, preferably up to battalion size in peacetime, with preparedness up to brigade size in case the division

level is activated. That means that Sweden would need to substantially increase its ambitions for the development of its army.

As a response to Russia's war in Ukraine, NATO has expanded eFP, with multilateral battle groups to Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia. Sweden and Finland should contribute to eFPs outside of the region from time to time—for instance, in Romania—to illustrate commitment to Alliance solidarity, and further strengthen interoperability and understanding of threat assessments in accordance with the 360-degree approach.

The following initiatives would serve to further solidify the deterrence-by-denial bubble.

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- Finland, with its 1,340-kilometer border with Russia, the longest in NATO, should initiate having an eFP on its territory. Doing so would

be consistent with other NATO members bordering Russia, creating a coherent eFP structure along the eastern flank. Since summer 2022, there have been eFPs in Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, in addition to the existing ones in the Baltic states and Poland. An eFP in Finland would clearly signal that Finland has shifted its defense posture from national to collective defense, including the ultimate guarantee of US extended deterrence. Russia would be left with the strategic dilemma to climb the escalation ladder in Finland, as opposed to NATO weighing responses post factum.

- Sweden's geography calls for a different contribution to NATO's deterrence posture. The Swedish Armed Forces recommend that Sweden establish itself as a basing area for allied ground, air, and naval forces. That would include preposition of material, and infrastructure for transport, basing, command and control, and protection. Doing so would allow the Baltic states to quickly be reinforced during crisis or war.
- NATO should establish a submarine and seabed monitoring mission, led by Sweden, to safeguard the subwaters in the Baltics.

NATO already has an intense and advanced exercise pattern throughout the region, in which Sweden and Finland as close partners already participate frequently. As they shift from partners to allies, further exercise opportunities open up not least in the Arctic—an area that requires increased NATO presence due to rising tensions, as Secretary Jens Stoltenberg has emphasized. NATO should focus more on the Arctic by indulging in advanced cold-weather exercises hosted by Arctic allies, and encourage Sweden and Finland to provide High-North expertise to the Alliance.

Another key area for strengthened deterrence and defense is to exercise the political decision-making process as Sweden and Finland enter the Alliance, with a particular focus on JISR. There is always a delicate balancing act between operational security and transparency in order to create political consensus. For deterrence to work, prompt and efficient response to any crisis will be crucial. This is a daunting challenge within NATO, and Sweden and Finland quickly need to adapt and learn a new strategic culture.

Strengthen robustness and resilience across the region

NATO allies must underpin the deterrence-by-denial bubble by individual and joint measures to strengthen robustness and resilience across allied territory through a comprehensive approach. Further NATO-EU cooperation is key in this regard.

The importance of national and Alliance-wide resilience is underlined by NATO in the new strategic concept, against the backdrop of hybrid threats, emerging technologies, and cross-border challenges such as pandemics and climate change.

Sweden and Finland have a strong track record in the field, given their total-defense structures that involves all citizens in

case of a major crisis or war. However, the comprehensive approach must not be limited by national borders, but serve to strengthen regional resilience and robustness. As Sweden and Finland join NATO, the expanded scope of allied territory in Northern Europe both creates vulnerabilities and opens up opportunities in north-south and east-west dimensions. Key areas that support deterrence by denial are critical infrastructure, logistic flows, and military mobility, where the EU membership of Sweden and Finland could pave the way for further investments by joint funding.

In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU Strategic Compass calls to enhance the military-mobility resilience of both the EU and NATO.³¹ Already, the EU is accelerating investments in the Action Plan on Military Mobility, as well as making new commitments to harmonize cross-border procedures.³² The European Commission has also announced additional and adapted grants that support civilian-military dual-use mobility.³³ Between 2021 and 2027, 1.69 billion euros of a 25.8-billion-euro Connecting Europe Facility for Transport (CEF) budget is earmarked for military-mobility projects.³⁴ In the 2021 call for proposals, Finland was awarded funding for electrifying a railway link to Sweden and preparing a rail junction for military use.³⁵ Sweden—along with Finland, Norway, Germany, the United States, Canada, the Baltic states, and, most recently, the UK—is already part of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) military-mobility project, which aims to enable the unhindered movement of military personnel and equipment within the EU.

Whereas NATO's access to reinforcing the High-North and Baltics was previously restricted to a thin sliver of northern Norway and the Suwalki Gap, Swedish motorways, railways, and airports provide substantial access to receive reinforcements and act as staging areas during times of crisis and war. Troops placed in Germany, for example, have substantially improved mobility in reinforcing the region, with the ability to transport via Denmark and the Öresund Bridge and use Sweden as a staging area to reinforce the Baltic states. Sweden also provides both Norway and Finland with strategic depth when conducting military operations.

The port of Gothenburg, the Nordic region's largest port, provides Sweden, Norway, and Finland critical access to shipping lanes in the Atlantic Ocean. It is a central hub for supply chains and commodity flows not only to Sweden, but to Norway, Finland, and the Baltic states. If access to the Baltic Sea is closed in the narrow Danish Straits, Gothenburg and overland routes provide direct access to the entire Nordic region. Swedish infrastructure provides critical links between continental Europe and the High-North and Baltic states.

The Nordics should capitalize on the EU dual-use mobility investments and projects to enhance the region's infrastructural resilience and mobility. Opportunities to do so are only growing. In November 2022, the EU Commission put forth the Military Mobility Action Plan 2.0. The plan "addresses the need to further improve the capacity of transport infrastructure to handle the weight, size and scale of military movement," continues to streamline divergent national procedures, and "adds a new preparedness and resilience pillar."³⁶ The overall strategic approach is to "enable swift, efficient, and unimpeded movement of potentially large-scale forces" within EU and NATO frameworks.³⁷ The Mobility Action Plan seek not only to reinforce cooperation with NATO, but to promote connectivity and dialogue among regional partners.

The Baltic Sea connects Sweden not only to the three Baltic states, but to all of the Three Seas states (Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Croatia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary). The Three Seas Initiative aims to develop a north-south corridor along the EU's easternmost flank, connecting the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas through various infrastructure projects (ninety-one transport, energy, and digital projects in total).³⁸ Around 25 percent of project funding comes from the EU CEF budget, with another 25 percent coming from national budgets.³⁹ Sweden and Finland should join the initiative. Sweden and Finland's inclusion in the initiative would not only provide substantial additional funding, but would fully connect the Baltic to the Adriatic and Black Seas, making one, resilient geopolitical flank.

Intensify joint agenda setting and initiatives

Politically, more efforts must be made toward joint agenda setting and initiatives among Northern European allies, in order to succeed with the military ambitions and ensure the sustainability of NATO's 360-degree approach. The accession of Sweden and Finland into NATO opens up possibilities to strengthen political cooperation in three main constellations: the Nordic, the Nordic-Baltic, and the broader Northern European community. For each of these circles, there are existing forums of cooperation that can be used as platforms to develop a more forward-leaning and vocal posture: Nordic Defense Cooperation (NORDEFECO), the Nordic-Baltic 8 (NB8) and US Enhanced Partnership in Northern Europe (E-PINE), and the Northern Group.

1. A Nordic vision through NORDEFECO

In 2009, the five Nordic countries founded the Nordic Defense Cooperation in order to “strengthen the participating nations’ national defense, explore common synergies and facilitate efficient common solutions.”⁴⁰ Capabilities cooperation within NORDEFECO has been wide ranging, including coordinating joint training operations in NATO's 2018 Trident juncture and the Arctic Challenge cross-border exercises.⁴¹ Particularly successful have been improvements in land and air ISR. However, other ambitious proposals within NORDEFECO, such as joint procurement, have a track record of not translating into reality.

With Sweden and Finland's entry into NATO, remaining barriers to operational military planning, mutual information sharing, and joint forces will be removed. The Nordics can rely upon each other in all areas, including security of supply, access to territory to provide operational depth, and troop commitments in case of war—issues that have prevented deeper cooperation in the past.

NORDEFECO's most recent political guidance, Vision 2025, becomes all the more realizable. By 2025, NORDEFECO aims to have “minimal restrictions on movement and storage of military units and equipment”; established logistical cooperation where possible; “improved regional and common situational awareness in peace, crisis, and conflict” across domains; enhanced transatlantic relations through increased training, exercises, and cooperation with other European partners; strengthened dialogue with the Baltic states; and potential utilization of the European Defence Fund to develop Nordic total-defense capabilities.⁴²

The vision comes with a range of possibilities to pursue initiatives in the EU and NATO that would call attention to the region, and ensure that it benefits from common funding and resources. That could include PESCO projects aimed at military mobility and logistics, joint procurement within ISR, and innovation projects based on emerging technologies. Both Sweden and Finland have been keen to emphasize the importance of the Nordic dimension in preparing for NATO membership. However, the Nordics must pay attention to avoid being too introverted in their deepened cooperation, and risking abandonment within the Alliance. In order to anchor Nordic collaboration within a larger regional context and create win-win opportunities for other allies, dialogue between with NORDEFECO, the Baltic states, and Poland should intensify.

2. Across the Baltic Sea—Strengthening the Nordic-Baltic dimension

Politically in NATO, the Nordic-Baltic 8—which includes Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—can be adapted to play an agenda-setting role. Established in 2000, the format, with a rotating chair, has addressed a wide range of political issues. Civilian issues have taken precedence over security policy, but there is precedence for the Nordics raising the profile of Baltic defense projects. This includes the Baltic Battalion supported by Denmark, the Baltic Defense College supported by Sweden, and the Baltic Air Surveillance supported by Norway.⁴³ However, outside ad hoc bilateral initiatives, the Baltic states have been reluctant to develop defense policies with Sweden and Finland as non-NATO members. With all eight nations now in NATO, the NB8 should strive to speak with one voice in addressing the security needs of the region.

In the EU, six of eight Nordic-Baltic states now participate in the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) after Denmark's turnaround in spring 2022. The EU also provides a forum to put focus on the region, and the capabilities needed for its protection.

The NB8 group has direct access to the United States through the US Enhanced Partnership in Northern Europe.⁴⁴ The forum is guided by three principles: building on successful multilateral engagement; creating resilient societies through strengthening democratic institutions; and exporting success to neighbors. These principles guide E-PINE's approach to cooperative security within NATO and other multilateral forums like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

The E-PINE should be used to increase US awareness and understanding of security concerns in the region, and to initiate joint projects that can strengthen resilience as part of deterrence and defense. E-PINE could also serve as a common vehicle to generate close transatlantic cooperation on the reconstruction of Ukraine after the war. When launched in 1997, E-PINE had the foremost goal of integrating the Baltic states into the transatlantic community of democracies. These experiences could be revived and applied in post-war Ukraine. The US National Security Strategy specifically supports the economic recovery of Ukraine and integration into the European Union. The vibrant democracies within E-PINE can once again forge new neighborly connections to promote the democratic, economic, and security integration of Ukraine into the transatlantic community.

3. Northern Group—Merging a Northern European outlook

The Northern Group is the most concrete expression of a military-political forum in Northern Europe. Founded in November 2010 on a UK initiative, it consists of the five Nordic states, the Baltics, Germany, Poland, and the Netherlands.⁴⁵ The Northern Group was created to provide a new and broader framework to tighten regional partnerships, regardless of NATO and/or EU membership, by working together on issues of common interest. Meeting about twice a year at the defense-minister level, the Northern Group has served as an informal setting to discuss positions ahead of NATO summits, exchange information and align positions on the security situation in Northern Europe, and push for greater regional security cooperation.⁴⁶

The Northern Group is a format that can be further developed to make sure that NATO's strategic discussions include Northern European perspectives. For the smaller Nordic and Baltic states, the Northern Group serves to focus the attention of greater powers like the UK and Germany on Northern Europe. As Germany enters its *Zeitenwende*, making major defense investments and adapting its strategic culture, it is crucial that Germany also recognizes itself as a player in Northern Europe. Poland, situated by the Baltic Sea but traditionally focused eastward, is equally important to engage, as its role in Europe is increasing due to heavy investments in defense.

Summary of recommendations

This issue brief sets the stage by suggesting that the Alliance use the accession of Sweden and Finland to create an ambitious deterrence-by-denial bubble over Northern Europe. Such a strategy does not merely include military capabilities but must be underpinned by civil robustness and resilience that stretches across NATO territory. Operationally, allies in Northern Europe should prepare to assume greater responsibility as first responders in case of a severe security situation, below or at the level of Article 5. In order to be successful in this regard, political cooperation and agenda setting must intensify among Northern European allies.

1. Create a deterrence-by-denial bubble over Northern Europe

- With Sweden and Finland as allies, NATO can establish a robust deterrence-by-denial posture in a once contested and fragmented region, enhancing the security of all allies.
- Russia's preoccupation with the war in Ukraine should be used as an opportunity for NATO to build stronger and more efficient deterrence, stabilizing and paving the way for a more secure environment ahead.

a) Air and missile defense

- A crucial step for NATO is to build a solid air and missile structure for the whole region.

- Investing in the European Sky Shield Initiative—joined by Germany, the Baltic states, Norway, Finland, and the UK—is key for shaping such a structure.
- Sweden should urgently join the initiative and pave the way for a network approach to the Patriot system, also operated by Germany and Poland, which creates opportunities for solid medium-range missile coverage across the Baltic Sea.

b) Airspace dominance

- Create a joint Nordic Air Force of Swedish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Danish combat aircraft that can operate seamlessly across national territories in the Nordics.
- Increase the deterrence value of such a Nordic air force by adding long-range weaponry to the Swedish combat aircraft, similar to the capabilities of Norway and Finland.
- Establish a Nordic Air Operations Center when Sweden and Finland join the Alliance. Such an operations center would provide for using the force in a holistic, joint manner.
- Avoid creating a limited “NATO within NATO” in the Nordics by ensuring that the Nordic Air Force functions as an asset for the whole of Northern Europe, as well as the Alliance in its 360-degree approach to security.

c) Subwater dominance

- Sweden, with tailormade capabilities for the Baltic Sea, should take a leading role in establishing a NATO Submarine and Seabed Monitoring Mission to safeguard the subwaters in the Baltics.
- Sweden could be joined in this endeavor by submarines from Germany, Poland, and the UK.
- The territorial waters off the Baltic states’ coasts, where the maritime conditions provide a suitable environment for Russian covert underwater operations, should be a priority.

d) Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance

- Sweden and Finland will bring extensive ISR capabilities to both the Baltic Sea and the vast area of the Arctic: in space, in the air, on the

ground, and at sea. Sweden will also provide subwater ISR. These capabilities must urgently become interoperable with the JISR structure.

- Identified capability gaps in the Baltic region includes airborne ISR and unmanned underwater vehicles. Swedish and Finnish accession to NATO is an opportunity to address these gaps, preferably through joint procurement.
- Sweden and Finland should contribute with intelligence analysts specialized on Russia within the NATO structure.

e) Readiness through operations and exercises

- Finland should initiate an eFP on its territory, as all other allies closest to Russia have, creating a coherent eastern flank. Bringing a multilateral force to Finland would clearly indicate Alliance commitment to Article 5, and would send a strong deterrence signal to Russia.
- Sweden should contribute troops to the eFP in the Baltic states, and if established, in Finland, on a permanent rotational basis. These should be solid contributions, preferably up to battalion size in peacetime, with preparedness up to brigade size in case the division level is activated. That means that Sweden would need to substantially increase its ambitions for the development of its army.
- Sweden and Finland should, from time to time, contribute to eFPs outside of the region—for instance, in Romania—to illustrate commitment to Alliance solidarity in accordance with the 360-degree approach.
- Sweden should establish itself as a basing area for allied ground, air, and naval forces. Doing so would allow the Baltic states to be reinforced quickly during crisis or war.
- NATO should focus on the Arctic by indulging in advanced cold-weather exercises hosted by Arctic allies, and encourage Sweden and Finland to provide High-North expertise to the Alliance.
- NATO needs to exercise the political decision-making process as Sweden and Finland enter the Alliance, with a particular focus on joint ISR.

2. Strengthen robustness and resilience across the region

- NATO allies must underpin the deterrence-by-denial bubble by individual and joint measures to strengthen robustness and resilience across allied territory through a comprehensive approach. Further NATO-EU cooperation is key in this regard.
- Key areas that support deterrence by denial are critical infrastructure, logistic flows, and military mobility, in which case the EU membership of Sweden and Finland could pave the way for further investments by joint funding.
- The Nordics should capitalize on the EU dual-use mobility investments and projects to enhance the region's infrastructural resilience and mobility, with a priority on the port of Gothenburg.
- Sweden and Finland should join the Three Seas Initiative, to provide substantial additional funding and fully connect the Baltic to the Adriatic and Black Seas, making one, resilient geopolitical flank.

3. Intensify joint agenda setting and initiatives

Politically, more efforts must be made toward joint agenda setting and initiatives among Northern European allies, in order to succeed with the military ambitions and ensure the sustainability of NATO's 360-degree approach. The accession of Sweden and Finland into NATO opens up possibilities to strengthen political cooperation in three main constellations: the Nordic, the Nordic-Baltic, and the broader Northern European community.

- The Nordic countries can use NORDEFECO's political guidance Vision 2025 to pursue initiatives in the EU and NATO that would call attention to the region and ensure that it benefits from common funding and resources. That could include PESCO projects aimed at military mobility and logistics, joint procurement within ISR, and innovation projects based on emerging technologies.
- The Nordics must beware of being too introverted in their deepened cooperation and risking abandonment within the Alliance. In order to anchor Nordic collaboration within a larger regional context and create win-win opportunities for other allies, dialogue between with NORDEFECO, the Baltic states, and Poland should intensify.
- With all eight nations now in NATO, the NB8 should strive to speak

with one voice in addressing the security needs of the region.

- E-PINE should be used to increase US awareness and understanding of security concerns in the region, and to initiate joint projects that can strengthen resilience as part of deterrence and defense.
- E-PINE should serve as a common vehicle to generate close transatlantic cooperation on the reconstruction of Ukraine after the war.
- The Northern Group should serve as a forum for alignment on positions on the security situation in Northern Europe, and Russia's war in Ukraine, to ensure that NATO's strategic discussions include these perspectives.
- The Nordic and Baltic states should use the Northern Group to focus the UK, Germany, and Poland on their roles as security providers in Northern Europe, and to make sure that their investments in defense spending and capability development cover the Northern dimension.