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NATO'S NORDIC EXPANSION, A DECISION AT STAKE. CONSEQUENCES UPON THE EUROPEAN SECURITY LANDSCAPE

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Abstract: *The international security environment, particularly the European one, is at a significant turning point, leading to substantial, long-term structural changes. From this point of view, the perspective of Finland and Sweden joining NATO under unfavorable European security conditions has a critical impact on the strategic environment. Without any certainty at the time of writing this research, the analyzed extension is approached as a possibility with a high degree of fulfillment, given the approving elements displayed a month before the NATO Summit in Madrid, June 28-30, when a new strategic concept will be launched. The accession of the two Nordic states represents, from an unquestionable standpoint, a return to the specifics of the Cold War period, characterized by ideological and political clashes between the West and the East, between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. More specifically, we are witnessing a maneuver to contain Russia, with the Baltic Sea becoming a NATO Sea and looking at the launch of a new deterrence policy by expanding the European security zone under the power of collective defense. Although, de facto, Finland and Sweden could be assimilated into the circle of the allied states, given the military cooperation between them and the Alliance that has been going on for almost three decades, de jure membership gives weight to the adherence process, including by the political symbolism of Article 5.*

Keywords: expansion, collective defence, security landscape, neutrality

1. Introduction

An unwritten rule of geopolitical analysis is that by knowing the history and drawing a line on the map between two geographical points one might decode the present and deduce future movements. From such a prospect, the outbreak of war should not be interpreted as a surprise. However, regardless of the degree of astonishment felt by one state or another, the war in Ukraine is already listed as a turning point in history, given the consequences that have begun to be extremely visible upon the European security system functioning: higher military spending, states somehow forced to an express or suggested alignment with one side or the other, prejudice of the economic interests, questioning the spheres of influence issue, redrawing the geopolitical map of Europe. Subsequent to the latest idea is the desire of Finland and Sweden to join the North Atlantic Alliance.

NATO's Nordic expansion will definitely change the European security, just like the Ukrainian War. Unlike the latter, the end of which is difficult to define in terms of outcome and time but will undoubtedly lead to a change in the European balance of power, probably in the global structure of power, the first process is much more predictable. The consequences are intuitive and almost certainly go in one direction,

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and the predictability of the official and legal consecration of the moment is relatively high.

2. Research methodology

Given that this paper addresses an ongoing process, to decipher the research elements identified and considered relevant to the topic, the following methods were used:

- Direct observation of events and deduction.
- Analytical approach of concepts and determinations.
- Open source research such as public documents and news articles.

The core of the article is structured according to the four research questions:

- How elaborate is the decision of the two states to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization?
- Does the construction of a united Europe necessarily include the transatlantic military segment?
- What is meant by neutrality / non-alignment and what is the attitude towards the military segment?
- What are the geopolitical consequences of NATO's Nordic Expansion?

3. Findings and analyses

3.1. Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO: a last-minute decision or an elaborate plan awaiting for a trigger

The issue of the two states joining NATO was not strange for the domestic political debate in Helsinki and Stockholm, but at the same time was not seen as a pressing issue for the public. It means that it could be interpreted as an exercise of imagination and democratic discourse in a functioning national space, where the economic and social comfort achieved by the two Nordic states is much appreciated by other European peoples.

The invasion of Ukraine changed the situation, generating at the political establishment level, but among the population, the desire to anchor in a secure space that is more articulated and based on the obligation of solidarity. The 2017 Finnish Security Strategy, called "Security Strategy for Society" [1], grants great importance to the nation and each individual in part. The comprehensive security model applied by Helsinki considers individuals to be "increasingly important security actors" who precisely through this "security-oriented attitude" contribute to strengthening society's resilience. In its turn, Sweden's National Security Strategy [2] also links security to the individual, defining the first element of the relationship as being "ultimately dependent on each inhabitant's desire and ability to take responsibility for their own and [Swedish] society's safety and contingency."

The "special military operation" launched by the Kremlin in Ukraine short-circuited the state of comfort of the two Nordic peoples who have realized, according to surveys [3] that neutrality / non-alignment is no longer a safe path to ensure national security in the 21st century which no longer could be tailored according to the military templates of the 20th century.

On the other hand, given that the decision belongs to politics, NATO membership must be tackled from the national interest perspective, which is much more comprehensive than the public one. For the benefit of the analytical approach, the decision makers' reaction to the pre-invasion sequence of events must be investigated. The moment of February 24, 2022, is only the pinnacle of some Russian attitudes, statements and actions, two of them standing out in particular: the Annexation of Crimea, in 2014, and the War in Georgia, in 2008. These two significant events should have provided evidence that Moscow has launched a policy of revising its relations with its immediate neighborhood, based on a revengeful thinking typical for a former great power struggling to regain the formula of past glory and international domination.

In fact, Finland acknowledges in a document prepared in 2016 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which assesses the consequences of a possible accession to NATO [4] that "The war in Georgia in 2008 demonstrated Russia's willingness to engage in wars beyond its border."

The 2014 Crimean Crisis has led the two states to re-evaluate their defense capabilities and publicly re-launch the idea of joining NATO [5].

Summary. Both the Finnish and Sweden political leadership has periodically discussed the idea of joining the North Atlantic Alliance. With its inherent problems, the European security environment worsened after 2008 when the economic ones doubled the political and military aspects. But nothing has been so critical as to generate this very fast-paced tandem act of applying for NATO membership. This partnership was under consideration for some time, the following statement being justifiable in this regard: "However, even if a 'fast-track' accession process could be agreed upon by NATO members, it would run counter to the likely need to manage two membership processes in parallel in Finland and Sweden." [4]. Nonetheless, it is true that a search on the map quickly reveals the situation of promoting the two of them together and the need for a coordinated action regarding the submission of the admission application. Of the nine countries bordering the Baltic Sea, six are already NATO members (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, and Denmark). Logically, Finland and Sweden must join together, the ninth state being Russia.

It was therefore necessary to have a very strong trigger that on the one hand would be able to generate among the population of the two countries the desire to join NATO and support the political decision in this regard and on the other hand that would lead to consensus among allies, given the danger of the Russian threat to the European security. It is normal, after all, for such a decision that radically changes the foreign policy, albeit a rapid one, to be in fact the result of a long process of assessing and analyzing specific opportunities and challenges. Even if the transition from the non-aligned status to the candidate one happened quickly, there is no reason to consider that it happened in a hurry.

3.2. Finland and Sweden's belonging to a united Europe: a change of course – from economic to military

The idea of a united Europe is generous and utopian at the same time. It expresses an ideal of peaceful coexistence between nations built on different historical and cultural patterns and between which the territorial or religious divergences have not entirely disappeared. However, the subject of interest is the formal, institutional Europe, completed of states willing to achieve common interests through dialogue and negotiation without surrendering their sovereignty. At the continental level, there are two such significant associations of states that have their roots in the West, in the early years after World War II: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and (what we call today) the European Union – a politico-military organization and a multidimensional but predominantly economic supranational structure.

The end of the Cold War gave way to the free will of Central and Eastern Europe states, leading to a radical change in their foreign policy and a predominant Westward orientation. While the European Union has processed, in more than 30 years, four waves of enlargement summing 16 states, NATO has gone through five such stages, counting 14 states.

Regarding the membership of the two international organizations, the following assessments need to be done:

• The vast majority of the so-called "New Europe" (Central and Eastern Europe) states are part of both organizations. This is also valid for the Western countries of the continent.

• History has first recorded military integration (NATO) and then economic integration (EU). The exception was Germany, which, together with France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg, 1951, laid the foundation of the European Coal and Steel Community. It was not until 1955 that it became a member of NATO, being forced, according to the 1945 Yalta Conference, to go through a complete process of denazification and demilitarization [6].

• The first enlargement of the European Union after the end of the Cold War can be considered "the last one in Western style" given that it was achieved by including three states that political and economic looked like the Western European countries: the neutral / non-aligned states of Austria, Finland and Sweden.

Summary. Compared to previous experiences regarding the level of preparedness of the candidate states' armies and the degree of cooperation achieved between them and the Alliance, the current enlargement is expected to take less time. It depends on the will of each state to approve and ratify the accession, and on the speed these procedures are scheduled to happen. The desire for military integration of the two neutral / non-aligned states demonstrates the unique dynamics of the European security environment and the importance of awareness of the multidimensional security approach. Even without joining NATO, the two states enjoy security guarantees due to the defense clauses contained in the Lisbon Treaty. But the ally status is supposed to give citizens and governments a stronger feeling of security, with the impact of Article 5 being huge.

3.3. Adoption of a new international status by Finland and Sweden: the foundations of neutrality / non-alignment and the military potential of the two states

Neutrality and non-alignment are two concepts that partially overlap, making them often used interchangeably. Obviously, there are differences between the two concepts that, in the 21st century, not only seem to be fading, but the concepts themselves seem to become irrelevant. It can be thought that they correspond more to the specific reality of the 20th century and can even be classified as "relics of the past" [7]. At the European level, five states are most often taken into account when dealing with the issue of neutrality / non-alignment: Austria, Switzerland, Ireland, and, of course, the two countries that are at the center of this research, Finland and Sweden. But Malta, Cyprus, and Moldova should not be forgotten.

Understanding one or the other of these statuses, in particular through the effects generated in terms of international relations, necessarily requires conceptual clarification. So:

• Neutrality expresses “the situation of states that, in time of war, do not take part in the war, but continue to maintain peaceful relations with all states, including the belligerents” [8]. In this regard, the *Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance* [9], concluded in 1948 between Finland and the Soviet Union, enshrines Finland's commitment (although the provisions of the Treaty were mandatory for both parts) to remain outside the international conflicts between the great powers, to promote peace according to the principles of the United Nations, as well as to reject any form of military cooperation "directed against the other High Contracting Party"; a provision which in fact meant for Helsinki a blockade of relations with the West (given that the Cold War had already begun). This attitude of resignation, even if born not of ideological considerations but of the need to ensure the system's functioning, would generate in the specific language of international relations a new concept, that of “Finlandization”.

Neutrality is the result of a decision based on sovereignty and by which the state undertakes to promote in fact two attitudes: to refrain

from any act that could be considered as an intervention in the armed conflict by one or the other of the parties (term of neutrality comes from the Latin *ne uterus*, meaning neither, nor) and to show impartiality in foreign relations, including in terms of equal treatment of belligerents [10].

• Therefore, neutrality is a state's foreign policy attitude in time of war, which means that in time of peace, a state cannot join a military alliance "because in so doing it would destroy its ability to remain neutral in time of war" [11]. The attitude that remains to be adopted is that of non-alignment, a policy promoted by neutral European states in the context of the Cold War.

Non-participation in military blocs does not mean non-involvement in international politics, withdrawal in a passive attitude toward military-political issues that may pose concrete threats to the national security of the non-aligned state. Apart from this military non-alignment, history has been recorded, since the 50s and 60s of the last century, when the decolonization process was launched, a more complex political non-alignment attitude with economic, military, and strategic implications. This type of non-alignment even led to the formation of a movement (*Non-Alignment Movement*) that would give the Cold War a "relatively" bipolar structure. The emergence of this coagulation of states took place against the background of the polarization of capitalism and communism reflected institutionally in creating ideologically based and therefore somewhat rigid alliances.

Neutrality and non-alignment do not exclude the existence and development of the military component of the global social system in a state. An overall assessment of the military potential of Finland and Sweden [12] indicates that the accession of the two Nordic nations to NATO is not just a numerical increase of members and an expansion of the territory under the security umbrella of the collective defense, but mainly that the two countries will enter directly into the position of "security providers, nor consumers" given the military capabilities they have.

Summary. The developments taking place inside of the international security environment, especially the consequences generated by the radical changes of the international politics' track, call for a reassessment of the theoretical framework of the analysis. The dynamics of the international relations, the new determinations generated by an increasingly complex environment, the blurring line between domestic and foreign policy, the multitude of domains that impact security at national and international level, all of them could be triggers for theoretical and doctrinal improvements needed to clarify the major systemic changes and thus to better understand world politics. In this context, the reconfiguration of the conceptual meaning is very important, including in the case of neutrality and non-alignment. Although it is the sovereign right of each state to decide whether or not to participate in an international armed conflict, permanent neutrality as a foreign policy is no longer justified in the context of globalization, when threats are cross-border and multilateralism is increasingly emerging as a problem-solving attitude. Permanent neutrality "may have to be adjusted to changing circumstances in Europe and worldwide" [13].

If neutrality implies non-participation in international military conflicts, non-alignment refers to non-participation in military alliances. However, in the post-Cold War period, European states considered neutral / non-aligned participated in international military experiences initiated by military alliances. Concerning Finland and Sweden, they: are member states of the European Union, an organization that also develops a security and defense policy; have signed the Lisbon Treaty (EU, 2007) [14], which establishes through Article 42.7 a provision regarding

mutual defense, similar to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty (NATO, 1949); have been NATO partners for almost three decades (PfP, 1994).

The difficulty for those unfamiliar with the peculiarities of the political thinking specific to the two national spaces to recognize the differences between "neutrality" and "non-alignment" will be eliminated with the NATO accession of the two states. Because their security policies are based on transparency and a democratic approach, and because they understand the importance of bilateral and multilateral military cooperation, by participating in joint exercises and missions, including along with the North Atlantic Alliance [15] [16], there are solid chances for a rapid accession (compared to other states). The ultimate beneficiary of the added value of strengthening the Northern flank will be the Alliance as a whole.

3.4. NATO enlargement and possible consequences for the continental stability: between accepting the new *status quo* and geopolitical turmoil

The accession of the two states to NATO could be a quick process, without necessarily being a smooth one, given that since the announcement coming from their capitals regarding such a desire with strategic implications, adverse reactions have appeared, including from within the Alliance. Turkey is currently the biggest obstacle, which should not surprise. Having the second largest army in the Alliance, after the United States, being the guardian of the Black Sea straits, aware of its position as a geopolitical pivot, able to ensure (at least in part) access to a strategic region of great interest but which culturally it does not resonate with the Christian West, Ankara escalates tensions with Greece (violating Greek airspace) and puts the Kurdish issue back on track. In other words, Turkey is taking tactical action to achieve a strategic goal, which could be the explicit recognition of its status of regional power. Anyway, so far, not all allied states have agreed in principle to this new wave. This time, surprises could arise from smaller states that, taking advantage of the moment, try to make their voices heard, not necessarily regarding this issue, but rather with aspects that concern them directly.

There are clear ways of promoting national interest and reaffirming sovereignty in a context where multilateralism should be preferable to unilateralism. The whole picture also implies harmonizing collective strategic thinking according to national sensibilities and transatlantic principles and values.

The consequences of the Alliance expansion and the emergence of a new *status quo* related to the region secured by collective defense must be considered in relation to the geopolitical changes that the Ukrainian War could bring to Europe, but not only. Suppose the enlargement is to occur, although most political analyses and statements do not address this process in terms of "if" but "how quickly". In that case, the issue of consolidating the European military cooperation within a trans-Atlantic architecture is realistic. In the unlikely event of a failure, the geostrategic impact will be huge. In this case, we will be talking about a rupture within the Alliance that, even if not formalized, will encourage local attitudes and make the decision-making process difficult for other problems. As for the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict, its outcome is currently difficult to decipher. However, a critical European security framework is prefigured: a massive multidimensional crisis. Put as simply as possible, Europe is facing an energy and food crisis which, in turn, will lead to a price crisis. In more complex terms, we are talking about: the humanitarian disaster caused by the huge wave of Ukrainian refugees that will put pressure on national social assistance systems, the safety of grain transportation in the Black Sea, the emergence of a new pandemic, the increase of the defense budgets to the detriment of the social sectors. Some variables need to

be taken into account: heightened disagreements between allies over strategic leadership, the surprise results brought by the national general elections in the coming years in the wake of the economic crisis, China's increasingly tempted attitude to put Taiwan under its authority, Washington's policy on major global issues, but also on how it intends to address its domestic issues (mainly the economic and citizens security ones), possible changes concerning the Russian political establishment. Last but not least, the pressure exerted by the citizens of the democratic countries upon the decision-makers or, on the contrary, their will to support possible austerity measures in exchange for ensuring democratic freedom.

Summary. The possibility of achieving this expansion is infinitely greater than the possibility of ending the conflict in Ukraine in the short term. The Kremlin's imperialist policy and the inability to attain conclusive victories have turned Russia into an unpredictable political player whose attitude could not be in favor of Finland and Sweden joining NATO. Being a player outside the Alliance, it will not be able to oppose. Still, it will be able to undertake military decisions, such as deploying nuclear weapons and hypersonic missiles in areas that would use its policy of hostility. Geopolitical changes will be more evident as the game of chess unfolds.

4. Conclusions

Justified by different historical, geographical, and identity considerations, the neutrality / non-alignment of Finland and Sweden seems to have come to an end. The dissolution of this fundamentally different justified status for each of them is precisely a military invasion, a conflict therefore, considered to be endangering the security of these two states for which the policy of non-military involvement has so far been the key to ensuring national security.

If the "special military operation" in Ukraine has been born out of the Kremlin's desire to create a buffer zone and if it has been a reaction to the Alliance's general expansion into Eastern Europe, closer and closer to Russia's borders, then it has had an adverse effect. The invasion of Ukraine is not only a consequence of NATO enlargement based on the sovereign will and democratic decision of some states eager to redefine their foreign and security policies, but it has also managed to generate consequences in the European security landscape. That is a further expansion that will relentlessly lead to an increase in the length of Russia's borders with NATO.

Starting from the premise that each state, as a sovereign actor, has the fundamental right to develop its security policy, participating in the military arrangements it considers most appropriate to ensure its defense and fulfillment of the national security objectives, then the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO: paves the way for strengthening the Northern flank, has every chance of success considering the existing of the military cooperation based on democratic decision-making and contributes to Russia's containment by reducing the European territory which does not fall under the Article 5.

But just as the opportunity to revive and reinforce collective defense opens up before the allied nations, so might the challenges brought by an authoritarian political actor, a supporter of obsolete security architecture, inconsistent with the spirit of freedom and democracy that pervades Europe.

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