

Discussion Article

NATO and climate security: Potential for a leading role for Finland and Sweden?

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Abstract

In recent years, NATO has put significant effort into advancing its work on the linkages between security and climate change. In the NATO summit in Madrid in 2022, the alliance declared its climate neutrality target, and it has previously announced it aims to become a leading organisation on climate security. For the potential new NATO members Finland and Sweden, climate security can also prove to be a relevant topic through which to contribute to the agenda of the alliance, as both countries prioritise climate issues in their foreign policies. In order to provide a meaningful input to climate security within NATO, however, the countries need to shape their message beyond presumed climate security know-how. This is not to be taken as a given especially as it may be in the interest of the countries to focus on traditional military security issues rather than climate change in the NATO context. Yet by neglecting climate security altogether, Finland and Sweden risk missing an opportunity to contribute to the strategic planning of the alliance in a field of emerging importance.

Keywords

climate security, NATO, Finland, Sweden, comprehensive security

Introduction

Speaking at the summit of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Madrid in June 2022, General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg described climate change as a ‘defining challenge of our time’ and argued that the alliance would ‘set the gold standard’ on addressing its security implications. He also announced NATO’s aim to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, aided by a new methodology it has developed for measuring its greenhouse gas emissions. While seemingly unexpected for a military alliance, the strong statements on climate change did not come out of the blue. The emissions reduction goal is just one move in a process that has been ongoing for some years.

In 2021 the alliance adopted a Climate Change and Security Action Plan, in which it stated an aim to take a leading role globally in promoting the understanding of and adaptation to the security impacts of climate change and to significantly reduce emissions from military-related activities. The plan was followed up with a Climate Security Impact Assessment, also published at the Madrid summit, evaluating expected changes in NATO’s strategic environment, its operations, and on resilience and civil preparedness. According to the assessment, NATO needs to ‘transform’ its approach to security and defence in order to adapt to climate hazards and retain the effectiveness of its operations.

Coincidentally, NATO’s climate commitment is taking shape concurrently with the Finnish and Swedish membership processes. The Madrid summit, where NATO’s climate neutrality target was announced, also marked a step forward on the membership path for Finland and Sweden. In both countries, media attention on the results of the summit focused on an agreement that seemed to provide the means to end Turkey’s stalling on the acceptance of the prospective new members. The climate security discussion was largely ignored, and it has played little role in the membership processes of either country. Yet as NATO appears to be committed to continuing its engagement on climate change, Finland and Sweden may well end up being looked upon for insights based on their previous experience

in wider security and climate security.

In this article, I argue that climate security can provide a relevant and meaningful avenue for Finland and Sweden to contribute to the agenda of the alliance, but only if they are willing to put deliberate effort into shaping their message beyond presupposed claims of climate security know-how. At present, however, both countries look set to focus their NATO agenda on more traditional military security issues, where the membership opens new possibilities. Yet by neglecting climate security in the NATO context, Finland and Sweden may end up missing an opportunity to contribute to forward-looking strategic planning in a field of emerging importance within the alliance.

NATO and climate change

Climate security is not a term invented by NATO, but rather an established concept in international politics as well as academic research. It refers to the risks which climate change poses to the security of states, societies, and individuals. This entails, for instance, the direct threat of extreme weather, such as floods and storms, on human life and health, but also indirect dynamics through which climate impacts may contribute to the onset of forced migration or societal instability. In addition to climate change itself, the sustainability transition needed to mitigate it will generate risks, such as new resource dependencies and geopolitical tensions.

NATO’s interest in environmental issues dates back at least to 1969, when it established the Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society (CCMS), which also included environmental challenges. Since then, NATO has engaged in environmental issues through scientific research activities and, since 1999, the NATO Environmental Protection Working Group. Climate change was first mentioned in the Strategic Concept in 2010, and in 2014, NATO adopted a Green Defence Framework with the aim of transforming its use of energy and environmental resources while improving sustainability.

Even against this backdrop, NATO can be seen as a latecomer to climate security. Several other international actors have indeed been more forward-looking in this field. Within the United Nations (UN),

climate change was linked to security in Security Council debates already in 2007, and a UN Climate Security Mechanism was set up as a coordinating body in 2018. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has worked on climate change since 2007, for example, through regional climate security risk assessments that have been produced since 2013. Even the EU, which has also been described as a slow climate security actor, has integrated climate change into all aspects of its foreign and security policy since the publication of its Global Strategy in 2016.

However, NATO's engagement with climate change has evolved progressively in a short time, leading up to the Madrid summit in 2022. The Climate Change and Security Action Plan (CCSAP) from 2021 focused on outlining tasks and responsibilities that NATO has yet to take on or fulfil regarding climate change. It lists four dimensions of work: allied awareness, adaptation, mitigation, and outreach. These entail, for instance, annual Climate Change and Security Impact Assessments to increase the awareness of allied countries, and, for mitigation, the development of a methodology for measuring greenhouse gas emissions from military activities and installations. Although CCSAP gives few numeric indicators, it clearly commits the alliance to further work on the topic.

The first Climate Change and Security Impact Assessment and the methodology for measuring NATO's greenhouse gas emissions thus are follow-up to the CCSAP. In addition, NATO has come up with measures to facilitate the ability of its member states to advance climate actions, such as a Compendium of Best Practices for awareness, adaptation, mitigation, and outreach, as well as accrediting a Centre of Excellence on Climate and Security (CASCOE) to provide a platform for developing and exchanging expertise.

NATO's climate security work has also faced criticism. In particular, the relevance of the climate neutrality target as well as the verifiability of emissions cuts have been questioned, as NATO has not pledged to make the methodology for calculating emissions open to the public. According to critics, the lack of transparency does a disservice to the global efforts

to cut security sector emissions and could therefore weaken NATO's claim for climate security leadership. Questions have also been raised about the alliance's seemingly late arrival to the climate security discussion, which could be taken to demonstrate a lack of genuine commitment.

So far, however, NATO appears to mainly have benefited from building upon the climate security work others have done before. Rather than developing its own approach from scratch, it has been able to draw on the practices of its member states and other international organisations. It may also have been able to operate on a more responsive ground than some of the pioneering actors on climate security, as the linkage has at least partially been introduced and mainstreamed to key arenas for international security and politics.

Moreover, climate security looks set to be a long-term commitment for NATO. Its statements demonstrate a strong recognition of the relevance of a better understanding of the impacts of climate change and the systemic transition to mitigate it for the strategic planning and foresight of the alliance. Rather than a fleeting curiosity, climate security is inextricably linked to NATO's core activities. This commitment is also reflected in the way climate change has not been forced off NATO's agenda even after the Russian attack on Ukraine. Despite the return of armed conflict in Europe, climate change remains important enough to be discussed, for example, at the Madrid Summit alongside Finnish and Swedish membership in the alliance.

Therefore, climate security is an area for the new member countries to contribute to in the long term. Yet Finland and Sweden should be able to offer something new to the extensive work that is ongoing. The two countries have so far had different perspectives to climate security, both of which have relevant aspects for NATO, as will be discussed next.

Swedish and Finnish approaches to climate security

On the international arena, Sweden has been a climate security leader for several years, particularly since its membership in the UN Security Council

(UNSC) in 2017–18. One of the key elements Sweden pledged to promote during its term was the integration of climate change on the UNSC agenda, and it has since continued to contribute to the development of the climate security agenda within the UN architecture. Although UNSC has failed to pass a resolution on climate security due to the opposition of several permanent Council members, primarily Russia and China, the topic has remained on the Council agenda through a number of debates, one of which was initiated by Sweden in July 2018. Sweden also proposed the establishment of a Climate Security Mechanism, located in the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) with the support of the UN Development Programme and UN Environment Programme, to find concrete solutions to the security risks of climate change.

The Swedish engagement has been aided by active cooperation between Swedish research institutes and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that has produced analysis and practical solutions on the pathways through which climate change impacts security around the world. In 2018, Sweden formed the inter-disciplinary Stockholm Climate Security Hub, consisting of Swedish research institutes from different sectors, to produce research and analysis on climate security. Sweden has thus actively contributed to building the global evidence base on climate security risks and responses as well as mainstreaming these into practice in the work of international organisations. While the focus has been on UN agencies, Sweden has also worked, for example, within the EU to turn its climate security approach from the Strategic Compass into action.

Finland has taken a far less visible international role on climate security. Although it has supported relevant initiatives within the UN and is a member of the Group of Friends on Climate and Security, for example, it has not been a major driver for climate security within international organisations. This is at least in part due to a lack of resources, which has driven Finland to focus on a small number of specific issues where its strengths lie, such as the role of women and youth in peace and security. Finland may also have remained slightly on the outside with regard to emerging topics within the UN as the

Finnish campaign for membership in the UNSC for the 2013–14 term was not successful.

Meanwhile, in its overall approach to security and preparedness, Finland emphasises a model of cross-sectoral cooperation and coordination that has been conceptualised as comprehensive security. Based on a wide understanding of security, the model aims to safeguard the vital functions of society through the cooperative efforts of authorities, the private sector, organisations, and citizens. Comprehensive security heavily relies on foresight and preparedness, seen as crucial for ensuring the continuity of critical societal functions in times of crisis as well as in times of normalcy. As such, comprehensive security bears a close resemblance to NATO's work on resilience and civil preparedness. In this context it is important to note that Sweden also implements the concept of total defence which, similarly to comprehensive security, entails civil defence as a broader concept of societal resilience. During considerable reductions in the defence budget in the early 2000s, however, resources for civil defence were cut and the civil preparedness system was decentralised. Efforts to reform and strengthen the system in recent years have so far proven insufficient.

Although the Finnish model of comprehensive security has so far not had a major focus on climate change, it has a strong potential for integrating preparedness for climate-related risk. As a cross-sectoral, participatory model, it enables the identification of society-wide impacts and responses that climate security calls for. In addition, climate-related security risks require the kind of anticipatory perspective that is emphasised through the foresight and preparedness aspects of comprehensive security. Recent developments, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis, and a growing recognition of several different crises unfolding simultaneously seem to have triggered some of the Finnish preparedness actors to call for a better integration of climate aspects into the practices of comprehensive security, although further work is still needed to achieve this in concrete terms.

The differences in Swedish and Finnish climate security approaches suggest that the two countries do not have a clear-cut shared agenda to promote

within NATO. This could lead them to promote competing approaches, to combine aspects of their respective perspectives, or to one or both countries ignoring climate security altogether in the NATO context. The potential for these different strategies merits further discussion.

Climate security strategies within NATO: Competing or cooperative Nordic perspectives?

As demonstrated by its Climate Security Action Plan and measures such as the annual Climate Impact Assessments and the methodology for emissions reductions, NATO has already outlined the basic principles of its approach to the linkages between climate and security. It therefore has little to gain from member states' perspectives that contradict its existing plans or are too tentative to bring added value. Both Finland and Sweden have something to contribute to this, but they need to look beyond the most obvious catchphrases.

Sweden's strength lies in its pioneering role on climate security policymaking at the highest international levels. In the scope of its work with the UNSC and other international organisations, it has contributed to a more detailed understanding of the intersections behind climate security risks and to the development of practices and responses to counter them. Swedish activities have also given rise to research cooperation that produces analysis to inform policymaking on the topic of climate security. Swedish actors, such as the Stockholm Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), also have the kinds of global networks and partnerships needed to further facilitate discussion on climate security.

On the other hand, Sweden's focus has been on the most fragile countries and the human security implications of climate change. Its work has tended to focus on a development cooperation context, emphasising questions of global peace and insecurity. Such an emphasis makes sense in the context of Swedish foreign policy priorities and its work with the UN as well as most other international organisations.

NATO's climate security interest, however, has

centred on impacts on the military, defence capabilities, and societal resilience. Although the scope of these impacts is understood in broad terms, the perspective generally is that of a military or defence actor. The ways in which climate impacts interact in fragile state contexts and may generate wider security risks have been recognised in the first impact assessment, but efforts to address those interactions at the local level is not necessarily a NATO priority. In this sense, NATO has kept to its role as a military alliance, leaving actions that fall under broader development cooperation to other organisations. This may also mean a tendency to prioritise resilience and civil preparedness, considered from the point of view of the alliance itself and its members.

Meanwhile, the Finnish model of comprehensive security can provide insights for climate security work within NATO precisely because it emphasises societal resilience. Climate change can relatively easily be integrated into the existing structures and principles of the model and applied to NATO's resilience and preparedness activities. The comprehensive security model can thus be used to feed into NATO's Compendium of Best Practices on climate security, to be shared with other allies.

However, the problem with the Finnish comprehensive security approach to climate change is that it does not yet exist in practice. As pointed out above, climate change remains a relatively marginal part of the comprehensive security model, and Finland has little to offer in terms of concrete practices or policies on climate security. On the other hand, NATO membership would provide an opportunity for Finnish comprehensive security actors to develop climate security in practice in cooperation with NATO and other allies. Yet this would require a deliberate decision to include climate security at least to some small degree as a part of Finnish NATO policy and, crucially, a constructive approach with the aim of sharing knowledge, learning from others and jointly yielding new insights. As there clearly are major deficiencies in the Finnish approach to climate security, Finland stands to gain little from a presumption that merely due to its reputation as a leader in sustainability, it will be the one lecturing others.

Moreover, the shortcomings in the practical approaches to climate security pointed out above reveal that Swedish climate security expertise will remain a vitally important resource for Finland, as well as for NATO. A vast amount of the knowledge base on the dynamics between climate impacts and security as well as potential responses to counteract them will be relevant for various regional or societal contexts. Swedish policymakers also have vast experience in turning the analysis into action on international arenas.

Meanwhile, regardless of whether there is an emphasis on a military and defence perspective, NATO will not be able to gather full situational awareness unless it has a grasp of the human security impacts of climate change in fragile contexts. Emerging risks at the local level all over the world will have implications on the security of NATO allies and their military and defence capacities. Therefore, it may not make sense to place human security implications of climate change at the core of NATO's activities, but it will need this analysis produced by UN, Sweden, and other actors in order to complement its own assessments.

In other words, NATO's climate security agenda could benefit from the participation of both Finland and Sweden in its further development, especially if the countries were to combine their respective strengths on the topic. Yet this does not inevitably mean that Finland or Sweden will consider it relevant to include climate change in their NATO membership agenda or that it will be in their interest to do so. Their potential strategies will be considered next.

New NATO members and climate security

Climate change will not be a top priority on the NATO agenda for either Finland or Sweden. For both countries, the applications for membership are tied to the changing security situation in Europe and the need to strengthen their defence through alliances. Especially in the short run, the focus of NATO policymaking will be on implementing the core responsibilities and opportunities that the membership will bring.

However, NATO membership will mark a wider change in foreign and security policy in both countries and have ramifications beyond military and defence capabilities and posture. It is also likely that NATO and the other alliance members will have some expectations as to what the new members can contribute to broader planning and policymaking within the alliance. Considering the importance it has placed on climate security as an emerging topic, NATO is likely to welcome the input of two new member countries that have been known to prioritise climate issues in their foreign policies.

Yet it is possible that Finnish and Swedish policymakers will consider climate security an issue of minor importance in the NATO context. This may seem contradictory in light of their foreign policy priorities, but it is also important to note that those priorities have to some degree been shaped by their position outside the alliance. NATO membership will therefore yield opportunities and arenas for engagement. As climate security is an issue that both countries are able to advance in other contexts, it may make sense strategically to use the NATO platform for themes that are more at the core of military security and defence.

Although Sweden can be argued to have something of a comparative advantage on climate security in the international arena, it may in particular have an interest in focusing on the more traditional aspects of security in the NATO context. As the previously mentioned budget cuts and reductions in capability suggest, traditional security and defence have been de-prioritised for some time. Compared to Finland, Sweden will have to put more effort and resources into ensuring that it adequately meets all NATO requirements as a potential member. Moreover, the security policy community is also increasingly shifting towards questions of military security and defence capabilities.

The Finnish position differs from Sweden to some extent. Finland has maintained a high level of defence capability and is not expected to encounter major difficulties meeting NATO targets. Although NATO membership is likely to bring about significant changes in Finnish security policy debate, there has been very little tendency to question the importance

of military defence capability in the recent past. At the same time, Finland has recognised the role of societal resilience from the point of view of defence as well as civil preparedness, and has aimed to maintain it through the comprehensive security concept. It might therefore be in the Finnish interest, especially in the long run, to be able to contribute to climate security as one of the more innovative and emerging discussions within NATO. If considered from the point of view of comprehensive security, this could also feed into NATO's work on resilience and civil preparedness, where Finland can also be expected to have a visible role.

Finally, the NATO membership process may be a good opportunity to consider the division between so-called 'hard' and 'soft' security questions, where the first are related to military and armed defence and the latter concern issues like climate, peace, and health. Particularly when it comes to climate change, these two categories seem to be increasingly intertwined. Even if climate impacts are not seen to present direct causes of conflict, second-order risks like supply chain disruptions and inadequate renewable energy access are inevitably linked to questions of defence capability planning and geopolitical tensions.

This is not to say that climate change should in any way undermine questions of military and defence on the security policy agenda. On the contrary, as the Russian attack on Ukraine underlines, traditional defence capability remains as necessary to maintain as ever. However, adequate situational awareness as well as functional capability at present, and especially in the future, will require better understanding of and preparedness for climate impacts. The idea that climate security can be treated as a trivial issue draining resources from efforts to tackle real security threats is bound to backfire as it will weaken preparedness in the long run.