

Discussion Article

Asmus strategic vision makes a comeback: Finnish-Swedish role in defending the Baltics

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Abstract

As the three Baltic countries embarked upon their NATO membership path, Western critics objected that these nations were militarily indefensible. To neutralise such concerns, a key NATO enlargement architect on the US side, Ronald Asmus, had proposed looking in the Nordic countries' direction. His plan, sketched out in 1997, was to woo the Finns and Swedes to join NATO ranks, which would effectively alleviate the Baltic problem of strategic depth. At the time, Nordic leaders balked at the idea and conveyed their unwillingness to carry Baltic security burdens on their shoulders. With the recent double Nordic NATO alliance membership, it is well worth revisiting the arguments and discussions surrounding the proposal of putting Nordic countries in charge of Baltic security. Drawing primarily upon declassified US State Department materials, this article sheds light on the envisioned Nordic-Baltic security linkage and how Finnish and Swedish diplomats perceived it at the time. Subsequently, the discussion article assesses Helsinki and Stockholm's transition from non-aligned to full NATO-member status and how this geopolitical fact may benefit the outlook of the three Baltic states..

Keywords

Baltics, NATO, Finland, Sweden, Ronald Asmus

Introduction

In the summer of 1997, key NATO enlargement architects in the Clinton administration, Ronald Asmus and Strobe Talbott, schemed how to get the three Baltic countries into NATO. Achieving this objective, however, faced steep odds. Among other things, Baltic membership prospects were plagued by the issue of ‘defensibility’. Critics, both within the United States and Europe, posited that NATO simply did not have the means to defend such exposed small nations on Europe’s edge. Baltic location on the map as well as their insignificant indigenous military forces had discouraged many policy planners and strategists. In personal correspondence between Asmus and Talbott, the former put the finger on the problem: “One reason we don’t have enough support either at home or in the alliance is because of the defensibility issue [...] In the Baltic case, their small size, lack of strategic depth, and geographic proximity to Russian power all add up to make this a rather daunting task” (Asmus, 1997b, p. 2).

To neutralise such concerns, Asmus proposed looking in the Nordic countries’ direction. The United States, he insisted, should attempt to woo Finns and Swedes to join NATO ranks, a move that would effectively alleviate the Baltic problem of strategic depth. Having toured the Nordic countries in the summer of 1997, Asmus laid out the plan in greater detail: “Use the next five years to get the Balts ready; let the Swedes and Finns get closer to NATO; in the meantime build cooperation with Russia in Northern Europe and put it all together in the years 2002-2004 by bringing both the non-NATO Nordics and the Baltics into the alliance” (Asmus, 1997a, p. 2). Eric Edelman, who at the time served as US ambassador to Finland, later recalled that in case the US was going to add the Baltics to NATO, they simultaneously needed to get Finland and Sweden into the transatlantic alliance (Edelman, 2017). The Clinton administration had reasoned that the Nordic membership would be the key to solving the Baltic defensibility conundrum. “You’ve got to have the Finns and the Swedes in because they create a strategic hinterland from which you can more easily reinforce the Baltic states”, Edelman explained the US geopolitical reasoning (Edelman, 2017).

More than two decades have passed since Asmus first laid out his Nordic-Baltic strategic connection and vision in US policy documents. With Helsinki and Stockholm now officially under the NATO umbrella, it is well worth revisiting the arguments and discussions surrounding the proposal of putting Nordic countries in charge of Baltic security. Drawing primarily upon declassified US State Department materials, this discussion article sheds light on the topic of Nordic-Baltic security linkage and how Finnish and Swedish diplomats perceived it at the time. Subsequently, the discussion article assesses how the rapidly changing security environment prompted Helsinki and Stockholm to transition from non-aligned to full NATO-member status and how this geopolitical fact may benefit the outlook of the three Baltic states.

The Baltic whisperers

At a time when major European actors approached Baltic NATO aspirations with great wariness, the Nordic countries exhibited more flexibility and support. While non-aligned themselves, Finland and Sweden had lent their hand in modernising Baltic armed forces. Since the early 90s, Stockholm and Helsinki had assumed the role of a mentor and material supporter for the newly created Baltic armies. As noted by Dahl (2011, p. 8), Finland had sought to take Estonia under its wing, while Sweden worked closely with Estonia and Latvia to sharpen their military readiness. It is worth recalling that at the time, the Balts had to build their national security structures entirely from scratch (Kasekamp and McNamara, 2018, p. 43). In the words of one Latvian senior diplomat, all that the country had

inherited from the withdrawing Soviet forces was the rubble. The state had no weapons and no defence plans (Teikmanis, 2020). In this context, various Nordic initiatives proved invaluable in terms of setting up the basis for Western-oriented armed forces (McNamara, Nordenman and Saloniuss-Pasternak, 2015; Kuldkepp, Piirimäe and Aunesluoma, 2022).

As non-NATO members themselves, Helsinki and Stockholm were rather reserved in their public pronouncements regarding who should or should not be included in future NATO expansion rounds. The Finnish government did, however, stand up for the rights of the Baltics to choose their own alliances and security partners (Honkanen 2002, p. 6). During the mid-90s, Finnish diplomats had expressed their worries that without proper anchoring into Western institutions, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania would once again be relegated to Moscow's sphere of influence (Shearer 1995b). Likewise, the Swedish ambassador to the US, Carl Henrik Sihver Liljegren, had assured to US officials that Sweden was playing an important role in bolstering the Baltic integration into the West and expressed the view that "no grey zones of insecurity should be allowed to reemerge in Europe" (Liljegren, 1996, p. 5). While measured in their public rhetoric, Finnish and Swedish policymakers in talks with their US counterparts did reiterate support for NATO's open-door policies, including for the Baltics (Albright, 1998b).

In the context of NATO's eastward expansion, Washington would come to see the Nordic partners as valued Baltic-whisperers. American officials regularly turned to them for advice on how to better craft their Baltic strategy. Washington assumed that, due to the close geographic proximity, these countries had a better grasp of Baltic developments (Asmus, 2002, p. 231). Countries like Finland, which were grounded in the West but also had long-standing relations with Russia, were seen as critical actors for promoting the Baltic-related agenda. During a conversation with Estonian Foreign Minister Siim Kallas in 1996, US officials had made it clear that Washington was constantly prodding the Nordic governments to enlist their support for the Baltic cause (Talbot, 1996b). Tighter Nordic-Baltic links, the Clinton administration surmised, would help to puncture the prevailing notion among some NATO governments that the Baltics ought to be forever excluded from the transatlantic alliance. Another US cable posited that the interaction between these countries could be a "force for peace, and prosperity" (Talbot, 1997, p. 3).

The Clinton administration viewed Finland as an ideal mentor for the Balts that could speed up their integration into the West (US National Security Council, 1997). The same message had been relayed to Stockholm. Anna Wieslander, who spent numerous years at the Swedish Defence Ministry, later recalled that Ronald Asmus would visit the ministry every half a year and ask: "What can you do to help prepare the Baltic states for joining the alliance?" (Wieslander, 2019). At the time, other prominent US national security figures had likewise conveyed the understanding that Northern European support was essential for the Baltic Western trajectory. Zbigniew Brzezinski, a distinguished American strategic thinker, had told the Lithuanians that the Baltic road to Western-based institutions could only go through the Nordics (Janeliūnas, 2021, p. 228). In sum, during the 90s' discussions about the future European security order, and the Baltic place in it, many viewed the Nordic role in solving this puzzle as highly salient.

...But not security guarantors

While Finland and Sweden played an instrumental role in advancing the Baltic agenda, they were nonetheless forthright about their unwillingness to carry Baltic security burdens on their shoulders. Such an undertaking, they expressed, was a task for a great power. As one US diplomatic cable in 1995 recorded, it remained a Finnish axiom not to link its national security directly to the future of the

Baltic states (Shearer, 1995a). In interaction with US policymakers, this point was constantly repeated by the Finns and Swedes. Just before departing from his post in 1996, the Finnish ambassador to the US informed his American colleagues that the ideas floating around about Finland and Sweden becoming the security guarantors of the Baltic states were undesirable (Talbot, 1996a). During a conversation with US President Bill Clinton, Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari had “hammered down” the same message in no uncertain terms: “We are helping Estonia establish better border controls and proper visa restrictions. We have extended similar cooperation to Latvia, but this is where our possibilities for cooperation end. There is no way that we or the Nordic countries could give security guarantees to the Baltic states; that would be beyond our capabilities” (Albright, 1997, p.6). On another occasion, Ahtisaari reiterated the same to US Secretary of State Warren Christopher – only the US military was in a position to take on the responsibility for defending the Baltics (Ainola, 2015). The Swedes were on the same wavelength. Discussing the Baltic question, a high-ranking Swedish representative had informed Washington that it was better to leave to Stockholm the “non-security measures” (Asmus, 2002, p. 160).

Briefly, it is worth mentioning that at the time, another Nordic country, Denmark, an actual alliance member, was ‘all in’ for Baltic NATO membership. Copenhagen had already displayed its Baltic activism during the early 90s when it staunchly supported the Baltic calls for independence (Olesen, 2022). Subsequently, the Danish government led the way in spearheading the Baltic Battalion (BALTBAT) in 1994, an institution that enabled Baltic participation in various NATO Partnership for Peace activities. In due course, Denmark emerged as the most vocal supporter in Europe for an early Baltic inclusion in NATO (Mouritzen, 2007, p. 156). The Danish parliament had given widespread support for Baltic aspirations to join both the EU and NATO (Archer, 1999, p. 50). All of this was carried out with the political backing of Washington. As the Danish Defence Minister assured US officials in 1998, his government was pressing the case for Baltic NATO accession (Albright, 1998a). In discussing those NATO countries who would potentially back Baltic membership in 1997, Asmus in internal correspondence had scribbled down that the Balts enjoyed the support of the “plucky Danes” (Asmus, 1997b, p.2). Yet, the staunch Danish support could not, on its own, solve the Baltic ‘defensibility’ equation – a broader Finnish-Swedish buy-in as security guarantors were deemed necessary.

In March 1996, retired British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd had “stirred the pot” further, insinuating in a public speech that Sweden and Finland would be good candidates for assuming a security guardian role for the three Baltic republics (Sharp, 1997). Helsinki and Stockholm were growing visibly infuriated. When US diplomats engaged the Norwegian State Secretary Siri Bjerke on this matter, he noted that Finland and Sweden were becoming “hyper-sensitive to any proposals which suggest regionalization of security structures that might appear to shift the responsibility for security in the Baltics to them” (US Department of State, 1997, p.3). Gradually, Americans acknowledged that Finns and Swedes were rather immovable on this issue. In internal discussions, Strobe Talbot noted that while Helsinki and Stockholm were at the forefront of supporting the Baltic republics’ Western orientation, they visibly had no desire to link their future security with these countries (Edelman, 1997).

Years later, former Finnish Chief of Defence Pauli Juhani Kaskeala publicly asserted that one of the reasons that Finland had refused to join NATO in the mid-1990s was because the country, in case of a conflict with Russia, would have been forced to take responsibility for defending Estonia. “The old members of NATO wanted to ask us [Finland and Sweden] to take responsibility for defending the Baltic states. This expectation had an impact on Finland’s decision not to join NATO”, he asserted

(ERR, 2015). In the end, the Baltic countries joined NATO in 2004 without Finnish and Swedish direct involvement as defence guarantors. The post-9/11 era, during which Washington's relations with Moscow had visibly warmed, had defused the question of Baltic defensibility and they managed to join the transatlantic organisation.

Vision fulfilled: Nordic-Baltic security alignment

Russia's full-scale attack against Ukraine in February 2022, however, forced both Finland and Sweden to rethink their guiding security paradigms and apply for full NATO member status. It is worth noting that already before hoisting the NATO flag, these countries collaborated intensively with other Baltic Sea region countries. After the Russian illegal takeover of Crimea in 2014, a certain alignment in geopolitical thinking and threat perceptions transpired whereby countries like Sweden began to take defence issues more seriously (Ålander and Salo, 2023, p. 56). In many ways, Helsinki and Stockholm, even as non-aligned NATO members, were already steaming in the same direction as the three Baltic states. For instance, they routinely took part in NATO-led regional military exercises, practising interoperability with Baltic Sea states (Banka and Bussmann, 2023, p. 11). As Claudia Major and Alicia von Voss postulated in 2016, the Baltic Sea region had already become "one interdependent military operational area from which no country can withdraw" (Major and von Voss, 2016, p. 3). Russia's unprovoked attack against Ukraine in 2022 only further cemented this notion.

While Finland and Sweden, even as non-aligned countries, were already seen as essential pieces of the broader Baltic Sea region security landscape, their formal NATO membership was nonetheless greeted as a seminal transformational event. Emphasising the difference that their allied status makes, Elgin and Lanoszka (2023, p. 35) underscore that "NATO planners can now assume Swedish and Finnish participation, rather than treating it as a variable". Indeed, across the Baltic capitals, their decision to seek full NATO member status was hailed as a geopolitical "game changer" (Jačauskas, 2022).

Martin Herem, Estonian defence forces commander, for instance, contends that Finnish and Swedish NATO accession provided Estonia with a "completely new angle" to solve its security questions (Bath, 2023). Indeed, various research institutions have drawn attention to the fact that in military terms these Nordic nations are well-placed to make noteworthy contributions to Baltic deterrence and, if need be, defence efforts. Whereas Finnish territory enables the alliance with much-needed strategic depth for defending the Baltics, Sweden brings to the table a first-class navy that can operate in Baltic waters (Pesu, 2023; 2024). According to a report by the Estonian-based International Centre for Defence and Security, Finnish and Swedish accession plugs a "large hole in NATO territory, reducing the isolation and vulnerability of the Baltic states" (Lawrence and Jermalavičius, 2024, p. 4). In sum, their membership undoubtedly redraws the security map in favourable ways for the three Baltic states.

To be clear, the Baltic defence does not rest solely on its new Nordic allies. For the foreseeable future, Washington remains the alliance's ultimate underwriter. What is more, in 2016 NATO agreed to implement the so-called enhanced forward presence model on its eastern flank. As a result, multinational battalion-sized forces are stationed across the Baltic states, led by the United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany. That said, purely due to geography, the Nordic newcomers are bound to play an important role in NATO's defence plans for this region. Inevitably, some responsibility will be transferred to Helsinki and Stockholm. In the run-up to the 2023 Vilnius NATO summit, alliance military planners drew up highly specific classified defence plans detailing what each member would be responsible for in a crisis (Joshi, 2023). Reportedly, Finland and Sweden are already being woven

into these allied plans as defenders of the High North and the Baltics (Holmström, 2024). More than 25 years after US diplomat Ronald Asmus had linked Baltic and Nordic security in a policy memo, his outlined vision is being implemented in practice.

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