

EU defence

Finland and Sweden face security dilemma ahead of Nato decisions

Nordic pair would not benefit immediately from Article 5 collective defence guarantee



Swedish and Finnish tanks taking part in a military exercise in Evenes, Norway last month © Yves Herman/Reuters

Richard Milne in Oslo and **Henry Foy** in Brussels 17 HOURS AGO

The Russian military plane that entered Sweden's airspace briefly on Friday was interpreted as an unsubtle warning to the country as it debated joining Nato alongside its neighbour Finland.

Russia has repeatedly warned of "serious military and political consequences that would require an adequate response" should the two Nordic nations apply for Nato membership, an increasingly likely prospect.

Joining Nato would mean Sweden and Finland were covered by the Article 5 collective defence commitment that ensures an attack on one member generates a response from the entire alliance. But what particularly worries both countries is the period before they became official members, when no such guarantee would apply.

Much attention in Finland, the more advanced of the two Nordic countries [in terms of preparation](#), has therefore focused on how Nato and its 30 member states could help it through a vulnerable period lasting months or even a year or more.

"Joining Nato would be a [huge provocation](#)," said one European diplomat.

Finns and Swedes are braced for any number of hybrid and cyber attacks from Russia, although few currently think a military confrontation is likely.

Their expectations of support from allies have also shifted in the frenzied two months

since Russia's invasion of Ukraine shook Europe's security order and forced both Nordic countries to rethink their non-aligned status.

Talk was no longer about security guarantees, but assistance and vocal declarations of support once the applications were made from the likes of the US, UK and Nato itself.

"Everyone understands Article 5 guarantees are not on the table [but] that doesn't mean we can't improve regional security in other ways," said Henri Vanhanen, foreign policy adviser to the National Coalition party, Finland's main opposition group. "There can be political declarations, information exchange, increased defence co-operation such as exercises in the Baltic Sea," he listed.

Finnish officials said they have been surprised not to have experienced more Russian mischief already, given Moscow would have to act quickly to have a chance of stopping the Finns from a Nato application.

Finland's president Sauli Niinistö has promised an announcement by May 12, with expectations in Helsinki that an application would follow quickly. Russia has in response threatened to move nuclear weapons to its Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad, although Lithuania has said Moscow may have done this already in 2018.

Robert Nurick, non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, said possible security assistance for Sweden and Finland was a subject "very much on the mind of US government officials and the policy community".

"One of the main things will be what Sweden and Finland want — what they think they need, what they think will be useful without complicating their own internal debates," he said, adding that it would probably be a "balancing act" given Russia's already public warnings. "One question will be: do we want to aggravate this?" he added.

Finnish officials said they want to avoid the impression that they are sending Russia a message or punishing it, instead insisting their goal was to boost their own security by joining the west's defence organisation.

So a mixture of measures are likely, some to be announced, others kept hidden. Political declarations from the main allies as well as Nato would be public. But, a senior Nato official added, more concrete defence arrangements would remain secret. "Ambiguity is a big part of deterrence," the official said.

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Nato secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg said last week that he expected processing the two countries' applications to "be quick". Making Finland and Sweden formal invitees could take as little as two weeks, officials said.

But it would take far longer for all the countries in Nato to sign off on the two new members. The process of ratifying North Macedonia, Nato's most recent addition, took nine months.

Anna Wieslander, the Atlantic Council's Northern Europe director, said she would expect Nato and its allies to hold training and exercises in the countries, while Finland and Sweden could join the alliance's air policing mission in the Baltics.

She also pointed to the Joint Expeditionary Force, a UK-led group of 10 countries including Sweden and Finland, as something that could be used to provide reassurance.

"By various informal steps and declarations in this period by major allies and working with Nato, I think we'll get through this period," she said.

Vanhanen, the foreign policy adviser, said that a smooth accession would also be in Nato's interest, echoing the Finnish view that the alliance's credibility would be on the line should anything happen. The assistance Finland and Sweden receive would be a carefully calibrated message, he added.

"On the one hand, we need signals of deterrence that Russia can read and understand. On the other, there's no need for unnecessary provocations. Clarity in this case would likely be a better option than ambiguity," he said.

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