



## Briefing Paper No.93

6 May 2022

Contact:

Dr. Ian Davis

Email: [idavis@natowatch.org](mailto:idavis@natowatch.org)

[www.natowatch.org](http://www.natowatch.org)

# Should Finland and Sweden hold a referendum on NATO membership?

Ian Davis

Finland and Sweden look set to [declare](#) their readiness to join NATO later this month in time for the alliance summit in Spain at the end of June. However, neither country proposes to hold a referendum on NATO membership, despite both countries doing so prior to EU membership in 1994 (and in Sweden before adopting the Euro in 2003).

Sweden's Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson has [said](#) that the government does not plan to hold a referendum if its parliament decides to proceed with an application for NATO membership, adding that a referendum was a "bad idea". She told reporters: "There is a lot of information about national security that is confidential, so there are important issues in such a referendum that cannot be discussed and important facts that cannot be put on the table". An opinion poll by Demoskop in daily *Aftonbladet* published on 20 April showed 57 per cent of Swedes in favour of joining NATO, up from 51 per cent in March, although Sweden's ruling Social Democrats appear [divided](#) on the issue. Finland's president Sauli Niinisto has also [said](#) that a national referendum on NATO will not be necessary, in part to limit opportunities for Russian meddling.

Since the 12 initial founding members established NATO in 1949, 18 new states have joined the alliance (in eight rounds of enlargement between 1952 and 2020). In only 5 of the 18 cases—Spain

(1986), Hungary (1997), Slovakia (1997), Slovenia (2003) and North Macedonia (2018)—was a referendum held on NATO accession. Interestingly, Denmark, a founding member of NATO, decided to opt out of the EU defence policy and military operations, and abstain from providing support or supplies, after a referendum in 1993. However, Denmark is to hold a [referendum](#) on 1 June to decide on overturning the opt-out in the light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

### *The benefits and pitfalls of referenda*

A referendum on NATO membership would allow the Finnish and Swedish publics to have a proper debate on the security, political and economic benefits and pitfalls of NATO membership, as well ensure a broad base of political support for the outcome. It would also 'lock in' a choice that may necessitate (in the event of an affirmation for joining) riding out difficult consequences during the implementation stage. For example, both countries expect Russian spy operations, cyber attacks and attempts to influence parliamentarians to increase. Moreover, given the impact of the decision on both countries—Sweden, for example, would be abandoning a nearly 200-year-old policy of armed neutrality—and for the future of European security, the prospect of a popular vote would concentrate the minds of parliamentarians in both countries to do the hard work of considering the bigger security picture.

Of course, a referendum campaign opens the space for actors both domestic or external to pollute the discussion with false information and/or unrealistic beliefs about what alternatives are possible. Referendum campaigns can also be fiercely divisive, especially when the prospect of a slender victory tempts campaigners to use every argument at their disposal (witness Brexit in the UK).

### ***National security concerns***

While referendums could make both countries vulnerable to influence campaigns from Russia, it is a worrying sign that both countries are looking to suspend democracy because of the risk of external influence. It is particularly worrying that the 'confidential nature of national security issues' is being cited as a reason for not holding a referendum. This feeds into the false belief that security is an exclusively elitist concern, and is deeply old-fashioned, based upon national security being defence of the realm, when contemporary concepts of [human security](#) seem more appropriate.

It also feeds into an existing democratic deficit within NATO, where the process of policy formulation—the discussions, debates, arguments, meetings, research, diplomatic back-and-forth—largely remains out of view and behind closed doors. Even when the NATO policy development process moves to an agreed course of action across the alliance, the default position is to withhold information—largely because of NATO's long-standing secrecy and classification rules. NATO is the only major intergovernmental body not to have even a basic information disclosure policy, and after the end of the Cold War, rather than revisiting these classification rules, they simply became a [requirement](#) for those states in Central and Eastern Europe seeking accession to NATO. They were even mirrored by the EU as it sought to become more closely aligned to the alliance.

These secrecy rules have already had impact on Finland and Sweden as NATO partners. It took Finnish MPs two years to [find out about](#) a secret agreement

concerning strengthened defence cooperation with neighbouring Sweden and NATO. The Finnish Parliament's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee members claim they were kept in the dark about an agreement drawn up between Finland, Sweden and NATO in 2018 which increased information-exchange and dialogue in crisis situations. This was despite foreign and security policy matters, as well as military cooperation, falling within their respective committees' jurisdiction. The arrangement was reportedly classified as Secret by NATO and was assigned the highest security classification in Finland. Hence, there is a clear contradiction between NATO's claims to be a 'democratic' alliance and its lack of democratic scrutiny. Rather than hiding behind 'national security' concerns, secrecy should be regarded as an exception that in every case demands a convincing justification. It is not clear that a convincing case has been made by either Finland or Sweden for preventing a referendum on such grounds.

### ***The issues are not settled***

It is also being argued that a referendum is unnecessary because the issues are already settled and the options are relatively clear cut. [Expert opinion](#) is currently united in the belief that NATO membership is good for both countries and for European security, and opinion polls in both countries also suggest growing support. Moreover, both countries are already closely aligned to NATO as '[enhanced opportunity partners](#)', two of only six countries with this status (the other four are Australia, Georgia, Jordan and Ukraine). However, the expert views largely reflect narrow interests and public opinion is being driven by 'heat of the moment' thinking. A referendum would allow a period of reflection on some of the weightier and longer-term considerations that are in danger of being drowned out by the elite drumbeat towards NATO membership.

First, the clamour for NATO membership is clearly being driven by perceptions of an enhanced Russian threat and the theoretical comfort of the alliance [article](#)

[5 commitment](#), which means that an attack against one ally is considered as an attack against all allies. It is certainly heartbreaking to watch Ukrainians flee their homes as their cities are mercilessly bombarded by Russian forces. And yet, as bad as that situation is, and the undoubted increased risk of conflict spillover to other countries in the region, the threat of a Russian attack on either Finland or Sweden has not risen significantly. In over two months of war Russia has struggled to capture cities which are only 20 miles from its border. The chances of Russia's depleted conventional forces successfully invading Finland or Sweden, or even trying (or wanting) to invade them are remote even were there to be any incentive to do so. Yet, the motivations, politics and relationships between Russia and Finland/Sweden are incomparable to those between Russia and Ukraine.

Talking up the risk Russia poses to Finland, Sweden and NATO suits the interest of the military industrial complexes in both Russia and the West, but it does not reflect the reality. There are Russian threats, of course—cyberattacks, missiles and ultimately the nuclear nightmare. But NATO membership is no guarantee against them, and extended nuclear deterrence adds to rather than negates the nuclear threat. Indeed, NATO membership potentially exposes Finland and Sweden to enormous new risks, including sub-conventional attacks and the risk of nuclear escalation.

Second, on the issue of nuclear weapons, in a changing and increasingly uncertain security environment, the risk of a nuclear weapon being used is greater than generally acknowledged and is widely considered to be growing. But instead of reinvigorating efforts towards nuclear disarmament, NATO has moved in the opposite direction and actively [opposed](#) initiatives to advance disarmament—most notably the negotiation of the nuclear ban treaty, the Treaty for the Prevention of Nuclear War (TPNW). Sweden has a strong history of supporting humanitarian causes and

disarmament, participated in the negotiation of the TPNW at the United Nations in 2017 and voted in favour of its adoption. Although neither Sweden or Finland has yet signed or ratified the treaty, both governments said that they would attend the first meeting of states parties to the treaty in 2022 as observers.

Before the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, [opinion polling](#) suggested that a majority of the Swedish public was in favour of joining the TPNW. Although this will undoubtedly have changed, the war in Ukraine does not negate the initial underlying judgement (shared by the vast majority of the world's states) that nuclear disarmament is a safer and more secure path. While membership of NATO does not preclude Sweden or Finland joining the TPNW, it does become much less likely due to internal alliance pressure for conformity on the issue of nuclear weapons.

Third, the anticipated increases in military spending in both countries will have security consequences and opportunity costs. Sweden will need to massively increase its military spending in line with the NATO commitment to spend 2 per cent of GDP on defence. Sweden's military spending in 2021 was \$7.9 billion or 1.3 per cent of GDP. Thus, it will need to increase military spending by over 50 per cent to about \$12.2 billion. Sweden has already embarked on its largest military build-up for decades and is expected to increase spending to about 1.5 per cent of GDP in the next four years, as well as increasing troop numbers from 60,000 to 90,000.

Finland on the other hand, already spends 2 per cent of its GDP on the military (totalling \$5.9 billion in 2021). And in December 2021, as Russia was building up its forces on Ukraine's borders, Finland announced that it would [invest](#) some \$11 billion in 64 F-35 Joint Strike Fighters. NATO countries collectively already outspend Russia by almost 18 to 1, yet this did not dissuade Putin's actions in Ukraine. New spending commitments within NATO countries will likely take this ratio to over 20:1 next

year, but it is deeply questionable whether this increases security. Indeed, the most likely consequence of further spending increases will be reciprocal increases in Russian and Chinese expenditures, as these countries perceive an increasing threat from NATO and its domination of global security outcomes. This would trigger a costly and dangerous global arms race in which everyone loses: due to the development and proliferation of ever more dangerous weapons, increased mutual tensions and reduced spending in areas such as poverty alleviation, protection against pandemics and addressing the climate crisis.

Fourth, NATO membership for Finland and Sweden would set back the opportunity for developing an [alternative European security architecture](#) that includes a more prominent place for military non-aligned and neutral states, and that promotes common security (as championed by the OSCE) rather than collective security (as championed by NATO). This idea—of creating a network of stable and successful nonaligned states in the space between NATO and Russia—was outlined by several commentators as a potential way forward prior to the outset of the war in Ukraine. Since then, Ukraine has also [said](#) on several occasions that it may accept neutral country status if key states provide binding security guarantees. However, it seems less likely that Ukraine would opt for this approach if two of Europe's more secure and stable military non-aligned states demonstrate a lack of confidence in neutrality by joining the NATO stable.

***Conclusion: another fateful enlargement?***

The enlargement of NATO up to Russia's borders in the late 1990s was widely supported at the time. A few critics, such as the American diplomat and historian George Kennan attempted but failed to conduct a wider debate. In 1997, Kennan wrote, "The view, bluntly stated, is that expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold-war era. Such a decision

may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations; and to impel Russian policy in directions decidedly not to our liking".

While NATO enlargement in 1994 and thereafter does not justify or excuse the actions of President Putin in 2022 they are undoubtedly part of the context. It seems that few Western experts and politicians today are prepared to challenge the dominant narrative that another round of NATO enlargement will produce only positive outcomes—despite creating an 830-mile border with Russia. What is really needed is a different way of governing the pan-European space (and the globalised world); an approach not based on military alliances, but one that reframes international relations and devises new instruments and cooperative arrangements. These ideas were popularised by the 1982 Palme Report, '*Common Security: A Programme for Disarmament*', the culmination of the Commission led by Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme. Forty years on, a follow-up report [Common Security 2022: For Our Shared Future](#) has just been published with fresh ideas about renewing the global security system based on common security principles. How to fold Russia (post-Putin) into European cooperative arrangements remains a key outstanding question, and one that should be part of a vigorous debate in Finland and Sweden prior to joining NATO.

Overall, the benefits of using a referendum to settle this decision seem to outweigh the drawbacks, particularly if cross-party agreement is obtained on its terms and timing. Since these are such weighty decisions, referenda would robustly bestow a mantle of democratic legitimacy on them. It would also allow a period of reflection to assess the wider implications for the new and still unfolding European security landscape.