

Sweden And Finland In NATO: What's In It For Us?

If the U.S. wants to remain a superpower and defend its own citizens' interests, it must learn to say no.

Doug Bandow

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Both Finland and Sweden are applying to join NATO. The Blob, as the foreign policy establishment has come to be known, is ecstatic. It cannot conceive of saying no to any alliance applicant, no matter how insignificant or irrelevant.

Once upon a time, serious nations defended themselves, rather than begging faraway great powers to do the job for them. And no serious great power would do so unless it believed the other state to be essential for its own security. As Great Britain's Lord Palmerston remarked, countries had no permanent friends, only permanent interests.

Even serious defensive alliances could drag members into war, often against their interests, when deterrence failed. World War I provides the most dramatic modern example. Serbia committed an act of state terrorism against the Austro-Hungarian Empire. When the latter threatened Belgrade, Imperial Russia stood by its Slavic brethren, lest Vienna establish dominance in the Balkans. Imperial Germany backed Austria-Hungary with the infamous "blank check." France supported its ally Russia. Great Britain feared a rising Berlin and joined its historic enemies Paris and St. Petersburg. Other states, either feeling threatened (Ottoman Empire) or perceiving a chance for territorial gain (Italy) later joined in.

The result was continent-wide catastrophe, and another much worse war just a generation later. The latter turned America into a global power and left Washington to play leader of "the free world," defending Western Europe and Asian dependencies amid fears of Soviet aggression and threats posed by the newly created People's Republic of China. The policy made sense as a temporary expedient, protecting vulnerable states as they recovered and became able to defend themselves.

It wasn't just the Old Right which feared "allies" becoming permanent defense dependents. So did Dwight Eisenhower, World War II allied commander, first NATO military head, and U.S. president. He warned against acting like "a modern Rome guarding the far frontiers with our legions." Instead, he advocated helping "these people [to] regain their confidence and get on their own military feet." Foreign policy scholar Mark Sheetz explained that "The purpose of

America's 'temporary' intervention in Western Europe was to eliminate the need for 'permanent' intervention."

However, Ike's admonitions were forgotten as U.S. policymakers came to enjoy America acting as the "essential power." Moreover, foreign governments—whether of allies, partners, friends, or otherwise connected states—learned the useful arts of deception and flattery. Defense dependents promised to do more while planning to do less, sure that Washington would forgive them, no matter how loud U.S. officials whined and wailed. Allies also insisted that freedom would disappear, a new Dark Ages would descend, and the world would end if the U.S. ever did anything less, an argument enthusiastically repeated by the Blob.

Yet the transatlantic alliance's spell over U.S. foreign policy appeared broken when the Warsaw Pact dissolved, followed by the Soviet Union. Even NATO's most loyal retainers feared that the alliance's time was coming to an end, proposing that the organization shift over to handling student exchanges and fighting the drug war. But creative policy entrepreneurs came up with "out-of-area" activities, which essentially meant bombing, invading, and occupying more distant nations which weren't threatening NATO members.

Of course, the U.S. would do the real war-making, while the allies would pretend that their assistance was essential. It was difficult to discern America's interest in Serbia and Libya and Europe's interest in Afghanistan, but all went forward as alliance campaigns. Although European NATO members suffered casualties in the latter, none of these wars could have been prosecuted except by Washington. Indeed, the Europeans ran out of missiles when fighting *Libya*.

All the while the transatlantic alliance abandoned its role as continental guardian and became a militarized Welcome Wagon for the detritus of the Soviet empire. The European Union was better suited to that task, but the U.S. did not control the E.U. Hence, Washington's preference was to use NATO to extend America's reach.

Unfortunately, this process violated a multitude of assurances given Moscow that the alliance would not advance ever eastward. The alliance also shifted from defense to offense, most importantly against Yugoslavia (an enhanced Serbia, for which Russia went to war in WWI). Although Vladimir Putin started out inclined to do business with the West, by 2008 his patience was gone and he turned toward confrontation, starting with Georgia. Although NATO expansion continued, even alliance members recognized that adding Georgia and Ukraine were steps too far: For 14 years the allies prevaricated, simultaneously reiterating and then ignoring promises to Tbilisi and Kyiv.

Yet when the Ukraine crisis began last fall, the U.S. and European NATO members refused to state the obvious, that Kyiv would not be joining the alliance. Doing so might have forestalled Putin's invasion. Of course, allied irresponsibility did not justify Moscow's invasion, but Washington and Brussels share blame for the tragic war.

With conflict raging in Ukraine, Finland and Sweden decided that they want formal U.S. protection as well. That comes as no surprise: Countries and even movements around the world eagerly seek the great superpower's assistance. Years ago, I was asked by ethnic Karen insurgents in Burma/Myanmar why Washington did not send troops there to do what it had recently done in Kosovo. If I faced such a regime, I also would want the U.S. to eliminate the brutal, oppressive Tatmadaw, as the Burmese military is known.

However, the U.S. government is not the world's 911 number and should stop treating its defense guarantees as a matter of charity. Sweden, in its (long ago) day a great power, perceived no threat and reduced its military. Finland retained tough armed forces, which proved their worth—and the Finns' determination to protect their nation—during the infamous “Winter War” from November 1939 to March 1940. The Soviet Union triumphed, but only at great cost; rather than occupy Finland, like the Baltic states, Moscow accepted territorial concessions and a pledge of neutrality.

Although Russia's attack on Ukraine understandably unsettled Europe, Moscow never demonstrated any interest in reviving hostilities with Helsinki or threatening Sweden. And Russia's poor military performance demonstrates that, contra its pre-conflict reputation, Moscow could not conquer its many neighbors, let alone the entire continent, even if it desired to do so. The two countries' desire to join appears to be an attempt to get an insurance policy at America's expense, expanding still further Washington's already lengthy list of defense dependents. If the Duchy of Grand Fenwick was available, it would join NATO as well.

Instead, the U.S. should be shifting responsibility for Europe's defense to Europe, which far outranges Russia in economic strength, population, and military outlays. While America patrols the entire globe, the Europeans (and America's Asian allies as well) scrimp on their armed forces—for instance, 19 NATO members spend less than two percent of their GDP on defense.

Today, Washington is hurtling toward insolvency. The national debt is 100 percent of GDP, nearing the record set after World War II. Even as the Covid-19 pandemic recedes, the U.S. is running trillion-dollar annual deficits, with the red ink set to increase as the Baby Boomers continue to retire, inflating medical and retirement outlays. The Congressional Budget Office warns that the debt to GDP ratio could hit 200 percent by mid-century.

And now Washington is going to subsidize Finland's and Sweden's security?

The U.S. also loses by further contributing to Russian paranoia. The invasion of Ukraine should make obvious that Putin's oft-repeated concerns about NATO expansion were real. Overturning the peaceful Scandinavian status quo and creating another allied front just a few score miles from St. Petersburg will encourage a response likely to further unsettle regional security.

Of course, there is little that Russia can do directly against Helsinki and Stockholm. However, Moscow is likely to further rely on nuclear weapons to bolster deterrence. Putin ally (and former stand-in president) Dmitry Medvedev warned: “If Sweden and Finland join NATO, the length of the land borders of the alliance with the Russian Federation will more than double. Naturally, these boundaries will have to be strengthened.” It would be one thing to accept enhanced nuclear risks as a response to necessary defense measures. But should we do so because two more wealthy European countries desire a share of America's defense subsidy?

Simply joining the alliance might be only the start. Who will help Finland cover its 810 mile border with Russia? Already, U.S. forces in Europe have jumped 20 percent since January to their highest level since 2005. Among Europe's NATO members, only the U.K. has made a measurable, though still modest, troop contribution over the same period. Yet Poland and the Baltic states are not satisfied with NATO's Article 5 guarantee. They also want American (not European) garrisons to create tripwires guaranteeing U.S. involvement in any war. Playing to President Donald Trump's perceived vanity, Warsaw lobbied the last administration to establish

a permanent base, proposing the name “Camp Trump.” Helsinki might not want to be left out the great garrison game.

Instead of waving more applicants through NATO’s door, Washington should end expansion. Nothing in the alliance or its founding documents requires the organization to accept applications, let alone grant them. To the contrary, Article 10 provides: “The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty.” The transatlantic alliance is supposed to take the initiative and act for the benefit of existing members. That is, NATO was created to promote security, not extend charity. Instead of expanding the antiquated U.S. defense dole, the European security system should be reconstructed and placed in European hands.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine should remind Washington policymakers that alliances are serious commitments, which in the past have expanded as much as diminished conflict. Equally important, the U.S. should go to war only when forced to do so, to defend itself. That was not the case with Kiev, which is why America neither forced Ukraine’s inclusion in NATO nor joined in Ukraine’s defense against Russia. If the U.S. wants to remain a superpower and able to care for its own citizens, it must learn to say no.

***Doug Bandow** is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire.*