THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF NATO ENLARGEMENT IN 2023: FROM THE ARCTIC TO THE BLACK SEA AND BEYOND

This paper will examine the geopolitical implications of the most recent round of NATO enlargement, which was spurred by Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, through a three-dimensional assessment. First, we will broadly examine how NATO enlargement and the war in Ukraine have shaped the international system of alliances. Second, we will look at the strategic implications of NATO expansion in Sweden and Finland's geographical backyard, the Arctic and the Baltic regions, and their effects on regional politics and security. Finally, we will examine how NATO expansion has impacted Türkiye, one of two members that has delayed NATO's recent enlargement, and its strategic balancing act in the post-Ukraine world.

Megan Gisclon* & Fuat Keyman**

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* Megan Gisclon is the Managing Editor and a researcher at Istanbul Policy Center (IPC).
** Professor Fuat Keyman is the Director of Istanbul Policy Center and Vice President of Sabancı University.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was a watershed moment not only for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) but also for the international political system as a whole. While NATO has been undergoing an extended process of soul searching since, first, the Cold War and, second, the war on terror, the international system has been undergoing equally challenging changes to its modus operandi. First, the rise of right-wing populism and, second, the rise of Great Power competition have rocked the proverbial "end of history" for democracy. As the West has been forced to reconcile its place within these changes and restore its position amid the landscape of so-called "Westlessness," both the United States and Europe had ventured from their traditional decades-long outlook on cooperation, pushing Europe to seek greater strategic autonomy—or, put simply, European states' decision to seek autonomy and independence from the American security architecture.

Despite the popularity of this Trump-era trend toward securing an independent Europe, which has been strongly championed first and foremost by French President Emmanuel Macron,[1] attempts at strategic autonomy have proven far from successful amid today's shifting security environment. NATO and its members' firm support for Ukraine following the Russian invasion has trumped states' calls to pursue more divergent foreign and security policies as both the United States under President Joe Biden and the rest of Europe—particularly those in the Eastern bloc who have been most affected by the threats stemming from Ukraine—have called for stronger transatlantic ties and a more united NATO alliance. An increasingly broad understanding of security over a wider geography, as swiftly adapted by NATO and set out in its 2022 Strategic Concept,[2] requires increased multinational cooperation on not only hard security issues but also democratic values in face of Russian, and potential Chinese, aggression. Such a transatlantic zeitgeist necessitates greater cooperation and a stronger sense of multilateralism on both sides of the Atlantic, especially within countries who have pursed their own policies of strategic balancing in recent years.

There is no stronger example of this geopolitical shift in Europe than the example of NATO's latest round of enlargement, with Finland becoming the 31st Alliance member on 4 April 2023 and Sweden's ongoing accession aspirations. Foregoing both parties' historical preferences to be neutral actors, the war in Ukraine has highlighted the need for both states to seek additional security guarantees that are only offered from such a high level of multinational cooperation that is found in NATO.

1) Luke McGee, "Analysis: 'Tone deaf' Macron faces backlash over Taiwan comments," CNN, 14 April 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/13/europe/macron-taiwan-comments-transatlantic-relationship-intl-cmd/index.html

2) NATO, "NATO 2022 Strategic Concept," Adopted by the Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid 29 June 2022, https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/

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The Impact of NATO Expansion on Global Alliances

As highlighted in a new report from the German Marshall Fund (GMF), "Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been a clarifying moment for alliances."[3] Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and subsequent NATO expansion, most countries appear to have fallen into one of three categories: first, countries in support of (or at least aiding) the Kremlin and its war of aggression; second, countries in support of Ukraine, many of which have sought closer ties with NATO and the West; and, third, non-aligned countries. The coalescence of these blocs has precipitated significant changes for global security. NATO's recent enlargement to include two historically neutral countries into a distinctly Western political and military alliance is representative of a massive shift in political alliances on the European continent. Meanwhile, the rise of non-aligned nations in the post-Ukraine setting offers both challenges and opportunities should these states move past unilateral actions. As Western nations have been able to unite under their shared opposition to the Russian invasion, other nations have been unable to unite under a similarly shared global outlook.

While the trend toward the rise of smaller regional powers as prominent actors on the world stage has been ongoing over the last decade, the war in Ukraine has placed these actors in a more precarious position, creating a global third bloc of non-aligned countries. Although the large majority of these 'non-aligned' countries voted to condemn Russia's war of aggression within the United Nations, many of these countries have failed to make greater commitments to supporting Ukraine against it. As many of these states have prioritized their significant trade, energy, or security ties with Russia over their moral stance on the conflict, only 46 of these 141 nations have fully committed to the U.S.-led sanctions regime on Moscow.[4] Such moves are indicative of the position that these non-aligned nations have striven to adapt since

3) Heather A. Conley et al., "Alliances in a Shifting Global Order: Rethinking Transatlantic Engagement with Global Swing States," German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2 May 2023, https://www.gmfus.org/news/alliances-shifting-global-order-rethinking-transatlantic-engagement-global-swing-states

4) Heather A. Conley et al. (2 May 2023), 12.

the outbreak of the war. While many observers have lumped this group of actors into a third grouping of states, the possibilities for these states to act in coordination have so far been few as the preference of these states to "escape bipolar logic"[5] and act according to their own interests has so far trumped cooperation.

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The bloc has yet to realize collective action beyond the musings of Brazilian President Luiz Inâcio Lula da Silva, who has called for a "peace club" of non-aligned actors to help broker an end to the war. Despite the potential challenges arising from such a negotiation club—namely its close economic relations with not only China but also Russia,[6] with whom Lula has closely cooperated since the advent of the BRICS economic bloc—the serious consideration of such an alliance would be a significant test for the weight of a potential bloc of non-aligned actors within the international order. However, with such a club yet to materialize, the power behind a non-aligned bloc has yet to extend beyond the weight thrown in by individual actors and the pursuit of their own interests. Meanwhile, China's co-opting of Central Asian states, who together held the first China–Central Asia Summit opposite the G7 Summit in Hiroshima in mid-May 2023, has sparked talk of a Beijing-led "axis of autocracy" that excludes Russia. Again, though, such a bloc has yet to solidify.[7]

In contrast to the trajectory of other neutral actors, the abandonment of a third bloc of actors in Europe and their anchor within NATO has held great geopolitical significance for the war and the shape of the international order moving forward. The shift from the historically neutral, third-bloc mentality of Sweden and Finland to the declaration of

5) Heather A. Conley et al. (2 May 2023), 2.

6) Katarína Javorceková, "The delusion of Lula's 'peace club,'" GLOBSEC, 27 April 2023, https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/commentaries/delusion-lulas-peace-club

7) Willy Wo-Lap Lam, "A Tale of Two Summits: G7 Displays Unity as China Courts Central Asia," China Brief, The Jamestown Foundation, 23 May 2023, https://jamestown.org/program/a-tale-of-two-summits-g7-displays-unity-as-china-courts-central-asia/?mc_cid=3ca079fdb1&mc_eid=1cd4490e9b

its membership aspirations in 2022 represents a sea change for international politics. In contrast to the non-aligned bloc's divergence, the Western bloc has drawn closer and grown stronger. Though critics of the West see Finland and Sweden's membership as an "inevitable choice" amid an environment in which "neutrality is dying",[8] the 180-degree shift in the perception of Finns' and Swedes' attitude toward NATO membership is evidence of just how monumental this shift is.[9]

While it is true that Sweden and Finland have been integrating themselves deeper within the NATO architecture since they were declared Enhanced Opportunity Partners at the 2014 Wales Summit following Russia's invasion of Crimea, and their military capabilities are already deeply intertwined with NATO, there is a fundamental difference and strong geopolitical signal between being a close partner and a member of NATO—namely, the willingness to accept members' Article 5 responsibilities. The move toward membership has solidified the Western bloc in Europe in the new post-Ukraine era and wiped away the Cold War remains of neutrality along Russia's northwest border. Researchers have proclaimed that "the dust of Finlandization has been brushed off."[10] While the global trend toward a non-aligned bloc may one day play a greater role in the war in Ukraine or the post-Ukraine world, no doubt stronger ties between Western nations will continue to outweigh those of a third bloc due to NATO's role as both a political and military alliance with a shared worldview. Furthermore, NATO's enlargement has improved the geostrategic position of the Alliance not only globally but also regionally, which will be discussed in the following section.

The Strategic Expansion of NATO in the Arctic and the Baltic Sea

Finland and Sweden's membership aspirations have reshaped the entire security landscape of the European continent. The addition of Finland into the NATO alliance and the likely prospect of Swedish membership have shifted the balance of power within both Europe and NATO toward the northeast of the transatlantic sphere.[11] While the three Baltic States (Estonia Latvia, and Lithuania) have been sounding the alarm on the Kremlin for over a decade and have been the subject of several hybrid attacks

8) "Finland's NATO membership Deepens Concerns Over the Bloc's Expansion into Asia," Global Times, 9 April 2023, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202304/1288763.shtml

9) E.g., in Finland, popular support for Finland's NATO membership skyrocketed after the onset of the war, from 28 percent to 76 percent in favor of NATO membership between January and May 2022. See, Tuomas Forsberg, "Finland and Sweden's Move Toward NATO," PRIO blogs, 9 May 2022, https://blogs.prio.org/2022/05/finland-and-swedens-move-to-nato/

10) The term "Finlandization" refers to Finland's role as a Third Power between the West and the Soviets during the Cold War. See Bradley Reynolds, "Finland's Long Road West," Wilson Center, 6 April 2023, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/finlands-long-road-west

11) Nicholas Lokker, Jim Townsend, Heli Hautala, and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "How Finnish and Swedish NATO Accession Could Shape the Future Russian Threat," CNAS Transatlantic Forum on Russia, January 2023.

in recent years,[12] the addition of new Baltic littoral states into the Alliance provides additional security guarantees and new avenues for the defense of the increasingly vulnerable region. Once Sweden's membership is put into place, the sea will effectively turn into a 'NATO lake' over which it is will expand its land, air, and sea power. Though Russia's access to its Baltic bastion in Kaliningrad and its territory along the Gulf of Finland will continue to be a security concern for Allies,[13] the addition of Sweden and Finland will put NATO in a better position to defend its member states.

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On land, Finland's accession to the Alliance has more than doubled NATO's land borders with Russia, including a significant increase in its land border with Russia's strategic Koala Peninsula. In the air, by 2026, Lapland will host the world's second largest fleet of F-35 fighter jets,[14] providing ample opportunities to expand NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission. On sea, access to the Swedish and Finnish islands of Gotland and the Åland Islands will offer strategic assets for the defense of Baltic littoral nations.[15] NATO's access to these territories will also help bolster the defense of the three Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which prior to Finnish membership were geographically cut off from other NATO members with the exception of the narrow Suwalki Gap.

Sweden and Finland's move toward NATO membership has not only reshaped the strategic landscape of the Baltic Sea but also the Arctic. Politically, with Finland and Sweden's membership, Russia will be the only member on the Arctic Council that is not a member of NATO. Militarily, Finland's sizeable icebreaker fleet and Sweden's submarine fleet will help secure the high seas. Both militaries have significant experience in preparing for the extreme temperatures in this region and can offer other member states knowledge in this area through joint exercises.[16] An increased

12) Gabrielius Landsbergis, "7 Myths Standing in the Way of Ukraine's Victory," Politico, 19 March 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-war-victory-russia-7-myths/

13) Julian Pawlak, "No, Don't call the Baltic a 'NATO Lake'," RUSI, 5 September 2022, https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/no-dont-call-baltic-nato-lake

14) Lokker, Townsend, Hautala, and Kendall-Taylor, January 2023.

15) Luke Coffey, "NATO Needs a New Strategy for the Baltic Sea," Hudson Institute Policy Memo, October 2022.

16) Both militaries have been exercising with NATO member states for many years. Sweden recently hosted its largest military exercise in 30 years with the participation of several member states. See Charles Szumski, "Sweden to conduct

NATO presence inside the Arctic Circle not only has the potential to counter Russia's militarization of the region but also China's efforts to further destabilize the region as it builds up its Polar Silk Road. As NATO's High North has become increasingly important to Allied security as the ice in the Arctic continues to melt, Sweden and Finland are essential to help NATO defend this new strategic center. While much more is needed to counter Russia's military superiority in the region,[17] Finland and Sweden are essential to this.

Away from its geographic backyard, Finland and Sweden's membership offers protection of much more than the Baltic and the Arctic. Both nations offer large, highly capable militaries with significant experience internationally within NATO structures. Both nations have participated in several NATO operations over the last three decades, participating in NATO's peacekeeping mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Afghanistan with the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) and Resolute Support Mission (RSM), in Kosovo with KFOR, in NATO Mission Iraq (NIM), and with NATO's Response Force (NRF) in a supplementary role.[18] Finland and Sweden have become increasingly integrated within the NATO military structure since becoming Enhanced Opportunity Partners during the Wales Summit in 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea. Furthermore, both nations have experience in combatting hybrid threats. For Finland, NATO can benefit from both the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) in Helsinki as well as draw lessons from the Finnish concept of "societal security" and resilience.[19] Both states are vibrant democracies and have been members of the European Union since 1995, offering greater opportunities for NATO-EU cooperation.

Despite their long history of neutrality, there is no doubt that Sweden and Finland will easily be incorporated into NATO's multilateral framework and continue to act as strong, effective proof of the multilateral shift within the global framework. Indeed, following Finland's accession into the Alliance on 4 April, its first act as a member was to submit its approval for Swedish membership. However, while Finland and Sweden's shift toward multilateralism has been a demonstration of cohesion amid the threats posed to the Western order *vis-à-vis* the war in Ukraine, Türkiye's continuing unilateral challenge to Sweden's membership has highlighted the need to continue to

largest military exercise in 30 years," Euractiv, last updated 24 April 2023, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/sweden-to-conduct-largest-military-exercise-in-30-years/

17) Jacob Gronholt-pedersen and Gwladys Fouche, "NATO Allies wake up to Russian supremacy in the Arctic," 16 November 2022, Reuters, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nato-allies-wake-up-russian-supremacy-arctic-2022-11-16/

18) See, NATO, "Relations with Finland," last updated 5 April 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49594.htm#footnote; NATO, "Relations with Sweden," last updated 12 April 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52535.htm

19) Dr Katri Pynnöniemi and Dr Sinikukka Saari, "Hybrid Influence – Lessons from Finland," NATO Review, 28 June 2017, https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2017/06/28/hybrid-influence-lessons-from-finland/index.html

strengthen multilateralism within NATO. Looking at what's next for Türkiye's strategic balancing act following its recent elections on 14 May and 28 May will help us to see the tests and challenges that NATO expansion has posed for certain member states.

NATO Expansion and the Challenges to Türkiye's Strategic Balancing Act

Following Finland and Sweden's announcement to pursue NATO membership, Türkiye's persistent opposition to this round of enlargement has continued to shock the Alliance. As Türkiye eventually cleared the way for Finland's accession, Ankara's continued opposition to Sweden's membership rests in a bilateral dispute over individuals and organizations that Türkiye identifies as terrorists, namely the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). With some of the most liberal free speech laws in the world, Sweden's reluctance to arrest or deport such individuals has aroused anger and spite from Türkiye, which claims it cannot accept a NATO member who does not recognize Ankara's security concerns. Against the trend toward multilateralism within the Alliance, Türkiye has exercised strong resistance to NATO's enlargement to Sweden, instead clinging to its unilateral views.

Since the re-election of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on 28 May 2023, hopes that an opposition victory would immediately lead to Türkiye's approval of Sweden's membership prior to this summer's Vilnius Summit in July have been dashed. Erdogan's renewed mandate to rule promises little to no change in Türkiye's top-down foreign policy, especially as his party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), and its coalition partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), simultaneously scored a parliamentary majority. In the lead-up to the second round of the elections—following Erdogan and his main opponent's, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, failure to receive more than 50 percent of the vote in the first round of elections—Erdogan stated during an interview that he does not intend to green-light Sweden's membership following the elections.[20]

Furthermore, nationalist parties' sweeping success in the parliamentary elections have further reassured Türkiye's nationalist turn, presenting additional challenges to Türkiye's cooperation in multinational fora and reminding political scientists, again, that nationalism is "one of the most powerful… single movement[s] in the world today."[21] These nationalist parties—namely the AKP's main coalition partner, the MHP—will continue to push Ankara's gaze increasingly inward. Ankara's continued

20) Tamara Qiblawi and Isil Sariyuce, "Erdogan hails 'special relationship' with Putin ahead of crucial Turkey runoff vote," CNN, 19 May 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/05/19/middleeast/turkey-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-interview-mime-intl/index.html

21) Isaiah Berlin, quoted in E. Fuat Keyman, "Nationalism in Turkey: Modernity, State and Identity," in *Symbiotic Antagonisms: Competing Nationalisms in Turkey*, ed. Ayse Kadioglu and E. Fuat Keyman (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011).

refusal to approve Sweden's accession will be just one symbol of this strategy as will Ankara's continuing efforts to seek tangible gains—e.g., the sale of F-16s—in return for engaging in multilateral cooperation.

Türkiye's nationalist turn has positioned Ankara further in line with other states practicing similar transactional governance strategies such as Russia, which following the elections congratulated Erdogan for continuing to champion an "independent foreign policy."[22] While Ankara has long sought to maintain its strategic balancing act between Russia and its membership in NATO, this position has indeed had some positive repercussions, most recently Türkiye's mediator role in negotiating the UN-led Black Sea Grain Initiative. As long as the war in Ukraine continues, Türkiye will likely continue to act as a go-between for the two sides, which in some ways will benefit the Western bloc. However, while this involves keeping one ear open to Moscow, this more importantly necessitates that Ankara maintain and strengthen its anchor within NATO and shift its strategic balance West to be firmly identified as a rooted NATO member rather than as a "global swing state."[23]

Now that Türkiye's elections have been decided, Ankara will face a litmus test to Türkiye-NATO relations in the lead up to the Vilnius Summit. Although Erdogan has thus far resisted Sweden's membership, several NATO member states as well as NATO itself have shown a strong will to keep Sweden's accession alive and negotiate between Stockholm and Ankara. As reflected in Western leaders' post-election congratulations to Erdogan, particularly that of President Biden, the West is "look[ing] forward to continuing to work together as NATO Allies on bilateral issues and shared global challenges."[24]

As the summit approaches, Erdogan must prepare to face the first test to NATO-Türkiye relations since securing his electoral victory. The new government must recognize that Türkiye's foreign policy cannot prioritize unilateral over multilateral action, and it should not continue to hamper NATO expansion. Türkiye has been strategically anchored within NATO as a member since 1952, and Ankara must recognize that NATO's expansion to include Sweden is beneficial to its own global and regional strategic position, as well.

22) "From Biden to Putin, world leaders congratulate Erdogan on election win," France 24, last updated 29 May 2023, https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230529-from-biden-to-putin-world-leaders-congratulate-erdogan-on-election-win

23) Conley et al., "Alliances in a Shifting Global Order."

24) "From Biden to Putin," France 24.