Commentary
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Sweden in NATO: Is there a future for neutrality?

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Summary

Sweden and Finland personified successful neutrality in international relations for decades. Does their accession to NATO mean that the policy of neutrality will no longer have any prospects in the modern world?

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Sweden becomes the 32nd member of the North Atlantic Alliance. As we predicted a few weeks ago, the Hungarian parliament ratified the accession protocol of this Scandinavian kingdom relatively quickly and removed the last obstacle to its official NATO membership. This ends the almost two-year story of the Alliance's enlargement in northern Europe, which was initially expected to have a much more rapid development.

Stockholm's finish line

Of the 30 member states that were part of NATO when Sweden and Finland submitted their applications in May 2022, 28 carried out domestic procedures to ratify accession protocols in a tick. But two countries – Türkiye and Hungary – had questions for the candidates. In particular, Ankara said that it was impossible to have allied relations with countries that have become "guest houses for terrorists" and impose sanctions against Türkiye. This referred primarily to Stockholm's policy, so Finland joined the Alliance in March 2023, while Sweden was left in the "waiting room".

After twenty months of negotiations and a series of concessions from Sweden itself, as well as the USA, which agreed to unblock the deal to sell F-16 fighter jets to Türkiye, the Turkish parliament passed a positive decision on Stockholm's application on 23 January.

After that, Sweden faced the final obstacle – Hungary's lack of ratification. In Budapest, as the speaker of the Hungarian parliament put it, Stockholm was expected to show "some respect" and prove that it "takes Hungary seriously".

As a result, in recent weeks the drama has come down to whether Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson will accept his Hungarian counterpart Viktor Orban's invitation to visit Budapest and personally discuss all issues that concern Hungary. At first, the Swedish government responded sharply and unambiguously that its head had nothing to discuss with Orban, at least until there was a positive decision on the kingdom's admission to NATO. In the end, however, Kristersson did fly to Budapest on 23 February.

After the negotiations, Viktor Orban said that the agreements reached in the field of military-technical co-operation "help restore confidence between the two countries". In particular, an agreement was reached on Hungary's purchase of four new Gripen fighter aircraft and a 10-year extension of the maintenance service of 14 Swedish fighter jets already in the Hungarian Air Force. Three days later, on 26 February, the Hungarian parliament ratified the protocol on Sweden's accession to NATO: 188 deputies voted in favour and only 6 against.

Thus, supporters of the Alliance's Northern European enlargement can calmly exhale. Within days, the Swedish flag-raising ceremony is expected to take place at NATO headquarters in Brussels. It will draw a line under Stockholm's two hundred years of non-alignment with military blocs, a period during which Sweden has become one of the most recognisable avatars of the very idea of neutrality.

No country for neutrals?

Sweden's decision to end its non-aligned policy, as already discussed, can hardly be called completely spontaneous and breaking all the foundations and trends of the past decades. Indeed, it was made under the extraordinary conditions of public shock after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, but Stockholm has been slowly moving towards it for a long time. This is important to know and understand, because against the background of NATO's North European enlargement in 2023-2024, several natural questions arise about the significance of this event in the broader international context.

For example: What does Sweden's and Finland's accession to NATO mean for the concepts of neutrality and non-alignment? Are the decisions of Stockholm and Helsinki indicators that place for neutrality in today's world is shrinking? And should states that are still outside political-military blocs look closely at the example of Sweden and Finland and perhaps follow it?

These questions are not just theoretical. Immediately after the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine and the imposition of the first anti-Russian sanctions, both in the media and from high political tribunes, the thesis began to be heard that there is no place for neutrality in the confrontation between Russia and the West over Ukraine. At least, in this way Kyiv itself and its Western partners have formulated their position. The explanation is simple: Russia's actions, they emphasise, must be qualified as a flagrant violation of the UN Charter, which means that any form of neutral attitude to the conflict would encourage these violations and is therefore immoral and illegitimate. Based on this logic, they called on the nations of the world to condemn Moscow's actions and join the Western sanctions regime. Since not all countries were willing to take sides in a conflict they do not consider their own, Ukraine and the West expectedly (but with varying success) used various instruments of convincing and pressure. This can be clearly seen in the dynamics of voting on war-related resolutions at the UN General Assembly.

> In general, the thesis "No country for neutrals" is as old as the world. It always sounds especially loud at the initial stages of large-scale geopolitical and military confrontations.

This was the case, for example, in the early years of the Cold War, when the position of traditionally neutral states and leanings towards neutrality by countries such as Yugoslavia caused a harsh reaction both in the Kremlin and in the White House. Both considered them not only harmful in the fight against ideological enemies, but also deeply immoral.

It is now once again difficult for small states to argue the importance of maintaining a neutral policy on the basis of their historical traditions or even their desire to help resolve conflicts; not to mention their own interests, which are not necessarily similar to those of the conflicting parties. The case of Switzerland is illustrative. Even with the naked eye one can see how difficult it is for Bern to implement its natural policy of neutrality, which, unlike Sweden, did not succumb to significant erosion either during the Cold War or after its end. On the one hand Switzerland is under enormous Western pressure, and on the other – under slightly different but also pressure from Moscow, which has been quick to include Switzerland among unfriendly states for joining some of the EU sanctions.

Revealingly, in mid-2022, Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis, who was then also the country's president, even proposed that a new concept of neutrality be enshrined in law. The idea was to transform the classic Swiss neutrality into "cooperative neutrality".

However, what exactly the new concept meant remained a mystery (although the name already makes it more or less clear), as the members of the Swiss Federal Council rejected the proposal. But the very fact that such an initiative emerged is a good illustration of the challenges that neutral states face today.

The future of neutrality

The Cassis initiative also suggests that neutral states will not abandon their policies easily if they consider them optimal under the specific structural conditions that define their security environment. True, they will adjust to changing circumstances and adapt their foreign policy positioning accordingly, because, unlike major powers, small states cannot independently shape their own security environment and by definition are forced to adjust, look for vague wording, and manoeuvre. But they will not simply abandon a policy that has been tested for decades or even centuries.

> That is, the national interest of these countries remains at the centre of everything, rather than pressure, wishes and appeals to morality on the part of the participants in certain conflicts, even if they are superpowers.

This is how the cases of Sweden and Finland differ from those of Switzerland, Austria, Malta, Ireland, and other countries that continue to adhere to neutrality and/or non-alignment: they define their national interest in fundamentally different ways in the specific geopolitical conditions that are developing here and now.

At the same time, a simple rule always applies in international relations. The more uncompromising and fierce the confrontation between key actors becomes, the less opportunities and room for manoeuvre neutral states have. Therefore, in Europe, these are very hard times indeed for neutrals. But in some other parts of the world, the structural conditions are different, and the incentives for non-aligned policies in many countries, on the contrary, are only growing.

India is a vivid example of this. It is now a welcome guest everywhere, and the main geopolitical antagonists are literally competing in inviting Delhi to co-operate. In such a situation, it is quite natural for India to skim all the cream with the help of neutral positioning, which she successfully does.

European neutrals, however, now have to fight for the right to retain as many elements of the policy of non-alignment as possible and hope that their position will soon be in demand again. In this process, the forms and methods of neutrality are inevitably evolving. One of the leading theorists of neutrality, Austrian Professor Heinz Gärtner,

has estimated that there are more than 20 different types of neutral policies. There is no doubt that this list will only grow over time. From the legalistic forms enshrined in the Hague Conventions in the early 1900s, neutrality will evolve further and further towards hybrid political forms such as hedging.

> It is important that in any case, a neutralist policy, no matter what forms it occasionally takes, will always have a place in international relations.

Especially given the level of globalisation that has been achieved, which distinguishes the modern world from the realities of the Cold War. The great powers opposing each other will themselves eventually have an interest in linkages in the form of neutral and non-aligned countries. In addition, without neutral states and non-state actors, many practices basic to international relations would be impossible. For example, it is difficult to imagine the full implementation of international humanitarian law without them.

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