



CALCULATED RISK?

Barry Scott Zellen examines, following Turkey and Hungary's consent, the approval by all NATO member states of Finland's NATO accession

On 30 March, the Turkish parliament ratified Finland's application to join NATO, taking down the final roadblock hindering Finland's much delayed accession into the expanded Atlantic alliance just two days after the Hungarian parliament did the same. Both nations continue to thwart Sweden's accession, however, leaving this last Nordic state outside of NATO for the time being. But unlike Norway, a NATO founding member, and Finland, its newest member, Sweden does not share a land border with Russia at all; therefore, Finland's accession to the alliance is all the more consequential, further encircling Russia by integrating its last non-aligned Nordic neighbour sharing a

common frontier, bringing western military power to Finland's 1,340km long border, which combined with Norway's 196km border already fully embedded into NATO's strategic architecture, will soon create what will become a 1,536km fortified frontier to contain any possible future Russian aggression against the Nordic region.

Widely perceived as a diplomatic and strategic setback to Russian strongman Vladimir Putin, who launched his Ukraine invasion over one year ago in part to prevent Kyiv's further drift into the western camp and to forestall it from eventually joining NATO, and – Putin likely hoped – to thus deter other non-NATO states along its perimeter from seeking membership down the road, thus far Russia has not expressed any

The Swedish Air Force takes part in Exercise Arctic Challenge

grave concerns with this northern expansion of NATO. But in the years to come, it is anyone's guess whether Finland's abandonment of its long-embraced policy of neutrality will help or hinder its quest for greater security. For the moment, six of the seven democratic Arctic states are now bound together as military allies, providing a measure of hope that none will experience what Ukraine has gone through during these last 400-plus horrific days of war.

For greater insight into the impact of the NATO accession on Finland, *intersec* spoke with University of Lapland professor of International Relations and acclaimed author, Dr. Julian Reid, based in Rovaniemi – just 415km by air and 583km by road to Russia's northern naval bastion of Murmansk, and the target of Soviet troops during the Battle of Salla in the Winter War between the Soviet Union and Finland, when Moscow initiated its unsuccessful lightning conquest of Finnish Lapland. But just a few years later, during the 1944 Lapland War between Finland and Nazi Germany, the Battle of Rovaniemi resulted in the near-total destruction of the city. With Ukraine now experiencing Russian aggression on comparable scale of destruction as experienced in the Lapland War, and a military stalemate reminiscent of the Winter War when they were outgunned and outmanned Finnish defence forces held off the numerically superior Soviet invasion force, there's little wonder why Finland has so quickly pivoted from its long history of neutrality to full NATO membership. But the repercussions of Russia's loss of one of its longest and most stable neutral buffers along its western frontier as NATO comes ever closer to the Russian heartland remain to be seen, and is the subject of our interview with Dr. Reid.

intersec: How does the NATO expansion in Finland and how do Laplanders feel about it? Do they find comfort in the military protection from an expansionist Russia or do they worry it may provoke a bear that had been productively cooperating regionally with the Nordic states? Are there second thoughts and regrets on abandoning official neutrality or has neutrality largely disappeared as Finland grew closer to NATO over the years since the Soviet collapse?

Dr. Reid: The overarching sentiment of the Finnish public is indeed one of comfort and assurance that NATO is willing to take Finland as a member. There is confidence that this is the right move, and scant sense that it might provoke Russia or make Finland less secure. The process by which Finland has grown closer to NATO has been gradual, although it is difficult to overstate the importance of the invasion of Ukraine for hastening the shift of its allegiance westwards. It has happened with a sense of urgency, underpinned by fear. Parliament and the policy community have mimicked the public mood, and it is very hard to locate meaningful opposition to NATO membership anywhere here.

But it's not just that there is a lack of opposition which is the problem. There is a real lack of strategic imagination. And that lack has played a major role in determining the ease with which the process has moved forwards. The conversation has been polarised, and parliamentarians as well as policy and media 'experts' have all tended to take the same simplistic pro-NATO

stance, with little consideration for the nuances of the problem and virtually no lateral thinking. I would have liked to see Finland develop a more inventive response in terms of policy and strategy, rather than the rush to join NATO. If not just continued neutrality then a stance with more flexibility.

intersec: Does the expansion of NATO make Finland more secure or might it bring new risk?

Dr. Reid: The simplistic assumption is that joining NATO makes Finland automatically more secure, because bigger and more powerful states are then not only allied but contractually obliged to act in the case that Finland were to be attacked in the way

THERE IS NO SENSE THAT THIS MIGHT PROVOKE RUSSIA OR MAKE FINLAND LESS SECURE

Ukraine was. Commentators and policy makers talk endlessly about NATO's Article 5 and the security guarantees it supposedly brings. This is naïve to say the least. Since 2014, NATO has been placing ever greater emphasis on Article 3 and the obligations of member states to practice 'resilience' and 'self-help' in the case of armed attack by another state. In fact Finland has been flaunting itself during the process of application for membership, by talking up its capacities in the area of 'resilience'. If Russia were to attack Finland, you can be sure that it would be the resilience of Finnish society and its armed forces which would be called upon by NATO as a fundamental means of response.

intersec: Has Turkey's continued opposition to Sweden's ascension (unless it renounces its support for the Kurds and extradites selected 'terrorists' and other bad actors to Turkey), and Hungarian resistance to expanding the alliance to include Sweden (in tacit support of Russia) led to any second thoughts in Helsinki?

Dr. Reid: No, not at all. The opposition of Turkey and Hungary has been cast as a minor irritant, and something simply to be dealt with and surpassed, but not in itself a reason to reconsider. Nothing seems to be able to confuse Finland's certainty as to the wisdom of its application to join NATO.

intersec: While Russia has appeared unconcerned in its public statements with the NATO expansion across the Nordic region, could Moscow in fact be more upset than it has let on, and might this lead to increased tension and potential conflict with Russia that might otherwise have been avoided through continued neutrality?

Dr. Reid: For sure. Maybe 'upset' is the wrong word though. I am sure, given their larger views on NATO expansion, that Moscow will be taking it very seriously indeed, and that all its

calculations concerning present and future strategic engagements with NATO, and with Finland in particular, will be changed accordingly. This will have every consequence long into the future, practically for as long as anyone can foresee.

intersec: If Russia does feel pressure from the expansion, what might it do – could it use force, or hybrid-warfare methods below the threshold of war, to sow the region with instability and where might it do so? Would Lapland be at risk?

Dr. Reid: They will certainly be looking at other areas of the border with NATO as potential spaces to act and change the dynamics of the conflict with and in Ukraine. It would make common sense to do so. One way or the other they have to engage NATO with a view to weakening it.

SO FAR RUSSIA HAS NOT EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT THE NORTHERN EXPANSION OF NATO

How and where that will happen, we will have to see. But for sure, Finland has offered itself up as a potential battle space, and that includes Lapland too.

intersec: With their land borders now closed to Russian entry, has the Nordic region shut off a much-needed escape hatch for young Russian men avoiding conscription and opponents of the war avoiding persecution – and would allowing refugees to arrive by land provide a helpful escape route for opponents of Putin's war?

Dr. Reid: For sure. The closing of the border and the severing of relations with Russians, including

the Russian academic community, looks really narrow sighted for all sorts of reasons.

intersec: Has the war in Ukraine, by consuming fighting men from Russia's remote northern communities as well as military weapons and ammunition hitherto stored in the north near to the Nordic states, paradoxically reduced the military threat Russia poses to the Nordics?

Dr Reid: That would certainly be one way of looking at it. It would be foolish to underestimate the importance of the Arctic to Russia though. Given that its contemporary strategy of cooperation over conflict in the Arctic no longer has the same value, I think we can anticipate a shift towards their using conflict as a means by which to make strategic gains. They have no choice when the other Arctic states are offering them so little to work with otherwise.

intersec: What's your prognosis on the year ahead: will the Ukraine war expand geographically, might Russia implode militarily or experience internal upheaval comparable with the end of WWI when domestic instability rendered its military unable to project power externally? Or, might Russia master the art of protracted warfare, and regain momentum – in Ukraine and beyond. Could Russia turn to its nuclear arsenal to double down on the fight and would this increase the security risk to the Nordic region?

Dr. Reid: I think Russia is invested in its ability to hold out in Ukraine and fight a protracted war against adversaries the morale of which will be worn down over time. How long that might take it is impossible to say. One has to look at this current conflict in context of the realities of US economic and strategic decline, the growth of power of China and the immiseration of Europe. In context of which Russia has every reason to trust in its capacities to outlast the West in Ukraine. ●

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**NATO Secretary General
Jens Stoltenberg with
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Sauli Niinistö**

