

**Matti Pesu**, *Research Fellow*

## FINLAND, SWEDEN, AND NATO'S 2018 SUMMIT

### THE AGENDA LOOKS GOOD FOR THE NORDIC NEIGHBOURS

*The heads of NATO's allies will assemble in Brussels in mid-July to give their blessing to NATO's future agenda. Although non-members, Finland and Sweden expect to be involved. More importantly, from the perspective of the neighbours, NATO's agenda for the coming years looks good.*

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is due to hold its first major summit of the Donald Trump era in mid-July. Irrespective of recent transatlantic turbulence, NATO has not lacked an agenda. Indeed, much remains to be done in adapting the Alliance to the requirements of the current security environment.

NATO summits give broad direction to the Alliance's priorities and policies. However, crucially, the meetings have significance not only for the Allied but also for NATO's partners. Two countries – Finland and Sweden – stand out in this regard. As a result of intensified cooperation with the Alliance, NATO's decisions have growing importance for the two countries' security. Hence, NATO summits

have become significant events for the Nordic duo, with palpable outcomes.

The two previous summits were indeed landmarks for Finland's and Sweden's defence policies. The 2014 Wales summit gave rise to the Enhanced Opportunities Partnership – an initiative tailored for NATO's closest partners, including Sweden and Finland. Moreover, the Nordic non-allied also signed their respective Host Nation Agreements with the Alliance.

At NATO's 2016 Warsaw Summit, Finland and Sweden enjoyed a special status in comparison to other partners; President Sauli Niinistö and Prime Minister Stefan Löfven joined their allied colleagues for the summit's working dinner, which symbolised the close bond

between the two Nordic countries and the Alliance.

This year's summit will address at least four issues. The most important priority for the Alliance is the reinforcement of deterrence and collective defence. Moreover, and secondly, NATO will discuss the question of burden-sharing – a theme close to President Trump's heart. The third issue on the agenda is NATO's cooperation with the European Union, which has made considerable progress during the last few years. Fourthly, NATO has not forgotten regions outside Europe, and hence it will also focus on the stability of its southern neighbourhood.

How do Helsinki and Stockholm view the meeting and, more importantly, NATO's current agenda?

Fundamentally, Finland and Sweden wish to be invited. Moreover, in the event that non-NATO members join the Allies for the event, it would be advisable to repeat the Warsaw practice and grant Finland and Sweden a special status – something that Helsinki and Stockholm certainly wish for. Dining in the company of the Allies or attending the meeting of the North Atlantic Council when NATO-EU relations are discussed would be a signal that the so-called 29+2 format is the new normal. Moreover, although being mostly symbolic, a visible Finnish and Swedish role in the summit would further legitimise and normalise close cooperation with NATO in the eyes of the respective domestic constituencies.

When it comes to the summit's agenda and NATO's priorities at large, things look promising from a Fenno-Swedish perspective.

The neighbours wholeheartedly support NATO's efforts to reinforce deterrence and collective defence in Europe. Both nations are increasingly building their policies upon the premise that, in the event of a crisis, there would be real political and military incentives to assist them militarily. Indeed, Finland and Sweden count on their geographical location, which they reckon is important enough to make them

recipients of crisis-time support from NATO regardless of the absence of official security guarantees.

Against this backdrop, NATO's higher readiness, a more rapid and streamlined decision-making process, and more capable and deployable combat forces are something that could potentially benefit Finland and Sweden should a crisis erupt in Europe.

Finland and Sweden have somewhat different approaches to the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. However, with NATO, they are on the same page, and their support for EU-NATO cooperation – another priority of the summit – is unequivocal. Currently, the potentially most fruitful – but not the only – issue on the EU-NATO joint agenda is military mobility, a question falling under the responsibility of both organisations. Notably, Finland and Sweden are participating in one of the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation projects aimed at improving the free cross-border movement of military forces. The issue of mobility is crucial for Finland and Sweden in terms of security of supply and also in terms of potential troop enforcements, particularly for Finland. Ideally, NATO and the EU would arrive at a seamless division of labour in order to make substantial progress on the matter.

As non-NATO members, Finland and Sweden are somewhat excluded from the burden-sharing debate. However, both nations currently spend well under NATO's two percent of GDP target, but – due to major procurements – Finland at least will easily meet the goal in the 2020s. One may disagree with the Trump administration's methods of advocating more balanced burden-sharing but, militarily, a more capable Europe is something that is clearly in Finland's and Sweden's mutual interest.

Although the Nordic neighbours' emphasis has been on territorial defence lately, they are not indifferent to challenges emanating from the southern neighbourhood, even though the region is clearly a secondary concern. Instability in the region might have ramifications for Northern Europe as well, for example in the form of migration and terrorism. Moreover, NATO's Southern flank – particularly the Middle East – is vital not only for the nations around the Mediterranean but also for the United States. If Finland and Sweden expect solidarity from the Allied, they must be willing to understand their concerns too. /