

Bottled up in the Baltic:
Finnish NATO Accession and Russia's Security Implications

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¹ *Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Air University, the United States Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any other US government agency."*

“The sides oppose further enlargement of NATO” and demanded the alliance abandon its “cold war approaches” according to the Sino-Russian Joint Statement signed just before Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.² They failed spectacularly on that goal when Finland became the thirty-first member of NATO on April 4, 2023, less than a year after submitting their application; Sweden remains hopeful of joining before the Vilnius Summit in July. It is difficult to interpret that result as anything other than a strategic failure for Russia and another setback for President Putin – almost as damaging strategically as the stalemate on the ground in Ukraine. What follows is an analysis of the impacts this latest NATO expansion will have on Russia’s Baltic Sea operations.

The first impact Finland’s accession has on Russia’s military situation is the most obvious one from a cursory examination of a map of Europe – the common NATO-Russian Federation land border doubled with the stroke of a pen from 755 miles to 1,585 miles.³ This represents 830 miles of newly-hostile borderlands in President Putin’s mind, and significantly increases the area that will require new force commitments in the future. Finland ranks fifth in terms of defense spending as a percentage of GDP within NATO, and its wartime military strength is comparable to France’s, so Russia’s new NATO neighbor is clearly a formidable opponent.⁴ A shared border and a strong NATO ally will require a realignment in the Baltic Sea region and Russia’s far north.

In addition to the extensive land border vulnerability, sea lanes are perhaps an even larger problem. Prior to Finland’s accession, it was possible to pass through neutral waters from St.

² Russian Federation and People’s Republic of China, Joint Statement on the International Relations Entering a New Era.

³ Tara John, “Finland Joins NATO, Doubling Military Alliance’s Border with Russia.”

⁴ Marcus Turovski, “Finland Fifth in NATO in Terms of Military Spending.”

Petersburg to Kaliningrad, and from either of those points to the international waters of the Danish Straits and thus out to the high seas of the Atlantic Ocean.⁵ Now, Russia's access is severely restricted – the Baltic Sea narrows to only 52 km between Porkkala, Finland, and Rohuneeme, Estonia, leaving a narrow sea route outside of NATO allies' territorial waters and making a blockade and cutoff of Kaliningrad a real possibility Russia must be prepared to face.⁶

The final impact of NATO expansion we will examine in relation to Russia's new-found Baltic challenges is air operations. Russia has faced NATO enhanced air policing on the southern Baltic coast since 2014.⁷ Now they face NATO fighter jets – soon to include fifth generation F-35s – on the north Baltic coast as well. Because all airspace over the Baltic Sea is controlled by NATO nations Russia's air operations in the Baltic region have been reduced to a single cul-de sac air corridor connecting mainland Russia to Kaliningrad. In a conflict with NATO, Russia would have to comprehensively defeat NATO air forces in the region before conducting air, land or sea operations – no easy feat given the strength of Allied airpower.

On the whole, given the challenges briefly outlined above, it becomes obvious that Russia's strategic situation has become even more fraught as a result of the NATO expansion prompted by the Ukraine War. Finland brings robust and well-defined capabilities to the NATO alliance. Perhaps as importantly, Finland brings an intangible – *sisu*, politely interpreted as “guts” – to an alliance that has sometimes been accused of lacking just that. And the Baltic Sea is now a NATO lake, comprising the theater upon which the defense of Europe's northern flank rests, stronger and more secure than it was before Finnish accession.

⁵ Alex G. Oude Elferink, “The Regime of Passage Through the Danish Straits.”

⁶ Uusimaa Regional Council and Harju County Government, “Gulf of Finland.”

⁷ “NATO Air Policing: Securing Allied Airspace.”